Summary

Of Dwobbits, Dragons and Dwarves

by ISeeFire

Bilba has been a slave her entire life. All she knows of the outside world is what she sees from time to time outside the gates of Moria and the stories her mother used to tell her. Stories of a place called the Shire where her mother once lived and a place called Erebor where, as far as she knows, her father still lives. Stories of dragons a thousand times larger, and more intelligent, than the beasts the orcs rode and of a strange concept called freedom where one was allowed to live as they wished with no one to tell them what they could, or could not do.

The stories meant little to Bilba. The only future she had was to live, and die, as a slave as countless number had before her.

And then the orcs dragged an injured female firedrake through the gates, her rider screaming obscenities behind her as he fought to reach her side...and everything changed.
This fic is a gift to my amazing beta, Drenagon, in gratitude for the copious, COPIOUS amount of work she has done editing my story, Homeward Bound. :D Without her Homeward Bound would have any number of VERY embarrassing errors!

It is based off an earlier version that I posted a portion of as a Drabble in my drabble story collection. SO, if you think this first chapter sounds familiar it's because you probably read it in there - it's called "Of Firedrakes and Dwobbits" and, in it, Bilbo is a male. In THIS one Bilbo is a female cause I'm on a huge FemBilbo kick. Also, in my fic dragons have live birth because I wanted to see Bilba with an itty, bitty premature baby dragon. :)

Anyway, I hope you enjoy it!

I hope you guys, and Drenagon in particular, likes it!! :)
The sky burned.

Bilba huddled in a small niche just inside the gates of Moria and watched quietly.

Dragons, scores of them, swarmed in a frenzied dance. Even at a distance Bilba could easily tell the difference between them. The ones the orcs used were small, about the size of a warg, stocky with short wings that barely got them off the ground. All of them were the same yellowish white color and if they possessed any intelligence of their own she had never witnessed it.

The dragons the dwarves rode were on a different level entirely.

They rode Firedrakes.

The creatures were massive, long and snakelike, their bodies coiling through the air in movements of pure grace. They came in the color of jewels, shimmering and sparkling as they wove in battle with the orcs.

Rushing feet sounded as a new wave of orcs raced past her out the gates. Bilba drew herself tighter into the alcove, pressing back into the shadows. The last thing she wanted was for one of them to see her and report it to Azog later. Her master often punished her for imagined disobedience. The punishment for actual disobedience would be a thousand times worse. He did so enjoy being creative.

Her eyes were drawn out the gate again, away from the dragons to the battle happening on the rocky plain outside. The landscape was crawling with warriors, the bodies of the dead and dying scattered about like macabre decorations. She had no idea why they were there or why wave after wave continued to surge forward only to break upon the never-ending wall of orcs pouring from the mines.

Some of the injured screamed in pain and, as she watched, others darted forward to drag them to safety, risking their own lives in the process.

A memory flickered deep in her subconscious, her mother risking a beating by comforting a dying slave. Bilba hadn't understood. The slave had barely been there a week, neither of them had any connection to him, why would her mother risk a beating? A beating could cause an infection or, worse, slow you down and have you labeled as no longer useful.

Because, her mother's words floated back to her, I am not an orc and I will not behave like one.

Her mother's eyes burned into Bilba from deep within her mind.

And neither will you.

An ear-splitting roar suddenly sounded from overhead, causing her to start, her mind snapping back to the present. The sound was so loud she could feel the rock vibrating around her. A massive, blood-red dragon burst from the pack. Flame erupted from its maw, barely missing many of the orcs and dwarves below. On its back she caught a glimpse of a single rider, a middle aged dwarf with a long decorated beard. A moment later the dragon and rider were gone, the dragon shooting straight up and vanishing into the clouds. Several orcs gave chase, disappearing quickly after them.

A second scream, this time from a dwarven throat, rang out and Bilba followed it to where Azog stood on a low outcropping of rock. His arm was outstretched and dangling from his hand was the
severed head of a dwarf. White hair tangled in Azog’s fingers, trailing down to the macabre object swaying lightly in the breeze.

A dwarf burst through the ranks, stepping forward to face Azog. He was young, tall and broad chested with long dark hair and a short beard.

Azog stepped forward to meet him and Bilba tensed, rising up just a little to see.

The battle closed about them and she lost sight of them. She waited, hoping they would reappear but, after several minutes, there was still no sign.

She sighed in disappointment. She’d been hoping the dwarf would kill Azog and she’d get to witness it.

Deciding she’d risked being there long enough she carefully edged her way out of the alcove and headed back into Moria.

She kept herself low, scuttling past legions of orcs rushing outside. They paid her no notice, eager to be out in the thick of battle.

The sounds of fighting didn’t fade until she was several levels below the surface. Here the corridors were less populated as almost all of the mines had emptied into the upper levels.

All that had been left were the slaves. Orcs preferred hobbits as slaves as they were small and generally peaceful, offering little resistance. It didn’t prevent them, however, from taking humans, dwarves and even the occasional elf slave as well. Any who gave them too much trouble was simply killed and replaced with one less likely to cause problems.

The ones she passed now huddled together in masses, half-starved, filthy and beaten.

Bilba knew she looked little better. The rags she used for clothing hung off her and dirt was ground so deep into her skin it would probably never come off. Her hair was shorn close to her head to try and prevent lice and, combined with a frame so thin it was nearly skeletal, made her gender almost impossible to tell. Most of the slaves had long ago forgotten she was female, half the time she was pretty sure Azog had forgotten as well. It meant little to her either way, gender had no meaning in the mines. Male or female, elf, dwarf or hobbit, all suffered and died exactly the same.

She padded down even lower. There were fewer fires, forcing her to find her way by memory alone and the cold beneath her bare feet became intense.

Finally she reached an enormous chamber lit only by the barest number of torches in sconces on the walls.

The faint light illuminated the firedrake that dominated most of the room. She’d been dragged in nearly a month earlier, after she and her rider had the misfortune of traveling too close to Moria and had been beset by orcs and their dragons. From what Bilba had heard, the drake had been injured and forced to crash into the mountainside.

It had taken nearly a week to get her inside and her shrieks of pain had nearly deafened them all. They’d been so loud that Bilba still could swear she heard them sometimes in the upper levels, echoing off the rock.

It had taken the slaves another week to scrub the blood she’d trailed behind her from the stone.

Her rider had been nearly out of his mind, roaring obscenities and fighting to get to her. He’d broken
an arm in the process and hadn’t seemed to notice.

Neither one made a sound now.

The firedrake had fallen asleep within days of being brought down and hadn’t woken since. She still breathed but responded to nothing, not even the cries of her rider when Azog tortured him to try and bring her around.

Bilba shuffled forward carefully just in case the dragon chose that exact moment to wake up. When they’d first brought her in she’d been a brilliant gold color but now had faded to a pale yellow. Her sides barely moved and there were long pauses between each breath.

Staying as quiet as possible, Bilba moved around until she found the rider. He, as always, was tucked just behind the dragon’s foreleg, against her stomach. When he’d first come in he’d been wearing rich clothing and armor. He’d been big and powerful with long blond hair and a thick beard.

Now he looked markedly different. The orcs had taken his armor and most of his clothing leaving him with only his trousers and a shirt. They’d ripped out his beard and his hair was disheveled and matted. Dirt and blood caked his body, which was now far thinner than when he’d come in, and numerous welts and lash marks striped his flesh. A thick manacle was locked around his left ankle, clanking loudly every time he so much as shifted.

Moving closer she knelt next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling the sharp point of his shoulder beneath the skin.

He twitched and opened his eyes, the once brilliant blue now faded.

“Ah, my little guard,” he said, his voice a low rasp. “It’s been awhile hasn’t it?”

Bilba nodded. It had been about a day and a half since she’d seen him last. The orcs couldn’t be bothered to look after their slaves when a battle raged so she’d spent the time scrounging every scrap of food she could to hand out to them. Most of them had been too terrified of Azog, or anything associated with him, to even look at her but they’d accepted the food nonetheless. Bilba didn’t begrudge them their rejection of her, she’d have done the same thing in their place. She still helped them regardless of how they treated her. It was what her mother would have wanted.

The dwarf shifted, grimacing in pain. The arm he’d broken was strapped to his side with strips of his shirt, what was left of it. She’d helped him set it as best she could and wrapped it.

“So,” he said, blinking his eyes in an apparent effort to clear his mind. "What’s going on? There seem to be far fewer orcs scuttling around down here than usual."

Bilba frowned. In the time he’d been there the dwarf, whose name he still refused to give lest an orc be around to hear, had been teaching her a hand language. He called it Iglishmek and stated they would be able to talk to one another once she’d learned it.

She hadn’t learned very much yet, however, so she struggled to convey to him what was happening overhead.

He must have gotten the idea because his entire demeanor changed, his body straightening and a strange light entering his eyes.

“They came for me,” he whispered.

Bilba gave him a skeptical look. Why would an entire army come for him? He was just one person.
Even the drake wasn’t that special, to the dwarves at least. They had many others. She almost asked him but he was indicating for her to continue so she put it aside and did so. Her grasp of the hand language was soon exhausted and she had to resort to a mix of Iglishmek and pantomime. When she got to the point about Azog and the decapitated dwarf she was startled when the rider’s hand suddenly stopped her wrist with a surprisingly strong grip.

“Describe him.”

Bilba obeyed, carefully using what words she knew. When it came to the color of the dwarf’s hair she pointed to her own eyes, indicating the white area outside of the iris.

The rider looked as though he’d been struck. Bilba watched as his face crumpled and he actually seemed to shrink inward. He released her wrist and hunched in on himself, drawing up his knees and wrapping his good arm around them, his fingers digging into his calf so hard the knuckles turned white.

He made a strange sound and then another, his shoulders shaking.

He was crying.

She hesitated and then stretched a hand out to rest lightly on his shoulder. The rider had been kind to her. He spoke to her instead of at her, like she was an actual person and not just a slave. It had been so long since anyone had done that, she’d almost forgotten what it felt like.

He took a deep breath and looked up. His eyes were red-rimmed but when he spoke his voice was strong.

“Continue.”

Bilba described the dark haired dwarf and the rider smiled bitterly.

“Fool,” he said, “he better not get himself killed.”

Bilba frowned and struggled to remember the right signs to question how the rider knew the other dwarf.

Words suddenly ripped like blades into her mind, shredding her shields, and Bilba leaned forward, wrapping her arms around her waist and pressing her forehead into the ground. Pain bloomed in her head, pounding behind her temples and sparking down her nerves until her entire body shivered with it.

COME, HALFLING. NOW.

Bilba let loose a small whimper and now it was the rider who leaned forward to place a hand on her shoulder, his grip strong.

“It’s alright, breathe through it.”

The first time it he’d witnessed Azog ripping through her mental shields and sending words into her mind like weapons he’d tried to help her. For a split second she’d felt the rider’s shields expand to cover hers, protecting her against Azog’s attack.

Azog had been angry. He’d taken it out on her, ignoring the rider’s screams about it being his fault and demanding any punishment be laid on him.
Azog didn’t care. He was teaching a lesson.

It had been learned.

The rider didn’t try to help her again.

Bilba grit her teeth, wrapping her arms around her torso and struggling to her feet. The last thing she wanted was for Azog to speak to her again.

The rider was staring at her, his eyes dark.

Bilba gave him a pained half smile and left, hurrying back through the corridors and levels until she’d reached the top.

The battle appeared to be over. She no longer heard the noise of it or the roaring of dragons from outside the gates. Orcs no longer raced outside but instead straggled back in. Many were injured and she knew most would be killed in the coming days, if they weren’t lucky enough to die on their own.

Weakness was not tolerated among the orcs.

A roar that was unmistakably Azog came from the direction of his room and she hurried in that direction.

Upon taking over Moria, Azog had located the royal wing and promptly moved in. The room she entered was enormous and filled with treasures and rich tapestries abandoned by the dwarves when they’d fled.

Azog was lying on the massive, four poster bed with multiple orcs holding him down. Blood was spraying everywhere and as Bilba approached she was stunned to see one of his arms was missing, removed completely just below the elbow.

A fierce joy rose in her at the thought the wound could very well prove fatal. This feeling was followed immediately by an equal amount of fear of what might happen to her once he died. The average life expectancy for a slave could be measured in a handful of years. Bilba had only lasted as long as she had because Azog had taken a special interest in her and claimed her as his personal slave. If he were gone it was unlikely whatever orc replaced him would want her around. She’d either be killed outright or be sent back to the general slave populace, where she would undoubtedly die quickly.

One of the orcs holding him down snarled at her and she jumped. She left and gathered the few medical items the orcs possessed. If Azog had been anyone else he’d have been left to die. It was very possible he might still be killed by someone hoping to take his position.

After returning with the supplies, and having them wrenched from her arms by the orcs, Bilba quietly took her spot on the small pile of filthy rags she called a bed in the far corner of the room. The arm and leg manacles she normally wore were piled there but she hadn’t had them on in a month. Azog had removed them to speed her trips to and from the rider. So far he either hadn’t seen fit to put them on again or had forgotten she was no longer wearing them altogether.

Bilba felt it was probably the latter and had tried to stay as quiet and out of his way as possible, in the hopes he wouldn’t remember.

In spite of the rudimentary attempt at medical care, or perhaps because of it, the wound soon developed an infection. For the next two days Bilba stayed mostly in her corner, out of the way and hoping fervently Azog died. She tried to keep herself awake in the hopes someone would sneak in
during the night to kill him and she could cheer them on.

Eventually Azog developed a high fever and began ranting and raving in delirium. Concerned she’d be blamed if he hurt himself Bilba finally got up and alerted a few of the orcs that she knew were loyal to him. She deliberately did so as slowly as possible, taking a full hour just to reach them.

Once they had headed off to his room Bilba went back down to check on the rider. On the way she scrounged up a few scraps of food and some brackish water to take with her.

The dragon was even worse, her breathing shallow and with long gaps between each breath.

The rider was awake. His eyes were fixed straight ahead and, at first, he didn’t seem to notice Bilba’s approach.

She knelt before him and offered the meager items she’d been able to find.

His eyes shifted to her and he gave a weak smile.

“Thank you.”

Bilba nodded and settled back as he ate. Her own stomach growled at her, reminding her how long it’d been since she’d eaten, but she ignored it.

A portion of the food, about half, slid into her view. Bilba shook her head but the rider insisted.

“Eat it.”

She sighed in exasperation but obeyed. The food did little more than wake her stomach up to greater hunger pains but it was better than nothing.

“What’s been happening?”

Bilba explained as best she could.

The dwarf nodded, his eyes lighting up at the mention of Azog’s injury. “Do you know what happened to the dwarf that fought him?”

Bilba shook her head.

He nodded and leaned back, his face tightening in pain for a brief moment before smoothing out again.

“And you say the battle appears to be over.” He sighed. “The orc presence is too strong here. I could have told them it would be futile.”

He was silent a long time after that. Bilba settled in next to him and studied the flickering patterns cast on the wall by the torches. She was very good at staying quiet.

“Does anyone know you’re down here?” The rider asked, the oddest look on his face.

Bilba shook her head. Generally Azog locked a metal collar around her throat at night, ensuring she couldn’t leave her corner. He couldn’t do it in his current condition, however, and no one else had bothered.

The rider closed his eyes, his lips moving soundlessly and his face twisting as though in some horrible pain though she couldn’t see any new injuries on him.
He struggled to his feet, his movements stiff and awkward. Moving slowly and carefully, one leg dragging from the weight of the manacle, he made his way to the dragon’s head and knelt. He stretched out his arms and lay his upper body across its massive snout like a child might hug a parent when a nightmare became too horrible to bear alone. For several long seconds he was completely silent. Then, in a voice almost too low to hear, he began to speak.

Bilba recognized the language she sometimes heard the few dwarf slaves speak. She didn’t understand the words but recognized the pain in his voice well enough.

The dragon never responded. The rider continued to speak, grief leaking into his voice. His head lowered and his voice gradually grew quieter.

The dragon’s breathing began to slow.

Bilba held still, as if by doing so she could pause time. She’d done much the same thing after her mother became ill.

The dragon breathed in and then exhaled, her sides deflating.

She did not inhale again.

The dwarf put his hands on both sides of her snout and leaned forward, his forehead resting against her. Bilba heard him let out a single sob, his shoulders shaking.

She got up and started to take a step forward but he was already pushing away and standing up. His face was bone white and the look in his eyes was one of utter devastation.

“I need a knife.”

Bilba frowned, her hands half forming a question.

He shook his head. “Now, please.”

Something in his voice sounded fractured. She’d heard that sound only once before, in her mother’s voice right before she died.

“Tell him, Bilba. Promise me you’ll tell him.”

She had promised then.

She obeyed now.

It wasn’t hard to find a blade, orcs weren’t known for their organization or cleanliness. She only had to go a few hundred feet out of the cavern before coming across a number of weapons scattered about. Most had been taken off captives and cast to the side or carried for a while before the orc had grown tired of it.

She caught the slight glint of metal in a corner, partly under some rocks, and dragged the weapon out. It was a beautiful long dagger, practically a sword for her, elvish looking in design with curling script etched into the blade. She hefted it in one hand and hurried back to the rider.

He was sitting against the dragon’s silent body when she returned, eyes staring vacantly into the distance.

When she offered the weapon he got up and took it from her. The look in his eyes was vacant, like he had been the one to die and not the dragon.
“Look away,” he ordered, his voice hoarse.

Bilba lifted her hands, confused.

“Now,” he ordered, his voice brooking no defiance.

Bilba flinched, reacting almost viscerally to the tone of command, and obediently turned her back.

There was silence behind her, for a long time.

She heard the rider take a deep breath and then a horrific squelching sound. Without thinking, Bilba turned around, just in time to see the rider use his good arm to drive the sword a second time into the belly of the dragon. Bilba raised an eyebrow in surprise. Did dwarves eat their dragons, then, as orcs did? She had no idea what dragon tasted like but always imagined it must be good as the orcs certainly hoarded it tightly enough. Azog in particular guarded the meat of the orc dragons like it was gold, storing it in his chambers in such quantities the smell alone made Bilba want to throw up.

The rider drove the knife in again, slicing deep. Blood sprayed out, drenching his hair and staining his clothes. He threw the sword down, his movements angry, and then shoved his way inside the dragon's stomach.

That was something she'd never seen before. What in all of Middle Earth was he DOING?

He returned a few seconds later, gasping out the breath he’d been holding, his entire body so covered in blood and gore he looked more like a monster than a dwarf. He carried something awkwardly in one arm but she couldn't see what it was under all the blood and whatever else covering him.

The rider nodded toward the sword on the ground. "Take that and strap it on."

Bilba gave him an incredulous look. Had he gone out of his mind? She would be killed, instantly, the second an orc saw her with a weapon.

His eyes narrowed for a second and then changed, grief clouding them. "Please."

Bilba sighed, she supposed she could humor him. The orcs were all on the upper levels anyway and she could just take the weapon off as soon as she left the room. She moved forward and picked it up, ripping part of the remnants of a sleeve off to use to tie the sword to her waist.

"It'll have to do for now," the rider said. He shifted and held out whatever was in his arm. "Here, take her."

Her?

At his insistence Bilba put her hands out and had the object placed in them. Warmth flooded her palms, followed by the unmistakable feel of something breathing. The realization she was holding a living creature startled her so badly she very nearly dropped it but recovered at the last second and pulled it close.

She could see now, through the blood, that what she was holding was a baby dragon. The tiny creature fit easily into her arms, its eyes closed and tiny wings were folded across its back.

"You have to get her out of here."

Bilba looked up at him, stunned. She had to do what?

"Please," the rider said again, "please, you know what will happen if Azog gets her." He rattled the
manacle on his leg. "I can't go so it has to be you." There was a desperation in his voice, his eyes wide and frantic.

He was right about Azog. Bilba had no doubt the orc would TRY to keep the baby alive but she also had no doubt he would fail. There was no way something this small could survive in the mines of Moria. She had survived but that had been a fluke, a miracle.

Azog would kill the baby just as he'd killed the mother and just as he would undoubtedly kill the rider once he found out what had happened. Her eyes went to the manacle and she mentally cursed the fact that she didn't know where Azog kept the key to it.

The rider grabbed her shoulders and looked her in the eye. "You can do this," he whispered, voice intense. "I know you can. Get her out of here. The dwarven army should still be in the area. Go to them, they'll protect you both."

Bilba began to tremble. She'd never known anything but the mines, could she actually survive outside? On her own?

_Free_?

She didn't even know what the word meant. It was an abstract concept. Her mother had tried to teach her but, having never experienced it, Bilba had no way to truly know what it was.

"I know you're scared," the rider said, "I do, but do you really want to stay? Would you rather risk dying out there, or in here?"

Out there.

The answer was instant. She wanted to experience the stories her mother had always told her. Stories of dragons and the sky, of the feel of grass under her feet and the wind in her hair.

Fear continued to inch along her nerves but now it was accompanied by a strange thrill, an excitement almost. She could feel her eyes widen, her breathing coming in short gasps.

She'd dreamed of this for so long, could she really do it?

What if the orcs caught her?

What if they didn't?

The rider stepped forward and hugged her suddenly, his good arm wrapping around her, careful of the baby dragon. Bilba barely had time to react to it before he was stepping back, smiling at her.

"Hurry," he said. "Every second you tarry is another second the army moves farther away. Go to them, quickly."

Bilba nodded, shaky and turned to leave.

As she reached the door she cast one final look back to see the rider had taken up a position by the dragon's snout. He had a leg drawn up and an arm thrown over his knee. His head was tilted back to rest against the dragon and, even from where she stood, Bilba could see the tears streaming down his face.

She turned away again, facing the dark opening that led into the rest of the mines. She moved quickly after that, keeping to the shadows. It was easy that far down, there were few orcs and the
slaves were all asleep. The ones who were awake didn't look at her, as usual, allowing her to walk right past without them giving her a second thought.

The shaking in her body grew worse the higher she went, as did the doubt.

What was she doing? She'd never make it through the gates. She'd be stopped and dragged before Azog. He'd take the baby and kill her and then what would she have accomplished other than her own death?

She should just take the baby to Azog. Throw the sword aside and take the baby to him and pretend like that had been her plan all along.

Bile rose in her throat and she bit it back even as her legs continued to carry her onward.

More orcs began to appear, most of them asleep in various corners and halls. The ones who were awake ignored her as she skittered past.

When she reached the front gate she stopped and stared, half convinced she was dreaming. Had she truly made it so far?

She stepped forward slowly, stopping just short of a patch of moonlight illuminating the rock outside the gates. A cool breeze drifted in from outside, wrapping around her body. By this time she was shaking so hard it was a wonder she didn't shatter into a million pieces. Her stomach was in knots and breathing was difficult.

She didn't know how long she stood there. There was no concern for a guard, the orcs were so convinced they could repel any attacker that they didn't bother to post one. It was now beginning to occur to Bilba that they were equally convinced the slaves were all so terrified that they wouldn't dare try to escape.

She imagined that would change after they realized she was gone.

In her arms the tiny dragon shifted, snuggling into her arms and settling itself once more. Bilba looked down at it and, again, imagined what would happen if someone like Azog got his hands on it.

You are not an orc, her mother's voice whispered once more, be sure you never act like one.

Bilba took a deep breath and let it out. Her stomach settled somewhat and an almost trancelike peace settled over her.

She stepped through the gates.

Halfway across the world, Fili, Crown Prince of Erebor, woke up from a dead sleep with a gasp.

Stumbling out of bed, the young prince ran out of his rooms and to one down the hall. Shoving the door open he raced across the floor, barely feeling the cold rock against his bare feet, and lunged into the bed, shaking its occupant.

"Kili! Kili! Wake up!"
Kili woke up with a start, automatically reacting in self-defense and lashing out at the form attacking him. Fili evaded the attack easily and wound up straddling his little brother, pinning him until Kili woke up entirely and recognized him. Even then he didn't move because it was nice to prove he could still kick his brother's butt even if Kili seemed intent on catching up with him in height.

"Fili," Kili said conversationally, "something I can do for you?"

Fili grinned at him widely. "My dragon was just born."

Kili blinked at him, his sleep heavy mind slowly processing the words. Then his eyes widened in shock. A moment later the world tilted wildly and Fili found himself flat on his back, his brother sitting on his chest smugly.

"Are you serious?" Kili asked, "you've felt it?"

"I did indeed," Fili answered, trying, unsuccessfully to flip his little brother off and then trying, equally unsuccessfully, to look at though he were allowing Kili to continue pinning him.

"That's fantastic!" Kili said then almost immediately frowned as a look of confusion entered his eyes. "I don't understand though, who's expecting right now?"

"No one that I know of," Fili said, "it must have been an early birth."

"Well, in that case," Kili drawled, "let's go find out, shall we?"

He scrambled off the bed and Fili rushed after him, racing him down the halls until they reached the levels where the dragons rested.

The dark, quiet levels.

Fili frowned in confusion, skidding to a halt at the entrance. For a birth the area should have been a hive of activity. Every rider within the mountain would have been awakened by their dragon...which, now that he thought about it...

"You weren't alerted?" He asked Kili.

Kili shook his head, looking as though he'd just thought of it himself. He tilted his head to one side and got a far off look in his eyes, a look Fili had longed to have himself for longer than he could remember.

After a moment Kili came back to himself, his expression one of confusion. "Lyth says there have been no births."

"But that's not possible," Fili said in desperation, "I know I felt it!"

"Maybe it was a wild drake," Kili said, reaching out to grab Fili's shoulder. "There are some still out there. Maybe it's--"

He went white, his eyes widening and a look of horror crossing his features.

Fili felt a surge of panic and he reached out to grab his brother's tunic. "Kili? What's wrong? What is it?"

Kili swallowed. "I just--I just thought of something."

"What?" Fili asked.
Kili looked at him and Fili could see he was struggling to decide whether or not to tell him.

"Quenth," he whispered finally. "She's pregnant, but she isn't due for months so I didn't think -- I mean, it COULDN'T be her, could it?"

Fili's hand went slack and fell off his brother's shirt. He staggered until his back hit the wall and then slid down in a boneless heap against it.

"Finally," he said numbly. "I've finally heard it." He looked at Kili and saw the pain in his brother's face that he was sure was reflected in his own.

"I heard it...and you're telling me it comes from the depths of Moria?"

"Uncle is there," Kili said, his voice desperate. "He'll -- he'll do something. I'm sure of it."

His tone rang false even as he said it and Fili didn't bother to answer him.

They both knew that, regardless of what happened, nothing would be the same ever again.
Chapter 2

Nothing happened.

Bilba stood frozen mere feet from the gates of Moria, blood-slicked stone cold beneath her feet. A breeze, heavy with the threat of rain, wrapped around her. The baby dragon was a solid weight in her arms, warmth from its tiny body radiating against her skin through her clothes.

She was outside Moria.

She drew in a deep breath and released it, then another and another. Her body felt strange, hot one second and cold the next. Her muscles wound tight with tension around her bones and a light tremor crawled across her skin. She hunched her shoulders, pulling her head down as best she could as she waited for the alarm to sound. Any minute she was sure orcs would come pouring out of the gate after her and wrench the baby dragon from her arms.

Seconds passed.

Nothing happened.

Bilba swallowed, feeling her nerves settle, if only minutely. She risked a look behind her but Moria continued to sleep.

She kept herself hunched and turned to survey the area before her. Clouds scudded across the sky, the moon shining through in brief bursts that cast a silver glow over the remnants of the battle. Orc and dwarf, even firedrakes lay crumpled and silent. The only movement was the occasional brief flutter of a sleeve or hair, the breeze giving false life to the fallen.

Most likely the orcs would leave the dead to rot, though it was also possible they would go out and harvest what they could for food, particularly the dragons.

Orcs were not picky eaters.

For a brief second, Bilba considered it herself, but then rejected it.

“We are not orcs, Bilba. Do not act like one.”

She was still standing there like an idiot.

What should she do?

The rider told her to go to the dwarves but the only ones she could see would not be going anywhere but back to earth. The dwarven army, whatever had been left of it, was gone. She saw no sign or hint of what direction they’d headed.

Should she go back and ask the rider?

She risked another look behind her, considering, but then rejected that also. She didn’t want to go back in there, not for anything.

“If you ever escape, Bilba, go to the Shire, or Erebor and find your father.”

Bilba’s mind calmed. Her mother had told her what to do. She would do that.
She took a shuffling step to her left. When her mother had still been alive she’d used to describe the outside world to Bilba over and over and over again. As they worked her mother would have her memorize what’d she’d taught, querying Bilba on the best way to get from one location to another, no matter where she was.

After her mother had died Bilba had learned to visualize the journeys in her mind. She would often spend hours, particularly after she’d drawn Azog’s notice, mentally traveling all over the Middle Earth of her imagination.

Because of that she now knew that left would take her in the direction of a pass that would allow her to go through the mountains and toward the Shire. If she didn't take the pass and continued on instead she would eventually find a path through the forest of Mirkwood that would take her to Erebor.

She would not go to Erebor. Her father had never come for them, no matter how much her mother had believed.

Bilba would certainly not go to him now.

She picked her way carefully among the corpses, trying not to slip on areas that were still slick. Many of the bodies had been cut open or mangled in various ways and she picked her way around spilled organs and guts strewn across the landscape. The sight did not bother her. She’d seen worse.

She’d DONE worse, thanks to Azog.

A number of weapons were also thrown about and she paused a few times to look at them but could find none as good as the one she already carried.

In her arms the little dragon slept on, oblivious to the carnage.

Bilba pressed on, eventually passing the remnants of battle. She went through a narrow passage of rock, a lifetime spent in the mountain guiding her instinctively over the stone.

The night was just beginning to lighten with the promise of dawn when she reached the end of it. By this time the little dragon had begun to drag at her arms, slowly becoming heavier as she tired. She stopped near the last bit of rock and set down for a few seconds, settling the small creature on her lap to give her arms a chance to rest.

She kept her ears open for any sound of pursuit. If she were very lucky her absence wouldn’t be noticed until Azog recovered, if he did. She hoped to be able to put at least a few days between her and Moria before anyone knew she was gone.

After that she had no doubt Azog would be after both her and the dragon.

Deciding she’d rested long enough she pushed to her feet, fighting off a wave of dizziness as she did. The threat of rain had dissipated as she traveled and the clouds had moved off, leaving nothing to dim the sun as it rose and illuminated the landscape in front of her.

She knew what grass and dirt looked like. Sometimes when she’d sneak to the front gates she’d catch glimpses of it stretching away before the foot of the mountain, racing off to the trees in the far distance.

Her mother told her that the Shire was filled to bursting with grass, deep emerald in color and impossibly soft underfoot. This grass certainly didn't match her mother's description. It was brown and sparse, rock and dirt visible in many areas.
Bilba sighed; her feet would no doubt be torn to ribbons.

She started to step forward, only to stop as a tiny squawk caught her attention. She looked down and found the tiny dragon awake, her eyes looking up at her. The baby female squawked again and Bilba could swear she heard a note of curiosity in the little girl's tone.

Bilba hesitated and then adjusted the dragon until she could clasp her around the midsection and lift her up to eye level. The little dragon curled her lower body forward, lifting her tail to wrap around one of Bilba’s wrists.

The tiny creature squawked again and, this time, Bilba was positive she heard a questioning tone. She knew firedrakes were smart but how smart? And how young? Did they come out knowing things?

She chewed on her lip, studying the little baby, who calmly returned the favor. The little dragon was still drenched in blood, so much that Bilba couldn’t begin to guess what color she was.

Her eyes, however, were a multitude of colors, purple, blue and green. They swirled and shifted hypnotically and it was only with a supreme effort that Bilba dragged her gaze away before she ended up lost in them.

She started to settle the dragon back in her arms only to have her squawk in what could only be annoyance and flail, trying to get back up to her eye level. Bilba flinched at the level of the noise, it echoed against the rock around them.

She lifted the baby up again and frowned in frustration.

Without understanding why, and feeling quite stupid for it, she focused as best she could and THOUGHT at the tiny creature.

*You have to be quiet. There are bad things after us.*

The dragon cocked her head to one side as though listening, giving Bilba a considering look. Bilba could feel her arms dragging again and wondered how she would manage to carry the little creature all the way to the Shire while maintaining the speed they’d need to keep away from any orcs that came after them. Not to mention the fact she couldn’t use her sword in case of danger while her hands were taken up by the dragon.

Without warning the dragon began wiggling, tiny front legs reaching for her. Bilba hesitated and then moved her arms closer to her body. The creature was too small to actually hurt her so she might as well see what it wanted.

As soon as the baby got close enough she latched onto the rags that made up Bilba's shirt, carefully wiggled out her arms and then swarmed over her shoulders and behind her neck, ending up with her head and front legs draped over one of Bilba's shoulders and her tail and back legs over the other. Bilba felt the baby's tail lightly wrap around her throat and tensed but there was no pressure and she relaxed again.

She took another deep breath and stepped off stone for the first time in her life.

Immediately rocks and granules of sand scratched and bit at the bottom of her feet. The grass was dry and crumbled at her touch or lightly teased along her skin, leaving an annoying, itchy feel behind.

Definitely nothing like what her mother had described.
Bilba clenched her teeth and moved on; she’d endured pain a thousand times worse than this before without complaint and for far less reward. Where she’d come out the forest of Lothlorien now lay behind her and open plain stretched ahead. Much of the grass was tall and there were large rocks every now and then. Bilba did the best she could to stay in those areas as much as possible in the hopes of avoiding anyone pursuing.

The sun rose as did the heat and Bilba soon felt sweat prickling at her scalp and along her skin. The dirt and blood felt suffocating and, even worse, the smell of it combined with her own unwashed scent soon nearly made her sick.

At least she wouldn’t have to worry about anything attacking her as the smell would undoubtedly drive it off.

Her mouth began to feel parched, her lips cracked but she pushed on. Her body had little energy to give on a normal day and her feet soon dragged, her stomach clawing at her spine in hunger spasms but she forced it back, her natural stubbornness coming to the forefront.

Once she’d cursed that stubbornness as it had brought her the attention of Azog but now she welcomed it, doggedly pressing onward. She knew the basic layout of the land from her mother’s teachings. There was water, she knew there was, she just had to reach it.

Through it all the baby made no complaint. She knew the little creature had to be every bit as miserable as she was but the little girl lay quietly across her shoulders. The only sign the small creature was even still alive was the movement of her sides against Bilba's neck as she breathed. A few times Bilba reached up to touch the baby and was rewarded with a tiny nuzzle against her hand, showing the little girl was awake.

The small drake seemed to understand what was going on and, again, left Bilba questioning just how intelligent she was.

The sun had passed overhead and was sinking back toward the opposite horizon before Bilba caught sight of a thin strip of water in the distance. Her heart leapt in her chest and, as though in reaction, the little dragon lifted her head as well.

Quickening her steps as much as she could, and trying to ignore the pain from a thousand cuts and bruises she’d sustained through the course of the day, Bilba staggered to reach it. The strip never got much larger, it was little more than a stream, but it was water and she’d never been so grateful to see it. She nearly collapsed next to it, plunging her hand in and scooping up great draughts. In all her days she’d never tasted such water. Free from grit or debris, no strange aftertaste, barely any taste at all in fact.

Still, even the greatest water did not prevent her from almost immediately turning to the side and throwing most of it up, her stomach unused to having ANYTHING in such great quantity in so short a span of time. Even when events approached and Azog allowed her to eat more so as to not be disgraced by her falling to a lesser opponent because of starvation she'd never had THIS much of food OR water.

Once she was done throwing up she tried again, more careful this time, using the water to rinse her mouth out and then taking slow sips until her thirst was more or less slackened.

The dragon meanwhile had carefully picked down her arm and settled on the bank next to the water. As Bilba watched the little baby reached out and stuck her muzzle into the water, her small forked tongue reaching out to taste the liquid. Almost immediately she jerked back, looking at the water as though it’d sprouted horns, and then turned to give Bilba a pitiful look.
The baby couldn’t drink the water.

Bilba felt her gut clench. What did baby dragons eat? She rarely saw the orc dragon babies, unless they were being served to Azog on a silver platter. The adults ate meat but they also drank water, were babies so different?

*I’m sorry.* She thought at the baby. *I don’t know how to help you.*

The baby slumped, her head going down. As she did, however, she stretched her neck out and gently nuzzled Bilba’s hand, as though trying to reassure Bilba that there was no blame to be had. Gently, Bilba picked the baby up and edged closer to the water. There was at least one thing she could do for the little creature. The sun had not yet set and there was still enough warmth left that she was fairly sure she could get the little drake cleaned up and dried off before the temperature fell. The little baby seemed more than happy to get cleaned and held patiently still as Bilba scrubbed the blood and gore off. As she worked on the tiny wings she frowned at how soft and pliable they felt. The orc dragons, and the firedrake in the cavern, had rigid wings, a framework almost with membrane stretched over it. Was there something wrong with the baby dragon’s wings?

The little dragon looked up at her and gave a happy squawk as though trying to answer her and then settled down again. Bilba sighed and put it aside, she had more than enough to worry about without adding the little creature’s wings to the mix. The blood came off; revealing blue scales the color of brilliant sapphire.

The color of the sky.

The last rays of the sun sparkled off them, the scales glittering like freshly cut jewels. Bilba picked the little baby up, turning the small creature this way and that to watch the light reflect off her body. As she did she felt her eyes widen as she happened to notice another interesting fact about the tiny dragon.

The rider, it would seem, had been mistaken.

The dragon was most definitely not a girl. 

*Well* she thought, accepting that the dragon appeared to be able to hear her thoughts, *it would seem I owe you an apology. You appear to be male.*

The dragon gave her a smug look as though to say, *well obviously.*

The last of the sun vanished beneath the horizon and Bilba could feel the air already cooling. She wouldn’t be able to bathe that night, not that she really felt she could. If she tried to wash with her clothes on she had no doubt they’d disintegrate and if she tried to take them off she imagined she’d only end up with the same outcome.

So, unless she wanted to walk to the Shire naked, she’d have to stay as she was, for the moment at least.

She got back to her feet and the dragon took HIS place once more, curling across her shoulders. As he did Bilba heard his stomach growl and felt another pang of panic. He’d had neither food nor drink since he’d been born. How long could he go without either?
She struggled to her feet and started walking again, crossing the stream and then changing direction to walk alongside it. According to her mother there should be a river around somewhere and she was hoping the stream attached to it. Once she found the river she could follow it to where a second, smaller river branched off and that one would lead her through the mountains in the direction of the Shire.

Assuming one or both of them didn’t die of starvation first.

In the end she did find the river, nearly two days later.

By this time the lack of any food had her nearly crawling more than walking. The world around her seemed dominated by black spots and the landscape was permanently tilted at an odd angle. Bilba could barely manage to lift one foot in front of the other and was forced to stumble along in what was more or less a straight line. The land had grown steadily wetter and muddier, causing her to struggle even harder as she made her way through. She’d tried using the sword as a crutch for a while but, as the ground grew wetter, it began to sink with each step until it was useless and took too much effort to drag out of the mire.

The dragon was even worse than she was. He’d had nothing to eat or drink and, as time passed, he’d had grown quieter and quieter. His scales had lost their luster and dulled, reminding Bilba of his mother before she’d died. He slept a lot as well, sometimes so deeply she couldn’t rouse him.

When they’d finally reached the river, passing underneath the canopy of a small copse of trees, it seemed a cruel jest.

Because they weren’t going to make it to the Shire.

They weren’t going to make it anywhere.

Bilba collapsed at the base of a large tree and pulled the dragon into her lap before sagging against the trunk.

She doubted she had the strength to get back up again.

She rested her hands on the dragon, feeling his back rising and falling under her palms. Bilba felt her eyes close and she rested her head back on the bark.

At least she would get to die outside Moria, it was more than her mother, or probably the rider, had gotten.

She wondered if anyone mourned the rider. He’d believed an entire army of dwarves marched on the mountain to save him, did they mourn failing to free him? Did they mourn the dead who’d fallen in the attempt?

Her mind drifted further, taking her where her body could not. She rushed along the river to the smaller tributary and then up to a cleft in the mountains. Her mind darted through and out the other side, watching as the whole world opened up before her. She darted, her imagination giving her wings, over the tops of trees until she reached the Shire. There she saw the small homes her mother had so often described, the fat, well dressed Hobbits with no despair in their eyes, the quiet laughter of children who’d never known the feel of a lash.
She reached out to touch it, only to have it burst and fade.

It had only been a dream.

She relaxed to the sound of water rushing over rocks in the river, the breeze rustling through branches in the tree overhead. A sense of something she’d never felt before settled over her, a calm she’d never had in the mines.

Perhaps it would not be so bad a thing after all, to die here in this place. She wished she could have saved the dragon from such a fate but, at the least, she’d saved him from Azog. He could die here with her and perhaps the two of them would be left alone, forever settled under a tree watching silently as the Ages passed.

Under her hands the little dragon stirred. The action woke Bilba up just a bit, her mind moving sluggishly.

Without warning the dragon jerked, his body shooting up and throwing her hands off. He squawked, his tiny voice carrying through the small glade they were in.

Adrenaline surged through Bilba, bringing her back to full consciousness in an instant. Her eyes snapped open to see the dragon on his hind legs squawking excitedly at the sky. His tiny wings flapped wildly, uselessly, as though he could lift off from sheer force of will.

A roar rang out overhead.

Bilba felt her heart stop, liquid fear surging through her veins.

She grabbed the dragon and clutched him in one arm even as she scrabbled for her sword with the other.

Useless, her mind said, useless, useless, what are you going to do with a sword against a DRAGON?

She moved, managing to get to her knees before her body effectively laughed at her and refused to do any more.

The little dragon continued to make noise, ignoring her as she desperately thought at him to be quiet.

A second roar, even closer, and then it was far too late as she saw it land a few feet outside the copse of trees.

The dragon wasn’t an orc dragon, for which she was eternally relieved, but it also wasn’t a firedrake. It was far smaller than a firedrake, maybe twice the size of the orc dragons, with bright, emerald green scales. Its body was stockier and thicker but more compact than what she was used to seeing and its wings were separate from its front legs unlike a drake’s, rising up over its head in a brilliant yellow and green color. The muzzle was less angular and the neck and tail were also shorter.

The overall effect, though definitely a dragon, was oddly not the least bit scary.

The baby gave a tiny, questioning squawk and Bilba looked down to see him, looking at her. He squawked again, and then gave a slow, deliberate look from her to the other dragon and then back again.

Bilba had the distinct impression she was being talked down to by a baby dragon.
She was definitely being talked down to.

There was movement and then someone was dismounting from the back of the green dragon. Bilba stiffened, feeling a flush of heat as fear clutched at her. She was in no condition to fight. If the stranger approaching wanted to harm her or the baby there was nothing she could do about it.

As the figure approached Bilba, for a brief second, thought she was looking at her mother. A surge of grief washed over her and the back of her eyes burned though she refused to let any tears fall.

The other woman drew nearer and now Bilba could see that her hair, which flowed down her back in lustrous waves, was much darker than her mother's. Her eyes were also different, brown instead of blue and her face had an angular, square shape her mother had not possessed. She was healthier than Bilba’s mother too, dressed in trousers, a vest and shirt. She wore no shoes but didn’t seem to notice how hard the ground was under her feet.

Bilba became aware of how she must look, and smell, to the other woman and drew back slightly. Maybe she could have if the idiot dragon had shut up but, no, he was making as much racket as ever. The green dragon made a low noise and the woman turned for a second to look back at it before resuming her walk forward.

When she got near enough to see Bilba clearly her eyes widened in shock, and possibly horror, before her entire face went blank. Staying well out of range of Bilba’s sword, the other woman carefully knelt on one knee.

“It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you,” she said her voice musical. “My name is Primula.” She nodded over her shoulder and continued, “That’s Snapdragon. I just promised her that you weren’t planning to run me through with that sword. I do hope I won’t be proven a liar.”

Bilba stared at her. Her arm was already beginning to tire and the point of the sword seemed determined to not stay up no matter how hard she tried.

Primula had to have noticed but made no attempt to come closer. Instead she nodded at the little dragon Bilba held. “That baby doesn’t look very good, is he, or she, hurt?”

Bilba hesitated. Her eyes went to the green dragon, Snapdragon, noting how healthy it looked. Surely Primula would know what a baby dragon ate, right?

She put her sword down slowly and then indicated the water behind her with one hand, trying to show that the baby hadn’t been able to drink it.

Primula’s eyes narrowed as she tried to make out what Bilba was saying and then widened with comprehension. “Oh, no, of course not. That baby is much too young, babies need milk.”

Milk? Bilba raised her eyes in question. Where would she find milk?

Again, Primula seemed to understand. “The mother,” she said gently. “Babies need their mother. Do you know where she is?”

Bilba’s face fell. She reached down and lightly tugged on her clothing, stained with blood.

Primula paled. “Oh.” It was her turn to hesitate as she started to get up, stopped, and then started...
again. “Could I see the baby? Would that be ok?”

Bilba shot a look at Snapdragon again and then carefully held the baby dragon out. It did odd things to her heart when she did it but, in the end, she wanted the baby to be okay and if that meant giving him to someone who knew how to help him then so be it.

Primula came forward and the little dragon politely moved into her lap, though its tail reached back and wrapped around Bilba’s wrist.

“You’re much too young,” Primula said, examining the small creature, “much, much too young. I’m not sure you should even be born yet.” She looked up at Bilba again and said, “I can help him, if you’ll let me. There are more dragons where I come from. Some of them are nursing and I know they’d never turn away an orphaned baby.”

Bilba chewed on her lower lip but nodded. She wanted the baby to be safe, it was what the rider had wanted and she was sure it would have been what her mother wanted.

Primula stood up, carefully disentangling the baby’s tail from Bilba’s wrist, and walked back to Snapdragon. Bilba settled back against the tree again, ignoring the sudden empty feeling on her wrist, as she watched Primula lift the baby onto Snapdragon’s back. The green dragon angled her head around, appearing to nuzzle the baby. She could hear him squawking from where she sat and saw Primula speak to him for a second before turning and heading back.

As she approached, Bilba lifted an eyebrow in surprise. Why had she returned?

“All right,” Primula said, kneeling beside her. “Your turn.”

Bilba looked at her askance. Her turn WHAT?

“Don’t give me that look,” Primula scolded, “I’m not very well going to leave you here in that condition, not to mention the baby refuses to leave without you. Now come on, the sooner we get out of here the better.”

She ducked and slid an arm around Bilba’s waist. With her other hand she grabbed Bilba’s arm and dragged it across her shoulders before rising to her feet, dragging Bilba with her. Bilba barely had time to grab her sword with her free hand as she was lifted, unwilling to leave it behind.

“You’re barely skin and bones,” Primula said, her voice angry, “whoever did this to you deserves to be roasted alive.”

Bilba mentally agreed. She was forced to lean heavily on the other woman, her feet barely keeping her up. Together they were able to get her over to the green dragon, however, where Bilba saw the baby curled up on the front of a large saddle.

Snapdragon lowered herself until she was laying on the ground and Primula helped Bilba get on. Once she was settled, Primula reached down and began unhooking a number of leather straps from the side of the saddle. She wrapped them around Bilba’s legs and waist before securing them back to the saddle. “I don’t usually use these because Snapdragon and I don’t do a lot of acrobatics but they’ll keep you from slipping off.” She took Bilba’s sword and slid it through several more straps, securing it to the side of the saddle. “There,” she said, “don’t want you accidentally skewering our ride.”

She clambered onto the saddle in front of Bilba and grinned back at her. “Will this be your first flight?”
Bilba nodded, her eyes wide. She’d reached down to twist her hands in the straps, her fingers shaking slightly from more than just fatigue and hunger. Primula reached back and patted her hand gently. “It’ll be alright. Just hold on, okay?”

Bilba nodded again and Primula turned back around.

Snapdragon crouched, muscles bunching beneath her and then leapt, her wings unfurling with a snap to either side of her body.

Bilba was thrown back, the straps digging into her waist and legs even as her heart leapt into her throat. She held onto the straps so tight it was a wonder she didn’t snap her own fingers from the pressure. She could feel gravity pulling at her and wind rushing past, stealing her breath as they climbed higher and higher. Snapdragon’s wings pushed at the air, driving them up. Bilba risked a look down and felt her breath freeze in her throat as the land receded beneath them rapidly.

Without warning they dropped a foot or two and then settled into a smooth glide, Snapdragon’s wings beating with far less frequency as they were propelled forward instead of up.

Bilba found herself breathing hard, her hands shaking with adrenaline and shock. In front of her Primula looked back with a question in her eyes. The wind was rushing past them so Bilba doubted she’d have heard the other woman if she spoke but she read the question just the same. She nodded and Primula smiled at her before turning back.

Bilba focused on calming down as they continued to glide through the air. Flying was the one thing her mother had talked about the most. She had not been bonded to a dragon but Bilba’s father had been and her mother would tell the story of him taking her up for the first time over and over again. She never grew old of describing the sensation of soaring through the air on the back of her husband’s dragon, arms clasped around his waist.

Bilba tilted her head back, gazing up into the sky. It stretched in all directions, racing off endlessly into the distance. Below her the earth rushed past at dizzying speeds. She thought of how long it would take her to cover the same distances on foot, locked to the rock and dirt beneath her feet.

She thought, perhaps, she understood a little of what her mother’s fascination had been.

They flew for a long, long time. Bilba’s adrenaline faded and, with it gone, the exhaustion returned. It was fortunate Primula had strapped her in as she soon found herself drifting, lulled by the gentle motion of the flight.

At some point she felt her stomach drop and she jerked upright in surprise, expecting to find herself falling from the saddle. Instead she realized they were going down that she started awake, a new slight surge of adrenaline waking her up once more.

She looked down to see where they were and felt her breath catch in her throat.

They were soaring over lush, verdant fields. In the near distance a cluster of hills rose in her field of vision. Small round doors were set into them, windows with flower boxes and small fences bordering them. Dirt paths led from each home and then wound down leisurely toward a collection of stalls and booths featuring what looked like food and other items.

And there were Hobbits. Hobbits like Primula dressed in fine clothes, healthy weight with smiles on their face and easy gaits, their lives relaxed and calm.

Bilba swallowed hard and felt her throat constrict as Snapdragon began to spiral down toward the house on the top of the hill. A large meadow stretched out behind it, starting from a tree on top of the
hill and sloping back. Dragons, all of them the same bright green color though of varying shapes and sizes, lounged about in the grass and near a river at the base of the meadow. Several more swooped lazily through the air, carrying riders on the currents.

They landed on the top of the hill, near the large tree. As soon as they did the little baby dragon popped his head up and began squawking loudly.

Instantly a half dozen or more heads turned their way in the field. By the time Primula had dismounted a small crowd of dragons was surrounding them.

Primula gently lifted the baby down and cradled him in her arms.

“He’s been orphaned,” she said to the crowd, “and is far too young to eat on his own. Would anyone be willing to be a surrogate for him?”

Immediately there was movement at the back of the crowd. A dragon, smaller and more petite than the others, moved forward. As she did Bilba saw she had a baby of her own snuggled on her back. She stepped up and reached down to nuzzle the baby dragon Primula held.

Primula smiled. “Thank you Daisy.”

She moved forward and lightly settled the baby on Daisy’s back, next to the other baby. It woke up blearily, acknowledged its new friend and then settled back again.

Daisy turned and began to move off, a small crowd following her. Bilba reached to pull the straps off, wanting to go after him.

“It’s okay,” Primula said, beside her. “You’ll see him again soon; they’ll take good care of him.” She reached up and started to undo the straps keeping Bilba in the saddle.

Bilba swayed as a wave of dizziness washed over her.

“Anyway, in the meantime let’s get you cleaned up too, okay?” Primula smiled at her. “Come on.”

Snapdragon lay down again and Primula grabbed Bilba’s arms, helping her slide out of the saddle.

Bilba’s feet hit the grass and it was as soft and thick and lush as her mother had said. Again her eyes watered and, to her horror, a tear leaked out of one eye and tracked down her face. She reached up and scrubbed it away aggressively. Weakness in the mines was never tolerated.


Bilba felt her own lips twitch, moving in a parody of Primula’s expression though the action felt foreign.

Then darkness rushed in and she promptly passed out flat on the ground.

The very last thought she had before the black took her completely was her imagination had been a poor, poor substitute for the reality.
The news was a thousand times worse than they could possibly have imagined.

Thror was dead.

Thrain, in despair had gone insane. Before he could be recovered both he and his dragon had been set upon.

Both were dead.

Over half the firedrakes of Erebor and a third of the army had been slaughtered. The rest were even then limping home, bloodied and defeated.

They had failed.

None of them had spoken after the announcement by the messenger, simply staring in numb shock. Dis had finally reacted, letting out a wail ripped straight from the bottom of her soul and collapsing to her knees. Vili had gone down with her, holding her and rocking her as she sobbed.

Kili spoke, his voice stunned. "And what of uncle Frerin? And Quenth?"

The messenger swallowed thickly and Fili felt himself feel a pang of sympathy for the dwarf. He wondered how it was he'd come to be tasked with so horrible a responsibility.

"His Majesty says he felt the bond break with Quenth," the dwarf explained, "it is assumed Prince Frerin was lost at the same time, though it would be impossible to confirm it."

Kili sucked in a breath and staggered, his hand flailing wildly until it found a chair. He gripped the edge and sank into it, dropping his head into his hands.

That left Fili as the only one standing, staring dumbly at the dwarf who'd called them all to a private council chamber to break the news.

His Majesty. He was talking about uncle Thorin, Fili thought. Uncle Thorin who'd just found himself King under the Mountain right after losing his grandfather, father, brother/dragon partner and dragon.

"Did he feel the bond break before or after great-grandfather and grandfather fell?"

His voice sounded odd to his own ears, strangely calm even though Fili's hands were clenched in fists and his body was shaking.

"After."

Fili sighed. When a bond with a dragon was broken the shock was so intense it effectively deafened a person, temporarily blocking out all other bonds. Had the bond with Quenth broken first then uncle Thorin would not have felt the bonds with Thrain and Thror as they'd broken, just as he'd not felt the break when uncle Frerin undoubtedly died alongside Quenth. As it was, however, the break had been later meaning uncle Thorin had felt every death but the last, that of his brother.

"How is Uncle doing?" He couldn't imagine what that must have felt like. A bond between a rider and dragon was limitless in scope but bonds between fellow dwarves, or anyone else, had a range. Fili had felt his with his uncle Frerin fade into silence a while ago and had felt the bonds with his great-grandfather, grandfather and uncle Thorin fade slowly as they'd set off.

He hadn't felt any of them break, they'd been too far away.
"As well as can be expected," came the response. "They are returning home even now. His Majesty insisted on coming with the ground troops and Captain Dwalin refused to go ahead with the dragons so they shall all return together."

Fili nodded and waved a hand vaguely, dismissing the dwarf. After he had left, Fili walked to a nearby chair and sank into it, dropping his head back against the headrest. He didn't bother to ask about Quenth's pregnancy. Most likely the babies had died with her. Even if by some miracle they hadn't the entirety of Erebor's army had not been able to get uncle Frerin out, there was no way the remnant could be expected to go back now on the off chance that one of the babies had survived.

Fili sent a silent prayer to Mahal that the dragon he'd felt born had indeed been the offspring of a wild drake and it would find its way to him someday soon when it got older.

In the meantime Fili mourned for those he'd lost. He went to the places inside his mind where the bonds with each lay and felt the silence echoing down them. Even then it didn't feel like it was real. He was sure that if he just waited long enough he'd feel them again, that the bonds would reawaken as his family came together, complete once more. Perhaps one day, far, far in the future his mind would be able to accept that silence was all he had from them now, and all there would ever be.

But he doubted it.
“It’s carrying a SWORD in case you hadn’t noticed!”

“Look at what’s been done to him! I’d be carrying a sword too!”

“You don’t even know what it is under all that….filth. You could have brought an orc into the Shire!”

“Oh for the love of – HE is not an orc, Lobelia. You know as well as I do no firedrake would associate with an orc.”

“The dragon is a baby, it doesn’t know any better!”

“YOU know better. He’s not an orc!”

“Well if it’s not an orc why haven’t you talked to it? You don’t even know its name!”

“His shields are shredded. I’m not touching his mind until I have his permission.”

“Ridiculous. I’ve told you and told you that your insistence on flying wherever you felt like going would get you in trouble and now look what you’ve done. Brought some….thing into the Shire!”

“He isn’t a thing, Lobelia. He’s a person. A dwobbit, judging by his look.”

“Wonderful, because that’s just what we need more of.”

“Lobelia! That’s enough!”

Bilba blinked slowly, the world drifting back into focus. Primula was kneeling beside her, glaring up at another woman. The second woman was about the same age but with a stern face, currently twisted in a scowl, and lighter hair pulled back in a tight bun. She wore drab clothing and carried an empty basket over one arm. She was currently looking at Bilba in much the same way the orcs had.

Bilba shifted, trying to push to a sitting position. Primula grinned, grabbing her arm to help her up.

“You’re awake! I was beginning to worry.”

“I wasn’t,” the other woman grumbled.

“If you can’t be civil,” Primula snapped. “You can leave.”

Lobelia opened her mouth to respond but Snapdragon, lying behind Bilba, gave a warning growl. The unpleasant woman huffed, “Well I never. To think of a hobbit dragon threatening a hobbit! Clearly you’ve been a poor influence Primula, a very poor influence indeed.”

She spun on her heel and stalked off, still muttering deprecations under her breath.

Primula sighed, watching her go. “It’s little wonder she was never chosen.” She turned her attention back to Bilba. “Don’t worry about her. She’s just bitter and takes it out on everyone. Come on, I bet you’d feel better after a warm meal and a hot bath.”

She pulled Bilba up and supported her with an arm around the waist.

“Just skin and bones,” Primula lamented, “you poor thing.”
Bilba wondered what the woman would say if she told her how well off she would be considered by
the other Moria slaves. If she’d escaped just before or after an arena event she’d have been even
healthier, though still nowhere close to Primula or the other woman she’d just seen, Lobelia.

As Primula helped her around Snapdragon, toward the road at the bottom of the large field, Bilba
noticed a large crowd of people gathering. Most were hobbits like Primula but she saw a number of
Dwarves scattered throughout the crowd also. Many of them wore armor and carried weapons, an
odd contrast in the peaceful environment. According to her mother the dwarves had a garrison in the
Shire, providing protection from orc raids in return for food supplies sent to the colony Erebor had
established in the Blue Mountains.

A lot of good that garrison had done her mother.

She also saw a few that were clearly neither dwarf nor hobbit. They were closer in height to the
dwarves but their bodies were slimmer. They all wore shoes and many of the males sported stubble
on their chins. Bilba remembered others like them in the mines, dwobbits like her, the product of a
liaison between a dwarf and a hobbit.

Near the back of the crowd a commotion started and Bilba felt herself tense. A male hobbit pushed
through, tall and rotund with short, dark curly hair.

“Primula,” he shouted as he neared, “are you all right? What’s happened?”

Bilba tried to draw back but Primula tightened her grip. “It’s all right,” she said, “It’s just Drogo, my
husband.”

She smiled brightly at Drogo and called, “It’s fine dear, just some excitement.”

Drogo scowled. His eyes flicked over Bilba and narrowed. “Lobelia is carrying on about you
bringing an orc into the Shire.”

Primula scoffed, “honestly, that woman.” She started to say more but, at that moment, Bilba’s legs
decided to buckle and Primula staggered, trying to hold her up. Drogo moved in and, a moment later,
had swept Bilba up in his arms.

Bilba went rigid, clasping her hands in her lap and wishing desperately that her sword wasn’t still
strapped to Snapdragon’s side. She focused her eyes on her hands but not before she caught the
startled look that flashed across Drogo’s face.

Primula put her hands on her hips. “As you can no doubt tell he’s not exactly a threat. Do you think
we might continue this conversation inside, away from prying eyes, and perhaps AFTER we do
something about the half-starved DWOBBIT?” She said the last word loudly, directing it toward the
crowd at the fence.

Bilba didn’t hear Drogo say anything but he must have nodded or something because suddenly they
were walking away from the crowd and toward the nearest house, the one she’d seen at the top of
the hill when they were flying in.

Primula opened the front door and Drogo strode in, still carrying Bilba with ease. Inside Bilba saw a
large foyer filled with comfortable-looking furniture and knick knacks. The door, once shut behind
Primula, sealed completely, leaving only silence inside.

“This way,” Primula said to her husband and headed down a long hallway. Drogo followed his wife
and Bilba kept still, unsure of what they planned to do with her. She imagined she’d have a good
chance of escaping them both if the need arose but, for the moment at least, they hadn’t threatened
her so stayed still.

Primula opened a second room and entered. As Drogo carried her inside, Bilba saw the floor under Drogo’s feet had changed, from the wood of the hall to tile. She’d seen tile before, in some of the rooms of Moria, elaborate and decorated with gold leaf and other precious gems. Here it was a simple white and much cleaner than the cracked and stained remnants of the mines.

Drogo set her down and she stumbled slightly, the tile cool beneath her feet. It leeches into the cuts on her soles, numbing the pain somewhat. He grabbed her arm, supporting her. Bilba saw a counter with a mirror over it and a massive basin of some kind in the corner. Just behind it was a round window set high in the wall. It was open and a cool breeze wafted in. Primula walked over and turned a knob at the top of the basin. Bilba jumped as water spewed from it.

Seeing the look on her face, Primula smiled and said, “This is called a bathtub. Have you seen one before?”

Bilba shook her head.

“That’s okay,” Primula continued, “it’s to get you cleaned up. I’m sure you must not feel good having all that dirt on you.”

Bilba shrugged. It didn’t feel good at all but she was used to it.

“Can’t he talk?” Drogo’s voice came from behind her. As he spoke, Bilba adjusted her stance to keep both hobbits in her line of sight.

Primula rolled her eyes, “He HEARS perfectly fine and you can see he understands so why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Drogo shrugged and his eyes shifted focus. For a second, just a brief second, Bilba felt something brush against her mind. She screamed and wrenched back, losing her balance and hitting the floor hard, her elbows cracking against the surface and sending pain racing up her nerves.

At the same time she heard Primula yell, “No!” and what felt like a wall slammed in front of her mind. A second later Primula dropped next to Bilba, her hands reaching out to her. Bilba made a strangled sound and moved further, her back hitting the wall. A tremor ran over her body and her heart raced.

Primula dropped her hands immediately though she stayed on her knees on the floor. She glared at her husband. “What is wrong with you?” she demanded, “can’t you see the state his shields are in? What were you thinking?”

Drogo looked stunned, his eyes wide. “I’m sorry,” he stammered, “I didn’t…I mean I’ve never seen….” He trailed off helplessly, lifting his hands and then dropping them again. “I’m sorry.”

Primula sighed. “Why don’t you go see if you can find some clothes for him to wear and maybe put some soup on? I’ll take care of him in here.”

Drogo hesitated. “I hardly think that’s appropriate--”

“Oh, for Yavanna’s sake,” Primula cut in, “it’s not like he has anything I haven’t seen before.”

Drogo looked hesitant but, after a moment of awkward shuffling, he nodded and left, pulling the door nearly closed behind him.
Primula turned her attention back to Bilba. “I’m sorry. He didn’t mean any harm.”

Bilba gave her a suspicious glance. She hadn’t known it was so common for others to be able to
touch her mind like Azog had. Her mother had never explained anything like that. The rider had
tried, briefly, but she’d still chalked it up to something rare. Just how many people could get inside
her head without her permission?

Primula was still kneeling next to her, hands in her lap, patiently waiting. Carefully, Bilba uncoiled
and sat up, wary. Primula smiled brightly and got up, only to pause mid-motion as Bilba jerked and
tensed. Carefully, she stood the rest of the way and turned her back to shut the water off in the
bathtub.

“All right,” she said turning around to face Bilba again, “come on and get in.”

Bilba stood up slowly and stepped toward the tub. She put a hand in the water only to immediately
jerk it out.

“Oh,” Primula came up beside her in concern. “Is the water to hot?” She put her hand in and
frowned, removing it after a second. “It seems all right.”

The water hadn’t been that hot, it was just the fact it was hot at all. Bilba was used to the rivers and
streams in Moria, most of which were fed by glaciers from the top of the mountain. She stepped up
again and grabbed the edge of the tub to climb in.

“Take your clothes off first,” Primula said. At Bilba’s look she added, “I promise I won’t look.
Drogo will bring you some new ones.”

As she finished talking she made a show of turning around, facing the door. Bilba hesitated and then
took off the scraps of clothing she’d worn for longer than she could remember. She put them on the
floor, grimacing at how dirty they made the tile.

She stood awkwardly, waiting for Primula to tell her what to do. Idly she crossed her arms over her
chest, shivering in the slight breeze from the window.

“Are you alright?” Primula asked several minutes later. When there was no answer she said, “I’m
going to turn around. I just want to make sure you’re ok.”

She turned and immediately gasped in surprise, her eyes widening. “Oh! Well, I’m certainly glad I
didn’t have Drogo help you then! He’d have been quite embarrassed!” She walked forward and
lightly touched Bilba on the shoulder, “come on, my dear; let’s get you cleaned up shall we?”

Bilba obediently climbed into the tub at Primula’s urging, sinking down into the water. The heat
wrapped around her body, leeching into sore muscles and the torn flesh on her feet. Almost against
her will, Bilba felt her body beginning to relax.

Primula picked up a dark colored bar and held it out to her. “Here you go.” At Bilba’s blank looked
the other woman showed her how to use the bar, that she called soap, to clean the dirt and grime off.

Bilba started in, scrubbing at her body and watching as years of dirt, grime and blood washed off her
skin. The water quickly grew filthy and Primula ended up emptying the tub and refilling it with fresh
water. That process was repeated many many more times and Bilba was startled that the water never
ran out and never grew cold. The bar of soap didn’t last long but Primula seemed to have a ready
supply that she pulled new ones out from every time there was a need for a fresh one.

As Bilba continued to scrub she found herself slowly beginning to run out of areas to clean. Her
body felt physically lighter without the weight of layers of filth. Her head was finally the only thing left and she dunked it forward into the water, scrubbing vigorously and watching as chunks of grime and muck fell out into the water.

When she had started Primula had been keeping up a steady stream of chatter but, as time progressed, she’d grown quieter and quieter as more of Bilba's skin was revealed under the muck. When Bilba finally felt her head and hair were clean she straightened and was startled to see tears tracking down Primula’s face. She frowned in confusion and Primula forced a watery smile, swiping a hand across her eyes. “Sorry, it’s nothing.”

She gripped Bilba’s arm and helped her out of the bath. As the water drained Bilba saw the tub was filthy, sludge and dirt caked on the sides. She stepped forward, intending to start cleaning it but Primula shook her head. “Its fine,” she said, pulling Bilba away, “I'll take care of it.”

Grabbing a towel off a nearby shelf she wrapped it around Bilba and then patted her on the arm. “I’m going to go see where Drogo went with the clothes I asked him to bring. I’ll be right back.” With that she hurried out of the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

Bilba hesitantly began to dry off with the towel, startled at how soft it felt. A flicker of movement from the mirror drew her attention and she moved to stand before it.

She didn’t recognize the figure in it. The only times she’d ever seen herself had been reflections in the water in murky, dark caves. The figure in the mirror was hunched and Bilba hesitantly pulled herself upright, trying to straighten her shoulders and hold her head high the way Primula did. The sensation hurt, her back pulling and stretching. She grimaced as a deep soreness settled into her lower back, the muscles and bones unused to supporting her upper body in such a way. She settled the towel on her shoulders. She could just make out her ribs and the skin along the rest of her body lay taut, stretched rigidly across lean muscle and bone. Scars crisscrossed nearly every inch of her skin, thicker bands wrapping around her ankles, wrists and throat. She knew if she turned around her back would be little better, the skin always slightly tight from the scars of innumerable lash marks littering the flesh.

She was slightly surprised to see her hair wasn’t as dark as she’d always believed. There was little more than a short fuzz on top of her head but it was a light, almost golden brown. Bilba reached a hand up and ran it over her head, marveling at the soft feel of the strands of hair under her palm.

The door opened again and Primula entered with a large bundle in her hands.

“Here we go,” she said, her face once again composed. “Let’s take care of those feet first, all right? I noticed they were bad off when I first saw you.”

She helped Bilba sit down on a stool and began working on her feet, first applying an ointment that stung on the various cuts and marks and then wrapping both feet in thick bandages.

“We’ll have to get you some shoes,” she remarked. “Dwarf blood is always stronger than Hobbit blood.”

Bilba knew that. Dwobbits always tended to be more like their dwarf parent than their hobbit one, both in look and in life expectancy.

The thought gave Bilba pause. The concept of living for hundreds of years hadn't meant much to her when her mother first explained it. Moria slaves didn’t live that long and what her lifespan been if she hadn't been a slave was a moot point. She was a slave. She would die young. That was reality, anything else was fantasy and, as such, a waste of time.
Now, however…if she truly did have hundreds of years stretching out before her…what in the world would she ever do with it?

Primula finished with her feet and helped her stand before shaking out the bundle of clothing she’d brought with her. Before Bilba knew it she was wearing a dress of all things, the fabric hanging loosely off her body and tangling around her legs with every movement. She frowned, pulling at the skirt. Her mother had worn a dress, it was what she’d had on when she was captured and she’d forever complained of how she wished she’d been wearing something more practical.

“It’s one of mine. It’s a little loose,” Primula beamed at her, “but you’ll grow into it, you’ll see.”

She nodded toward the door and led the way out. As she did Bilba was hit with a smell that set her stomach to growling loudly. Primula laughed and headed down the hall with Bilba trailing behind her. She lagged somewhat, exhaustion weighing at her once more but the smell was amazing and she was definitely getting closer to it.

They rounded a corner and entered another large room. A table sat in the middle with a stove on one side. A large pot of liquid sat on the tabletop and Drogo was in the process of setting out plates and tableware.

“Well,” he said, looking at her, “I guess there was a dwobbit under there after all.”

Bilba’s mind went to the figures she’d seen standing at the fence. Did she truly look like them? She thought of the few females she’d seen, long, curly hair, crystal-clear eyes and unblemished skin. Azog always claimed her parents must have been deformed to have given birth to one as ugly as her. She had no idea what her mother had looked like before slavery but she’d never seen any sign of deformity on her which meant, if she were ugly, it must have come from her father.

“I told you so,” Primula tartly informed her husband before guiding Bilba to sit in the nearest chair. She got a bowl and ladled up some of the soup before setting it down in front of her. “Eat this slowly,” she admonished gently, “once your stomach gets used to it we’ll start moving up to more, all right?”

Bilba nodded and picked the bowl up, feeling the heat from it warming her palms. Primula had laid out a spoon but she ignored it in favor of bringing the bowl up to her lips. She sipped slowly and carefully, tilting her head back to ensure the soup made it inside her mouth and not down her front.

It was, without a doubt, the most delicious thing she’d ever tasted. Bilba found herself closing her eyes in bliss as the rich, thick liquid went down her throat and warmed her stomach in a way she’d never felt before.

She barely got it finished before her hands began shaking slightly, her fatigue refusing to be ignored any longer. Hands gently took the bowl from her and set it down on the table again. Drogo appeared and picked her up. By this time Bilba was so out of it already she barely reacted.

She was aware of being carried and then laid down on what she’d always imagined a cloud to feel like, soft and deep, her body sank into it and whatever it was wrapped around her. Something warm and heavy was placed over her and she drifted off to sleep as the slow murmur of voices receded back down the hall.

Bilba sighed and, for the first time in her life slept without fear.
She was only vaguely aware of consciousness for a long time after that. Every so often hands would wake her up and get her to drink water, insist she hold a bowl of soup, even lift her and carry her to the bathroom. She was never hurt or mistreated and, in the end, was always returned to the cloud and allowed to sleep once more.

A few times memories intruded into her dreams, convincing her she was back inside Moria. She’d wake up to the sound of her own screams echoing through the rooms and hands holding her and trying to calm her. After the third or fourth time that happened she became vaguely aware of something small and warm snuggling against her stomach but she was too exhausted to put much thought into what it was.

She no longer had nightmares, though, after it started happening.

Then, finally, one early afternoon Bilba opened her eyes and was fully and completely aware of her surroundings. For an instant panic set in and she shoved herself to a sitting position, convinced Azog would be there any second to kick her and rage at her for being lazy.

She wasn’t in Azog’s room. Instead she was in a large, wood paneled room with several windows, opened to allow the sun and fresh air in. She lay on a large bed with a mound of blankets bundled around her.

Memory rushed in and Bilba felt her eyes widen. Had it truly not been a dream?

She looked down at herself and saw she was wearing what looked like a long shirt; she could feel it around her ankles and long sleeves hung nearly to her wrists. Her eyes focused in on her wrists and she was stunned to see her skin looked a little fuller, pushing up her sleeves revealed, indeed, she had more flesh on her arms as well.

She wasn’t hungry, or thirsty.

Something moved against her leg and she stiffened and shoved the blanket back to see the baby dragon curled up against her leg. His eyes blinked open blearily and he made an annoyed sound before grabbing the blankets in his teeth and pulling them back over himself. Bilba drew them back again, examining the little creature. His color was back to a healthy, glittering blue and his stomach was full to the point of being swollen.

Bilba carefully swung her legs over the baby and out of the bed. Her feet pressed against the smooth grain of the floor and she stood up.

She felt strong.

Her legs held her without shaking, the ground didn’t seem to drag at her and there was no gnawing in her stomach, dryness in her mouth or pounding of a constant headache behind her eyes.

The long, white shirt thing she wore was far too big but she saw the dress Primula had given her neatly folded on a table a few feet away so she changed into it instead. It was still too large but at least it didn’t feel like it was about to fall off. She studied the closed door leading from the room. She wanted to go out but was unsure. Was she allowed out or did they want her to stay in the room until called?

A nudge against her hand drew her attention and she saw the baby had come out from under the blankets and was giving her an exasperated look. When he saw he had her attention he tugged on her hand lightly with his teeth until she reached down and picked him up. He snuggled down in her arms
and then deliberately indicated the door with his head, looking at her expectantly.

That was ridiculous, Bilba thought. The baby couldn’t possibly protect her from anything. Did he really think his presence would make her feel more comfortable in going out?

He simply stared at her.

Okay, Bilba thought, so maybe his presence DID make her feel better.

Just a little.

She tightened her grip on him and moved to the door, grabbing the knob and opening it. Outside was a quiet hall that she vaguely remembered. Staying as quiet as possible, she slid out from the room and padded down the hall, keeping close to the wall.

The hall opened into a large area with a small chest and a table. A round, green door was set in the door to her left and a window looked out into the world outside. Bilba hesitated and looked down at the baby dragon in her arms.

*What do you think I should do?* It was the first time she’d thought a direct question at him other than general thoughts or ideas like she’d done when they’d fled Moria. He’d seemed to understand her then, when she wasn’t entirely sure what she was doing, so maybe he would understand her now?

It appeared he did as he made a peeping sound and indicated the door with his head. Bilba nodded and went to open it. A cool breeze darted in and her eyes went to the sky where fat, dark clouds streamed in from the horizon. It reminded her of the day she’d left Moria and she shivered with the memory. She stepped outside, pulling the door closed behind her. A short line of steps led down to a fence with a bench next to it and she headed there, sinking down on the worn seat and placed the dragon on her lap. He settled down immediately, his eyes closing and his breathing evening out into sleep.

Bilba put her hands on him lightly while her eyes drank in her first real sight of the Shire.

It was so quiet.

She could hear the sound of the wind rippling through the grass, the distant noise of a river babbling, voices and laughter from further down the lane. From the bench she could see the path outside the gate as it wound down past more homes until it passed through a hedge and continued out the other side. If she looked the other direction the path crested the hill. It was from that area she heard the quiet sound of voices.

A shadow passed over her and she looked up to see a dragon flash by overhead. At about the same time she heard the door open behind her and, a moment later, Primula stepped down next to her and sat on the bench.

“I’m glad to see you’re feeling better,” she started, “you’ve been asleep nearly a week.”

Bilba frowned. A week? That would certainly explain why she felt so much better.

“While we were taking care of you,” Primula began. She stopped and frowned, her hands clutching the edge of the bench seat until her knuckles turned white. Bilba turned her attention back to the other woman, raising a questioning eyebrow. Primula gave a tremulous smile and tried again. “When we were taking care of you we…well…when we were trying to help you eat…we saw,” she trailed off, her hand vaguely indicating her mouth.
Understanding dawned and she tensed. Another memory Bilba would rather not reflect on. She turned her attention back to the Shire, eyes studying the area and feeling her body relax into the bench.

Beside her, Primula was still for a while before finally saying, "If you want, I can show you how to talk to me, mentally, not using your voice."

Bilba stiffened and her breathing hitched. On her lap the baby opened an eye lazily and gazed at Primula for a moment before settling down again.

“It’s all right,” Primula said, her hands up placating. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Bilba forced herself to take deep breaths, trying to calm her nerves.

“I’m sorry,” Primula repeated, “I just wanted a way to talk to you. I don’t even know your name.”

Bilba took a breath and then shifted the dragon to the bench beside her, ignoring his squawk of indignation. Sliding off the bench she knelt in the dirt and carefully wrote out her name, remembering the letters her mother had drilled into her. She didn’t add her last name, it identified her as her father’s daughter and she had no desire to be associated with the dwarf who’d abandoned her and her mother to die.

Primula slid off the bench beside her. “Bilba,” she read slowly. She looked up and smiled at her. “Well, Bilba, I’m very pleased to meet you. Welcome to Bag End.”

Bilba flinched.

"I always felt bad about it," her mother’s voice whispered in her mind, “our marriage had been arranged since we were children. He built Bag End for us and insisted I move in before him. It was for our children and I had every intention of welcoming him in with open arms once we were wed. I even fancied I loved him, after a fashion. He certainly seemed to love me and I thought, surely, that would be enough.”

In her memories a smile spread across her mother’s face, erasing the exhaustion and pain for a split second. “And then I met your father and realized I had never loved Bungo at all. It had always been your father, Bilba. I think, somehow, even before I met him, I was waiting for him. I just didn’t know it. After I’d met him it could never be anyone else. Not for me. Not for him.”

Bilba raised her head and looked at the bench she’d just been sitting on. She’d heard the story so many times and hadn’t managed to connect it to this very house and bench. In her mind’s eyes she placed her mother on the bench reading a book, young and carefree, possessing a beauty and strength not yet stripped away by decades of slavery. She saw her mother’s face turned up from the book as she spoke to a dwarf walking past on his way to the marketplace. A chance meeting that wouldn’t have taken place had her mother not gotten distracted by a particularly engaging chapter and put off going inside for a few moments.

“Bilba?” Primula’s voice intruded and her mother vanished. Bilba turned back to Primula, wishing she could have somehow been present for the beginning of what her mother called her grand adventure, instead of only being there for the end.

“I was asking if you knew how old you were,” Primula was saying, “it’s always so hard to tell with Dwobbits.”

Bilba nodded and wrote down her birth date and year in the dirt. Primula stared at it in silence.
“Fifty,” she whispered finally. “You’re fifty years old.” She looked up at her and Bilba saw the other woman’s eyes were watering again, though she couldn’t begin to imagine why. Maybe Hobbits just cried a lot? Her mother hadn’t but, then again, she hadn’t the water to waste on so useless a task. “You haven’t even reached your majority,” Primula stated, “and you’ve been through so much.”

Bilba shrugged. It wasn’t as though she could do anything about it. She straightened again and sat on the bench once more. Primula stayed where she was, virtually kneeling in the dirt before her. When she finally looked up her jaw was set and she had a determined look on her face. Before Bilba could react the other woman had reached up and clasped both of Bilba’s hands in her own.

“You’re just a child,” she said firmly, “and I’m going to take care of you. You won’t have to suffer anymore, not ever again.”

Bilba risked a glance beside her and saw the baby dragon open an eye again. He gave a peep that somehow conveyed the sentiment of “you’re on your own” without saying anything and promptly fell asleep again.

Bilba sighed and forced a smile at the other woman.

Truth be told she had never truly been a child and certainly wasn’t one now regardless of her age.

But if that’s what Primula wanted then she’d give it to her. She owed her more than she could ever repay after all. It would be dishonorable to refuse.

***

Primula was true to her word and, before Bilba knew it, she was firmly ensconced in Bag End. Upon learning she could write Primula provided her with an empty journal and a pencil for whenever she wanted to communicate.

Primula and Drogo also plied her with more clothing than she knew what to do with and so much food that she was convinced a single meal would have fed her for an entire year in the mines.

Adjusting to it was difficult. Bilba tried her best to stay out of the way, convinced if she stepped wrong she’d be cast out or punished. She also couldn’t shake the feeling that, at any moment, she’d wake up and find herself back with Azog informing her that a new event had been scheduled and she’d have to fight again.

She tried to stay in Bag End, in her room and out of the way but it proved almost impossible, particularly as her health began to improve. She was used to working from the moment she woke up to the second she collapsed in exhaustion and there was only so much sitting still she could handle.

Still convinced she would only be allowed to stay so long as she was out of the way, and going slowly insane with being inside all day with nothing to do, Bilba began to go on walks. No one who saw her bothered her and she left them alone as well. She’d been just fine on her own in the mines and certainly had no need of anyone now.

Of course that didn’t mean she went completely alone. The first day she walked by herself, going only so far as the borders of Hobbiton before returning to Bag End.

The second day when she walked out the baby dragon was bounding along beside her, so small he
would often vanish into the tall grass they walked through. The third day he was there along with Primrose, the baby daughter of his surrogate mother, Daisy.

After that it became a regular occurrence for the three of them. At first they were short as the babies tired quickly and, to be honest, so did Bilba. Over time, however, her body began to fill out to the point where someone looking at her from a distance would never know she’d once been nearly starving to death. The dresses Primula gave her, donated by other dwobbits in the Shire, eventually came to fit almost perfectly and her hair, while still short, soon covered her head in short spikes instead of the near bald look it had always worn.

The babies became stronger and bigger, growing faster than Bilba would have thought possible. They ventured further and further on their walks, until they sometimes reached the borders of the Shire.

Bilba never set foot over, however, and she never lost sight of the dwarf garrison in the distance. Her mother had been attacked outside the Shire and Bilba was terrified of the same thing happening to her, of orcs grabbing her and dragging her back to the mines.

So she stayed in the Shire and stayed out of the way. She visited places her mother had told her about. The scene where her mother and father met for the second time, their first outing, their third where he had asked officially to court her, the spot where they had gotten engaged.

She saved the spot where they married for last. It had taken place in an enormous field nearly a half day’s walk from Bag End. They had needed it to fit all the hobbits who came from the Shire and all the dwarves who came from both Erebor and the Blue Mountains.

Once she reached it Bilba stood in the middle and watched the waist high grass ripple in the wind. The babies both bounded about, appearing briefly above the grass and then vanishing beneath it once more.

“*You would have been amazed, Bilba,*” her mother’s voice whispered in her mind, “*there were so many people, and dragons, too. The sky was nearly black with them. Your father and his kin spent two days preparing the field. They trimmed the grass back and brought in flowers from all over Middle Earth to decorate it. The chairs for the guests were hand carved and your father…*”

The voice trailed off as Bilba began to imagine it. An aisle of pure white silk seemed to flow out from under her feet, arcing gracefully about the meadow until it reached the center. There wooden beams held up sheets of white, black and gold fabric, all fluttering and snapping in the breeze.

Chairs lined both sides, overflowing with people and their chatter filled the air. Along the edges dragons filled the meadow, lounging as they waited for their riders.

At the head of the aisle her father stood though his image was murky and ill defined. No matter how often Belladonna had described him, Bilba had never been able to picture him.

Her imagination took over and Bilba turned to see her mother walking down the aisle.

She’d always been able to picture her mother, even if she couldn’t be sure this was how she’d truly looked before Moria.

It was how Bilba hoped she’d looked, radiant in a new gown of crushed purple and gold velvet, with a long train flowing out behind her. Her amber colored locks curled and hung down her back in soft waves and her eyes sparkled with life and light.

A look of pure radiance on her face as she gazed through Bilba toward her future husband because,
no matter how Bilba might feel about her father, there was no question her mother had been deeply in love with her husband and Bilba’s mind always demanded she acknowledge it.

Her mother neared the front of the aisle and, as she did, faded. The voices, other dragons, decorations all drifted away and Bilba was left in an empty field with two small dragons sitting at her feet staring up at her quietly.

Bilba felt her breath catch in her throat and she slowly sank to her knees. She gathered the two small creatures in her arms and, for the first time in a decade, she cried.

Not for herself but for the woman who’d once stood in this very spot and stepped forward onto a bright and shining path.

Never seeing the utter darkness at the end.

***

When she returned home that evening Bilba was exhausted in both mind and spirit. Primula was sitting in a chair in the living room reading a book but put it down to give her a quiet greeting. Normally Bilba would have gone past her into her own room but, for whatever reason, she found herself walking forward instead to sit at the other woman’s feet, her eyes fixed on the fire crackling merrily in the fireplace.

Behind her the baby dragons, having apparently found a new well of energy somewhere, vanished out of the room chasing each other throughout the house.

Primula didn’t ask her where she’d been. She hadn’t asked her a single question, in fact, since the two about her name and age. Nothing about where she’d come from, though Bilba imagined she had probably guessed, nothing about how she’d come by the baby drake. She just quietly offered her help, asking for nothing in return.

She reminded Bilba of her mother. Belladonna could have abandoned Bilba, should have in all honesty. She hadn’t. Instead she’d sacrificed portions of her own food and water to Bilba and had given even more to the other slaves in exchange for their help. She’d begged them to help her protect and guide Bilba without thought to her own pride and had freely taken on extra shifts for them, handed over her food, traded away water, all in return for protection for Bilba until she was old enough to help protect and care for herself.

She studied the paper and pencil in her hand. Primula had already explained mind talking to her, stating it was something only dragonriders or potential dragonriders could do. She’d offered to help Bilba rebuild her mental shields and control them so no one could rip them down ever again. After that Bilba could control who she spoke to and who spoke to her.

Bilba had refused, not wanting to be a burden.

Her mother had never considered her a burden, however, and if Primula truly was like her…..

The tiniest glimmer of an emotion she’d never felt before started to flicker, just a bit, inside her. The feeling that maybe she wouldn’t wake up, wouldn’t be cast out if she did something wrong.

That maybe Primula truly did want to help her.

Maybe she could stay.
She pulled the small journal along with her pencil. She hesitated and then bent to write.

Then, trying to ignore how her hand was shaking slightly, she lifted it up to hand to Primula.

*Could you teach me what you said? About the shields and the talking?*

Primula’s smile lit up the room. “Of course.”

Bilba felt the corners of her own lips twitch just a bit in response and tried to ignore the tremor of fear in the back of her mind.

She felt she was taking the first steps onto a new path of her own.

She prayed it didn't end as her mother’s had.

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Primula proved to be an excellent teacher. She showed Bilba how to build up and control her shields, eventually turning them into layers strong enough to repel almost any attack. After that Primula taught her how to recognize other dragon riders, and potential riders, how to see their shields and also how to reach out and contact a specific person if she so wanted.

The first time Primula invited Bilba to speak into her mind, Bilba hesitated, not wishing to cause the other woman pain.

Primula insisted, however, gently encouraging her until Bilba finally obeyed, reaching out until she felt the presence of the other woman’s mind and then quietly thinking, *Hello?*

Primula positively beamed.

*Hello, Bilba.*

Bilba tensed, expecting pain, but none came.

*You see?* Primula’s voice continued. *It’s that simple. Now, you can only talk like this to another rider or potential rider and you never try to force your way past their shields.*

Like Azog had done to her. Undoubtedly that had been where the pain had come from, Bilba thought, and not the words themselves. There had often been great gaps between times when Azog would speak to her. No doubt he’d been waiting for her natural shields to reform so he could tear them down again. He enjoyed causing her unnecessary pain.

*Can you read my thoughts?* She asked suddenly, curious.

*No,* Primula answered. *Not like this anyway.* She leaned forward in her chair, clasping Bilba’s hands. *If you bond with a dragon you’ll be able to hear one another’s thoughts if you concentrate. You’ll also be able to feel one another’s emotions and sense each other’s location. You can communicate at any distance too; the sort of talking we’re doing, person to person, is quite limited unless you have a soul bond with the other person.*

Bilba frowned. *What’s a soul bond?*
It’s basically the same as the bond you have with your dragon, only you’ve chosen to have it with another person instead. Primula explained. Usually these bonds are done only with close friends, family, or a spouse. It allows you to speak at greater distances than this sort of talking allows, though not as far as you could speak with a dragon.

And also gave the other person access to her thoughts, feelings and location? Bilba couldn’t imagine ever wanting something like that.

Anyone who did would have to be at least slightly insane.

***

Being able to talk to Primula, and learning how to build and control her shields, did wonders for Bilba’s confidence and, a few days later, she gathered enough of it to go to the Shire marketplace. She’d never gone that way before and therefore had seen little of Hobbiton aside from its outer borders and farmlands.

So, when she left Bag End, instead of going left she went right, over the hill and down toward a large field in the center of the small town. A number of booths were set up near a river and she could see many hobbits milling about, speaking to one another and examining the wares.

As she drew closer, Bilba felt her stomach beginning to clench and her breathing grow short. Her hands twisted together and her shoulders hunched. As she drew even closer her footsteps slowed until she was shuffling. Maybe this had been a bad idea, a terrible one in fact, her mind informed her. She should have gone with Primula, or brought the baby dragon, or SOMETHING.

Why had she thought this was a good idea again?

“Hi!”

Bilba jerked so hard and nearly lost her balance as a young woman, popped into her view from out of nowhere. She was shorter than Bilba with strawberry blond, curly hair and blue eyes.

“You’re Bilba, right?” she smiled. Bilba was beginning to believe everyone in the Shire walked around perpetually smiling. “I’m Holly. I’ve been hoping to meet you!”

She stuck a hand out and Bilba stared at it blankly wondering what she was expected to do. After a moment Holly simply shrugged and linked an arm through Bilba’s as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “Primula talks a lot about you,” she said happily, “is it true you have a baby firedrake?”

Her eyes shone up at her and Bilba found herself wondering how old the other girl was. It was hard for her to tell at times unless they were clearly very young or very old. This girl, Holly, seemed to be somewhere in the middle.

Holly tugged her toward the stalls, still chattering away about something or other. Every so often she’d ask a question but then would keep talking without waiting for an answer. Eventually Bilba figured Holly was content to just hear herself talk so she let the girl pull her along as they went from booth to booth in the small area.

None of the other hobbits paid her much mind and Bilba soon found herself beginning to relax and actually enjoy the experience. Each stall was filled to overflowing with food, pastries and items with
no practical purpose that people apparently bought to just set them on a shelf and have them look pretty.

On one table she found a small barrette in the shape of a Snapdragon flower. She thought it would look pretty on Primula but had no money to buy it. In the mines things were done for trades, perhaps the woman selling the pin would be willing to do something similar?

A commotion broke out suddenly, drawing her attention. Several yards away, near a tree, a small girl was huddled, rubbing at her leg as though it pained her. Another boy, taller and older-looking, stood in front of her with his back to her. His back was straight; his head held high and a cold look in his eye.

He faced a boy probably twice his size, with short blond hair and a heavy set build. He had two other youths on either side of him. One of them was holding a doll of some kind.

Holly sighed, “That’s Falco,” she said, indicating the blond one, “he’s always bothering someone, but he especially likes to harass Brandybucks, on account of them being from Buckland and not here.”

Bilba watched as the bigger boy taunted the smaller one, his two friends crowding in until they had their victim nearly backed against the tree, almost falling onto the girl.

Bilba began to step forward only to have Holly tug on her arm, “Don’t,” she said, “one of the adults will deal with it.”

They weren’t, however, Bilba noted. One of them had commented about getting something called a Bounder and at least two had left the marketplace altogether but not a single one had stepped so much as a foot forward to try and help the two.

She shook off Holly’s arm and moved until she was standing directly behind the biggest boy, Falco. The two being menaced didn’t spare her a glance and the three she now stood behind didn’t seem to notice her.

Bilba reached up and grabbed Falco’s arm. He whirled and loomed over her, nearly in her face. The intent to intimidate was obvious and Bilba reacted without thinking.

She laughed.

It wasn’t that she meant to laugh or planned it. It was just that the boy’s attempt to intimidate her, when she’d been threatened by Azog, was, to put it simply, laughable.

It was too bad that Falco was used to being feared and that he certainly wasn’t expecting a GIRL to laugh at him.

Especially in front of his friends.

Falco’s face turned an interesting shade of purple, a vein throbbing on his neck.

And then he swung at her.

Bilba had spent the last decade of her life fighting opponents much larger and stronger than her and she reacted instinctively, ducking the blow and coming up well inside his guard.

She honestly believed, mainly through experience, that anyone willing to launch an attack must be trained and experienced enough to carry it out. She knew, too, that the only way to survive was to
strike quick, strike when she had the chance and strike as hard as she could with the full expectation
that at least part of her blow would be blocked.

With all that firmly in her head Bilba reacted exactly as she had a thousand times in the arena,
prepared to have her swing blocked at worst and, at best, prepared to dance away before
another attack could land on her.

That’s what she expected.

And, that, more than anything else is why the sound of snapping bone probably startled her more
than anyone else.

Fili stood at the right hand of his uncle but felt as though all of Middle Earth separated them.

The Thorin who had come back bore no resemblance to the one who had left. He was quieter,
grimmer, spoke less, barely smiled and never laughed.

And he kept his bond firmly closed.

Fili had been surprised to hear the news of his uncle's return when it happened as he'd never felt the
presence in his mind showing that Thorin was nearing. He knew Kili hadn't felt it either, or their
mother.

Maybe it was because Thorin had never really returned at all.

The coronation had been a quiet affair, his uncle's first duty as King had been to oversee the funerals
of his own father, grandfather and brother.

Not that there was any body to bury for uncle Frerin.

He was just gone, like so many others.

The halls of Erebor lay silent, the living consumed by the memory of the dead.

Beside him, Thorin sat rigidly on his throne, eyes fixed ahead as some councilmember or another
babbled on about something no one cared about.

His uncle's shields were still firmly in place, the soul bond closed. For all intents and purposes his
uncle looked as though he'd literally been carved from stone, no emotion, no grief. Even at the
funerals he'd stared straight ahead as though the entire thing had no effect on him.

Fili wondered what Thorin would say if he told him the closure of the bond wasn't complete, that a
little leaked out.

He wondered if his uncle would open the bond back up if he mentioned he could hear the muted
screams dimly echoing down the closed pathway.

He wondered.
Fili said nothing though.

He merely fixed his eyes straight ahead and tried to pretend the sound of his uncle’s mental screams didn't match the ones coming from his own soul.
Time seemed to slow as Falco fell.

It sped back up once he hit the ground, the thud making Bilba flinch. He hit hard, one hand clapped to his face. Already, Bilba could see blood beginning to well between his fingers. He shot her a look, his expression a mix of pain, embarrassment and outright malice. His friends stared at him in shock. Even the boy and girl who’d been the objects of his bullying appeared stunned at the violence they’d just witnessed.

Bilba’s entire body was frozen. Her mouth hung open and her breaths came in great pants. Her hands were clenched in fists at her side and she was dimly aware she was shaking. The low murmur of voices reached her and she turned to see many of the hobbits in the marketplace nearly surrounding her.

She recognized their expressions; horror, shock, fear.

She’d seen looks like those before, on the faces of newer slaves every time they saw an orc.

She ran.

It wasn’t a conscious decision. One second she was standing still, the next she was flying out of the market, shoving past hobbits only too happy to get out of her way, and back up the hill. She didn’t stop until she’d pushed through the door of Bag End. Inside it was blessedly quiet, her footsteps the only sound. She bolted down the hall and slammed into her closed door, the shock jolting her body.

Then she was inside.

She slammed the door behind her, wincing slightly at the sound. A second later she was wedged between the dresser and the side of her bed, drawing her legs up and wrapping her arms around them.

She shook so hard her teeth rattled and her breathing was harsh and ragged in her ears.

How could she have been so stupid? She knew hobbits were different than orcs. They were soft, content to sit in their homes, work in their gardens or shop in the marketplace.

She wasn’t like them. The orcs had infected her. Her mother had talked of the Shire as if it were a paradise. Any slave currently in Moria would gladly sever an arm to be in the Shire, or anywhere that wasn’t the Valar-forsaken mines.

They wouldn’t feel so bored they found themselves spending their days walking, usually away from the Shire. They wouldn’t slowly find even those outings growing tedious, driving them to search for something, she couldn’t even say what, within the populated areas of the Shire.

They wouldn’t react to a soft, weak target with violence.

She moaned and tightened her grip, fingers digging into the flesh of her calves until pain throbbed up her legs.

Why her? Why had she been the one to escape? There were so many others a thousand times more worthy than her, who wouldn’t begrudge what they’d been given, who wouldn’t screw it up like she had.
Yet they continued to labor in the mines and here she was on, on the outside.

She didn't understand. Why?

They could throw her out of the Shire for this.

Fear uncoiled in the pit of her stomach, a living, vicious thing. There were orcs outside the Shire. She could be captured again, dragged back to the mines and thrown before Azog.

She couldn't imagine what he would do to her.

Her shivering began to decrease slightly.

Maybe...maybe she wouldn't be caught. Maybe she could go into the woods and hide. She was just one person after all, easy to miss if she were careful.

Her mind went to the maps her mother had drawn. The main ones had always been to the Shire or Erebor, but not all of them. Her mother had loved maps and travel, it had been a hobby of hers before Moria. Bilba could remember every map her mother ever had ever shown her. There had been Gondor, the great white city, and Rohan, home of the horselords. The homes of the elves, Imaldris and Mirkwood, even the Blue Mountains, nearly on her doorstep already, home to the colony from Erebor.

If she were banished from the Shire she could go to one of those places, or all of them.

Deep inside her mind the thought ignited just the slightest flicker of interest, almost excitement.

What was wrong with her? After all Primula and Drogo had done for her, was this truly how she would repay them?

The sound of squawking came from outside her window. Bilba stiffened as she recognized the unmistakable voices of baby dragon and Primrose. The two sounded like they were arguing, one scolding and one annoyed.

The annoyed one was probably baby dragon. It usually was.

One of them cut off and she heard a scrabbling noise against the wall. The scolding noises changed into a worried peeping.

Bilba raised her head in time to see tiny claws appear hooked over the windowsill. Baby dragon’s head popped over the edge. Bilba could hear the sound of his back legs working to get him the last few inches up. She started to rise to help but, before she could, the baby gave a shout of triumph and surged up onto the sill.

He barely fit, he’d grown quite a bit since they’d arrived, but he managed to squeeze himself on. He turned to look back out and began to chatter, smug and more than a little triumphant.

As he did his tail, and the bulk of his body that most definitely did not fit on the sill, began to slide backward until; with a squawk, the dragon found himself falling back to land on her bed. From outside the window Bilba heard a worried squawk and then, seconds later, Primrose leapt easily onto the ledge from the ground outside, then from there to the bed.

Baby dragon flailed at her as she tried to check on him, pushing to his feet and moving until he could drop onto the ground in front of Bilba.
He arranged himself, wrapping his tail around his feet and laying his wings against his back.

He then gave her a polite peep as though simply inquiring about her day.

Bilba laughed and then instantly clapped a hand over her mouth. The last time she’d laughed it hadn’t gone well.

Baby dragon gave her a look, huffed, and then proceeded to start chattering at her animatedly.

On the bed, Primrose stretched out and looked over the edge, adding in her own chirping comments from time to time. At one point baby dragon chattered up at her, almost like he was telling her to shut up, but she ignored him.

Bilba studied the baby as he continued to lecture her…or whatever it was he was doing. He’d filled out well since she’d first seen him. When she stood he came nearly halfway up her calf and would soon be far too large and heavy for her to carry. His wings, which had once worried her with their pliability, had begun to stiffen just slightly and, according to Primula, would soon grow the framework inside them that would one day allow him to fly.

A sense of sadness settled over her like a physical weight. Soon he would be old enough to speak. Once that happened he would name himself and would be old enough to choose his rider, or riders if he so wished. Primrose was already old enough but hadn't chosen anyone yet. Bilba had no doubt there would be a long line waiting to try and impress the baby dragon in the hopes of gaining his favor. Even the dwarves in the garrison were excited, there were no firedrakes in the Blue Mountains and, for many; baby dragon was the first drake they’d seen in a long time.

He was also a one way ticket out of the Blue Mountains and to Erebor for any of them he chose.

They would line up and the dwobbits, who could bond with a hobbit dragon or a drake, would be close behind.

There was little chance, with so many wanting him, that he would ever consider her no matter how much Primula insisted she was a candidate.

Baby dragon would pick someone else, as would Primrose…and then she would be alone again.

Baby dragon was still chattering away and, now, Bilba noticed, for the first time, his chest was beginning to glow.

What in the world?

Baby dragon didn’t seem to notice but, on the bed, Primrose chattered a question.

This seemed to be the last straw for baby dragon who turned and practically snarled something at her, an exclamation punctuated by a tiny spurt of fire that shot straight from his mouth and barely missed Primrose.

For several seconds there was total silence. Bilba stared in shock at the baby dragon who, in turn, was nearly cross-eyed as he tried to stare at the tip of his own nose.

Primrose jumped back up and began squawking angrily at the baby, her claws gripping the bedding…right near where it was on fire.

Bilba lunged up, pushing Primrose away and slapping at the flames with her hands. Thankfully they hadn’t fully caught yet and she had them out almost immediately, leaving only a small scorch mark
behind.

She sat down with a huff and Primrose clambered on her lap. She was older than baby dragon but smaller and also had much slower growth than he did.

Baby dragon looked dejected for a split second and then apparently came to a decision. His head came up, his chest puffed out, his wings flared out dramatically, or as dramatically as they could at his age, and he began to march on his hind legs. Primrose and Bilba watched as he slowly strutted toward the other end of the room, turned, and strutted back.

By that time Primrose was draped across Bilba’s lap, making a noise that Bilba was pretty sure was the dragon version of laughter. She was having a hard time holding it in herself to be honest.

A door opened and closed outside of her room and Primula’s voice called out, “Bilba? Are you here?”

Bilba tensed, the smile falling off her lips. Baby dragon bounded up on the bed next to her and casually draped himself over the scorch mark on the blanket.

The doorknob rattled and then it was being pushed open to allow Primula to come in. “There you are. I--” she frowned, her nose wrinkling, “did something burn?”

Baby dragon gave an innocent peep. Primrose, without warning, launched herself out of Bilba’s arms and landed flat on top of him. He squawked in outrage but, given he was trying to hide his accident; couldn’t move to dislodge her.

Bilba drew her legs up on the bed and opened her shields enough to talk to the other woman.

Did he die?

Primula looked startled. “What? Of course not! You simply broke his nose, and jaw. From what I heard it was self-defense.” She came forward and sat on the bed. “You’re allowed to protect yourself, Bilba, and others.”

I’m no better than an orc. I expected him to fight back. Bilba sighed, her shoulders dropping. In the mines the only ones who ever attempted violence were the orcs or the fighters in the Arena.

It was the first time she’d mentioned the mines to Primula though she had no doubt the woman had been able to make the connection between Bilba’s physical state when she found her and their relative proximity to Moria.

“The Arena?” Primula asked, “What is that?”

Some of the slaves, like me, were stupid enough to resist, Bilba explained. So they’d have us fight, each other sometimes, but usually other orcs.

A cave troll, once, but she didn’t feel like delving into that particular memory.

Primula was staring at her and Bilba felt a sense of resignation settle over her. She could almost see the woman’s view of her shifting, from “innocent, abused child” to “bloodthirsty killer”. There was no way Primula would let her stay now, who would?

Primula took a deep breath, her hands clenching in her lap. “I’m amazed you could survive something like that.”
That wasn’t the reaction she’d expected. Didn’t Primula understand?

*I didn’t have a choice,* she explained. She hesitated, but then decided to continue. It was important Primula know exactly what sort of person she was. *Sometimes*…

She trailed off.

“Sometimes what?” Primula studied her calmly, no sign she was thinking of fleeing in terror.

*Sometimes I enjoyed it,* Bilba kept her eyes down, unable to look at the other woman. *Not when I had to fight other slaves. The orcs.*

Primula still didn’t flee. She nodded. “And what about Falco? What did you feel when you hit him?”

Bilba swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. *I was horrified,* she admitted, *but I also felt happy, just a little.*

She tensed, that should finally do it. Primula would see what she truly was and run to get the Bounders or the dwarven guard to throw her out.

“What made you happy? Seeing him in pain?” Primula’s voice was measured and held no hint of fear.

Bilba’s head snapped up. *What? No! Of course not!*

Something in Primula’s face seemed to ease. “Then what was it?”

*I, Bilba concentrated as she thought back over the incident. I liked that I evaded his attack so easily.*

She had been good at it. There was little else she was particularly skilled at, especially here in the Shire.

“Okay,” Primula shifted on the bed, bringing a squawk from baby dragon who was still pinned under Primrose. “You took pride in something you did well. Anything else?”

*I was happy I could stop him,* Bilba responded immediately. *I was happy he didn’t get to hurt anyone and it was because I stopped him.*

Primula nodded and, if anything, looked even more relieved. She reached out and grabbed Bilba’s hands. “And what about in the Arena? What made you happy to fight the orcs but not the other slaves?”

Bilba replied instantly, *I liked being able to defeat someone who was stronger than I was, someone who liked to hurt the weak. The other slaves were no better off than I was, even if they were a challenge sometimes. They didn’t want to fight, the orcs forced them. I didn’t like fighting them because it…it…* She frowned, struggling to put her feelings into words.

“Because it wasn’t fair,” Primula said gently. “You are not an orc, Bilba. If you’d said you enjoyed seeing others in pain or that you liked fighting for the sake of fighting I’d be worried.” She tightened her grip on Bilba’s hands and smiled. “But there is nothing wrong with taking pride in being strong and there is never anything wrong with fighting for the sake of your own safety or that of others.”

Bilba shook her head, feeling the back of her eyes burn. *I’m not good at being a hobbit.* She looked up at the woman, her gut clenching. *I’m sorry. I’m sorry – I – you’ve done so much for me and I’m grateful, I am. I just*…
“I’m the one who should apologize,” Primula cut in, her hands squeezing Bilba’s. “I should have talked to you more instead of assuming I knew what you wanted. Bilba, you aren’t a hobbit.” She grinned. “You’re a dwobbit.”

Bilba blinked in confusion. But I’ve seen other dwobbits in the Shire, she argued. They don’t like fighting. They act like hobbits, they don’t mind sitting at home or working in their gardens. They like peace.

“Bilba,” Primula explained, “That’s because those are the ones who have chosen to live as hobbits. The ones who feel the pull of their dwarven heritage leave. They go to the Blue Mountains or Erebor.”

She pulled back, absently picking up Primrose as she did, causing the little dragon to squawk mournfully as she found herself no longer able to pin down baby dragon.

Primula got to her feet. “Leave it to me,” she stated, “I’ll take care of everything.”

And, with that, she was gone, taking Primrose with her and shutting the door quietly.

Bilba looked after her, still utterly confused. That…was not how she’d expected anything to go.

She thought of the woman, Lobelia, who still glared at her every time Bilba happened to cross her path. That woman, she was sure, would have driven her from the Shire already and she had no doubt there were others who felt the same.

Primula, however, and her husband, Drogo, were unusual…or possibly insane. After all, who reacted with that much calm after finding out their houseguest of the last several months was an Arena fighter?

She looked down at the baby dragon who was still sprawled on the bed attempting to gather the threads of his ego back together. He glanced up at her and squawked before going back to what he had been doing.

Bilba sighed. She would never understand hobbits.

***

Primula was back within a half hour. Bilba heard the sound of the door and then low voices speaking from the living room. She stayed where she was. Perhaps she’d been wrong after all. Maybe Primula had just pretended to accept her until she could go get reinforcements.

“Bilba? Could you come out here please?”

Bilba slid off the bed, idly rubbing at her arms in agitation. A thump sounded as the baby dragon hopped off next to her and began happily sliding about her legs. Bilba went and opened the door and he sprang out, scampering down the hall and vanishing around the corner.

Bilba followed warily, sticking close to the wall until she’d reached the foyer.

Primula was there and, indeed, had a dwarf with her but he wasn’t armed. He was average height with a mustache and a bizarre, floppy hat on his head. Currently he was sitting down talking in a low voice to the baby dragon who was frolicking around his chair, along with Primrose who had also apparently returned.

“There you are,” Primula stepped forward to where Bilba hovered in the doorway. She grabbed her
hands, pulling her in. “Bilba, I’d like you to meet Bofur. Bofur this is Bilba.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Bofur said, standing up with an easy grin. “Primula was telling me you might be interested in training at the garrison.”

Bilba gaped at him. Primula said what?

Primula, meanwhile, was looking quite pleased with herself. “I thought about the Bounders,” she explained, “but, then, they don’t really deal with much more than the occasional stolen pie or dispute over who had the largest pumpkin in the harvest festival.”

Bofur nodded. “True enough. At the garrison we patrol the borders of the Shire, make sure to keep the orcs out, that sort of thing.”

Bilba felt a rush of excitement.

She cast a glance at Primula. Can I?

Primula smiled in reassurance. “I didn’t help you so I could tell you what to do, Bilba. It’s up to you.”

Bilba felt a knot in her stomach. She wasn’t used to making her own decisions, not on this magnitude anyway. Still, the thought of actually having a reason to get up in the morning instead of being faced with another day of trying to fit into a place she didn’t belong…

She took a deep breath and offered the smallest of smiles to Bofur.

“I think,” Primula told him, “that’s a yes.”

***

Primula and Drogo celebrated her making such a big decision on her own by buying her an clothing more suitable for such work. There were dark brown, soft trousers, a cotton shirt and heavy duty, steel-tipped boots that with straps and clasps all the way up her calf, protecting her legs and feet. Bilba tried to turn them down, concerned about the depth of the debt she owed them, but they just laughed it off and insisted. Bilba accepted if only because she had no other way to get better clothes and fighting in a dress was out of the question. She felt more like herself in the new garments. The only thing she left alone was her hair, now nearly covering her ears, as it seemed to please Primula.

It turned out to be perfect timing when she joined as the guard rotated from the Blue Mountains every six months and she arrived just at the beginning of the new rotation. The job was given to new recruits as their first assignment and, as such, they were all settling in and getting to know each other. Bilba didn’t quite know how to fit in with them but at least she didn’t have to deal with established groups or routines as she might have had she come in the middle of a rotation.

Every day Bilba would get up early at Primula’s, eat and get ready and then head to the garrison. There she would spend the day patrolling, or training. She trained not just with the sword she’d brought from the mines but also with axes, the bow and arrow, and hand to hand. She proved to be exceptional at the latter due to her time in the Arena and many of the dwarves lined up to spar with her and test their mettle.

Bilba loved it. In the Arena she’d had bursts of joy but it was always colored with the knowledge of her enslavement as well as the fact that, eventually, she’d step in the Arena for the last time, most likely coming back out in pieces.
Her body began to grow lean and hard, muscles replacing the slight hint of fat she’d developed from living a sedentary life and being allowed to eat as she wished. Often, on days when she patrolled, she’d jog the route instead of walking, getting in exercise while performing her duties.

The other dwarves, and assorted dwobbits, were kind enough, particularly when baby dragon and Primrose started accompanying her. As Bilba had expected they lined up, trying to impress the little dragon. A few of the dwobbits migrated toward Primrose even, trying to show her their worth as a potential rider.

“It’s not perfect,” Bofur told her one day as they took a break, sitting on a low bench just inside the garrison walls. “There are a lot of potential dragon riders who never get chosen. Dragons can choose up to two riders but some only want one, others none at all.”

Bilba watched as a group of dwarves and dwobbits played with baby dragon in the courtyard. He was having the time of his small life, leaping and frolicking and generally enjoying being the center of attention. Primrose was involved as well. She was still very small and currently clung to the back of Filith, a dwobbit female she’d taken a liking to.

A tall dwobbit male, Braden something or other, with short dark hair and eyes, suddenly broke off and began heading her direction. He’d barely made it a few steps, however, when baby dragon crouched and growled at him, a low, vibrating sound Bilba had never heard. The dwobbit paled before spinning on his heel and rejoining the group.

Bilba turned to Bofur in surprise. He shrugged. “Most assume you’ll be his first rider,” he explained, nodding to baby dragon, “some of them may feel they’ll have a better chance of being his second rider if they ingratiate themselves with you.” He grinned at her. “Dragons are good at judging character though, they don’t put up with such things.”

Bilba lifted her hands to sign. Bofur was not a potential dragon rider so she couldn’t talk to him mentally. She’d started out writing in her journal but he’d almost immediately offered to teach her the same hand language the rider had been teaching her. Bilba had felt a strong sense of nostalgia at the offer, her mind going back immediately to the blond dwarf and wishing, for not the first time, there’d been some way she could have saved him.

She hadn’t mentioned to Bofur that she knew some of the signs already, not wanting to dredge up further memories of the rider and her own guilt in being unable to bring him with her.

_They’d be wasting their time, _she signed. _He won’t pick me._

“Why not?” Bofur asked curiously. “You saved his life didn’t you?”

More than they knew, Bilba thought. Most of them, Primula included, seemed to believe she’d wandered in the Wild much longer than she had and, that during that time, had come across baby dragon and his dead mother. Bilba didn’t bother correcting them; she doubted they would believe her. Sometimes, to be honest, she didn’t believe herself.

_I didn’t save him so he’d be obligated to me, _Bilba responded. _He deserves better than an escaped slave._

Bofur frowned at her. “I very much doubt he _could_ do better.”

Bilba rolled her eyes. He was mistaken. What did she have to offer the baby anyway? According to Bofur, the drakes all lived in Erebor. When the colony at the Blue Mountain had been established there had been an attempt to station a few there but they’d grown so homesick and lonely for
their kin that they had returned home. Now anyone in the Blue Mountains who wished a chance to be chosen as a rider had to find a way to go to Erebor.

Bilba had no family or friends. Primula and Drogo, she was sure, simply pitied her, the dwarves accepted her as a comrade, the hobbits tolerated her.

Even here, in the garrison where she was as happy as she could remember ever being, she didn’t quite fit. She didn’t understand the jokes or the social cues, couldn’t talk to most of them unless they had the patience to wait for her to write or sign, and she tended to prefer being alone rather than in a group like the rest of them did.

In the Shire itself she was mostly ignored. She hadn’t seen Falco since the incident but the other hobbits gave her a wider berth than ever before, as though afraid she’d snap and attack them at the slightest provocation.

Bilba’s eyes went back to the baby dragon where he was playing with the other dwarves, dwobbits and Primrose. Bofur said drakes were social; they craved relationships with their own kind as well as with others.

She couldn’t even offer him that. She had no desire to ever set foot in Erebor. Her father lived there and the last thing she wanted to do was ever see him, not unless it was to punch him in the face for failing her mother.

She sighed and leaned against the wall behind her, eyes going to the sky. She thought, for a brief second, about the feeling she’d had soaring through the air on Snapdragon all those months ago. She still felt it was the closest she’d come to the true meaning of what her mother called freedom. Unchained, unfettered.

Her eyes went back to the baby and she carefully pushed those feelings aside.

She would not be flying again, she told herself firmly.

Baby dragon would pick someone else.

He deserved someone else.

***

Bilba saw her first convoy a month later. Spring had finally begun to give way to summer, the last of the rains and cold fading away to warmth and clear skies. The main road that ran through the Shire, connecting it to the Blue Mountains in one direction and the rest of Middle Earth in the other, ran right past the garrison and she was stationed on the heights as the group passed.

They were a small one, comprised mainly of dwarves, on their way to the Blue Mountains. All of them were armed and looked exhausted, their feet dragging as they shuffled through. In the center of their group was a small wagon, being driven by what looked like two more males but, upon closer inspection, Bilba suspected were females. They were rigid on their seat, their eyes darting about as if they expected to be attacked at any moment. They offered no comment to any of the dwarves at the garrison and she was stationed on the heights as the group passed.

Bilba asked Bofur about them later that night.

“The roads aren’t safe,” the dwarf explained, “and there are never enough Rangers to provide escort services.”
Rangers? Bilba signed. What's a Ranger?

“Men,” Bofur replied. He held a small piece of wood as he spoke, a knife in his other hand idly working at it, carving it into some shape or another. “They’re associated with the kingdom of Gondor.” He shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure of the reason why they’re here, something about old alliances and obligations. In any event, they protect the area as best they can but, as I said, there aren’t enough of them.”

Bilba’s mind went back to the two women on the wagon and wondered how dangerous their journey had been.

Her mother had been attacked on the road. Her group had had no escort either, no one to turn to for help when the orcs descended.

Were things like that still happening?

***

She got her answer soon enough.

Over the next few weeks Bilba saw several more convoys, particularly as she started spending more and more time at the garrison. Most of them were dwarven and, as the first had been, were unescorted. A few times she saw groups comprised of humans, complete with children, and she felt her gut clench at the thought of them alone on the road.

Once or twice she caught a glimpse of a group accompanied by a lone figure on horseback, dressed in greens and browns, always wearing a long cloak and hood so she could never tell if she saw the same person or a different one.

When asked, Bofur confirmed these humans were, in fact, the Rangers he’d told her about. They typically seemed to be with convoys that had a larger number of women and children or that were lacking in armed individuals who could aid in protecting the group.

But, as Bofur had said, there were only so many of them.

One early morning a convoy stopped at the garrison to fix a broken wagon wheel before continuing on. It was a small group, a family in fact, of dwarves on their way to Erebor to try and start new lives. The parents were both warriors, well-armored and well-armed.

There were three children, a large family for dwarves according to Bofur, two girls and a boy. They were all far younger than Bilba, in more ways than just physically. The girls were potential dragonriders and spent much of the day with baby dragon and Primrose, chasing one another through the courtyard and around the surrounding area.

Bilba sat and watched, amused at their antics.

The repairs were finished and the group set off once more. Bofur asked them about an escort and heard them reply there was no one available but, due to their small size, they hoped to move fairly unnoticed and unmolested.

Bilba stood on the road, baby dragon and Primrose on either side of her as they bid the family good-bye.

The next group that passed through, heading to the Blue Mountains, brought news of their fate.
Bilba listened, numbly, biting back tears, her hands clenched, to the story the caravan told. Of passing a broken and burned wagon, treasured possessions scattered like trash across the road. Of the two charred and mutilated forms lying silent in a ditch, looks of horror still etched on what was left of their faces.

There was no sign of the three children.

Bilba didn’t have to ask where they were.

Baby dragon and Primrose were both there for the story, hunched low with their wings down and their tails curled around themselves for comfort. By the end Primrose was making small noises as though she were crying while baby dragon studied the ground, his entire body drooping.

Bilba simply walked away.

Bofur found her, several hours later, sitting on the edge of the wall, her legs dangling over the side. The sun was setting before her, brilliant oranges and reds lighting the sky even as shadows crept toward her. As Bofur settled down next to her, Bilba signed to him without looking.

*My mother was captured on a convoy. It’s how I ended up a slave.*

“I’m sorry,” Bofur said, his own legs swinging in time with hers. “I can’t imagine how awful that must have been.”

Everyone always said that, Bilba thought, and it usually irritated her. Of course they couldn’t imagine, not unless they’d been there and she was sure he didn’t want that.

She also never understood what Primula, and now Bofur, kept apologizing for anytime she brought up the mines. It certainly wasn’t their fault she’d ended up there.

Bilba continued to stare ahead. The mark of how she’d been feeling were the blood stains on the stone where she’d been gripping the edge so hard it’d sliced into her palms.

*I don’t want anyone else to suffer that fate.*

She could feel Bofur studying her. “What will you do then?”

Bilba’s eyes narrowed. She’d spent months with the garrison training and, though her confidence had grown, the fear of leaving the Shire remained.

She pictured the three children again and felt her resolve strengthen.

No one had saved them.

No one had saved her or her mother.

There would be others.

Not if she had anything to say about it.

Her hands signed quickly, with only the slightest tremor betraying her fear.

*I’m going to join the Rangers.*

***
She was forced to wait until another convoy passed through, one with a Ranger attached to it. As soon as she saw them moving down the road Bilba darted out the front entrance of the garrison.

The Ranger, as usual, was at the back of the group. A woman, Bilba realized, as she jogged up. She was slim with long blond hair and raised an eyebrow in question at first but then readily accepted the folded parchment Bilba handed up. She opened it and scanned the words before giving Bilba a startled look.

“I’ll see to it our leader gets this,” she said, her voice soft and lilting. “I imagine you’ll be hearing from him soon.”

Bilba nodded her thanks and returned to the garrison.

And then she waited.

Primula flinched when Bilba told her. The dwarves at the garrison were supportive but, privately, Bilba wondered if they didn’t just want to get her away from the baby dragon so they could have a better chance of him choosing them.

A few weeks later she awoke to Primula shaking her. Baby dragon, who still slept next to Bilba every night to keep the nightmares away, woke up and squawked before vanishing under the covers again.

Primula looked bemused. “I think you have a visitor,” she said dryly.

Bilba frowned but obediently got up and dressed before following the other woman outside.

As soon as she stepped out she stopped in shock.

From where she stood she could see over the tops of the other houses all the way to the garrison.

There was a dragon at the garrison. Normally it wouldn’t be so unusual, it was the Shire after all, but this was no hobbit dragon. It was many times larger and the color of onyx instead of the green of the dragons she’d grown used to seeing.

It was not, however, a drake. Where a firedrake’s forelimbs were part of their wings, and they could walk on four legs or two, this one had four legs and a pair of wings. The spikes running along its back were thinner than a drake’s and it was smaller as well, though not by much.

“It’s a dragon from the race of Man,” Primula said behind her, “they’re similar to the elven dragons, not that you’d ever mistake one for another if you saw them of course.”

Bilba had never seen either, so she wouldn't know, but she’d take Primula’s word for it. She could see a number of Shire dragons swooping about over the bigger dragon, their riders taking them in for a closer look. The massive dragon ignored them, content to lounge with its eyes closed.

Around her, Bilba could see many of hobbits gathered in their yards or looking out their windows, straining to catch a glimpse of the creature.

An excited squawk rang out suddenly and she looked down just in time to see the baby dragon barrel past her, galloping toward the dragon in the distance.

Bilba shook her head, he couldn’t stand it if he didn’t meet everyone.

“You should probably go.” Primula gave her a tight smile, her hands clasped together in front of her.
“If there’s a Man’s dragon there must be a Man. It’s probably the Ranger you’ve been waiting for.”

Bilba hesitated, before lowering her shields. *Are you sure it’s okay?*

Primula sighed. “I’m not going to say I won’t worry but it’s up to you Bilba. I just want you to be happy.”

“I just want you to be happy.”

Her mother’s words echoed in her head. Bilba nodded and turned toward the dragon, following after baby dragon who was nearly out of sight already.

By the time Bilba eventually arrived baby dragon was prancing around in front of the other dragon, bouncing up and chattering excitedly. The dragon had lifted its head and was studying the baby, bemused.

Bilba smiled at it and then continued into the garrison. As Primula had predicted there was indeed a Man inside. He was tall, even for his race, broad with shoulder length, dark brown hair and dark eyes. He had on well-worn leathers and boots and a dark green cloak like most of the Rangers she had seen. A silver clasp held the cloak together and she could make out the image of a golden tree emblazoned on it.

Bofur stepped forward as she came in. “Ah, here you.” He seemed nervous and Bilba looked at him in surprise, wondering what was wrong. Bofur turned to indicate the Man.

“Bilba, allow me to introduce His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Gondor, Aragorn son of Arathorn. My Lord, may I present Bilba.”

Bilba raised an eyebrow, what was a Prince doing in the Shire?

Bofur was frantically gesturing at her to do something but, before she could figure out what he wanted, Aragorn stepped forward and gave a polite bow.

“Bilba, I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Had he? Bilba didn’t imagine there was much to tell. It was of little consequence though so long as she was allowed to be a Ranger.

“I received your note,” Aragorn continued, “and the Rangers would be honored to accept you into our fold. We can begin training immediately if that’s alright with you.”

Bilba nodded, relieved at how easy it was. She’d worried he’d make her sit down and outline why she wanted to be a Ranger and whether or not it was a good idea, as Primula had been doing the last few weeks, but he apparently was satisfied enough just with the fact she wanted it.

Aragorn stretched out his hand and, Bilba, having finally learned what that was all about reached out and clasped his forearm, feeling him grab hers in turn.

And, thus, with that simple action Bilba, formerly of Moria, recently of the Shire, became a Ranger.

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Aragorn was of the belief that the best training was done in the field so, only a week later, she headed out on her first convoy escort. Before they left she was provided with leather armor for her chest, shoulders and back and vambraces for her arms. Over all of this she wore a cloak similar to
the one he wore. She found room for the various knives she’d taken to carrying, including a place on
the belt for her sword. She added her bow and arrows as well slung over her back. She wasn’t as
experienced with them yet but would take the opportunity to learn and improve. The only thing she
lacked was the clasp Aragorn wore to keep his cloak closed. Apparently she was considered an
apprentice in status and would only receive the clasp on the day she was made a full Ranger. Still,
the outfit made her feel relaxed and comfortable. With it on she couldn't see any of her scars, even
the ones on her throat was hidden by the neckline of the armor. She could almost pretend she'd never
been a slave at all.

Aragorn would not be the one to train her. Though he was the Chief of the Rangers the position was
largely ceremonial as, being a Prince, he and his dragon were often needed on other errands. It had
been sheer luck, in fact, that he’d even been in the area when she’d sent her note off as he spent most
of the year in Gondor, coming to the Shire only in the spring and summer when travel was at its
peak.

Bilba was paired with the same woman who’d originally carried her note to Aragorn. Her name was
Aeran and she was originally from Rohan. She’d moved to Gondor at a young age and joined the
guard as soon as she was eligible. Much like the dwarven garrison in the Shire, serving in the
Rangers was considered the bottom rung of the guards though, with her service, she could eventually
rise through the ranks until she reached the position she was striving for, personal bodyguard to the
royal family.

She was an excellent teacher, showing Bilba not just how to fight but how to move unseen through
the trees and bushes, what plants were good for medicine, for eating, how to scout ahead and report
back using bird calls or other means.

Bilba had feared her ability to step out of the Shire but, as it turned out, the fear was unfounded.
Mainly because the baby dragon threw an absolute fit when she tried to leave without him.

Bilba finally gave in and allowed it so long as he took refuge in the nearest tree the second they saw
trouble. He appeared to agree, grudgingly, and she left it at that, trying to hide the relief she felt. It
was ridiculous that she would feel so much safer with a baby along, one still so small that wolves
were a threat, but she did.

Primrose wanted to come too but Daisy put her foot down and refused, outright ordering her
daughter to stay put. Bilba had knelt and hugged the little dragon, promising they’d only be gone a
week as it was just to the Blue Mountains and back again. Primrose was still put out but showed up
to see them off, along with Daisy, Snapdragon, Primulla, Drogo, Bofur and most of the garrison.

Bilba felt her face heat at the attention and quickly told herself that it wasn’t for her but for baby
dragon, who drew attention and affection wherever he went.

As if to prove her point he proved to be a massive hit in the convoy as well, going into such antics
that Bilba actually didn’t notice they’d left the borders of the Shire until it was hours behind them.

The trip went without a problem and she, Aeran and baby dragon soon found themselves bidding the
group good-bye and returning to the Shire where Bilba and the baby were welcomed back warmly.

Another convoy soon needed her help and another one after that.

It was the fourth one where Bilba saw her first action since the mines and the Arena. Instead of the
fear she’d expected, Bilba instead found herself full of rage at the thought of the orcs trying to harm
anyone the way they’d harmed her. She fell into a near trance, her sword out of its sheath almost of
its own accord and, when the trance cleared she was surrounded by dead orcs and the sound of cheering as the convoy celebrated its win.

Bilba stood still in the middle of the road, her chest heaving, blood splattered over her body and sword, and felt like laughing.

She’d won. The orcs had tried to hurt her, tried to hurt those she was protecting and she’d fought back and won.

Chattering caught her attention and she lifted her eyes to see baby dragon clinging to a branch in a tree over her head. He chattered again, a question, and she grinned at him broadly in response. The action seemed to satisfy him for he made his way down carefully and moved to her side. He looked around at the various bodies on the ground and Bilba realized this was probably the first time he’d ever seen death or bodies, or even orcs.

She knelt next to him. She still wasn’t entirely sure how much he understood but she had a feeling it was far more than he let on.

She pointed to the orcs littering the ground. Those are orcs, she thought carefully, ones like them killed your mother.

He was silent, studying the forms. Then, a low hiss escaped him, followed by a small jet of flame.

He was quiet for most the rest of the day but, when Bilba woke up the next morning; he was back to frolicking and running about like he normally did.

It was not the last attack. They were not frequent and, fortunately none of the orcs that attacked them were ever mounted on dragons, but they did happen enough that it eventually became routine. Bilba never tired of getting rid of them, however, deciding each one she killed was one less that could enslave another helpless person, or leave another child an orphan.

She felt like she’d finally found her purpose.

Baby dragon continued to flourish as well, soon reaching near to her waist in height. He was large enough that, when there were smaller children on the convoys, he would often give them rides. In the event of an orc attack he would race with them up the nearest tree to protect them.

He wanted to fight, on the occasions there were no children, but Bilba refused to let him. Primula had slowly been impressing on her how awful it was that someone her age had ever been forced to kill and she did all she could to protect the baby from the same fate.

Even if he wasn’t really a baby any longer.

Bilba spent her first anniversary away from the mines on the road guiding a large group of dwarves as they headed out toward Erebor. As so often happened they asked her to continue on with them all the way but she politely refused, leaving them in Aeran’s capable hands and returning to the Shire. She only ever went so far as the Blue Mountains in one direction and Bree in the other. Though she would like to go further she feared leaving the Shire unprotected for the length of time it would take for her to leave and return.

When she returned home it was to a surprise party held in her honor at the garrison. Primula and Drogo were there as was their dragon, Snapdragon. Primrose and Filith, now Primrose's chosen rider; were present as well along with the garrison. There were even a few hobbits who’d been convinced to come.
There was cake and food and gifts. A dagger from Primula and Drogo, a beautifully carved bracelet from Bofur, arrows and a new whetstone from the rest of the garrison. Several months earlier she’d refused Primula’s request to throw her a birthday party, not wanting to draw attention, and now had a suspicion the party was the other woman’s way of getting around it. Baby dragon, now nearly up to her chest, ran about cheerfully, playing with Primrose and attempting to steal food when he thought no one was looking.

For that one night Bilba actually forgot she’d ever been a slave.

She forgot the darkness that she fought against.

She forgot what it had felt like to be alone and scared, hungry and hopeless.

She let her guard down.

The orcs invaded three days later.

Fili strode through the tunnel. Technically he shouldn’t be in it as it was only to be used for escapes by the royal family in case of emergency.

Fili personally believed escaping the clutches of an overbearing female more than qualified.

He reached the end, placed his hands against the stone and pushed. A rumble sounded and the door swung out, bright light striking him in the eyes and blinding him for a moment. He held his arm up until they adjusted and then stepped onto the ledge outside the door. He’d planned to just stay there but, as his eyes roamed over the plains ranging out from the back of Erebor, he caught sight of something just below him.

Lounging on the ground in the valley below the ledge was a black and gold dragon. As Erebor only had one dragon of that coloring it could only be one person.

Fili hesitated a moment, then shrugged and made his way over to the staircase that led down to the valley floor.

He reached it quickly and headed to where a giant, tattooed dwarf was settled against the dragon, in the area where the head met the neck. Both the dragon and dwarf seemed asleep but Fili knew better.

“Want to explain why the Crown Prince is outside the mountain without an escort?”

Fili grinned. “What are you talking about? I’m with the Captain of the Guard.”
Dwalin grunted and Fili sat down next to him. No doubt Dwalin would have guards stationed on the door before the day was out but there was little he could do about it now.

Fili sighed and relaxed, dropping his head back against Xalanth. The dragon didn’t react. It was possible he really was asleep, Fili thought.

“That bad?” Dwalin asked. He opened an eye slightly and gave him a dry look.

Fili scowled and growled one word. “Beryl.”

“Oh,” Dwalin was clearly amused. It was no secret that Councilman Nar’s daughter had her sights set on Fili, and had for some time. “Trying to comfort you on the official day of mourning?”

Fili snorted. “Trying to drive me insane more likely. She keeps going on about how the dragon I insist I felt should be old enough to talk soon.”

Dwalin nodded. “Won't be much longer, then.”

"I'll be a relief," Fili muttered. He'd spent the last year daily looking toward the sky to see if there was any sign of an adult dragon bringing him a tiny baby but, to date, there had been nothing. Kili was convinced it was simply because the dragon wasn't speaking yet and couldn't announce he, or she, had a rider already.

If that were the case then the dragon should be arriving soon. Fili felt his gut clench at the thought. Not that his dragon might soon arrive but at the notion it might not. There were already some who doubted his claim that he'd felt a dragon born that was meant for him. He was fifty-six years old. His coming of age was in four years and, in all the history of the dwarves, had their ever been a member of the royal family who'd been without a dragon on at his coming of age ceremony.

Not once.

Dwalin shifted. “How’s Thorin?”

Fili shook off the dark train of thought and shrugged. “Locked inside his room. Mother is in there with him though so I imagine he’s at least alive and in one piece, for the most part.”

No one had expected the anniversary of what had come to be called the Battle of Azanurbizar to be easy.

They sat in silence. Fili felt the sun beating down on him and tipped his head up to watch clouds drift across the sky. It was odd, he thought, that the world could keep on going in the midst of so much pain. He didn’t think he’d ever get over the hole he felt inside from where his great grand-father, grandfather and uncle Frerin had once been.

He couldn’t imagine what uncle Thorin felt with the loss of Quenth on top of all of that.

Speaking of which, he reached behind him to lightly place a hand on Xalanth’s side. “How is he doing?”

Dwalin shrugged. “He lost his mate, what do you expect?”

As he spoke his own face darkened and his eyes took on a faraway look.

Fili flinched. He could still remember clearly that day long ago when Dwalin had lost his One. Fili had been small, Kili not even born yet, when Dwalin had strode into the dining room where the royal
family had been having dinner. He’d carried a bundle in his arms, one that stank of smoke and death. Fili could see clearly the lost look on the dwarf’s face, confusion as if he didn’t even know how he’d arrived there.

He’d simply stood there, holding that small, still bundle, looking at them all as if he thought somehow they could fix it.

Fili had always looked at Dwalin as stone, unbreakable, unmovable, able to handle any situation.

That had been the one and only time he’d seen him look so utterly lost.

It had been the first time he’d learned there were some things even Dwalin could not fix.

Uncles Thorin and Frerin had surrounded him, Fili’s father joining in close behind and had ushered him gently from the room.

Just as they’d walked out the bundle had shifted and a slim arm, blackened and charred, had fallen out. It had looked so small and, even then, Fili had wondered what evil could possibly exist that would do harm to one such as that.

“It just isn’t fair,” he whispered, not even sure who he was addressing.

“Aye,” Dwalin responded from next to him, “that it’s not.”
Chapter 5

Three days after the first party Bilba had ever attended she woke to find baby dragon sitting politely next to her bed.

That was rather unusual as she often woke up far earlier than he did. Light streamed in through her window but it was dim and her room was still shadowed, suggesting she hadn't overslept.

_Hello_, she thought in confusion. Had he worried they would be late for their next mission? They were escorting a group of hobbits to visit relatives in the Blue Mountains, hardly worth getting up early, even to prepare.

He leaned forward, close enough that his snout nearly touched her face. Bilba felt as though she were caught in his eyes, the world around them falling silent until it was just the two of them. A feeling of anticipation settled over her as though a momentous event were about to take place.

Something brushed against her mind and she felt her eyes widen. Without hesitation she opened a channel in her shields, allowing the presence in.

_Hi!

Bilba felt a wave of happiness followed almost immediately by sadness. Mentally she berated herself. She knew better than to get attached. In the mines no slave lasted long, getting invested in one simply meant more grief and pain when they inevitably died.

She accepted being left behind; it was the way of things. She had known the baby would start talking and, once he did, he would pick a rider and go on his way.

She had no right to feel sorrow or loss over it.

She just…she’d thought she’d have a little more time before it happened.

Baby dragon was positively preening, his head thrown back with pride.

Bilba did what she’d done in the mines when forced to fight another slave in the Arena. She pictured herself as being carved from stone. Nothing could touch her, nothing could reach her, and nothing could break her.

She smiled and reached out to run a hand over his snout. _That’s wonderful, congratulations! Does that mean I can finally stop calling you baby dragon now?

That earned her a glare. _You should have stopped already_, he grumbled. _I haven’t been a baby for months!_

_My apologies_, Bilba replied, amused. She didn’t point out the fact that, while he stood at her chest level when on all four legs and towered over her when on his back legs, he was still miniscule when compared to an adult drake.

He reared up on his hind legs now, unfurling his wings and posing in what he probably considered a majestic manner.

_Syrath_, he intoned solemnly.
Bilba’s lips quirked and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep it down. Pain twisted in her chest at the realization of just how badly she was going to miss him when he was gone but she didn’t let it show on her face. She also tightened her deeper shields as much as possible, keeping him on the surface in an attempt to prevent him from picking up on her mood. She didn’t want to ruin his moment.

She gave a polite bow of her head. *A fine name. I’m very pleased to meet you, Syrath.*

He dropped back down to a sitting position and Bilba raised an eyebrow at him. *Have you told Primrose yet? I’m sure she’d be very excited.*

His eyes widened almost comically. *I haven’t! She’ll be upset with me if I don’t tell her second after you!*

He scrambled to turn around, not an easy task given his size, and sprinted out the door. As he vanished around the corner he shouted mentally, *I’ll be back!!*

Bilba shook her head in amusement. Baby dr….no…Syrath would make a fine dragon someday. The person, or people, who partnered with him, would be lucky indeed.

She got up, ignoring the resigned feeling that had settled over her, and began to get ready. She laced her boots up, adjusting the clasps and laces and then strapped on her leather body armor and vambraces. Finally she swung her cloak over her back and hooked her sword to her belt.

She left her room and headed to the kitchen. Drogo and Primula were both already seated at the table, a full spread laid out for breakfast.

“Bilba,” Primula scolded. “You know how I feel about weapons at the breakfast table.”

Bilba did know but had forgotten in light of Syrath’s announcement. She removed the sword and propped it in a corner before taking a seat. She didn’t remove the knives at the small of her back, the ones slid under her vambraces or her boot knives. She had a feeling Primula was more upset about weapons she could SEE rather than weapons altogether.

“So,” Drogo spoke up, “what was it baby dragon was so excited about? He went running out of here like his tail was on fire.”

Bilba told them and then looked down at her hands as they both broke into exclamations of joy and congratulations.

“That’s fantastic,” Drogo said, a bright smile gracing his face.

“Syrath, hmm?” Primula mused. “A big name. I suppose he’ll grow into it though, eventually.” She too grinned at Bilba. “The two of you will make a fine team.”

Bilba gave her a noncommittal smile.

They lapsed into normal, breakfast conversation after that. Drogo would be off about the same time she was. He and Snapdragon were flying to Bree to pick up some supplies. Primula had an errand of her own, one she was refusing to tell them about.

“Come on,” Drogo teased, leaning over and giving his wife a pleading glance. “You’d keep secrets from your own, devoted husband?”

Primula laughed. One rested, for just an instant, on her stomach before sliding across the table to
grasp Drogo's. “I just want to make sure of a few things first before I tell you.” she said.

Drogo conceded with a theatrical sigh and went back to his own meal. Bilba felt a surge of affection toward them both.

Two more she’d allowed to get under her skin.

She finished and got up, retrieving her sword to head out. Primula jumped up to give her a hug, something she’d started doing recently when she’d discovered Bilba hadn’t had one in a little over ten years. The feeling was odd and Bilba still wasn’t quite sure what she was supposed to do in response but she tolerated it.

Primula stepped back and, with a wave to Drogo, Bilba headed out. The sun was still slowly rising and the air was cool. Very few were up and about that early, even the dragons in the field were asleep. Because of this Bilba walked to the garrison lost in her own thoughts.

The group of hobbits was already there when she arrived. There were about twenty of them, all from a single family. They’d made the journey before and were well prepared with several wagons packed full of supplies to take care of any need. The oldest, a couple in their eighties, sat together on the wagon's bench seat. A number of children darted about, chasing one another through the grass around the garrison, shrieks of laughter ringing through the air.

Aeran was leaning against a corner of the wagon and watching the children with amusement. She straightened and came over to greet Bilba before taking her to meet the couple seated on the wagon.

“Aeran?” she greeted, “allow me to introduce Bilba, she’ll be joining me as an additional escort.”

Bilba wasn’t surprised, pretty much everyone had heard about her it seemed though she couldn’t begin to imagine who it was doing all the talking.

The elderly hobbit leaned forward, sticking out a hand in that weird grab hand thing everyone always wanted to do when they first met. Bilba took his and he shook it firmly, a smile breaking across his face.

“Yes, we’ve heard a lot about you.”

Bilba nodded, swallowing thickly. Aeran was talking again, pointing out the various hobbits. Every last one of them was related to Bungo and Iris, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

“Bungo,” her mother’s voice whispered in her mind. “We were betrothed nearly from the second we were born. We grew up together and quickly became best friends.” Bilba remembered the affectionate, almost wistful look in her mother’s eyes when she would talk of that particular point in her past. “I think, somewhere along the line, we got caught up in what our parents wanted and forgot to ask what we wanted. It was easier I suppose, to just stick with what was comfortable instead of risking our heart on something else.”

Bilba nodded, swallowing thickly. Aeran was talking again, pointing out the various hobbits. Every last one of them was related to Bungo and Iris, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

“I often wonder what happened to him,” Belladonna’s voice spoke again. “He was understandably hurt when I broke off the engagement and moved out of Bag End. Sometimes, though, I think he may
have been relieved. I don’t know, maybe that’s just my own selfishness speaking. I do hope he found his happiness, however. I did love him, just not the way I loved your father.”

Her mother could rest easier, Bilba thought. Bungo and Iris were holding hands, watching their family with looks of fierce joy and love.

Something inside her eased. Her mother would be happy.

**Bilba! Bilba!**

Bilba turned to see Syrath galloping toward her with Primrose running alongside. She was so much smaller than him; she almost vanished in his shadow. Behind her, Filith walked along slowly, her hands shoved in her pockets and an easy smile on her face.

Syrath skidded to a stop and, as usual, soon found himself swamped by the hobbits, eager to meet him. He soon found himself flat on the ground as the children crawled all over him, many pretending to be dragon riders in their own right.

Primrose stopped in front of her, sitting primly on Bilba’s feet and watching Syrath play.

“Primrose says he’s started talking,” Filith stated, coming up alongside her.

Bilba nodded. She had never really spoken to the other dwobbit much before but heartily approved of the partnering with Primrose. The two fit well together, Filith bringing a bit more levity while Primrose provided the quiet maturity Bilba was convinced she’d been born with.

“Primrose says his name is pretentious,” Filith offered and Bilba laughed, nodding in agreement.

“Has he made it official with you yet?” Filith’s gaze was curious and Bilba frowned in confusion. Filith rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t give me that look. As if there’s any question whose dragon he’ll be.”

Bilba shrugged. She didn’t particularly want to talk about it. A glance at the garrison showed Bofur heading her way and she felt a rush of relief. She carefully nudged Primrose off her foot and ran to meet the dwarf, waving absently to Filith as she did.

Bilba had the rest of her gear with him, the bow and arrows and the second sword she’d just recently begun carrying. When she’d tried to bring them home Primula had put her foot down, stating there was a weapon limit in her home.

Now, Bilba nodded her thanks to him and quickly strapped on the second sword, longer and thicker than the other, before slinging the bow and arrows across her back.

Bofur slapped her on the shoulder. “Good luck my friend. I’ll see you when you get back.”

Bilba grinned, raising her hands to sign. *Maybe by then I’ll have figured out how to draw both swords without dropping one.*

He laughed. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll get it.”

They talked a bit more after that, Bilba telling him of Syrath’s new name and ability to talk. Soon enough, however, it was time to leave and she found herself setting off down the path. Aeran rode up front while Bilba and Syrath covered the rear. Most of the hobbits rode in the wagons but a number of the younger adults, and many children, ran alongside or walked.
As they reached the crest of a hill and prepared to go down the other side Bilba twisted in her saddle to look back. Bofur, Filith and Primrose all stood in the center of the path waving good-bye.

Bilba waved back. Beside her Syrath kept up a steady stream of chatter inside her head, remarking on literally everything from the consistency of the dirt he was walking on to how great it would be once he could fly.

Bilba turned to face the open road as it unspooled ahead of her.

*Do you plan to talk the entire way there and back?*

He gave her an affronted look. *Of course! I just learned how. I’m going to use it!*

Bilba sighed. It was going to be a long journey.

***

They’d been traveling about an hour or two, just leaving the borders of Michel Delving, when a strange sound came from behind them.

Bilba straightened in her saddle and looked around, trying to place the noise. It was faint and very, very far away, but sounded almost like a horn of some sort.

Ahead of her the wagon shuddered to a stop and she moved up alongside it, wondering what the problem was. On the bench seat Bungo and Iris were both white, her hands clutching his arm in a near death grip.

Aeran had come back and spoke before Bilba could think of a way to communicate with them.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s the horn of Buckland,” Bungo said, his voice harsh. “Only blown when the Shire is under attack.”

Bilba went rigid, her muscles snapping tight.

The Shire under attack.

Around her doors were beginning to fly open and hobbits were pouring out into the road. As Bilba watched dragons began to appear from different areas, circling overhead and landing briefly to pick up their riders.

“I’ve never heard it sound before.” Aeran already had her sword out, held loosely at her side.

“It hasn’t been used in over eighty years,” Bungo confirmed. “Not since the last orc invasion before the garrison was built.”

Orcs. Bilba felt sick. Faces flashed before her. Primula, Drogo, Snapdragon, Primrose, all of them and many more. At some point in the last year they’d all managed to claim a piece of her heart even though she’d tried as hard as possible to shield it.

A hand rested on her forearm and she turned to see Bungo, his gaze sharper than she’d expected for
one of his age.

“Go,” he stated. “We’ll take shelter here. Please, go save them.” His eyes grew haunted for a moment. “I don’t want to lose anyone else. Please go.”

She didn’t wait a second longer.

Spurring her pony around, Bilba launched it into a full gallop back the way they’d come. She heard Syrath shout in her mind and sent back a quick command, telling him to stay where he was.

If the Shire was indeed being attacked she had a feeling it was due to their presence. She thought about all the convoys they’d led from the Shire. Not all of them had made it; she knew that for a fact. How simple would it have been for Azog to have heard news about a firedrake baby and a strange dwobbit who never spoke? To hear how they hailed from the Shire and regularly accompanied convoys as they passed through? That the dwobbit had an unusual talent for fighting?

Wind raced past her face.

How could she have been so STUPID?

Her pony flew past other hobbits, some riding, some on foot. Overhead dragons darted past on their way and Bilba almost screamed at the sight, the orcs would show them no mercy.

There was no possible way this day would not end in death. In blood spilled in a place that had known peace for so long.

She would never get there in time to stop it all.

***

The Shire she rode back into wasn’t the one she’d left.

The dragons drew her attention first, flying overhead in thick clusters. Splashes of bright green were the Shire dragons, diving in amongst the orc dragons, their claws and teeth flashing.

As she watched an orc dragon opened its maw and sent forth a stream of thick, black liquid. It splashed over a Shire dragon and its rider. Both shrieked in agony, their skin curling and melting. She saw the white bone of the dragon shining through its hide for just a moment and then it was crashing out of sight beyond a copse of trees. The orc dragon dove after it and Bilba turned her head away, her breath coming in heaving gasps.

She urged the horse on, pushing it forward into Hobbiton. Thick smoke hung like a dark haze over the landscape and an acrid smell stung her nostrils.

The garrison was on fire.

Orcs swarmed over it like maggots on a corpse. As she drew closer Bilba saw the silent forms on the ground, their armor rent, and so mutilated their own parents probably would not recognize them.

A scream of near animalistic rage burst from Bilba’s throat. She didn’t recall when she’d drawn her weapons but they were suddenly in her hands and she didn’t hesitate as she flew from her pony at the nearest orc.
A red film seemed to descend over her eyes after that. Her vision narrowed. She shut out the screams of dragons overhead, the moans of the dying on the ground. It became about her and the nearest orc, and then the one after that and the one after that.

An axe flew at her head and she ducked it. The move forced the filth to open its stance and she stood back up, driving her sword into its gut. She ripped it out, reversed it and slammed it into the orc coming up behind her.

Movement flickered at her side and already her other arm was coming up, the short dagger in it finding a sheath in the orc's jugular.

She headed further in, drawing her bow and nocking an arrow to the string. She let it fly, watching in satisfaction as it struck an orc in the head with a meaty thunk. More flew after that, each one finding a mark.

She continued on. Bodies littered the landscape and she kept herself from looking closely at any of them, too afraid of seeing someone she recognized.

A roar, unlike any she’d ever heard, caught her attention. At first she thought the dragons bursting through ranks of orcs like they were water were dragons from the race of Men.

As they drew closer, however, she could see they were anything but. Where the dragons the Men rode had leather like wings, these had feathered wings, with another plume coming from the base of their tails and trailing behind them.

They also appeared to be made of light though they had to be solid given how they were slicing through the ranks of orcs and their dragons.

Hoofbeats thundered and elves were suddenly flooding into the area, swords out and hacking down all orcs that stood in their path. Close with them were Men, also mounted, bearing the green cloaks marking them as Rangers.

Bilba noted them and then turned back to her task, slicing through every single orc that dared set foot on Shire land.

A foul voice called out in Black Speech and Bilba felt her entire body react in a visceral manner. Suddenly she was back in the mines, small, terrified and alone.

She dropped, falling next to a dead Shire dragon. For a second she pressed her back to its rapidly cooling body. Then she rose to a crouch and risked a look around it.

She stopped breathing.

Azog himself stood only a few yards away. He sat astride that monstrosity of a warg he usually rode. Where his arm had been severed he wielded a long metal pole, the end twisted into a crude claw.

Why? Bilba thought desperately. Why Why Why had he lived? Her mother died. The rider had most likely died.

Why did AZOG get to live?

He turned to survey the area, a sneer twisting his features and Bilba bit her lip until she tasted blood to prevent a whimper from escaping.

Another orc scrambled up to him, talking rapidly in Black Speech. He spoke so low she couldn’t
make out everything that was said but caught enough to guess.

It had been as she’d thought. They’d come to the Shire for her and Syrath.

She struggled to breathe and thanked Yavanna, the Valar her mother had prayed to, that she’d left Syrath behind. She couldn’t have borne it if he’d been caught.

The tide of the battle was turning with the arrival of the elves and men. Already overhead the orc dragons were thinning and, on the ground, the elves were now fighting in clusters, no longer needing to spread out thin to fight the sheer number of creatures.

Azog gave a snarl and barked out a command to retreat.

A moment later he was gone, his warg bounding over bodies of both hobbits and orcs as if they weren’t even there.

Bilba sagged back against the dragon, shaking. Intense cold, so deep it felt as if her body were producing it, raced along her skin and her heart was hammering in her chest.

She reached out and drove the point of the sword into the ground, using it to lever herself into a standing position.

As soon as her legs steadied she set off at a dead run toward Bag End.

Her feet took her past mounds of corpses, hobbits, orcs and dragons of both races, all crumpled together in death.

Many of the homes she passed were on fire, others ransacked. Hobbits wandered about aimlessly, some injured, others with empty, dull looks in their eyes.

The door to Bag End hung off its hinges, most of it splintered in pieces on the ground. Bilba tore inside, mentally screaming for Primula and Drogo. She received no response. Could they have already left by the time the orcs arrived?

If they had though, if they’d already gone, they’d have been heading straight toward them.

Bilba leaned over, putting her hands on her knees and squeezing her eyes tight. She couldn’t panic now, she didn’t have that luxury.

She thought back to the mines, the Arena. Taking a deep breath she locked herself down, pushing her emotions away as best as she could. It was a thousand times harder than it had been in the mines. There she’d had no one she cared about, not after her mother died.

It had been so much easier before she cared.

She left and went around to the field. A number of dragons must have lifted up from it to engage the orcs. She knew because, when they’d died, they’d fallen straight back down into it.

A familiar shade of green, one with an almost bluish cast, caught her eye and her heart sank.

Slowly she picked her way around the dead until she reached a crumpled form in the far edge of the field.

One entire side of Daisy’s head was crushed. Her eyes were open and staring, sightless.

Syrath had lost another mother.
As had Primrose. Bilba thought back to the burning garrison and a groan escaped her. Please, she prayed, please don’t let them have still been there.

She ran back to the garrison as if Azog himself were on her heels.

She started to charge in, only to nearly run into Bofur heading out. She staggered and he caught her, steadying her. He had a nasty gash on his forehead and blood ran from it in rivulets but, other than that, he appeared fine.

“Hey,” he said his eyes dark and haunted. “Where do you think you’re going?”

She signed at him impatiently, asking where Primrose was.

“They ran,” Bofur stated his voice flat. “Orcs chased them. I tried to help but there were more and they blocked my path.”

He waved a hand vaguely in a direction and then staggered, his entire body slumping to one side. Bilba caught him, helped him away from the fire still burning in the garrison, and lowered him to sit against a nearby tree. She knelt to help him but he waved her off.

“Go find them,” he demanded, his voice only slightly slurred. “I’ll be fine.”

Bilba nodded. She stood, gripped her sword and started off in the direction he’d indicated.

It didn’t take her long.

The orcs had caught up to Filith near the hedge that bordered Hobbiton.

She lay curled in a fetal position, her body looking much smaller than it had in life. Her hair had fallen forward, covering her face. Blood splattered from great, gaping wounds all along the right side of her body. As far as Bilba could tell it appeared she hadn’t even tried to protect herself, instead drawing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around herself.

No, Bilba realized in that instant, no she HADN’T wrapped her arms around her chest.

She threw her sword down and dropped to her knees next to Filith. Carefully she gripped the slowly stiffening limbs and pulled them away before gently pushing the other woman’s legs straight.

Primrose was huddled in a ball against Filith’s stomach. The woman had tried to shield the little dragon with her own body, but had only been partly successful. Her eyes burning, Bilba sucked in a deep breath and reached to pick the little creature up, cradling her in both arms.

She flinched at the sight of Primrose's wings, both hanging at unnatural, limp angles. The little dragon gave no reaction but, as she held her close, Bilba felt a faint, faint movement as she breathed.

Slowly, Bilba got back to her feet, leaving her sword in the dirt. Tears tracked down her face freely, dripping off her chin and splashing onto Primrose’s still form.

She nodded at Filith.

You rest, she thought. I’ll look after Primrose now.

Then, her eyes so filled with tears she could barely see, she turned and went back.
The Battle for Hobbiton lasted about five hours.

Over a hundred orcs and dragons had come down from Moria, a testament to how badly Azog wanted Syrath and, most likely, Bilba back.

As they’d passed Imladris the elves had spotted them and mustered to follow but it had taken time to gather their forces.

The orcs had hit the Ranger outpost near Buckland and obliterated it. Even routed, however, those who had survived had circled back and come to the Shire’s aid.

But it had taken time.

Hobbits and their dragons were not designed for war. The Valar who created them both, Yavanna, valued peace and had gifted her children with no weapons to protect themselves other than the claws and teeth that none of the dragons had ever used for violence.

They hadn’t stood a chance.

By the time the Rangers and elves arrived over two hundred hobbits and nearly thirty Shire dragons were dead, dying, or dragged back to Moria. The elves had given chase but the orcs traveled at night and were in low enough numbers they were able to melt into the shadows and keep themselves hidden.

The garrison had been destroyed and most of the dwarven guard killed. The orcs had hit there first, knowing it would be the area where they would meet the most resistance.

Syrath arrived later in the day along with the caravan that had insisted on returning to see what had become of their home.

Bilba watched as Bungo and his wife stood in the midst of burning funeral pyres and held each other, crying over the death and destruction visited upon Hobbiton in their brief absence.

Two days after the attack Primula appeared…alone.

The look in her eyes was hollow and empty, her mind closed off to any who tried to speak to her. She’d walked into the ruins of her home, entered her bedroom and shut the door. The woman who eventually emerged nearly a full day later was a shell of who she’d used to be. She didn’t speak or acknowledge anyone but simply moved through the motions of life as if unsure of what else to do.

At night she could often be found wandering the lanes of Hobbiton, as though searching for her husband and dragon.

To her dying day she refused to say what had become of them.

No trace of either was ever found.
Bilba sat next to Syrath and watched him keep vigil over Primrose. She'd awakened shortly after Bilba had brought her in but had been in so much pain the healers had been keeping her in an almost continuous drugged sleep. Her wings were taped up completely, utterly covered in bandages and sticks in an attempt to help them heal correctly. She’d been put in a small area in one of the undamaged homes. It had hurriedly been converted into a place to bring the wounded and, even then, most of the space was covered with hobbits, dwobbits and dwarves in various stages of healing.

Primrose was the only small dragon injured, the rest having been further inside Hobbiton where their parents had hidden them, or outright fled with them, the second the horn of Buckland sounded.

The only reason Primrose hadn’t left was because she’d been at the garrison saying good-bye to Bilba and Syrath. **Will she be able to fly?**

Syrath had his entire body curled around Primrose, her tiny frame cocooned within the larger coil of his own. His question was the first thing she’d heard him say since he returned.

Bilba sat against a wall, her knees drawn up and her arms draped over them.

She thought only a moment before answering.

*No.*

He didn’t seem surprised.

***

They buried Filith soon after.

Primrose was still too drugged and injured to come. Bilba wasn't sure the little dragon even knew yet. She and Filith hadn't had the official ceremony to form a soul bond yet.

Bilba and Syrath stood at the foot of the grave and silently watched the dirt as it was shoveled over the dwobbit who'd willingly died to protect a dragon she wasn't even officially bonded to yet.

No one else joined them. As it turned out a number of the orcs had demanded to know the location of the baby firedrake and the mute dwobbit. Word had spread until almost everyone knew the reason the orcs had come.

They didn’t blame her, or at least most didn’t. She couldn’t have known the orcs would come. There were also stories already floating about already of how hard she’d fought for them.

They didn’t stay away, then, because they blamed her.

They stayed away because they were afraid of her.

Her and Syrath. No one spoke to him anymore and parents dragged their children inside the second they saw him.

They were afraid, just as the slaves in Moria had been.
Both times a fear of Azog isolating her, setting her apart.

He seemed committed to destroying her life over and over again.

Beside her, Syrath stirred.

_You don’t plan to stay._

_No, Bilba agreed. I don’t._

His eyes shifted away from her once more. _I’ll go with you._

Bilba raised an eyebrow.

_Why?_

_You’re one of my riders. The one I get to choose._

Once those words would have caused her to either dance for joy or reject it, because he didn't deserve to be saddled with someone as broken as her. Now, however, Bilba simply studied him in silence.

_Are you sure?_

_Yes._

And that was that. He didn’t ask for a soul bond with her, as was customary. She imagined both their souls were currently so damaged that no bond would hold.

She wondered briefly what he had meant about her being the rider he got to choose but she was too tired and heartsick to question it.

The small, wooden box slowly disappeared under layers of dirt.

She thought of Primrose sleeping under the weight of the drugs in her system. She would wake up to a dead mother and rider, and wings that would never lift her off the ground.

She thought of Primula, Drogo and Snapdragon.

All the others, dead, thanks to the cruelty and violence of the orcs.

A spark of anger began to burn deep in her mind.

With each shovel it grew, sliding into her veins and darting along her nerves. Love, despair, sadness, loneliness, all fled in its wake until there was nothing left.

Just white hot rage.

She felt as though she was on fire but held no fear of burning.

She would not burn.

Not until Azog lay broken in pieces at her feet.
Gondor and Imladris offered her sanctuary but she rejected both. She would not make the same mistake again.

So long as she lived Azog would be after her.

She would put no one else in harm’s way.

She would not let her guard down again.

She would not risk her heart, what little there was left of it.

Her last action before she left was to visit Primula. The woman sat quietly on the bench at the bottom of the hill Bag End was built on. How it had survived Bilba didn’t know but it had and the woman now could be found on it nearly every day. She never spoke, just sat quietly with her hands in her lap and her eyes fixed on the road.

Bilba knelt before her and carefully took the woman’s hands in her own.

Primula was still locked behind shields as strong as mithril but Bilba spoke through her link anyway.

_I swear to you, _she promised, _I won’t return until I have wiped every last one of them from the earth. Every last one, Primula, on this I give you my word._

Primula didn’t answer, didn’t even acknowledge her presence, not that she acknowledged anyone’s presence anymore.

At the top of the steps Bilba spotted Bluebell Cotton standing in the door. She’d moved in to help look after Primula until, hopefully, the other woman recovered.

Bilba nodded at her and then turned and walked out. Syrath, waiting at the gate, fell in alongside her.

He’d already said a similar good-bye to Primrose.

Aragorn waited for them at the hedge.

“Here,” he held his hand out, something clutched in it.

Bilba held up her palm and he dropped the object, heavy and round in it. She raised it and went still as she realized she was looking at a clip, one with a tree carved on it in gold.

“You have more than proven yourself,” Aragorn stated once her eyes snapped to his. “And you are a Ranger in full.”

He took a step forward and lightly grabbed her by the shoulders. “You have the support of the Rangers and the Prince of Gondor behind you, Bilba. Never forget that.”

Bilba pinned the clip to her cloak, watching as it caught and reflected the light.

Another thing she would have been happy over once.

Now all she felt was the rage.
Aragorn sketched a short bow to her and she returned it before moving past him. She’d already received a similar pledge from the Imladris elves, apparently they’d seen her fighting and had been suitably impressed.

Both groups, from Imladris and Gondor had already promised to work as long as possible to restore the Shire and, Bofur, the only one seeming not afraid of her had been convinced the Blue Mountains and Erebor would also help.

The Shire would be in good hands.

She reached the border in short order and paused, taking in the wild as it stretched out before her.

Well, she thought to Syrath, what do you say we go kill some orcs?

He drew his lips back in a dragon version of a grin; wicked fangs appeared for a brief moment.

Let’s.

Together they strode forward, away from the safety of the Shire and toward the uncertainty of the wild.

Neither looked back.

The report concerning the attack on the Shire was given to Fili. As Crown Prince, overseeing the alliance with the small but prosperous land was one of the duties assigned to him.

Seated at his desk he scanned through the report, startled that the orcs would dare attack with a fully armed garrison there. The whole point of the alliance, for the Shire at least, was to stop such things. Before the garrison the orcs would make regular raids, carrying off hobbits to serve as slaves in Moria. After the establishment of dwarves within the Shire the attacks had moved to only the occasional group or convoy traveling outside the borders of the land.

He noticed the estimated number of orcs thought to have attacked and scoffed. There was no way that many would have bothered with so insignificant a place, even if they had been suddenly in need of slaves. The dwarves stationed there were all low-ranking, fresh from training, and had probably exaggerated the numbers since it had been their first battle.

Though, he thought idly, he wouldn’t be surprised to find out it was a larger number and that the attack had been an act of retaliation against Erebor for the battle at Moria a year earlier. The Blue Mountains and the Shire didn’t have as large a standing army as Erebor. They also didn’t have drakes, making them a far easier target.

He put the report aside without bothering to finish reading it and grabbed parchment and a quill. He drafted out a missive to Grog, the current Lord of the Blue Mountains. He offered sympathies for lives lost and an offer of reassignment to Erebor for any who’d survived and so wished it. He also gave permission for Grog to request from Erebor anything he needed to help in the restoration and rebuilding of both the Shire and the garrison.
Signing it with a flourish he got up and went into the hallway to find a steward. He'd authorized a great deal and, as such, would require final approval from Uncle before he could send it out. He had no doubt he'd get it, however. Uncle had been nothing but generous with his allies since he'd become King and Fili knew he wouldn't hesitate to help the Shire.

He found a steward soon enough and sent him off to find his uncle and deliver the missive.

That done, Fili turned to go back to his office, only to come up short at the sight of the short, stocky woman standing in front of him. Internally, Fili groaned, even as he forced a smile and said, "Beryl, what a pleasure."

"I'm sure," she said, stepping forward and invading his space. He stepped away but she continued forward until he finally gave up and let her stand closer than he was comfortable with.

"What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering about your dragon." Beryl clasped her hands in front of her and gave him an innocent look. "People are starting to talk you know and I worry."

Fili's eyes narrowed. "What are they saying?"

"Oh, I'm sure you know," Beryl exclaimed. "The fact that you're nearing your majority and no Durin has ever has gone so long unclaimed."

People were crossing by in the halls and Fili lowered his voice, annoyed. "As I'm sure you're aware I felt my dragon born nearly a year ago."

"And yet he isn't here," Beryl snipped, "even though he long should have started talking and been able to explain himself."

Fili swallowed, his hands clenching into fists. She wasn't stating anything he hadn't already thought of. He'd comforted himself for a year with the thought his dragon wasn't coming because it couldn't talk yet and inform anyone that he was its rider. Now, however, now it should have been old enough and it still wasn't there.

Which meant....what?

"Some people," Beryl continued, "are suggesting you may have been passed over. After all everyone expected you to pair with your brother but then Lyth was born and--"

And his mother and brother had ended up being her riders. No one had been more stunned than Fili when that happened. He'd believed the same as anyone else, that he would one day ride a dragon alongside his brother.

He felt Kili's mind brush against his lightly, sensing his agitation through the soul bond they shared. Fili responded with a mental image of Beryl and felt a surge of sympathy, coupled with a thought Kili probably hadn't meant to send of "thank Mahal it's not me."

Fili gave a polite nod to Beryl. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention." He stated shortly. She opened her mouth to speak again but he had already moved around her and quickly continued down the hall.

He was shortly back in his office, leaning against his closed door as despair threatened to drown him.

He'd felt his dragon born, he KNEW he had. Even then he felt the dragon, he or she, was still alive
somewhere. He didn't know why, there was nothing he could put his finger on, he just knew.

What he didn't know was where his dragon was or why it didn't seem in a hurry to come to him.

He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face before returning to his desk and gathering up the papers there.

So agitated was he by Beryl and his own concerns he gave no further thought to the Shire or the attack that had taken place there.

He should have.

Had he taken a little more time to investigate it might have saved him nearly four more years of anxiety.

As it was, however, he cleaned up and headed to dinner and didn't think of the Shire again.

And so time passed.

And he continued to wait.
Bilba lounged on a rock, ankles crossed and arms folded over her stomach. Heat leached from the stone through the back of her shirt and trousers, easing sore muscles. She dozed lightly, more relaxed than she’d been in a long time.

The sound of voices and the clink of tack brought her slowly back to full consciousness. The road she lazed near was a key one for caravans. It was also a major one for orcs and bandits, lying in wait for unsuspecting and weary travelers.

She opened her eyes and sat up in one fluid motion, a hand already on her sword where it lay next to her.

Around her stretched an open, rocky plain. Overhead dark clouds drifted slowly across the sky promising poor weather later. A cool breeze swirled around her, lifting a few strands of hair from the tight braids wound around her head. In the years since she’d left the Shire it had grown rapidly and now reached nearly to her hips when loose and wet enough to pull the curls out. She wore it long for her mother who could not and Primula who’d so loved the thought of it growing out, though she doubted it was anywhere near as beautiful as theirs.

Voices drew her attention again and she turned her gaze to a line of people walking along the trail a few hundred yards off to her left. The group was mid-sized for a caravan, about twenty or so in total. Most were male but she could see a handful of women as well as a child or two darting among the wagons and ponies.

As they drew nearer she realized they were dwarves. They were coming from the wrong direction to have originated from the Blue Mountains, however, which meant they were most likely from Erebor or the Iron Hills.

Bilba grimaced, glancing toward the sky again. Nothing but clouds darted overhead. The last thing she wanted was for Syrath to show up and start going on about Erebor again.

She saw one of the dwarves point her out to another. The entire caravan ground to a halt and the two who’d seen her started picking their way in her direction. Bilba sighed in annoyance. She often patrolled this road and most on the Shire side of the Misty Mountains knew to leave her alone. She would protect them, kill any orcs or bandits that threatened them and, in return, they stayed out of her way. That was how it worked. She neither wanted, nor needed, socialization. This group in particular was very near Rivendell and she knew there were no orcs for miles, they didn’t need her.

The two stopped just below the rock she sat on, staring up at her as if they expected her to suddenly do a trick to entertain them. She glared at them, her face blank but neither seemed very impressed. Bastards.

“Greetings,” one of the males called up. He was large, as most dwarves tended to be, with flaming red hair and a thick beard. “What’s your business in these parts if I may ask?”

Bilba bristled at their arrogance. Definitely from Erebor then; only they would have enough egotism to demand what she was doing in the Wild, as though they had any right or claim to it. She thought of Bofur and the others from the garrison. From gossip she picked up on her infrequent visits to Bree she knew most had been offered positions in Erebor after the attack but, to a one, they had all refused and chosen to stay in the Shire to help rebuild. They had felt personally responsible for the inability to keep the orcs out and insisted on making it right.
She personally doubted anyone from Erebor would have done that. She was glad Bofur hadn’t ended up leaving; no doubt the pride would have rubbed off and corrupted him.

The second dwarf, white haired with elaborate braids, elbowed the redhead in the side. That one grunted and Bilba raised an eyebrow, wondering how strong the older must be for the redhead to have felt it through his armor.

“My apologies,” the second dwarf said, his voice surprisingly soft. He bowed politely at the waist. “My name is Dori. My rude friend here,” he indicated the redhead, “is Gloin. What he meant to say to you was ‘greetings, friend. Would you happen to know if the way ahead is safe?’”

Bilba felt a slight smile tug at her lips but clamped down on it. She made an obvious show of looking at the rock she’d been resting on before looking at him and giving him her best ‘are you an idiot?’ look. Syrath claimed she was exceptionally good at that expression but she never could tell if he was telling the truth or just flattering her.

The dwarf, surprisingly, seemed to catch on. “Ah, of course. Why would you be here if it was a dangerous area?”

The rude dwarf growled something in their language, Khuzdul, and, with an apologetic look from the less annoying one, they stepped away to converse.

Bilba dismissed them, studying the rest of the caravan instead. They looked tired but she could see no sign they had been attacked while on their journey. Raids had fallen dramatically in the few short years she’d been preying on the orcs. Now, so long as they stuck to the roads and didn’t wander off, most could be relatively assured of safety in their journeys.

The handful of children, all fully dwarven, darted about under the wagons and other travelers, playing some bizarre game that seemed to involve one hiding and waiting to be found by another one. The other warriors, easy to pick out based on their heavy armor and weapons, had arranged themselves loosely around the entire group, ready to snap to attention at the slightest hint of danger.

Clearly they didn’t see much danger in a lone female dwobbit.

It appeared that, for the most part, the entire group had been walking. The only exception was a woman seated on the bench of the front wagon. She sat straight with her gaze pointed ahead, not acknowledging anyone around her. Her clothing was ridiculous for the area, a silk dress embroidered with jewels and shimmering threads. Ropes of what looked to be pearls wrapped around the slim column of her throat and rings sparkled on her fingers. Her thick hair, nearly onyx hair was done up in an elaborate style and studded with an obscene amount of jewels and other ornaments. It was a wonder they hadn’t been set on by bandits for her alone, Bilba thought. More than that, however, it was a wonder anyone had allowed her to come. Her wardrobe put the entire group at risk and that was ignoring the fact she was clearly a noblewoman and could doubtless fetch a stunning ransom.

The crunch of boots in dirt alerted her to the return of rude jerk and his slightly more polite friend.

Slightly more polite friend, Dori, was the one who addressed her. “We were wondering if you might be able to direct us to Rivendell, my Lady? None of us here have been much on this side of the world and I’m afraid our confidence may have led us slightly astray.”

In other words, they were lost. It was easy enough to do, she mentally conceded. Imlaldris was located in a hidden valley after all, she had trouble seeing it herself sometimes, even from the air. They were actually heading in the right direction but, given how everything looked the same, it was understandable they might have convinced themselves they were on the wrong track.
She slid her feet up and stood. Gloin tensed but Dori didn’t react. She couldn’t decide which reaction to feel insulted about. She retrieved her sword, sheathed it and grabbed her bow and quiver of arrows. She stepped forward and dropped off the edge of the rock, landing easily in a half crouch before the two.

Straightening, she settled one hand on the hilt of her sword and strode between them, heading in the direction of Imladris.

“Is she just leaving?” she heard Gloin hiss behind her. “Or are we supposed to follow her?”

Bilba rolled her eyes and stopped, turning halfway back toward them.

“I guess that answers your question,” Dori replied.

Bilba started walking again, striding to a position well in front of the wagons. As she did she almost absently made eye contact with the bejeweled dwarf female. The woman sneered at her, lifting her chin up and cutting her eyes to one side. Bilba felt her lips curl slightly in a smirk, wondering how fast the pride would fade if an attack happened.

She brushed it off after that, moving at a quick pace ahead of them. If she were lucky she could get rid of them before Syrath came back. Behind her she heard the rattle of the wagon wheels start up again and the chatter of voices as Gloin and Dori explained what they thought was happening.

Bilba stayed well in front, making it clear she had no desire for conversation. Overhead the clouds began to slowly increase, casting long shadows on the ground. The breeze cooled a bit, bringing a welcome relief to the dust and heat from the road.

As she moved, Bilba dropped into an easy rhythm. She allowed her mind to wander, idly working over the latest plans to piss off the orcs. Over the nearly four years since she’d left the Shire she’d done an incredibly good job of enraging them. She had no doubt Azog knew who she was; even he was smart enough to be able to connect the lone dwobbit with a dragon and a vendetta to his personal slave who ran off with a baby dragon. Over the years he’d tried many times to capture her but failed.

The attempts didn’t bother her. She stayed away from everyone, rarely visited any populated place except to get supplies and, then, was in and out as fast as possible with little to no interaction with the local denizens.

Azog no longer had anyone to use against her with the exception of Syrath but the pale orc wanted him regardless, her presence didn’t change anything.

Hoofbeats thudding on hard packed earth brought her back to attention and she lifted her head to see a small group of elves heading toward them. Bilba paused and waited. As they drew nearer she recognized Elrond and those two idiot sons of his at the front. Her eyes narrowed, she had a personal grudge against him both.

Behind him the caravan halted awaiting the arrival of the elves. As they neared Bilba could see the smile on Elladan and Elrohir’s faces and rolled her eyes skyward.

“Orcrist!” Elladan called out. “So you finally decided to visit did you?”

Gasps and exclamations ran through the dwarves behind her and Bilba briefly considered murdering Elladan on the spot. The elves pulled to a stop in front of her and dismounted, Elrond striding forward.
“Greetings, Bilba,” he said, his voice pitched too low for anyone to hear. “It is good to see you well.”

Bilba resisted the urge to roll her eyes yet again. They would have heard if anything had happened to her or Syrath. Azog would probably personally announce it, hopefully right before he took an arrow in the throat, she didn’t care from who.

A number of the elves headed toward the dwarves and Bilba heard a shrill voice start speaking imperiously. She didn’t even have to look to guess it was the overdressed woman.

“Where is Syrath?” Elrond questioned. “It’s rare to see one of you without the other.”

Bilba raised an eyebrow, dropping her outermost shield to activate the link she’d once forged with him.

Don’t you mean Glamdring? She thought, her mental voice as dry as she imagined her physical voice might have been had she been able to speak.

Elrond grinned and Bilba wanted to hit him. “You insisted on trying to make a name for yourself while staying mysterious. We had to give some answer to the constant inquiries.”

She hadn’t tried to make a name for herself at all; she’d simply been killing orcs. When nosy people who had nothing better to do started asking questions Elrond could have given them her and Syrath’s names or, better yet, said nothing at all. Instead, deciding to go the melodramatic route, he’d made up titles.

Orcrist, Orc Cleaver.

And Glamdring, the Foe Hammer.

Elrohir broke away from where his brother was dealing with the dwarves and came to greet her.

The obnoxious woman was getting louder, her voice so strident Bilba couldn’t understand what she was saying. There was an odd note of panic in her voice, though why that would be Bilba couldn’t fathom. They were right on the doorstep of Imladris, the elves had arrived to escort them in so what possible reason could she have to be worried?

She turned her attention back to Elrond.

I have to go. You can take them from here.

“Are you sure?” Elrond asked. “You could come with us. Rivendell has always been open to you.”

Bilba shook her head. She didn’t want Rivendell open to her. She didn’t need it open to her.

She waved and turned to go, easily shrugging off Elrohir’s attempts to try and convince her to stay.

A shadow fell over her and she stumbled back a step as Dori suddenly stood before her. He gave a slight bow. Next to him stood another dwarf, slimmer and younger looking. He held a journal of some kind in both hands and an already dipped quill.

“I’m sorry,” Dori said, “we wanted to thank you for guiding us.”

Bilba shrugged. Beside Dori the younger dwarf was shuffling his feet and ducking his head, both hands clasping the journal so hard his knuckles were white. Every so often he would risk a look at her only to immediately flush and look away.
“Also,” Dori continued, “I don’t want to embarrass you but my brother,” here he indicated the younger dwarf, “is a big fan of yours. He was wondering if you might consider signing his journal?”

The younger dwarf thrust the journal out, eyes fixed on his feet.

Bilba stared at him, utterly baffled. A fan? What did that mean? More than that, however, how in the world did anyone in Erebor know about her? She stared at the journal, and then slowly took it and the already dipped quill he was holding out. Her mother had taught her to read and write as best she could in the mines and Primula had furthered her education after her escape.

She almost scrawled out her actual name but, at the last second, changed her mind and wrote Orcrist instead. She doubted the dwarf would have any interest in Bilba.

She handed the journal back slowly, still confused but she must have done what he wanted for the younger man looked ready to pass out on the spot. Dori looked amused. He nodded to her in thanks and the two of them headed back to the rest of the group.

Bilba watched them for a moment. The elves had moved out and were mingling with the dwarves, all of them clustered in small groups and talking animatedly. The pretentious woman had several around her and was speaking wildly, her arms gesturing as she punctuated whatever point she was making.

Bilba shook her head and turned away. A slight hollow feeling gnawed at her but she pushed it away. She had no need of relationships or friendships.

She had Syrath.

Even as she thought it her stomach twisted slightly, an ever present mix of guilt and fear, and she quickened her steps, hoping to be well away from the dwarves before Syrath returned. Over the time they’d been in the Wild he’d asked repeatedly if they could go and find his second rider. Neither of them completely understood it. As far as Bilba, or Syrath, knew riders were chosen. Nevertheless Syrath insisted he had another rider, somehow, someway. He said he could feel this other soul tugging at him, drawing him. Given the fact that firedrakes only bonded with dwarves or dwobbits, and he wasn’t feeling it from the direction of the Blue Mountains, it meant this other rider was most likely in Erebor or the Iron Hills.

Every time Bilba thought of it her very soul seemed to twist in anguish. The idea of Syrath having a rider somehow destined for him, one that surely wasn’t broken and twisted as she was, one who would be more than willing to open him or herself up and enter into a full soul bond instead of holding him at arm’s length, cut deeply. She continually made up excuses for them not to go, the weather was poor, orc attacks were up, she didn’t feel up to it after her latest injury. She had no doubt Syrath saw right through them but, for the moment at least, he allowed it. The guilt clawed at her but every time he brought it up it became suddenly incredibly hard to breathe.

What possible need or desire would Syrath have for her after finding another rider? One whose body wasn't twisted and marred, whose soul wasn't scarred and blackened with hatred?

And then of course was the knowledge that Erebor was where her father lived, or had lived at least.

A chill ran over her, not caused by the changing weather, and she wrapped her arms around her torso. Her mother had wanted her to go to him if she ever had the chance but Bilba couldn't bring herself to do it. The last thing she wanted to do was face the dwarf who had let her mother die, who'd let her languish in slavery for decades.
She would want to kill him.

Her mother would want her to forgive him.

In the end Bilba did neither.

She sighed, digging her finger into the flesh of her arms until she was sure she'd leave bruises.

Perhaps she was her father's daughter after all, a coward.

She kept moving for over two hours, getting as far from the dwarves and Rivendell as possible. The landscape stayed quiet, no sound other than the crunching of her feet on dirt and her breathing.

Overhead the clouds increased until the sky was an ominous slate gray. The temperature dropped and a smattering of raindrops began to fall. A light wind picked up, throwing the occasional drop against her face and body.

Something pricked at the back of her mind and she lifted her eyes just in time to see Syrath burst through the clouds; body spiraling as he cheerfully swirled and danced through the air.

That dragon had far too much energy, Bilba thought mildly. She'd attributed it to his age at first and had assumed he would settle down as he aged and grew.

She'd been wrong.

If anything his energy level had only increased until it seemed almost boundless. As she watched, he swooped back up into the clouds and vanished from sight. Bilba shook her head and started walking again. He'd come down when he was ready.

It was nearly a half hour later when he finally wore himself out enough to want to land. Bilba was just cresting a large hill when he hit the ground in front of her, the force of it sending a vibration through her legs.

Bilba raised an eyebrow. Nearly the size of a human’s dragon, and with a lot of growing still to do, Syrath towered over her, his neck craned over to look down on her.

He enjoyed towering. She felt a renewed sense of guilt for rushing so fast to get away from the dwarves. She knew the stalemate couldn't last forever, him wanting to go to his other rider, her wanting him to stay. She also knew the very fact that he did stay with her suggested devotion and love.

But, her heart whispered traitorously, that's only because he hasn't met his other rider. It's only because he owes you a debt.

He stays with you out of obligation.

Bilba cursed her heart and mind, one convinced if she let him go she'd never get him back, the other equally convinced she was being foolish, that Syrath stayed from love, not obligation, and would never leave her.

She wished she knew which was the truth and which was the lie.

*I caught a fish!*

*I hope you caught more than one.* Bilba replied dryly, packing away her fears and guilt for another day, again. *One would barely be enough for you to taste.*
I may have caught a few more than one, he answered happily. I didn’t want to overeat though, not right before a mission.

Bilba felt a lazy smile drift over her face. There was no sign then?

Syrath’s eyes glittered. None.

Bilba gave a short nod. Two weeks earlier she’d been in Bree buying supplies, using the few coins convoys often insisted she take after she helped them, when she’d heard the most unusual rumor. A hunter checking his traps had been spreading reports of a large company of orcs moving out from Moria, led by none other than Azog himself.

Bilba hadn’t heard of him leaving Moria since the Shire and hadn’t particularly believed the Man, particularly when she’d been unable to find any sign of the orcs, or any other witness who reported seeing them. She didn’t believe it would be possible for a large number to move unseen and for what purpose?

Then attacks by orcs had begun to decrease, the guards always placed at the gates of Moria since her escape vanished, the roads suddenly became a thousand times safer than they’d ever been.

The orcs had gone quiet, a fact terrifying on its own merits aside from the hunter’s assertions he’d seen them on the move.

Bilba had searched again.

She’d starting finding things in Dunland, small things, an orcish weapon here or there, the remains of a small handful of campfires, smoothed out patches of dirt that might have once held the imprint of footprints. Always the evidence stayed close to the foot of the mountain, hiding in its shadows.

She’d lost all evidence of their passage at the foot of the White Mountains. She’d alerted Gondor as well as the dour faced Wizard who lived in the fortress near the Gap of Rohan. She was vaguely surprised he had seen no sign of the orcs himself but he seemed rather self-absorbed so, in the end, perhaps it was little surprise after all.

It was only after returning to her regular haunts that the idea had started to formulate.

Now she strode under Syrath’s arched neck to where the black leather straps were looped around his body and knotted lightly on his back. She grabbed them and pulled herself up easily, settling herself in the dip where his neck met his shoulders. The straps came undone with a light tug and she quickly lashed them around her legs, thighs and waist. Finally she took her bow and quiver off and secured them to Syrath’s side, within easy reach if she needed them. The arrows were fixed inside the quiver with twine, strong enough to keep them in but weak enough she could snap them easily if she needed to. There were more quivers, each full of arrows, strapped to both his sides going all the way down the length of his body.

Alright, she thought, reaching down to run a hand over Syrath’s rough hide. Let’s get on with it then.

Syrath was only too happy to comply. His wings unfurled with a snap and he bunched down. Bilba felt adrenaline rush through her and a grin spread across her face. She turned her gaze up and lifted her arms as though grasping for the sky.

Syrath started running, gathered speed and then pushed off.

Bilba was thrown back as the clouds were suddenly racing toward her, rain pelting her in the face and wind howling past her ears. She laughed and looked down as the ground dropped further and
further away.

They burst through a layer of clouds and she stretched out her hands as mist slid through her fingers and swirled around her. Air, heavy with rain, filled her lungs and her clothing and hair grew damp.

Then they were through and the sun bore down on them, its rays chasing the chill from her skin.

Syrath leveled off, adjusting his wings so he was gliding on air currents. Bilba looked down and saw the dark clouds that had hung so menacingly over her head were now below them. She stretched a hand down and Syrath dipped lower, allowing her to run her fingers through them.

Happiness flooded her and a peace settled over her. She sighed and relaxed, her eyes drifting closed.

Her mother’s voice entered her mind.

“The one thing I miss the most, aside from your father of course, is flying. I would beg him to take me up every time he visited, and he always did.” In her mind, Bilba heard her mother’s voice take on the wistful tone she always had when she spoke of flying. “There’s no possible way to explain it to you Bilba, not in a way that does it justice. It’s just so…quiet up there. It doesn’t matter what your day was like, it doesn’t matter what’s waiting for you when you land, you can leave it all behind…just for a little while. Just me and your father…and his dragon of course but I couldn’t talk to him so, sometimes, it felt like just the two of us…just us…flying where no one could ever touch us.”

Belladonna’s voice faded, as it always did, and Bilba’s eyes opened. Her mother had been right, there were no words to truly do it justice.

*The clouds are a big help.* Syrath’s voice broke into her thoughts. *They’ll never see us coming.*

Bilba nodded absently, her stomach beginning to churn. She’d wanted to do this for years and the news that the main body of orcs, and Azog, were away presented the perfect opportunity. She’d never have dared getting so close to Moria at any other time.

She swallowed and felt her skin prickling as cold rushed over her. She hoped she was doing the right thing. It could all go right…or it could go terribly, terribly wrong.

*It’ll be fine,* Syrath said, sensing her disquiet. *We’ll be in and out in minutes. They’ll never have a chance to respond.*

Bilba didn’t answer, or bother to point out how uncharacteristically serious he was being. He was worried too.

*We’re almost there,* Syrath told her. *Ready?*

*I am,* Bilba answered, clenching her teeth. *Let’s go.*

Syrath dove and they rushed through the clouds, leaving the sun and blue sky behind them.

Seconds later they dropped back into a gray-cast world. Cold wrapped back around her and the rain, which had picked up significantly, soaked her through immediately. Bilba felt a sudden fear as the memory of her escape entered her mind. It had been a day similar to this one, overcast and dark.

Below them the rocky crags Moria lay spread out. It wasn’t the same location where she’d escaped from, that lay on the opposite side of the mountain. This was the back. There were no gates, just a simple door that, once, had allowed dwarves and other races in and out of the Kingdom.
Bilba knew that door well.

On the inside was a large landing dubbed the Arena by the orcs. It was where slaves were forced to fight, each other most of the time but also other orcs and, sometimes, even fouler things. Bilba could still hear the roar of the orcs, seated along the stairs leading up into Moria. There were only two ways to get out of the Arena once you’d been thrown in.

The first was to kill your opponent. The hordes of orcs covering the stairs would part and the victor would know they would be allowed to live another day.

The second was through the heavily guarded door.

It was the way many went…the losers from the Arena, those too old or injured to work any longer, those who caused to much trouble…and the dead.

Bilba always made sure her opponent was dead at the end of the match, it was the only mercy she could get away with, not that it had always prevented Azog from punishing her anyway. The orcs wanted a show after all, before and after the fight and she regularly deprived them of the second half of it.

The small, rocky basin just beyond the door came into view, the waters of the lake that filled it quiet.

Memory stirred within her and, with it, anger.

The orcs had come hours later, long after the last breath had left her mother’s body. They had torn her ruthless from Bilba’s grasp, dragging her away as though she were little more than trash they were taking out.

Bilba had scrambled to her feet, her legs shaking from weakness and lack of nutrition. She’d stumbled after them, not begging as many did, but fighting, trying desperately to claw her mother back from them.

They’d reached the Arena, a place she’d never been before. The area was dark and quiet but, in the dim light of a few torches, she could pick out the dark stains covering the floor, could see the grooves in rock, remnants of pain forever etched in stone.

She hadn’t realized at the time that Azog was nearby and heard the sounds of her cursing and fighting. He’d been impressed with her spirit and had claimed her as his personal slave.

She’d found herself back at the Arena the next day, as a participant.

Syrath roared, the sound echoing off the walls of the mountain and reverberating through the range.

Fire erupted from his throat, a massive column of heat and liquid death. It struck the surface of the water and fanned out, covering it.

An unearthly shriek sounded and a massive form rose from the center.

That was a mistake. Syrath refocused his fire, setting it dead center on the creature. Tentacles flew out, trying to catch them and drag them down. Bilba calmly lifted her bow and snapped an arrow out of the quiver. She nocked it to the string and let it fly, watching as it soared true and struck a tentacle. She sent several more after it, anger thrumming through her as each one struck home.

Syrath let lose another fountain of fire. Bilba held still, an arrow ready, but no more tentacles came at them. Instead the form slumped forward and slowly sank back under the now boiling water of the
Satisfaction surged through Bilba as the Watcher burned.

The gout of flame stopped and Syrath angled down, aiming at the door into the Mountain. Bilba took a deep breath and readied her arrow once more.

Syrath slammed into the rock face, claws gripping the edges of the doorframe. With a second roar he tore at the rock, wrenching huge chunks of it from the mountain. Pieces of grit and dust struck Bilba in her face and body and dust clogged her throat and lungs. She coughed, grimacing as it went up her nose and made her eyes run.

The wall crumbled, huge pieces falling into darkness. Immediately Syrath shoved back and up, pushing away from the gaping hole in the side of Moria. Orcs began pouring out, the Arena must have been active, Bilba thought. None of them held a weapon that could reach them, however, and they were far from the dragon pens. By the time the orcs could reach their dragons and return she and Syrath would be long gone.

She surveyed the giant hole in the Mountain and grinned. There was no way the orcs would be able to block it off. She’d destroyed the Arena and provided a way for slaves to escape in one fell swoop. Getting rid of the Watcher also deprived them of their method of disposing of corpses, they’d have to find another way and that would take manpower away from other areas.

*We dealt them a solid blow,* she thought to Syrath. *Well done.*

Syrath twisted in midair…and his entire body nearly stalled.

**Bilba!**

Bilba looked up…and sucked in a breath as her air literally froze in her chest.

The sky over their heads was crawling with orcs and the abominations they called dragons.

*No,* Bilba thought, *no…it cannot be.*

Rain splattered in her eyes, obscuring her vision. She shook her head to dislodge it and, when her it cleared, found the orcs had cleared a path in the midst of them.

Most orc dragons were the size of wargs if not a little bigger, barely large enough for an orc to ride. This one, however, was enormous, at least twice the size of a normal orc dragon.

She didn’t have to look to see who rode it.

Her entire body seemed to loose strength and she sagged forward on Syrath, nearly dropping her bow and arrows in the process.

*It was a trap,* she whispered. *It was a trap. How could I have been so stupid?*

*I don’t think so,* Syrath responded. *If it was they’d have stopped us before we destroyed everything. It’s just terrible luck.*

Terrible luck. Terrible luck and Azog. She looked at him and saw his lips drawn back in a sneer. In one hand he clutched an enormous mace.

Her weakness faded. Bilba felt fire light inside her, burning through her nerves.
Azog could haunt her steps for every day of her life if he so chose. He could drive her from every 
place she lived and from every person she ever spoke to.

She would endure it, had endured it already.

There was one thing; however, she would not endure. One thing Azog could not have.

He didn’t get Syrath.

She lifted her bow and sighted, letting the arrow off and nocking another before it reached its target. 
She heard Azog’s dragon scream as the arrow found its mark in its wing. It staggered and Azog roared in anger.

*Syrath! Go!*

Syrath was already moving, his body twisting and racing away from the door. Behind them the 
dragons and orcs gave chase, shouting and yelling insults as they came.

They came around them, above and to the sides. Bilba fired arrow after arrow, panic setting in as she 
saw the sheer number.

Syrath roared in rage, twisting his head to send gouts of flame at them. Several shrieks sounded and 
dragons fell burning from the sky, their riders falling to break upon the mountain.

Bilba felt Syrath lift as he tried to go up, hoping to get above where the orc dragons could fly. 
Immediately dozens closed around him, driving him back down even as he roared and spat fire at 
them.

Something thick and viscous landed on her leg and Bilba shrieked as pain scorched a path across her 
leg. Syrath twisted, spinning and snapped the dragon nearest her out of the air. The straps cut into 
Bilba’s thighs and legs as they held her in place and she nearly screamed again at the feel of the 
leather against her acid burned skin. The dragon and its rider crunched and burst inside Syrath’s 
mouth; blood and gore spraying out before he spat them out in disgust.

*Are you alright?*

*Fine,* Bilba gasped. She clenched her teeth and focused on breathing. Sweat beaded her forehead 
and her hands shook slightly as she nocked another arrow.

Syrath dove suddenly, darting between rock and Bilba realized they were by the High Pass, one of 
the routes leading through the mountains for those who had to travel on foot.

The orcs came after them, their smaller size making it easier to navigate the twists and turns of the 
passage.

Syrath pulled ahead, putting them behind him briefly. Bilba twisted but couldn’t get a good shot off. 
She bit her lip and then reached down with one hand to release the straps, tying them in a quick knot 
to keep them from falling off. Slight relief flooded her immediately as the leather no longer pressed 
against her injured leg.

*What are you doing?!*

Bilba ignored him. She pulled her leg up, pain screamed through her nerves and she swallowed 
against the surge of bile in her throat.
She pushed it aside and carefully got to her knees on Syrath’s back, her body instinctively adjusting to him as he banked and darted between rocks and other formations.

She’d been hurt worse than this before.

She’d flown on Syrath without her straps before.

She could do this.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, sighting the tip of the arrow on the nearest orc dragon. She released and watched as it hit home with a thump, digging deep in the muscle connecting the creature’s wing to its body. It fell with a howl, taking its rider with it.

Bilba reached down and found she only had one arrow left in that particular quiver. It would be enough. The orc dragons fit better in the pass but they were slower and had a harder time maneuvering. They were beginning to fall behind. A small sense of relief spread over her, breaking through the waves of pain radiating from her leg.

She nocked the arrow and, a moment later, let it fly, taking yet another dragon out of the sky.

She leaned over and strapped the bow in next to the empty quiver.

*Stop wasting time and strap back in!*

Bilba turned to face forward once more. In her mind she opened the link to reply to Syrath. She was going to chide him for his worry and point out how far ahead they’d pulled. They were far enough that Syrath could go above the clouds again without fear of them catching up. It would be a relief, he’d been forced to fly so close to the Pass itself she’d worried he’d actually crash into it at several points.

A wall of rock several hundred yards in front of them stood up.

Bilba froze, her mind struggling to comprehend what she was seeing.

Syrath banked hard, instinctively, and soared between the moving rock’s back and the space it had stepped out from.

He made it with inches to spare.

Bilba didn’t make it at all.

One second she had the feel of Syrath’s scales beneath her boot and knee, the next she had the feel of nothing at all.

She fell only a few feet but hit hard, pain bursting from her shoulder as it took the brunt of the impact. The rest of her body followed and she slid, grit and stone tearing through her clothing and ripping the skin of her face and hands as she threw them out to uselessly try to break her movement.

She caught up against a sharp outcropping and couldn’t stop the sharp cry of pain as she slammed into it.

*Bilba!*

Bilba looked to see the rock…whatever it was, lumbering down a side canyon, oblivious, or uncaring about the chaos it had caused. Syrath darted about in the sky over its head, having gained
enough altitude to avoid it and the orcs behind them, forever if he so choose.

A look back showed her pursuers just rounding the corner, Azog at the forefront.

She shot another look at Syrath, judging the distance between him and her and between her and the orcs.

He wouldn’t arrive in time.

**Bilba!**

He started to dive.

*No!* Bilba struggled to her feet, one hand drawing her sword that, through some miracle, had stayed in its scabbard through her fall. *Syrath, no! Run!*

*I won’t leave you!*

*If you come back we’ll both be caught,* Bilba whispered in her mind. The orcs were closer. Bilba cast about desperately and saw the opening of a cave nearby. She limped toward it, her entire body a mass of pain. Her leg dragged uselessly and her arm hung at her side. *Please,* she directed at Syrath. *Go.*

She risked a look and saw Azog, a sadistic look in his eyes.

*Just go,* she begged, *please.*

She reached the mouth of the cave and staggered in, gripping the wall to try and steady herself.

Outside Syrath roared, the sound agonized.

*I’ll draw them off,* he said, his mental voice terrified. *I’ll come back. I’ll come right back. I’ll bring help.*

Bilba felt fear for him, greater than anything she felt for herself. She prayed to Yavanna, the Valar her mother prayed to and added in Mahal and anyone else she could think of. They had never heard her before, and certainly hadn’t heard her mother, but, perhaps, just this once.

Noise came from outside the cave, the scrape of claws on rocks, the flap of wings. Clearly the arrow hadn’t done near as much damage to his dragon as she’d hoped.

Bilba moved toward the rear of the dark cave, holding her sword in both hands, point aimed at the entrance. The blade shook in her grip, the tip continually dragging toward the ground and forcing her to pull it up again.

A shadow fell over the doorway and Bilba had to fight back a whimper as Azog entered.

The last four years dropped away and she was nothing more than a child who’d just lost her mother. A little girl who’d truly and honestly believed Azog was untouchable, unbeatable, all powerful.

Perhaps that little girl had been right all along.

He stepped forward, lazy, smirking. A small sound escaped Bilba’s throat and she cursed herself for the weakness. Almost on its own her body backed up until she was against the wall.

“So,” Azog said, his voice amused. “You have finally returned to me. Did you think you could run
forever?"

She was slightly surprised he didn’t try to mentally attack her. Maybe he thought she’d soul bonded with Syrath and made herself untouchable, just as the rider whose name she’d never known had been all those years ago.

An odd noise permeated the cavern suddenly and she saw Azog frown in confusion as he tried to place it.

Bilba felt something shift under her boots and looked down. A fine line appeared in the dirt beneath her feet. As she watched it spread, winding through the floor and widening.

With a start she recognized the noise, sand falling through the cracks.

The floor was crumbling beneath her feet.

Relief flowed through her, so intense she swayed in place from the force of it.

She straightened and lowered her sword.

On the other side of the cavern Azog frowned; still unaware of what was going on.

Bilba couldn’t bring herself to open any kind of link with him so she simply stared at him.

Sorry, she thought, knowing he couldn’t hear her but hoping he somehow got it anyway. Looks like you lose after all.

Understanding dawned in his eyes as he caught sight of the cracks. With a roar he stepped forward, a hand reaching for her.

He was far, far too late.

Beneath her feet the floor collapsed away, leaving nothing but space.

Bilba fell, air cradling her body as it began its descent into darkness.

The last sight she had was Azog standing on the lip near the cave entrance, his face contorted with anger.

Bilba closed her eyes and relaxed. She spread her arms out to the side, arching her back and tipping her head back, a smile on her lips.

And thus she fell, content in the knowledge she would soon be far past where Azog or, anyone else, could reach her.

***

The Council devolved into yet another shouting match over something insignificant and Fili resisted the urge to bang his head on the table in despair.

Next to him, Thorin simply sat back and watched, content to observe the various Council members rather than try to get them to calm down, at least for the moment.
Fili settled back in his chair and copied him, trying to put into practice his uncle’s mantra of “using every moment to your advantage”.

His eyes went to Councilman Nar and narrowed slightly. The other dwarf was leaning back in his seat, much as Fili and Thorin were, the only one aside from them not involved in the shouting. As Fili watched the other dwarf idly drummed a finger on the table, the slightest signs of a smirk playing on his lips.

There was something off about him. It wasn’t the first time Fili had thought it. Nar hadn’t been the same since Moria but, considering no one had been the same since Moria, it was difficult to put his finger on exactly what it was that bothered him specifically about Nar.

Kili thought it was simply that the dwarf was Beryl’s father and anything concerning her threw him off. It was possible he was right, Fili conceded mentally. Beryl hadn’t slowed down in her efforts to awkwardly flirt with him or try to ingratiate herself by acting like his spy, though the only gossip she brought him seemed to be things he already knew or items concerning her father’s rivals.

The past months had been a relief. Beryl had unexpectedly announced she was traveling to the Blue Mountains to visit distant relatives. Fili hadn’t known she had relatives in the Blue Mountains and he couldn’t picture the noblewoman on a long, dusty caravan ride but, almost overnight, she’d packed and headed out with the next convoy leaving.

Something brushed against his mind and he opened his shields, recognizing the touch.  

_You keep staring at him you’re likely to bore a hole through his skull._

Fili’s eyes went to where Dwalin stood against the chamber doors. With his hands clasped behind his back and his body straight he looked more like a statue of a perfect Dwarven warrior than actual flesh and blood.

_I don’t like him._

_Well, now there’s a surprise._

Fili flinched. Dwalin wasn’t referencing Beryl and they both knew it. He was referencing six months earlier when a petition had started making the rounds calling for Fili to abdicate his position in favor of Kili. The grounds were the fact that his coming of age would soon take place, now less than a month away in fact, and there was no sign of a dragon. The argument was that the absence was proof Mahal had rejected Fili.

Thorin had denounced the petition immediately, stating Fili was and, always would be, his heir. It was an act that had cemented the love Fili already felt for his uncle into something nearing outright hero worship.

There was never any definitive proof of who had started the petition but, according to Nori, who was an actual spy and extremely good at it, the rumors all pointed to it being Nar. While that no doubt played into his dislike of the dwarf the strange feeling that there was something…off…about Nar went back farther still and it bothered Fili to no end that he couldn’t put a finger on exactly what it was.

Several members of the Council broke off arguing suddenly, their bodies tensing. At the door Dwalin shifted as well, his eyes taking on that far off look he got when talking to Xalanth.

“What is it?” Thorin’s voice rumbled from beside Fili.
Dwalin’s eyes cleared and he directed his attention to Thorin, his face grave. “Reports of a drake being run down by orcs near Mirkwood.”

“Near Mirkwood?” Fili said in surprise. “They would dare come that close?”

“Not sure they’re paying attention,” Dwalin responded. “Word is the dragon is the rogue blue from the eastern side of the mountains. I imagine they’ve been wanting him and his rider a long time.”

Rogue blue? Fili tensed as the description clicked. There were currently twelve rogues, defined as dragons paired with one or two riders who chose not to associate with Erebor, in Middle Earth. Erebor was aware of them but left them to their own devices; they didn’t own the dragons or their riders after all and had no rights to either.

Of those twelve dragons, however, only one was blue, an exceptionally rare color.

Glamdring. Very little was known of him, or his rider. Any attempts to gain information either lead to claims of ignorance, or outright refusals to divulge information. The dragon and his rider, named Orcrist by the Elves, also shunned contact and chose to stay isolated in the Wild.

Fili wasn’t sure how many of the stories of Orcrist and Glamdring were true and how many were exaggerated but, regardless, the pair had gained quite the name for themselves. The Dale market even sold carved figures of the two while others charged money to relate tales of how they or their caravan had been saved from orcs by the pair.

Thorin pushed to his feet. “Is his rider with him?”

“No sign,” Dwalin replied. His eyes lost focus again for an instant. When they came back his face was hard. “Xalanth says he’s losing. The orcs are going to take him.”

“Not on my watch they aren’t,” Thorin responded, his voice a near snarl. Since the loss of Quenth he’d become almost zealously overprotective of the dragons, particularly when it came to them engaging orcs.

The meeting was adjourned and Fili found himself running to the halls where the dragons rested, stopping only briefly to get his sword. Kili was already there by the time he arrived, strapping on his leathers. Lyth was coiled nearby, emerald green scales glinting in the light cast off from the nearby forges. Fili saw no sign of his mother, she must not have returned from her trip to Lake-town yet. She’d be annoyed. Having already suffered the loss of one dragon while still in its infancy she was as overprotective of dragons as Uncle was.

“You coming?” Kili asked, already tossing a set of leathers at him.

Fili nodded, grabbing them and pulling them on. “Of course.”

Kili jogged over and pulled himself up into the saddle strapped across Lyth’s back. Fili followed, grabbing his brother’s outstretched hand and allowing Kili to pull him up to the second saddle just behind him.

Kili retrieved his bow and quiver of arrows, strapping them both over his back. Fili watched the others getting ready as he did. Dwalin was already up on Xalanth with, surprisingly, Uncle Thorin behind him instead of Balin.

Kili finished getting ready and Lyth shoved up, turning her body toward the large corridor leading outside. She lumbered forward and Fili grabbed the back of Kili’s leathers, holding himself in place as she picked up speed.
Seconds later Lyth surged out, the ground dropping away from beneath them.

It didn’t take long to find the orcs. Even from a distance, Fili could see what looked like two score or more of orcs harrying a brilliant blue speck.

*I don’t get it,* Kili’s voice spoke in his mind. *Why doesn’t he go up? They wouldn’t be able to follow him.*

*I don’t know,* Fili answered.

Dwalin rose up beside them, his face grim. Thorin sat behind him, one hand gripping a bow, a quiver of arrows already slung over his back. The look on his face was dark as he surveyed the orcs.

A roar rang out and Fili saw Glamdring twist in midair, unleashing a burst of flame at the nearest orcs. As it did it finally occurred to Fili that, although they were drawing nearer every second, the dragon wasn’t getting larger as he would have expected. While he was more than big enough to ride he was far, far smaller than an adult drake would be.

*Mahal,* Kili whispered in his mind, *Glamdring is a CHILD?*

Fili felt something twist inside his chest. Judging by the dragon’s size he’d guess his age at well under ten years, possibly under five.

And if that was true it would mean he’d been born at about the same time Fili had felt his own dragon born.

Glamdring roared again and dove, coming up under two dragons and snapping them up in his mouth.

No, Fili thought, no it couldn’t be. Glamdring was free, if he was Fili’s dragon he could have come to Erebor at any time. The only reason for him not to come…would be choice.

A spray of acid flew from a dragon and Glamdring dodged it. This action, however, threw him into the path of several others. They mobbed him, collapsing his wings and sending him plummeting toward the ground.

Xalanth and Lyth both roared in rage, a sound echoed by several other dragons coming up behind them.

The orcs on the dragons looked up, seeming to notice them for the first time.

Glamdring struck the tops of several trees and vanished below them, the faint sound of a boom signifying his landing.

*They were so focused on him I don’t think they even noticed where they were,* Kili’s voice said in his head.

Fili ignored him, his gut twisting in fear over the young dragon. Several orcs and dragons darted down after him and Fili cursed.

*Kili!*

*Yeah, I see it.*

Lyth dove, Xalanth shooting past in the space she’d opened.
Fire erupted from Lyth’s maw, larger than what Glamdring had produced, incinerating several dragons before they reached the treeline.

She caught a number more in much the same way Glamdring had, crushing their bodies in her mouth and then spitting them out.

Through the splintered and destroyed trees Fili caught a glimpse of sapphire blue. Lyth darted to the side, where the trees ended and landed with a thump. She was barely down before Fili was off her back and running into the forest. He drew his sword and launched himself at the nearest orc.

The battle that followed was short.

The orcs had been foolish to track Glamdring to the edges of Mirkwood and within sight of Erebor. Though the elves had ignored the battle in the air they took an attack on the ground as a personal insult and soon showed up in force to join the dwarves. The orcs stood no chance against their combined might.

When it was clear the fight was nearly over Fili stabbed the point of his sword in the ground for balance and knelt, trying to catch his breath. In spite of the rain and cold he was sweating, his hair stuck to his face and neck. Blood caked his skin and clothing, most from the orcs, some his own. After a few minutes spent getting his heart rate back to normal he lifted his head…and felt his world come to a grinding stop.

Glamdring had just flung the last of the orcs against a trunk. Due to his smaller size he’d managed to avoid hitting most of the trees and was uninjured but for a few scrapes and shallow cuts. He was clearly also exhausted, his sides heaving, and his movements slightly sluggish as he turned. His eyes caught hold of Fili’s…and that was it.

Glamdring was his dragon.

Glamdring, legend of the west, terror of the orcs, the Foe Hammer.

Glamdring, who already had one rider.

Who could have come to Erebor at any time.

Who had chosen not to.

The dragon moved forward, toward him and Fili tensed, sure he was about to find himself officially rejected. He tried to steel himself even as his soul felt torn in two. His entire life he’d waited for his dragon, been utterly convinced it would show up any second…and now it had…and apparently had never wanted him in the first place.

The dragon’s head came down over him and, before he knew what was happening, Fili found himself picked up by the shirt and dropped down on Glamdring’s back. He barely kept hold of his sword as the dragon shot forward, aiming for the break in the treeline. Fili bounced hard, scrabbling for a hold on a saddle that wasn’t there. Instead his hands found leather straps, knotted in a loose mess and he desperately grabbed him with his free hand, trying to hang on.

_Fili!_ Kili’s mind shouted. **What are you doing?**

_It isn’t me!_ Fili shouted back. **It’s him!**

They burst from the trees and Glamdring leapt, his wings pumping frantically as he struggled to gain altitude. From overhead Xalanth roared down at him but Glamdring ignored him, his attention
focused back the way they’d come.

Fili tried talking to him but the dragon’s mind was locked against his, unwilling to budge even a fraction from whatever he was so focused on.

Fili didn’t have to ask what that something was.

Glamdring was missing his rider.

Orcrist, a mysterious woman few had seen and none had spoken to.

If Glamdring was his dragon it meant Orcrist was his fellow rider, a person deserving of the same loyalty.

A person who, judging by Glamdring’s panic, was clearly in danger.

He didn’t know why Glamdring had never come.

He set the question aside, there wasn’t time for it.

Alright, Fili thought to the dragon, leaning forward and holding his sword at the ready. He knew nothing about Orcrist, her personality, her reasons for waging a personal war against the orcs, he couldn’t even describe what she looked like.

But she was Glamdring’s rider.

As was he.

And so he would save her, no matter the cost.

***

The shock of water hitting her back wasn’t as startling as the fact she was still alive to feel it.

Bilba barely had time to register it before she was under the surface, the light quickly fading overhead.

She sheathed her sword, kicked her feet, nearly crying from the fire in her leg, and started to swim upward.

The pain was nothing compared to the agony in her shoulder. Each movement of her arm caused her to grit her teeth to keep from screaming, and promptly swallowing water.

Her lungs burned and fatigue dragged at her, trying to convince her to give up and just sink down. She refused. Falling where she had no control was one thing. This, however, this she did have some control over and thus would fight until her last breath.

A last breath she may well have already taken.

The burn in her lungs increased until she thought they would burst from the pressure, and then her head broke the surface and she gasped, sucking in air like a starving man would a feast.
She tried to take stock of her surroundings and caught sight of a small island, little more than a large rock, a short distance away. She struggled toward it, gritting her teeth and fighting to push back the unconsciousness threatening to drag her under.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, her feet found the bottom. She crawled until her upper body was out of the water and then collapsed, face down. The pressure on her burned leg proved too much, however, so, with a groan, she set her good arm under her and forced her body onto its back.

The ice cold water felt amazing on her leg so she stayed where she was, letting it numb the burns. She tried to move her arm and gasped out loud at the burst of pain. She lay still, her chest heaving.

She gave herself five minutes, carefully counting in her head. She made no attempt to call out for Syrath. Even if he was in range he could do nothing for her and she wouldn’t have wanted him to try. Better for him to flee, far, far away from her where he would be safe.

Five minutes were up.

She shut her eyes and banished the pain, locking it away behind walls and doors that none could break. It was a tactic she’d perfected in the Arena. Pain and injury had no place there; they were luxuries that could not be afforded. Many times she’d won a battle for no other reason than the fact her foe had surrendered to pain, favored a limp, tried to protect an injury from further harm.

Her eyes opened and her breathing evened.

She drew her sword and rolled over, using it as a crutch to lever herself upright. She straightened, and paused.

Before her lay the remains of what appeared to have once been a small dwelling place. Small stones and bits of wood had been stacked to create a small lean to. Parts of it were collapsed or sagging. Carefully, Bilba stepped forward to see it better. In the midst of the rubble she could make out bits of what looked like cloth or leather.

Bilba steadied herself on an outcropping of rock and used the point of her sword to pick through the debris. As she hooked the tip under a portion and turned it over a long, white bone slid out and tumbled down the side. Bilba frowned and continued moving objects, soon discovering the pile wasn’t trash but, rather, the remains of a person who had died in the center of the hut at some point in the past.

The distant past judging by the dirt and discoloration of the bones. She was about to turn away and look for a way off the island when a slight glint caught her eye. She frowned; there was no light in the cavern. The only reason she could see at all was due to her dwarven heritage, which gifted her with the ability to see in the dark. She looked again and, again, saw the slightest glint. Something was sparkling despite the lack of light.

Grimacing, she gingerly lowered herself down and reached for the object. Her hand closed around slim, delicate bones and she lifted the remnants of a hand from the pile. The action didn’t bother her, she had seen far worse than bones in her lifetime.

On one finger a slim, gold ring shone up at her. Setting her sword down, Bilba pulled it off and returned the hand to its resting place. She held the ring up, studying it. There appeared to be nothing special about it. It was simply a plain, golden band, similar to what one might wear for a wedding band.

With a shrug, Bilba slid it on the smallest finger of her right hand, surprised to find it fit perfectly.
She dismissed it after that and got back to her feet again. A search of the small island, which took all of three minutes, revealed the rotted remnants of a small boat and nothing else.

So she swam.

Primula had taught her during the year she’d been in the Shire and, though she wasn’t exceptionally good at it or strong, particularly injured, she made do, paddling and floating while keeping her eyes fixed on the far shore.

When she reached it she ended up having to give herself another five minutes before she was finally able to start on her way. Stone sense was another gift of her dwarven heritage and she easily found the paths and tunnels that would lead her to the surface.

As she moved she continued to carefully put herself in an almost disconnected state of mind. In the Arena she normally only had an instant or two to achieve the state. Now, with the luxury of time, she was able to immerse herself completely. She felt herself detach, the world drifted away until it seemed she was watching some other person pick their way through the dark. She felt no pain, no emotion, no fear.

No surprise when she rounded a corner and nearly tripped over a goblin pack.

***

There were dragons flying in a bizarre circle over the top of a mountain, like birds flocking to a roost. As they neared, Fili realized they were all orc dragons, their distinctive, disgusting color giving them away.

There were a lot of them, far more than the ones who’d chased Glamdring across Mirkwood.

He risked a look over his shoulder and saw Kili and Dwalin flanking him, several more of the guard behind them. The rest had returned to Erebor, unwilling to leave it undefended.

_Fili._ Thorin’s voice sounded in his head and Fili twitched in surprise. He could count on one hand the number of times his Uncle had spoken to him this way since Moria. _There are too many to challenge._

_I have to_, Fili answered back. _Glamdring is my dragon which means Orcrist is my fellow rider._

_Orcrist has made a personal enemy of the orcs._

_Is it any less than you would do?_ Fili responded. _Or any of us?_

It had been speculated that Orcrist might be a solider of Moria who broke away after the battle and took up the fight on a personal level, coming across a drake sometime after that.

The dragons were moving, turning to face them. The choice had been made.

Glamdring, who still hadn’t spoken to him so fixated was he on finding Orcrist, opened his mouth and roared in rage.

Fili’s stomach jumped and he tensed.
While he’d trained faithfully and helped deal with an orc pack every now and then he’d never been involved in a fight of this magnitude, and certainly not one involving dragons.

Guess it was time to learn, the hard way.

***

Syrath was calling her.

Bilba grit her teeth to keep from responding.

What did he think he was doing? He needed to leave.

One of the goblins wrenched her bad arm further behind her back and she nearly threw up and passed out at the same time.

When her vision cleared again she was being dragged, the tops of her boots scraping along the dirt and filth scattered on the ground. She forced her feet under her and stood back up, biting back a cry of pain as the four goblins holding her, two on each arm, tightened their grips.

They rounded a corner and Bilba’s breath caught in her throat, fear shooting up her spine.

A massive cavern lay before her, filled near to bursting with thousands upon thousands of goblins.

Clearly she’d been focusing far too much on orcs.

The goblins hauled her forward, forcing her over a thin, rickety wooden bridge. Howls and shrieks sounded around her as the goblins chattered in their own language. Many of them jumped on the bridge, causing it to sway wildly and throwing Bilba against the ones holding her arms.

She struggled to keep her breathing even and her body from shaking. Desperately she tried to find the disconnected place again, to go back where no one could reach her, but it eluded her. The place was reminding her of Moria, specifically of the Arena with the jeering, laughing orcs betting on her manner of death.

She didn’t want to go back.

She tried setting her heels but they forced her on, off the bridge and onto a large, flattened column of rock in the approximate center of the cavern.

At the far end a crude throne had been shaped out of what was probably the bones of their enemies. On it sat a monstrosity, a gargantuan goblin with stringy hair and bulging eyes that carried only a hint of insanity.

Bilba was dragged forward and shoved, hard. The action caused her leg to buckle and sent her crashing to all fours.

Syrath was still calling for her. He thought she was still outside, on the High Pass.

Syrath, she thought. You have to go.

Bilba! His voice came back, relieved. Where are you?
Nowhere you can reach, Bilba answered. She opened her mind further, allowing him a glimpse through her eyes. She was sloppy though, exhaustion and pain allowing him to deep. She felt him brush against the fear and panic she felt and she sensed him react in shock and anger. Instantly she shut the link down, withdrawing. Just go. You can’t save me.

She tried to stand up but her arm wouldn’t support her weight and her leg buckled under her, sending her crashing back to the ground. She ended up sprawled awkwardly in a mostly seated position with her legs curled up.

Her eyes went to the huge goblin, who appeared to be either singing and posturing for his legions or choking to death, and then past him.

She frowned. Next to the sorry excuse for a throne stood a tall metal cage, the door locked tight. Inside stood an elderly Man dressed in gray with straggly, dirty white hair and a beard. He stood at the door, his gaze locked on her. As soon as he realized he had her attention he cut his eyes very slowly and deliberately toward the throne. Bilba followed and saw a long wooden staff leaning against the side of the chair, just outside the reach of the cage as though taunting its occupant.

“Well,” a voice boomed and suddenly the goblin king loomed in front of her. “What do we have here? The legendary Orcrist, come to visit our humble abode?”

Bilba narrowed her eyes. Was there anyone who didn’t know her? His breath wafted over her and she nearly gagged from the stench.

The goblins standing nearby cackled and mocked her, laughing at her helplessness. Bilba had never given them much thought before. She’d kill them if she came across them but didn’t particularly seek them out. They had no dragons, according to legend Morgoth hadn’t gotten around to it before his humiliation and fall, and rarely bothered to leave their mountain. There was no reason to bother them.

If she survived this she might rethink that position.

“I know an orc,” the goblin idiot continued, his voice dropping to a low hush, “who would pay handsomely for your head.”

Bilba was glad she couldn’t speak for she no doubt would have said something that would only have gotten her in further trouble. Still, she couldn’t resist rolling her eyes skyward.

“Send word to Azog,” the goblin crowed, straightening.

Bilba felt a chill run through her. In her head Syrath had gone silent and, while she was glad he’d left, it scared her to know she was utterly on her own.

Her eyes cut back to the bearded Man in the cage, the only one who, hopefully, didn’t have it out for her. He was still staring at her and, again, cut his eyes to the wooden stick. Bilba reached out and tried to touch his mind, hoping to ask what he was going on about, but felt nothing from him. He wasn’t a dragon rider, she couldn’t reach him through a mental link.

She frowned. The eternally irritated Man in the tower had a stick like that. He was a wizard, apparently one of some power not that she’d ever seen him exhibit anything more than a poor attitude.

Did that mean this Man was a wizard? If so how in the world had he come to be captured by goblins? Surely he couldn’t be a very good one.
The goblin king was still gloating, waving his hands and eating up the praise and accolades his minions were showering on him. Bilba narrowed her eyes; he looked almost ready to burst into song again.

That decided her right then and there. Without giving it another thought she dove forward, hitting the ground hard and rolling. Both her major injuries screamed at her and she was sure she felt something in her shoulder burst but she clenched her jaw and pressed on, struggling to see through tears of agony clouding her vision.

She came up against the throne, grabbed the wooden stick and shoved it toward the cage.

The goblin king started to turn, his eyes wide and Bilba tensed. Her sword had been taken when she’d been captured and now lay several feet away, beneath the feet of a number of goblins.

She’d never reach it.

The enormous goblin took a lumbering step toward her.

Bilba stood up and took a step back, bringing herself to the edge of the chasm the ledge overlooked. Sweat drenched her skin and her entire frame shook from pain, threatening to send her to her knees.

If she had to die it might as well be on her own terms.

_Good-bye Syrath._

“Close your eyes!” A voice barked and Bilba obeyed, decades of conditioning to respond to commands still deeply burned into her psyche.

Light blossomed through her eyelids, so intense it hurt even with her eyes closed. She heard the shriek of the goblins and the voice of the old Man, shouting words in a language she didn’t recognize.

A hand grabbed her good arm and she snapped her eyes open to see the Man, now free from his cage, standing next to her. He was taller than she’d expected, towering over her, with steel in his gaze she hadn’t noticed before.

The goblins were strewn about them on the ground, curled in fetal positions with their hands over their eyes.

Huh, Bilba thought, maybe he was a Wizard after all.

“Get your sword,” he ordered, “We have to leave.”

Bilba could get behind that idea. She felt a surge of adrenaline, temporarily banishing the pain and fatigue. She retrieved her sword, ignoring how her hand trembled.

The Man led the way, back across the bridge and toward a large tunnel.

Behind them the goblins were starting to recover and Bilba could hear the sounds of more coming from every direction. From the sound of their movement they hadn’t been affected by the light.

The Man stopped and Bilba fetched up against his back. She looked around him and mentally cursed at the sight of goblins swarming onto the bridge. It rocked wildly and she grabbed onto the rope at her side, the rough fibers scratching against her hands.

She turned, ready to go back, and found more goblins blocking them in from the other side.
Bilba sighed and lifted her sword.

A roar split through the air.

Bilba blinked, her mind struggling to put so familiar a sound into so unfamiliar a setting.

In front of her a number of the goblins began panicking, cowering and looking up and to the left. Bilba followed their gaze and found herself blinking again at the sight of no less than four dragons flying into the cavern.

What? She thought, then immediately, Syrath, what are you doing? Get out of here!

He ignored her, as he was prone to do. She saw his mouth open and a great gout of flame leapt out, burning a number of bridges in his path and sending goblins scurrying away shrieking.

Movement caught her attention and Bilba felt her blood run cold at the sight of orc dragons flying into the cavern, at least two dozen if not more. She didn’t see Azog among them but it didn’t mean he wouldn’t show up.

Syrath! She yelled. Are you mad?

Exceptionally so, the answer came back. What was the whole dying thing you just tried to pull off?

Bilba didn’t answer. One of the other drakes, a huge black and gold one, soared past. A memory niggled at the back of her mind, her mother’s voice speaking, but she brushed it aside. What were the odds? Surely there had to be more than one black and gold dragon in Erebor now. Another dragon darted by, a bright green color and clearly an adult. It was only the second time she’d seen adult drakes aside from Syrath’s mother and that had been long ago and in poor circumstances. Seeing them now, with Syrath, drove home the realization that he was still just a child, one she’d been dragging out to fight orcs for four years.

Syrath changed direction…and Bilba felt her world crumble beneath her feet.

He had a rider.

She only caught a glimpse of him, a blond, male dwarf, and then she lost sight as they went to destroy another bridge.

She didn’t have to ask who the rider was.

She swallowed, fighting to keep her mind focused on the task at hand, and turned to face the goblins in front of her. Until that point they’d been staring in stupefied horror at the dragons massacring their kin.

That changed once she beheaded a couple of them.

On the other end of the bridge the goblins apparently got the idea of hostage taking and surged forward to swarm the wizard. Within seconds Bilba found herself back to back with the man, swinging her sword while he used his staff.

As she fought Bilba tried to pretend her eyes weren’t burning, that tears weren’t tracking down her face and her heart wasn’t shattering in her chest.
Squelch, her blade sank in the chest of a goblin.

*Stupid, she was just so stupid.*

Weight dragged at her arm as she angled the sword, flicking the goblin over the side. She kept her injured arm close in to her side, hoping she hadn't permanently damaged it.

*How could she ever have thought Syrath would want her?*

Another goblin appeared and she dropped to one knee.

*She had fallen.*

Pain ripped through her leg as she twisted it the wrong way and she couldn’t bite back the scream that broke out from between her teeth.

*And Syrath had immediately gone and found his second rider.*

She drove the blade into the eye socket of a goblin looming over her and pushed forward, knocking him back into his fellows.

*He had come back for her.* The voice was small, far in the back of her consciousness and Bilba bit her lip until she drew blood.

Maybe. Maybe.

She had no doubt the other rider was better than she was, it didn’t take much. Less broken, less damaged, less angry at everything. For all she knew they’d already forged a soul bond.

She decapitated another goblin even as a wave of pure despair washed over her.

If they’d forged a soul bond it meant she was on the outside, set apart from them.

Alone.

A rush of air passed over her and blue flashed over her head.

*Bilba!*

Syrath came around again, spiraling around the bridge and Bilba caught a glimpse of the dwarf on his back holding his hand out to her.

She clenched her teeth so hard her jaw ached. Wordlessly she sheathed her sword and raised the arm, keeping her bad one to her side.

A second later the hand of the dwarf who’d soon take Syrath from her closed around hers.

***

Orcrist was beyond magnificent.

There was no other word to describe it and even that one didn’t do it justice.
Fili was still stunned Glamdring had found a way into the mountain, somehow locating passages and tunnels large enough for him and the others to move.

He hadn’t even bothered fighting the orcs or their dragons, just shot right past them and into the mountain itself.

When they’d flown into the cavern he hadn’t seen anything at first, aside from scores and scores of goblins of course.

Then Glamdring had changed direction, his focus clearly on a specific area. Fili had followed that line of sight…and felt his heart jump in his chest.

The figure fighting on the bridge was like none other. A warrior of legend made flesh. Even from a distance he’d seen her moving like grace personified, her body an extension of her sword.

Then they’d arrived, he’d reached down…and felt her hand close around his.

He pulled her onto Glamdring’s back easily, his eyes taking in the blood caking her clothing, the blistered skin on her leg, the way she favored one arm. Her hair, the color of burnished copper, had come loose from its braids and hung in partially dried clumps around her face.

Her clothing was damp as well and, even through her shirt, he could feel cold coming off her skin.

She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

“Are you alright?” he blurted, even as he mentally kicked himself for his own stupidity. Of course she wasn’t alright, any fool could see that.

She turned her gaze on him, eyes the color of amber, and Fili felt the breath leave him as though he’d been physically kicked.

She turned her gaze on him, eyes the color of amber, and Fili felt the breath leave him as though he’d been physically kicked.

Her eyes were completely empty, blank. The look she leveled on him might be the same she leveled on an insect.

*She hates me*, he thought dumbly, forgetting he still had his shields wide open from his attempts to contact Glamdring.

*It’s not personal*. A voice suddenly spoke in his head and Fili jerked, his eyes snapping to Glamdring. *She hates everyone.*

Fili looked at Orcrist again, almost convinced the ice in her eyes might be capable of actually opening lacerations.

On the one hand his dragon had finally spoken to him.

On the other his dragon partner, who might possibly be the most beautiful and amazing woman he’d ever seen, hated him…and everyone else.

*Well, Kili’s voice spoke in his mind, where he’d apparently been eavesdropping. You did say once you hoped your dragon partner and dragon would be interesting.*

*Interesting,* Fili clarified. *I said interesting, not insane.*

*Apparently you and Mahal share different definitions of the word.*

*Clearly.*
The dwarf was gaping at her like a fish.

He also had his shields wide open, suggesting he was an outright idiot.

In response, Bilba locked hers down even tighter.

She shifted and caught sight of the black and gold dragon again. It was truly massive, larger than any of the other adults currently battling the orc dragons. She watched as it swooped down to pick up the wizard on the bridge.

As it did she caught a glimpse of the rider on its back. A large, powerfully built dwarf with tattoos on his head.

A large…powerfully built…tattoos on his head.

Bilba wrenched her eyes away, finding it suddenly hard to believe. Surely her luck couldn't be *that* bad, could it?

Syrath banked suddenly, avoiding an outcropping of rock, and Bilba fell to the side.

Immediately arms closed around her, arresting her fall even as she felt the male dwarf slide to the side with her.

The straps were still tied in the same messy knot she’d put them in when the orcs had first chased them.

Making a snap decision, Bilba quickly untied them and proceeded to lash the dwarf in place, tightening the straps around his thighs, legs and waist. He protested, saying something, but she ignored him.

She reached out to Syrath.

*We need to get out of here. Fight them in open air.*

He agreed and straightened out, shooting for the opening leading out with a roar.

Bilba sat down in front of the dwarf. His arms slid around her waist and tightened, holding her in place.

Bilba allowed it. She didn’t fancy slamming into the side of a mountain for a second time.

She risked a look back and saw the orc dragons were pursuing, as she’d suspected they might.

Her eyes fixed on the black and gold dragon again for an instant and then she tore her eyes away.

They shot through an opening into a narrow passage and Bilba ducked low, staying close to Syrath’s hide as they darted through the twisting paths of the mountain.

Finally light shone ahead of them. When they shot out Bilba had to shut her eyes a moment to allow them to adjust.
When she opened them again she couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her face. The clouds had mostly cleared overhead, leaving the sun in all its glory shining merrily down. Under them a river unspooled through a meadow of verdant green, trees lightly dusting the landscape at various intervals.

Joy rose up inside her. She hadn’t thought she’d ever see the outside world again, not after she’d fallen from Syrath’s back.

The pain receded and she found herself slipping back into the disconnected state she’d been struggling to find after the goblins had grabbed her.

She shrugged off the dwarf’s arms, ignoring his protests, and stood up. She’d fought with far worse injuries in the Arena, she could do so again now.

_Syrath_, she asked, _where are the orcs?_

_Just coming out, behind the green and the black and gold one. We could go up and avoid them if you want._

Bilba felt her lips draw back in a sneer. She drew her sword and held it in her good hand. _Now where’s the fun in that?_

_You have a point._

He turned around.

The other dragons were already lifting, making for higher altitudes beyond what the orcs could follow.

“What are you doing?” the male dwarf asked, still strapped in behind her.

Bilba sighed and opened the very first shield in her mind, not as far as she usually allowed Syrath but close.

_Making sure they don’t hurt anyone else._

“You’re hurt! You don’t have to do this!”

She ignored him.

She hesitated, then sheathed her sword, deciding on another course of action. She retrieved one of her spare bows and a quiver of arrows, strapping both on with ease. Using them would hurt worse than anything but they were also the best way to fight in the air. She shifted her body and pushed to her feet, grabbing the dwarf’s shoulder to edge around until she stood behind him. She slid her feet in along the dwarf’s sides, tangling them in the straps until she was reasonably anchored in.

She let herself go after that.

Arrow after arrow flew through the air, each one finding its mark. Drawing the string back each time caused pain to bloom in her shoulder, so bad she nearly threw up each time. Sweat poured down her face and her breathing came in ragged gasps behind clenched teeth but she pressed on.

It didn’t matter what the orcs or their dragons did, where they tried to go.

Syrath spiraled through the air and Bilba went with him, barely registering the sky that was sometimes above her and sometimes beneath. Her body was wrenched to and fro, the straps nearly
cutting off the circulation in her ankles as they fought to hold her in.

The other dragons returned and she ignored the black and gold one as best she could, tried not to check and see what its rider was doing.

As some point it occurred to her that the male dwarf she was nearly straddling had gotten her last bow and his own quiver of arrows and was doing a pretty good job himself. She felt a small, grudging sense of respect for him, not that she’d ever let him know.

Finally there was only one orc dragon left.

It flew well below them, fleeing back toward the safety of the mountains. Bilba hadn’t noticed how far they’d come from them.

Syrath had gone silent some time ago, his body lagging with fatigue. Still he had turned back, of his own accord, and was tracking the final dragon from above. He was every bit as bad as her when it came to hunting them down. It had been him after all who had come to her and asked how she'd come to have him, what had happened to his mother.

She'd told him.

He had the right to know.

His mother, his mother's rider, Daisy, Primrose's wings, her rider. Syrath had lost as much to the orcs as she had and had as much reason to hate them as she did.

Bilba frowned, barely noticing how her own chest heaved, how black spots danced in her vision or how blood ran down her fingers from the constant drawing back of the bowstring.

Syrath needed to rest, which meant the orc needed to die quickly.

She replaced the bow and remaining arrows and slid her feet out of the straps.

Then she jumped.

She heard the dwarf yell and then his voice was lost in the rush of wind past her ears.

The orc dragon came up fast. She almost missed it but, at the last second, reached out and grabbed part of its tail with her good arm. She clambered up, drawing her boot knife as she did. Her bad arm barely worked, the feeling nearly gone from it and her hold on the knife was weak. She needed to get this done fast, before she lost use of it completely. The knife was small, barely good for anything, but more than adequate to drive into the thigh of the orc that was already turning toward her. The action stunned it just long enough for her to get fully on the dragon’s back, and kick the orc off.

They really should learn to invest in straps.

The dragon started to buck wildly and she dropped to her knees, fighting to keep her balance.

She pulled her sword out with nearly numb fingers, and almost dropped it as the blood on her hands made it slick and slippery.

Taking a deep breath she raised it up and calmly drove the point into the base of the creature’s neck.

It barely even screamed as it died.

It fell out from beneath her and Bilba sighed, her body slumping in relief.
She released the sword, unable to hold onto it any longer. Wind wrapped around her body, roared past her ears.

She fell for a second time.

Sparkling blue flitted through the sky and swirled around her in a loop. A massive hand, tipped with sharp claws, closed carefully around her.

The ground continued to rush toward her but at a slower pace.

Finally it was near enough and the hand released her, dropping her into a jarring crouch that immediately buckled her bad leg under her.

Syrath set down a few feet away, more a barely controlled crash than a landing.

The area was empty of trees and vegetation, just a wide open, rocky plain. Casting about, Bilba noted Mirkwood on one side and Erebor on the other.

They were safe enough.

She got to her feet and stumbled to Syrath’s side, noting how hard he heaved for breath.

She collapsed against him, at the juncture between his head and neck, and shut her eyes as her own body fought for breath.

She was vaguely aware of someone shouting at her after that, the distant vibration that was probably other dragons landing, and then a lot more shouting after that.

Bilba didn’t bother to listen to any of it. With her adrenaline fading the lengths to which she’d pushed her body were making themselves known.

Footsteps crunched through the dry grass and she sensed someone kneeling beside her.

Something touched her and Bilba reacted by instinct, her hand snapping out, palm extended like a knife blade intended for the jugular of whoever had disturbed her.

A hand like an iron manacle locked around her wrist, stopping it mid-strike.

Bilba opened her eyes in surprise…and froze as she found herself face to face with the tattooed dwarf.

“Relax,” he groused, “I’m trying to help you.”

Bilba jerked her hand back and curled away from him, pressing closer into Syrath. He was nearly asleep, so exhausted his body had pretty much demanded it.

The dwarf stood up and backed away, toward the gold and black dragon and, oh, how she knew that dragon and wished she didn’t.

“Black and gold, Bilba, the only one of his kind! And he was big, even for a drake he was considered huge. There was always a crowd anywhere they would go, everyone waiting in line to see--”

“Xalanth.”

Bilba started.
The tattooed dwarf nodded to a bearded, dark haired dwarf who’d ridden with him. “And this here is Thorin Oakenshield, King under the Mountain.”

Thorin. Bilba knew that name too though she’d forgotten the description of the face that belonged to it.

The tattooed dwarf frowned at her, as if unhappy over something, but then moved on, indicating a younger, dark haired dwarf. “This is Kili, Prince under the Mountain.” He nodded toward the blond dwarf, the one who’d ridden Syrath. He was staring at her like she was some kind of bizarre creature he’d never seen and he was trying desperately to identify. “And, this, is Fili, Crown Prince under the Mountain.”

Of course he was, Bilba thought. Syrath’s two riders, an escaped, damaged slave and a Crown Prince. Somewhere Mahal, creator of the dwarves, was no doubting laughing hysterically at the joke he’d played.

The tattooed dwarf was speaking again, introducing himself, but Bilba shut it out.

She didn’t want to hear him state his name.

She already knew it.

Dwalin, son of Fundin.

Dwarf of Erebor.

Captain of the Guard of the King under the Mountain.

Warrior.

Husband.

Widower.

Traitor.

Coward.

Her father.
Bilba had seen someone torn in half, more than once.

The clearest memory was the first one.

It had been during her early days in the Arena, when Azog still saw her as a novelty rather than an asset.

He’d thrown her and another female dwobbit in with an entire orc pack, complete with their wargs.

She couldn’t dredge up the other girl’s name, if she’d ever known it, but she remembered the girl’s fear. It had been so overwhelming the girl had been paralyzed, barely able to function.

Bilba had ended up saving them both. She’d been terrified herself but, in the end, she’d had one thing the other girl did not.

Hatred.

Her mother had only been dead a short time and Bilba had been overflowing with hate, rage and grief. It had drowned out the fear until it was a bare murmur, allowing her to act in spite of it.

No one had expected her to live.

But there she’d been, standing in a sea of blood and gore with nothing alive but the other dwobbit cowering at her feet.

The orcs watching had been dumbstruck.

Azog had smiled.

And ordered her to kill the girl.

Bilba refused.

So Azog did it for her.

She could still hear the sound his sword made carving through flesh and bone.

She could still see the look on the other girl’s face.

She’d wondered, at the time, what it felt like.

Now, staring at her father standing over her, she imagined she had a pretty good idea.

One part of her soul howled at her to draw her sword and run him through for his treachery.

His cowardice.

The other half begged her to stop.

That half was her mother, whose final words had been of love and forgiveness toward her missing husband. She’d wanted Bilba to go find him if she ever escaped. Belladonna’s concern as she died had been for her daughter and her absent husband.
She hadn’t spared even an instant for herself.

Bilba felt like she was being ripped apart, her soul at war with itself. Her body nearly vibrated with energy; her muscles tight with the split desire to leap for his throat and hold herself back.

Her indecision had already cost her the element of surprise. Dwalin had already moved on. After making introductions he’d dismissed her, unsurprisingly, and was speaking to one of the other dwarves.

He’d said he wanted to help her.

The thought made her want to burst into hysterical laughter and scream in rage.

He was decades too late to help her.

Syrath shifted slightly behind her. He’d fallen asleep almost immediately after they’d landed. Without a bond he couldn’t tell the depths of her feelings but he could sense them to a limited extent through their surface link, particularly given the fact they were in physical contact.

She tightened her shields, building them up until he settled again. Her gaze went to some of the other dragons and her gut clenched at their size in comparison to Syrath. She knew, logically, he was young. She’d been there for his birth after all; she knew how old he was.

But alone in the wild with him towering over her, or in towns and cities where the only dragons were the same size, if not smaller, it was easy to forget.

Syrath was a child.

Her image of him shifted, from strong and sure to, so…so very fragile.

“You ever plan on letting someone help you with that leg and arm?”

Her eyes tracked to a large, white haired dwarf for a brief instant, acknowledging his existence, and then away again, back to her examination of the other dragons and the coward.

The white haired dwarf apparently took that as some sort of permission and knelt beside her, bandages and tubs of…whatever gathered in his arms.

She allowed it, showing no reaction as he began to manipulate her arm, gauging the depth of the injury. She’d learned early how to hide even the slightest flicker of pain. Pain was a sign of weakness and weakness was not tolerated in the mines.

The dwarf had blocked her view of the bastard and, as she shifted her attention, she found her eyes settling on Syrath’s new rider, the pretty, pretty princeling. He reminded her vaguely of the rider who’d given her Syrath, though he’d actually been capable from what little she’d seen and known of him. Granted, the pretty, pretty princeling had done alright during the battle and had, at least, shown enough intelligence to avoid getting killed.

That didn’t change the fact, however, that he was undoubtedly pampered and protected. The clothing he wore was clearly high quality, fur trimmed and velvet lined and utterly impractical. His hair and beard were immaculately groomed and the ease with which he turned his back on others suggested he was used to safety. She could imagine him sitting in his little kingdom while his soldiers did all the work for him, never bothering to get down in the dirt with them unless it personally concerned him or he was bored.
She’d met more than a few nobles like that. Aragorn was constantly inviting her to Gondor and, feeling indebted to him, she usually went. Aragorn was different of course, a rare exception, as was his wife Arwen. Even his father was alright as was the Steward and his two sons. Others, though… she had to resist the urge to punch them.

She highly doubted the pretty princeling was anything like Aragorn, regardless of how he’d conducted himself in one short battle…where she’d done most of the work.

The dwarf manipulated her shoulder and sweat broke out on her forehead. He grunted and said, “Sorry, dear. The pain should get better in a moment.”

Bilba glared at him, annoyed at his implication he could tell she was in pain.

He shifted slightly, allowing her a brief glance at the coward. She’d been too focused on survival to pay attention to him fighting. He looked capable but, as she well knew, looks could be deceiving.

The Prince was still staring at her. She felt like throwing a knife at him to make him stop. He was currently standing near his uncle, a dwarf who looked vaguely familiar although she couldn’t imagine where she would have seen a dwarven king. Maybe he’d been in Gondor at some point when she’d been there?

The princeling shifted his gaze to Syrath and her ire rose.

Maybe she should kill him. It would certainly solve all her problems.

Syrath wouldn’t like it.

Syrath didn’t like a lot of things.

Maybe he’d get over it?

She sighed, probably not. He still hadn’t gotten over her leaving him behind when the Shire had been attacked. He held grudges worse than she did and that was saying something.

The white haired dwarf finished bandaging her arm and moved onto her leg. A white hot wave of pain flared outward from the burn as he put something from one of his jars on it. It’d been too long since she’d been so badly injured; it was affecting her more than usual.

The pain in her shoulder had banked to a dull throb as promised and the sharp stabbing in her leg was also starting to fade from agonizing to merely intense. With a barely suppressed sigh she allowed herself to go limp against Syrath.

She could always kill the princeling after her leg and arm had healed. Maybe he’d do something particularly idiotic and Syrath would want to kill him too.

One could always hope.

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Fili was fairly certain Orcrist was trying to kill him with her mind.

He didn’t take it personally. Glamdring had already warned him, in an oddly cheerful manner, that
she hated everyone. That claim was further backed up by the look she’d leveled on Dwalin which, by all rights, probably should have incinerated him on the spot.

She didn’t seem to mind Oin though, a fact which sparked a flash of jealousy. As Fili watched the healer began manipulating her arm and leg, applying ointments from his jars checking the extent of the damage. The process had to be incredibly painful but, through it all, she never so much as flinched.

“It’s like she’s carved from stone,” Fili muttered under his breath.

“Nonsense,” a voice answered from behind him. “I can assure you, your Highness, that young Bilba feels just as much as the rest of you. She’s just more adept at hiding it.”

Fili saw his uncle turn to look back and he turned as well to see Gandalf approaching. The wizard looked terrible, thinner than usual, his hair and beard matted, his clothing torn. He looked exhausted on top of that and Thorin quickly got up to allow Gandalf to take his spot on the boulder he’d been sitting on. The wizard nodded his thanks and sank down with a grateful groan.

His words registered, finally, and Fili frowned. “Did you say Bilba?”

Gandalf gave him an amused, if tired, grin. “You didn’t really think they just so happened to have names that described their chosen occupations, did you?”

“I hadn’t thought of it,” Fili admitted in surprise. Orcrist and Glamdring, his mind dutifully supplied, Orc Cleaver and Foe Hammer. Embarrassment flooded him; of course those weren’t their names. No parent had looked at their newborn baby girl and thought, I'll name her Orc Cleaver.

“They’re titles,” Thorin said from his own seat. “No doubt bestowed by the elves. They do tend toward the dramatic whenever possible.”

“Indeed,” Gandalf said, “and I do not believe Bilba was all that excited by the news. Syrath, no doubt, was amused. His temperament is much different from that of his rider.”

Syrath, Fili thought. His name was Syrath. Syrath and…Bilba. He studied the young woman who, apparently, had decided she hated Oin after all and had added him to her “will everyone to death” list.

The name certainly didn’t fit her. Orcrist did. Orc Cleaver, a weapon, a sharp edged sword of vengeance visited upon the orcs.

Bilba…Bilba was…he didn’t know who Bilba was. Not that he knew who Orcrist was.

He wanted to know her though, whatever name she went by. It was a ridiculous thought. He’d barely met her and she’d made it pretty clear what she felt about him and everyone else. He hadn’t even officially spoken to her, not really. He didn’t believe in love at first sight and he had no intention of changing his mind on that front now, or ever.

For one thing, Kili would never let him hear the end of it if he did.

Still, he’d be a fool if he didn’t admit there was something about her that had caught his attention in a way no other woman ever had.

It didn’t mean it’d work out or that they’d be compatible, but it definitely meant she was worth getting to know, even aside from the fact she was his dragon’s other rider.
If he could just get her to move him off the “death to all” list. He didn’t expect her to immediately put him on the same list that Syrath was clearly on but maybe at least the “will agree to not sneak into his room and kill him in his sleep” list.

“Why were you in the tunnels in the first place?” His uncle’s voice caught his attention, drawing him back to the conversation between him and the wizard. “It isn’t safe, not even for you.”

“As I discovered,” Gandalf said dryly. He frowned and shifted on the rock, trying to get a more comfortable position. “What do you know of the legend of the lost key?”

Thorin snorted. “It’s a myth, a fairytale. There were only three keys.”

“One given to each race, or so the story goes,” Gandalf mused, “and yet there are four races.”

“You believe there really was a key given to the Hobbits?” Fili asked in surprise. “Why? They’re peaceful. Anyone could have taken it from them.”

“Perhaps someone did,” Gandalf replied. “The tales of how the key was lost are varied.”

Thorin grimaced, his eyes turning to rove over his people and their dragons. “It doesn’t matter. The dwarven key is well guarded and the exact location of the others isn’t known.”

Fili nodded in agreement. While the other races had multiple kingdoms within which to hide their keys, the dwarves only had the one. The Iron Hills and Blue Mountain groups were colonies and considered connected to the main kingdom.

Even so, any thief would have to know exactly where in Erebor the key lay, not to mention the notion of getting past scores of armed dwarves and dragons to reach. They’d also have to know what the keys looked like as each, according to legend at least, had been made with a different appearance.

“Even if they did know there were a fourth key,” Thorin continued, “and someone, somehow, managed to find it, it would change nothing. They’d never get the others, particularly not the dwarven one.”

“The odds would seem to be stacked against such an event,” Gandalf agreed, the slightest hint of irritation entering his voice, “but, regardless, having an unguarded key is a grave oversight.”

“One you’ve been willing to overlook for centuries,” Thorin accused, “why do you care now?”

Gandalf’s eyebrows drew together and darkness seemed to settle on his face. “Simple curiosity, your Majesty.”

Thorin snorted. “You are as terrible a liar as ever.” He pushed to his feet, his eyes finding his Captain in the crowd. “Have it your own way then.” He paused and turned to make eye contact with the wizard. “I trust, however, you will fill me in if your ‘curiosity’ proves to be something which endangers us all.”

“Of course,” Gandalf replied, returning the gaze without flinching. “You have my word on that, your Majesty.”

Thorin merely grunted in reply and headed in Dwalin’s direction. Erebor’s Captain was currently attempting to stop Kili and Lyth from sneaking up on a sleeping Xalanth.

He looked over at them. Syrath was still deeply asleep, delaying his ability to ask the dragon why he’d delayed so long coming to Erebor.
Not that he was entirely sure he wanted to know. A chill ran through him and he wrapped his arms across his torso.

What if Syrath didn’t want him? What if he’d only come because he needed help saving Bilba?

And Bilba, what of her? What if she had no interest in giving him a chance? What if she and Syrath simply got up and left him behind?

“You know,” Gandalf’s voice drawled suddenly, “I imagine talking to her might be of more benefit than simply watching.”


Gandalf merely looked amused.

Fili hesitated and then asked. “What do you know of her?”

That got him a raised brow in return and annoying silence. Gandalf clearly had no intention of helping him.

Fili muttered something unflattering, took a deep breath and headed over.

Oin had moved on and Bilba had gone back to glaring at Dwalin who, for some reason, seemed to personally annoy her.

He knelt next to her and immediately garnered the full force of her ire redirected at him.

“Hi,” he said, “I don’t think we were properly introduced.”

_I know who you are_, her voice sounded in his head, reverberating along the link she’d established during the battle. He was vaguely surprised she hadn’t torn it down after. _Do you expect me to bow?_

“What?” he said in surprise, “of course not. You’re my partner. Syrath is our dragonmate. You never have to bow.”

Her lips had twisted somewhat when he referred to Syrath as “ours” and she tore her eyes away, redirecting her gaze to an empty patch of sky.

After a moment, he saw her eyes narrow. _How do you know his name? Most simply call him Glamdring._

“Gandalf told me.” When she showed no comprehension he pointed back at where the wizard was lounging.

She made a noise of disgust. _Irritating Man. I should have left him in that cage._

“What were you doing down there anyway?” Fili asked.

_Killing goblins_. The words were accompanied by an expression suggesting she was weighing his intelligence and finding it wanting.

Fili sighed. “I noticed. I meant why were you killing goblins? For that matter, why are you so intent on killing orcs? I think all of Middle Earth has probably heard of you.”

For a second the blankness on her face vanished, replaced by what look like honest surprise. It was gone again in an instant but Fili filed it away. It proved she, indeed, was not carved from stone after
You don’t think orcs and goblins need to be killed?

Her voice rang through his head again, the tone almost melodic. He wondered what she sounded like speaking out loud. “Of course I do,” he answered, “I just don’t understand why you feel the need to see to it personally. And with so young a dragon.” He looked past her at Syrath. “How old is he anyway?”

Bilba shrugged. About five. And I don’t make him do anything. It’s his choice.

“He’s an infant,” Fili said, shock rippling through him at her words. “Durin’s beard, their parents don’t let them out of the mountain until they’re ten to fifteen years old, much less have them fighting.”

His parents aren’t around. Bilba’s voice snapped back in his head. I have no idea who his father was and his mother is dead. You can thank your precious orcs for that. She pulled herself up, heavily favoring her injuries. You don’t think he has the right to seek vengeance for her death?

“Of course he does,” Fili said. “I’d just think maybe you’d wait until he was weaned first!”

She snarled something that sounded suspiciously like Black Speech, the words jagged and cutting in his mind, before looking away from him. Her hands were squeezed into fists and her body was rigid.

Fili sighed, already feeling his anger dissipating. This was not what he’d intended when he’d walked over. He’d wanted to befriend her, learn more about her and Syrath and instead he was simply messing everything up. The others had already yelled at her when they’d landed and, though he was half convinced she hadn’t been listening, she still didn’t need him adding to it.

“I’m sorry,” he said now, “I didn’t mean to upset you. You’re right. Syrath is capable of making his own decisions.” He hesitated a moment longer and then asked, “What happened to his mother?” Five years would put the birth right around the time of the battle at Moria. There were theories that she was a soldier from that battle but the ideas about Syrath usually centered on her wandering and stumbling across him. Wild dragons, however, were rarely killed by orcs as they stayed far from their territories, particularly pregnant females or those with young.

She was imprisoned in Moria with her rider, Bilba’s voice answered after a pause. She died giving birth to him and her rider was unable to escape so he gave the baby to me and we left together.

Shock ripped through Fili, so strong he actually staggered and was forced to put his hand on the ground to keep his balance. Around the camp everyone he had a bond with reacted, dropping what they were doing and running toward him. Even the dragons responded, Xalanth waking up with a start while the others shifted in unease.

He felt a brief flicker of bewilderment from Bilba and then it was gone, her expression completely empty by the time the others arrived.

Kili reached him first, dropping down next to him while he shot an accusatory look at Bilba. “What is it? What happened? You’re as pale as a ghost!”

By this time Thorin had arrived, stopping just short of the group gathering around them. Bilba had pulled herself into a tight ball, bringing her legs up and wrapping her arms around them as she studied them. Behind her, Syrath shifted and opened his eyes, lifting his head until it hung low over hers.
What's going on?

Fili addressed his uncle. “I asked her how she and Syrath met.” A tremor ran through him. “She said-” He took a deep breath. “Uncle, she said Syrath was born five years ago, to a dragon imprisoned in Moria. That her rider gave her the baby and she escaped with it.”

She escaped with it, his mind repeated. If she’d been in Moria it meant she’d been a slave. How long had she been there? Had she been captured during or after the battle?

Thorin was staring at Syrath as though he’d never seen the dragon before. He took a step forward and almost hesitantly raised a hand. Syrath lowered his head until his snout was pressed into Thorin’s palm.

“My dragon was lost in Moria five years ago, along with my brother.” His voice was hoarse, and almost trancelike, his body so tense it was a wonder he didn’t snap and fly apart. “Her name was Quenth. His was Frerin.”

Syrath jerked back slightly and Fili felt the start of surprise from him.

*My mother’s name was Quenth. I do not know the name of her rider.*

There was dead silence in the camp. Fili almost opened his mouth to tell his uncle what Syrath had said, only to see by the look in his eyes that he already knew it. Syrath had chosen to speak to him directly instead of through one of his riders, a rare honor and possibly the first time his uncle had heard a dragon’s voice in his mind in five years.

Thorin stepped back from Syrath. He looked lost for a moment, until Dwalin stepped up and laid a hand on his shoulder. Fili couldn’t tell if they were speaking through their bond or not but, after a moment, Thorin gathered himself and straightened.

He pulled away from Dwalin and stepped over to Xalanth, lifting a hand to lay it on the dragon’s side.

“Xalanth,” he said, his voice ragged. “I would like you to meet Syrath–” He let out a breath, clearly trying to control his emotions. “Your son.”

Xalanth jerked, his massive head snapping around to stare at Syrath. He, in turn, looked equally as stunned. Both went still after that and Fili knew they were speaking mind to mind, sorting out the truth for themselves.

The rest of the camp stayed still, watching the reunion between father and son, their expressions joyous.

Except for Bilba.

Fili wasn’t sure why he was drawn to look at her but he did.

In her shock, she’d dropped her guard completely and the look on her face was not one of joy or happiness for her dragon finding his lost father.

It was one of complete and utter devastation.

As though Fili’s proclamation had stripped her world right out from under her feet.

He didn’t know why the revelation would be such a problem for her but he suddenly had the horrible
thought that it would be a long time before she would forgive him for it.

If she ever did.
Chapter 8

Bilba sat with her back against a boulder and tried to glare the princeling to death.

Naturally he didn't comply because he was an obstinate, stubborn bastard whose only reason for existing seemed to be to piss her off.

She was going to kill him in his sleep.

No, wait. That would be too merciful.

She was going to kill him while he was awake.

She would sneak up on him when he least expected it and shove a knife in his gut…or maybe a sword…or both.

Maybe she’d kill him with his own sword. That would certainly be fitting. It’d probably be the only time his sword would be legitimately used.

Every sword deserved to be used for the purpose for which it was created, at least once.

She would only be fulfilling its destiny.

She would kill him and solve all her problems. Then she and Syrath...she...and............Syrath…Sy Rath.

Her mood, which had been close to the useless emotion Primula had described to her as happiness, changed instantly and her heart wrenched in her chest as she remembered why she was so angry at the stupid, idiot, good for nothing, bastard Prince.

Her eyes went up, scanning the sky where Syrath and Xalanth had vanished over an hour ago. Syrath had asked her if it was alright if he and his…father…left for a while to try and figure things out without a crowd looking on.

She’d told him it was fine of course. What other answer could she have possibly given? No, please don’t go? I’m afraid you won’t come back? Her lip curled at the thought of showing such weakness even as her heart screamed at her for not doing it.

She said yes and Syrath left, his absence forcing her to support herself, his loss leaving her back exposed and cold. Everyone always left. She’d known Syrath would leave too, one day.

She’d known it and yet somehow was still stunned it was actually happening.

She was clearly a fool.

After Syrath had vanished with his family the dark haired king whose name she didn't remember, or care to know, had announced they would be returning to Erebor. Bilba had held back and watched as they readied themselves, gathering up their supplies and mounting the dragons. The human she’d rescued mounted the dragon the other princeling rode. She had no opinion of that one. He’d done nothing to piss her off as yet but he was related to the bastard princeling so it was probably only a matter of time.

The others all mounted as well until the only ones left on the ground were the bastard princeling and
the chief bastard.

While they'd packed up she'd retreated to the boulder she currently sat against, putting her back against it and gripping her boot knife in one hand. Mentally she made a note to try and track her sword down at some point. Dropping it had been sloppy.

As soon as the others left she'd get up and go. She'd have done it already except she had no doubt she'd be limping and the last thing she wanted was to let them see her weak.

It occurred to her suddenly that the bastard and chief bastard were walking toward her. Within seconds they were both looming over her.

She hated being loomed over. There should be a law against looming, punishable by death.

She'd be more than happy to enforce it.

"Come on," bastard princeling said. He held a hand out to her. "I'll help you onto one of the dragons. You'll be a lot more comfortable in the healing ward in Erebor."

Bilba barely resisted rolling her eyes.

She wasn't an idiot. She had no illusions that any of them truly wanted to help her and she certainly didn’t believe for a moment that they wanted her in their precious little kingdom.

They were no different than the orcs.

They didn’t want her.

They wanted Syrath.

It just so happened she came along with him so they would smile and behave and offer her aid, all the while secretly hoping she’d get the hint and simply go away. Some of the nobility in Gondor treated her like that on the rare occasions when Aragorn called for her. She only ever went when he called, never on her own no matter how often Syrath suggested it. The nobles there would always smile and act gracious when Aragorn introduced her but, the second he was gone, those same smiles would turn cold. An offer of a tour or meal would be rescinded, doors would be shut in her face.

She was little more than a parasite to them. A broken, mud grubbing slave of little note who’d sunk her claws into something beautiful and pure and kind enough to allow her to stay, at least until something better came along.

She didn't want to see that look in Aragorn's eyes when her welcome wore out. As it had in the Shire. When the welcome turned to discomfort, annoyance...fear. She didn't want to see the look of betrayal, anger and hate when the orcs came, as they always did, and destroyed everything she'd had the audacity to get close to.

She didn't want to hear to hear the disgust in Aragorn's voice when he told her to leave.

She didn't want to hear it in Syrath's.

She got to her feet, ignoring the hand the princeling was offering.

Pain lanced through her leg immediately, so intense her skin prickled and she broke out in a light sweat. She forced her back straight, lifted her chin, clenched her hands into tight fists...and then turned and started walking as best she could away from the lot of them.
The landscape ahead of her blurred slightly and she could feel a headache coming on but she pressed on. She would find some hole she could collapse into until her leg and arm healed, she decided. Then she’d find her sword, or get a new one, and go back to killing orcs.

Alone.

The pain of that single word cut her soul, damaging it in a way she hadn’t thought she could be damaged anymore. A massive lump rose up in her throat and her eyes burned. New bursts of pain erupted and radiated up and down her leg with every step but she continued to force one foot in front of the other.

Movement came from behind her and then an angry voice. A hand closed over her arm, an iron band wrapping around her bicep.

She reacted. She could sense his body behind hers, the barest hint of his clothing brushing against her body and letting her know exactly where he stood. She shifted weight onto her bad leg, gritting her teeth as the pain in her leg and arm exploded.

Then, in almost the same movement, she swept her foot back, hooked her leg around his calf and wrenched forward. He released her arm with a shout as he lost his balance and she twisted, her arm already up, palm extended like a blade to drive into his throat as he went down.

A second hand grabbed her wrist. Bilba stopped, stunned to see the chief bastard standing there, holding her.

He hadn’t been there a second before. How had he moved so fast?

She looked at him, only to watch in confusion as his expression morphed from one of anger to one that probably matched her own.

The grip on her wrist faltered and she broke it, ducking under his arm and spinning away before he could try to grab her again. He merely watched her though, arms hanging limply at his sides.

Bilba didn’t waste time.

She bolted for the forest, hoping to at least make it inside before she collapsed.

She did not look back.

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Fili scrambled to his feet, barely pausing to brush the dirt off his clothes. He started to step forward, toward where Bilba was just vanishing into the borders of Mirkwood, only to come up short as Dwalin grabbed him.

“Let go,” Fili ordered, jerking his arm to try and free it. At the same time he sent a terse reply across the link to Kili, who was currently shouting in his mind and giving him a headache.

“Stop fighting me,” Dwalin ordered. “Your uncle wants to talk to you.”

“My uncle can wait,” Fili snapped. “Did you see her face?”

Dwalin turned him to face the others and gave him a shove. “I did and she isn’t going very far, or fast, on that leg so go talk to your uncle and then go after her.”
Fili scowled but obeyed, jerking his arm free before heading over. On the way it occurred to him just what Dwalin had said and he looked at him sharply. “Wait, Uncle talked to you? Through his link?”

Dwalin grunted an acknowledgment. “Guess finding out he’s got a grandkid of sorts did him a world of good.”

Fili frowned. “That analogy is…really confusing.”

Dwalin shrugged.

They reached the others and Fil found himself surrounded by dragons. His uncle peered down at him from where he was perched on the back of Oin's dragon, in the space usually occupied by Gloin.

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked. His eyes were dark and unreadable.

“I’m fine,” Fili said. “In fact, you can return to Erebor if you wish. I’m going after her.”

Kili frowned. “Are you insane? She just attacked you! Let her go!”

“I can’t let her go,” Fili shot, “she’s my ride partner!”

“She isn’t bonded,” Thorin said. His eyes went past Fili to focus on Dwalin. “That’s what Xalanth reported, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Dwalin answered.

Thorin frowned suddenly, his eyes narrowing. “Are you alright?”

Fili looked back at Dwalin in confusion. He couldn’t see anything wrong with Dwalin and Bilba hadn’t laid a hand on him as far as he’d seen. What was his uncle talking about?

Dwalin glowered. “I’m fine,” he said shortly.

Thorin didn’t look convinced but let it go, his gaze shifting back to his nephew. “If she isn’t bonded then Syrath is free to choose another rider if he wishes.”

“I doubt he would,” Gandalf said suddenly, breaking into the conversation from where he sat with Kili on Lyth. “And I would caution you, Your Majesty, to recall the young woman and the dragon have been together for many years. Attempting to separate them as your first action would not endear you to either.”

Thorin grimaced. “You know I have no desire to separate a dragon from its rider but the woman--”

“Girl,” Gandalf clarified. “The girl was only in a position to save Syrath because she was enslaved in Moria herself. Trauma of that kind would affect anyone. Surely you would not hold that against her.”

“Of course not,” Thorin muttered, looking annoyed that Gandalf would even suggest such a thing.

“How old is she?” Fili asked, focusing on the rest of what Gandalf had said.

Gandalf studied him, an annoying knowing look in his eyes. “Elrond is rather protective of her privacy but, from our conversations, I’d judge her to be around your age, Your Highness, if not a few years younger.”

There was shocked silence. Even the dragons looked stunned.
“They’re both children?” one of the soldiers blurted. “Two kids have been singlehandedly eradicating the orcs the past five years?”

“Hey!” Kili shouted. “I’m not a kid! Mostly.”

Fili stared at the wizard, his own mind struggling to rewrite the image he’d created in his head. Granted he’d barely met Bilba but he’d already pictured her older. It’d actually worried him that someone of her age and experience might not consider him as anything more than a child. The way she carried herself, the way she interacted with others, her fighting ability and talents with a blade, all spoke to age and experience. But then the look in her eyes when she’d turned around…

He’d thought she was angry but when she turned to face him…her eyes had been redlined and the look on her face had been one of utter devastation. And, again, when Dwalin had surprised her and grabbed her arm. He’d seen fear, for just a split second before her mask came back down.

None of that spoke to age, just experience.

“The Arena,” Dwalin said suddenly. “That would explain her proficiency with the blade.”

“And her age would explain her less than stellar social abilities,” A random soldier, whose name escaped Fili at the moment, broke in. “Not to mention the trauma as the wizard says.” He looked at Thorin. “I’ve met some of the escaped slaves, Your Majesty. Even the older ones struggle. I can’t imagine how a child would have coped.”

Fili knew about the Arena. The slaves that occasionally escaped from Moria spoke of it sometimes, usually in hushed whispers and broken voices. Most who entered didn’t live to talk about it. Those who did, or those close enough to hear the screams, spoke of blood and bone and unimaginable horror repeated over and over and over until death became a sought after reward.

He tried to imagine his little brother in that environment, forced to kill in order to live. He tried to imagine himself in it.

“You know what?” he said suddenly. “I’m going to find my partner. I’ll see you back at Erebor.”

With that he spun on one heel and strode toward the woods.

He didn’t know who Bilba was yet. He’d barely met her. Was she Orcrist? The woman who faced down legions of orcs without flinching? Was she Bilba? The same age as he was, as Kili, enslaved and forced to fight for her life?

Or was the truth somewhere in between?

He didn’t know.

He did know one thing, however.

No one who’d been through something like that deserved to be alone.

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She was being punished for escaping from Azog. She just knew it. How else could it be explained that Syrath ended up being the son of the dragon that the chief bastard rode?
Or that Syrath’s other rider was a stupid, useless princeling who also happened to be associated with the chief bastard?

Or the fact that neither bastard would leave her alone?

She could hear them approaching even then and was absolutely not the least bit impressed that they’d managed to find her. She’d only made it a short distance inside the woods before her leg had given out, forcing her to seek cover under the branches of a low hanging tree.

It wasn’t because she’d expected them to come after her. It was because she knew she was never safe, not even on the edge of Mirkwood with a group of dragons a short distance away.

The footsteps stopped on the other side of the trunk and she went still, pressing her back to the bark, the sharp edges digging into her spine. She had her legs pulled up to her chest, her arms wrapped around them. Now she put her head down and closed her eyes, mentally praying to whatever Valar had ignored her mother to please, please, just this once listen and make them leave her alone. She didn’t want to be yelled at for attacking the princeling, dragging Syrath into battle, causing the destruction of the Shire or a million other ways she’d left death and carnage in her wake everywhere she went.

It was little wonder her father never came for her.

The footsteps rounded the tree, dry grass crunching under boots and she felt despair drape over her. Clearly the Valar had no more love for her than they had held for her mother.

She tensed, her fingers digging into the skin on her leg. Her hand was close to the burn on her bad leg and sharp daggers of pain vibrated through her flesh.

There was silence but she could feel them standing over her. If she looked up she would undoubtedly be able to see them through the branches.

The last two people she’d ever want to see her looking weak.

It wasn’t just that the Valar had no love for her.

They absolutely hated her.

Movement came from in front of her followed by the sound of branches moving. Bilba felt her muscles bunch, her hand nearly aching from the desire to have her boot knife in it, or her sword.

Someone sat down next to her, close enough she could feel the fur of their jacket brushing against her arm.

Fur. The bastard princeling had a fur liner on his coat.

The other presence receded. That would be the chief bastard then, running away like the coward he was.

She waited for the princeling to say something…and waited…and waited…and waited some more.

Finally she couldn’t stand it any longer.

Patience had never been her strong suit.

Why are you here? You got what you wanted.
“What is it that I wanted?” Fili asked.

Syrath Bilba said. *Everyone always wants Syrath.*

He shifted slightly, his body coming in closer contact with her. Bilba moved away.

*I don’t want to take Syrath from you.* Fili said. *If anything, I’ve been afraid you were going to take him from me.*

Bilba lifted her head in surprise. *What?*

Fili’s face was cast in shadow but she could still see the look of pain in his eyes.

“You two have been fighting together for five years,” he said, switching to speaking audibly, the slightest trace of bitterness in his voice, “but you never came to find me. When Syrath showed up today I thought maybe it was because he just wanted help rescuing you…and that you’d both leave after that.”

Bilba frowned. *You thought he would reject YOU? Why? You’re a Prince.*

He shrugged. “So what? My rank has nothing to do with it.”

Bilba studied him, trying to decide if he was sincere or lying to her, though she couldn't imagine why he would bother. *Was today the first time you used your sword?*

Fili frowned in confusion. “What?”

*Your sword,* Bilba repeated slowly, as though talking to an idiot. *Was today the first time you used it? Aside from practice.*

“No,” he answered, confused. “I go out on patrols sometimes with the guard. We don’t kill orcs every day like you’ve been doing but we’ve seen our fair share.” He grinned suddenly. “I doubt anyone has seen as much action as you have.”

He was pretty when he smiled, Bilba thought, and glowered. That was another mark against him. Pretty things were useless. Pretty things sat on shelves and gathered dust. Primula would complain about having to clean them and how they took up space but she never got rid of them. She’d drag Bilba out to look at flowers or birds trying to tell her to appreciate how pretty they were but all Bilba ever saw was what a giant waste of time it all was.

Pretty things served no purpose.

But the princeling…if he was telling the truth…wasn’t useless. She thought back to the battle. She hadn’t paid much attention to him then but, the brief glimpses she had seen, he’d been, calm, confident.

Not the image of someone in their first fight.

And, now…he couldn’t possibly be serious about not wanting to take Syrath from her, could he?

Regardless, she didn't like him accusing Syrath of rejecting him. Syrath shouldn't be blamed for things that were her fault. *Syrath wanted to come. I kept stopping him.*

His eyes widened. “Why?”

She didn’t answer but his expression was already shifting to one of realization. “You already said
why. You thought I’d take him away.”

Bilba didn't answer.

Fili sighed in exasperation. “You know what? Can we just start over?”

He shifted and Bilba frowned as his hand suddenly appeared in her line of sight.

“I’ll accept that you and Syrath weren’t rejecting me and you accept I’m not trying to take him from you. How’s that?” He smiled again. She hoped he didn't do that a lot. It was annoying.

*I still think you’re a useless princeling.*

“Okay,” Fili said slowly, looking slightly nervous suddenly. “That’s a start…I guess. It’s better than you thinking of ways to try and kill me at least.”

Bilba rolled her eyes. *I already did that, it didn’t take long.*

He laughed, suggesting he was insane in addition to being utterly useless.

She scowled. He, in turn, showed no sign of retracting his hand so, in an effort to make him stop; she finally reached out and grabbed it. She still didn’t understand the concept of holding someone’s hand and moving it up and down to seal an agreement but it seemed to make other people happy so she put up with it.

*I accept you might not intentionally try to take Syrath from me,* she allowed, *and if I’m forced to kill you I’ll make it quick instead of making you suffer.*

Fili gave her an incredulous look but then simply nodded. “Fair enough.”

Bilba sighed. The fact that he apparently wanted her to stay, for some such reason or another, didn't mean Syrath would want her to stay and it certainly didn't mean the rest of the dwarves would want her.

But getting to be around Syrath, even for just a little bit longer, was to tempting for her to pass up.

Still, she was going to regret this.

She just knew it.

***

Several yards away, Dwalin slowly released the hilt of his sword as it became clear the girl didn’t plan to murder the Crown Prince of Erebor. At least not yet.

He studied her as she settled back again, the emotions on her face suggesting she was trying to decide the degree to which she now disliked Fili.

And she did still dislike him, regardless of any truce they may have arrived at. The anger she felt toward Erebor’s prince was almost strong as the hatred she seemed to have personally reserved for him.
He couldn’t begin to imagine why. She was far too young to have been one of his soldiers at Moria. He didn’t allow them to enlist until they were eighty.

If she wasn’t one of his, though, then he couldn’t understand why she would hold any sort of personal animosity toward him.

And she clearly did. Every time she looked at him there was nothing but seething hatred in her eyes. He’d seen them widen with recognition the first time she caught sight of him and had felt her physically restraining herself from attacking when he drew near.

She knew him, even if he didn’t know her.

And he had no idea why.

He also didn’t understand the reaction he’d had when he’d grabbed her arm to stop her from hitting Fili.

When she’d turned and he’d seen the look of pain and grief in her eyes.

When, for a brief second, just the briefest of instances, his heart had jolted in his chest and a familiar laugh had bubbled up in his memories.

He could still remember looking down, watching the landscape fall away beneath him as Xalanth carried him away. He could still see her small figure, chestnut hair blowing around her in the wake left by Xalanth’s wings, face upturned and hand raised as she wished him a safe journey.

His journey had been safe.

Hers had not.

He shook his head slightly, trying to dislodge the memories. He hadn't thought of that scene in years but every time it he did the pain was as bad as it had been that first time.

He didn’t understand why the sight of the girl in pain had evoked the last memory he had of his wife.

He didn't understand how she knew him or why she hated him.

One thing he did know, however.

He was going to find out.
Fili stood and held a hand out. “We should head back. Uncle might think I inherited his sense of direction and got lost.”

Bilba slapped his hand away in irritation. The last thing she wanted, or needed, was help from a little princeling. She placed a hand against the damp soil of the forest floor and pushed up to a standing position. As she did it occurred to her the top of her head came to just under his nose.

Bastard.

She took a step...and quickly realized that might have been a mistake.

Physical bodies had limits, no matter how strong the spirit within, and as annoying as it was to admit, she was well past hers. Her entire frame was shivering and she suddenly felt ice cold even as her skin prickled with sweat. Her leg and shoulder throbbed; a bone deep pain that brought waves of nausea with each pulse and darkness ate at the edge of her vision. She put her head down, focusing on Princeling’s boots as she breathed slowly in through her mouth and out through her nose, trying desperately not to throw up.

She could vaguely hear Princeling speaking but had no idea what he was saying.

Bilba swallowed back bile and straightened, shutting her eyes for a second to try and clear her head. She was not doing this. She was not going to need help from the Princeling or the Chief Bastard. She was stronger than this. It was just a matter of willpower. She’d walk back and carefully sit down to wait for Syrath. No one would have to be the wiser.

She could do it.

She could.

She opened her eyes and lifted her head, allowing her breath out slowly. She took a second step forward… and promptly passed out.

***

Fili knew she was in trouble and was already moving seconds before the color drained completely from her face and her knees buckled. He caught her around her waist, slid his other arm under her knees and hefted her easily into his arms. She hung limp and he adjusted his hold until her head rested against his shoulder.

Awake she was larger than life, an intimidating presence, filled to overflowing with fire, passion, and marrow deep anger.

Unconsciousness wiped out all of that, leaving her face clear of the burdens of her past.

Gandalf was right. She was young, or should have been.

Boots crunched on dead leaves as Dwalin approached. “Want me to take her?”
“No,” Fili said instantly, his eyes still fixed on her face. “I’ve got her.” She barely weighed anything. Her frame was small, closer to a Hobbit’s structure than a dwarf’s denser bones, and carrying her barely affected him. She was more delicate than he was, easier to break and he shook his head at the thought of her throwing herself at the orcs over and over as though she were made of mithril instead of fragile flesh and blood.

Dwalin frowned. “You should be careful.”

Fili’s eyes flicked toward his. “Why?”

“You’re becoming infatuated,” Dwalin replied, “with a woman you don’t know.”

Fili bristled. “I can handle myself.”

Dwalin shrugged. “Just be sure you don’t end up so blinded by who you hope she is you miss who she actually is.”

“As long as you don’t end up so blinded by paranoia you decide who she is without bothering to get to know her,” Fili shot back. “She’s got a dragon for Durin’s sake, Dwalin. They don’t choose riders lightly.”

“Syrath is an infant,” Dwalin growled back. “We’re lucky he didn’t choose an orc. The only dragons in Erebor allowed to bond as young as he is are the royal dragons and that’s because they’re born knowing who their rider is. I didn’t get chosen by Xalanth until he was near twenty.”

“I don’t need a lecture on something I already know,” Fili muttered. He turned as he spoke, heading back toward the clearing.

“I’m not lecturing you,” Dwalin answered, falling in beside him, “I’m reminding you.” He sighed, his gaze troubled as he studied Bilba. “I’ve met a handful of Arena survivors. They aren’t safe.”

“No one is safe,” Fili said. “That’s one of your first lessons, isn’t it?” He scowled, “Don’t you think her past has hurt her enough without you insisting she be defined by it?”

“All I’m saying is watch yourself, lad.” They exited the clearing and began heading back toward where the others waited. “You don’t have the luxury of being ruled by emotion, misplaced or otherwise.”

Fili grit his teeth and didn’t respond. He hefted the small woman in his arms slightly higher and raised his chin as he strode to the others. Durin’s beard, why did Dwalin have to be so perceptive? He knew most who didn’t know the Guard Captain assumed he was little more than brawn, a shield of blood and bone standing between the royal family and its enemies.

Fili knew otherwise, as did anyone who spent more than five minutes with him. No dwarf became Captain of the Guard and head of royal security simply by being large. Dwalin was smart, to a scary degree sometimes. He always seemed to know everything that was going on at all times, to a point where sometimes Fili thought he was the Court’s Spymaster instead of Nori.

Kili frowned as they approached. “Did she try to attack you again?”

“No,” Fili said, his patience frayed, “she passed out. It happens when you have severe injuries, Kili.”

A shadow flashed by overhead and Fili’s heart sank. He looked up to see Syrath and Xalanth spiraling down toward them.
As expected, the young dragon did not react well to Bilba’s condition.

Not well at all.

***

Fili leaned against the stone wall across from the Healing Ward and idly chewed on his lower lip. After Syrath had yelled at Bilba for running around while injured, seemingly unconcerned she was unconscious and couldn’t hear him, and then at Fili for letting her run around injured, as if he could have stopped her, the small dragon had carried them to Erebor, muttering deprecations about the idiocy of his riders the entire way.

Once there Xalanth had managed to convince his newfound son to go to the lairs on the lower levels while Fili took Bilba to the Healers.

*Are you still lurking outside the Healing Ward?*

Fili sent the mental version of a scowl at his brother and ignored him. That, of course, had never stopped Kili before and a few minutes later he came strolling down the hall and took up position next to Fili against the wall.

“So,” he said, with a grin that suggested he was about to make Fili want to hit him, “I happened to overhear Dwalin talking to Uncle.”

Fili definitely wanted to hit him.

“By which you mean you were lurking outside his study like the stalker you are,” Fili corrected. He could feel a headache coming on. He had no doubt what the two had been discussing.

“Just keeping up on current affairs.” Kili responded cheerily. "With the way you’re going I’ll be King someday anyway. It’s important to keep up with what's going on.”

Fili raised an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Kili shrugged. “Just that most people who found out their second rider was more than slightly insane would run screaming the other way, not decide she might be their One.” He gave his brother a considering look. “That does not bode well for your future survival, brother.”

Fili rolled his eyes. “I never said she was my One and I don’t see why it’s any business of yours, or Uncle’s or Dwalin’s for that matter.” Some lesser noble or another walked by and both boys straightened long enough to exchange pleasantries. As soon as the other was past they slouched, in sync, against the wall once more. “Am I the only one who saw her fighting? She fights like she was born to it.” Not to mention she was gorgeous. Who wouldn't be at least something interested?

“She fights like an orc,” Kili's voice cut in, his voice tight. He locked eyes with Fili, in one of his rare serious moods. “I did see how she fights, like she has no fear of death, reckless.”

"You're one to talk about being reckless,” Fili accused.

"I didn't drag my brother headlong back into a fight we'd already escaped from," Kili said shortly. "We were out. There was no reason to go back. She wanted to kill, or be killed, and she didn't care if
she took you with her."

"We were fine," Fili said. He crossed his arms over his chest, studying the door. Kili had a point but there was no way he was going to admit it.

Kili glared at the door, his jaw set. "Dwalin thinks she was an Arena fighter. If she was then she’s well used to killing."

“We know that already,” Fili said. “She’s been slaughtering orcs for five years.”

“I’m not talking about orcs,” Kili said in annoyance. “I saw the way she looked at you. The way she behaved in the battle I’m not sure her own life means much to her but I know yours certainly doesn’t. Not to mention the life of her own dragon."

"They’ve been together five years," Fili argued back, "and nothing has happened."

"Which could be luck as much as her actually giving a damn," Kili shot back.

Fili's eyes narrowed. "I'm not going to judge her for what the orcs have done to her!" He leveled a look on his younger brother. "And neither should you."

Kili curled his lip in irritation. "I'm not judging her for Durin’s sake. I'm simply worried for my idiot brother!"

Fili sighed, his anger evaporating. "Noted." He leaned his head back against the wall. "You're getting ahead of yourself though. I've barely met her."

"She's your ride partner regardless," Kili said, still agitated, "and the last thing I want is to see her get you killed."

"She won't," Fili assured him. "I'll keep my eyes open."

Kili snorted. "Like you'd even notice. You're crushing so bad we've all seen it," Kili mused.

““You didn’t see it,” Fili replied dryly. “You stalked Dwalin and Uncle and overheard it.”

Kili’s eyes widened suddenly and he got that look that suggested he’d just thought of something particularly evil. “I wonder if Mom has heard yet. Just think, the one time out of the year she decides to visit Lake-town and look what she missed? She’ll probably never leave the mountain again.”

Fili groaned and shut his eyes, banging his head lightly on the wall behind him. “Kill me now.”

““I’m sure Bilba would be happy to oblige,”” a new voice said and Fili sighed as Dwalin and his uncle appeared from around the bend in the hall.

“I’m fairly sure she’d be happier to kill you,” Kili said to Dwalin from Fili’s other side.

Fili frowned, rolling his head to the side to study his brother. “You noticed that too? I thought I was just imagining it. Syrath says she hates everyone.”

Kili shrugged. “Maybe but she certainly seems to have reserved a special place in her heart for Dwalin.” He leaned forward to look at the other dwarf. “What did you do to her?”

Dwalin shrugged. “I had Xalanth ask Syrath but he didn’t even know there was a problem. He says she’s not a fan of Erebor but that could just be--"
“Because I was here and she thought I was going to steal Syrath,” Fili cut in.

Kili looked startled. “She thought you were going to what?”

Fili didn’t get a chance to answer as the door opened to the Healing Ward and Oin stepped out. Fili pushed off the wall. “Well?”

“She’ll be fine,” Oin said. “Just needs rest is all, her and the dragon both I’d imagine.”

“What else did you find?” Dwalin asked.

Oin scowled. “I don’t think it’s particularly your business do you?”

“It is if she plans to be near my heirs,” Thorin growled.

Oin sighed and then waved a hand at the door. “Then at least let’s move inside so I’m not blasting the poor girl’s business for the entire mountain to hear.”

Thorin gave a curt nod and they followed him inside. Fili didn’t see Bilba in the main room. Oin must have put her in a private one.

Oin walked to the large desk he worked behind and picked up a sheaf of papers. “It’s as was suspected,” he stated simply, “her body is heavily scarred and there’s evidence of her being manacled and collared, probably for long periods of time. She was undoubtedly a slave.”

Fili swallowed, his hands clenched into fists at the news. He’d suspected, maybe even more than suspected, but to have the facts laid out like that... “For how long?”

“Impossible to say,” Oin replied, “though, given her youth, and the fact the average life expectancy in the mines can be measured on one hand I wouldn’t think longer than a few years.” He cleared his throat and glowered at the paper as though taking personal affront to it. “She’s also missing her tongue. From the remnants I would imagine it was removed rather violently.”

Dwalin and Thorin showed no reaction. Fili sucked in a breath while, beside him, Kili hissed, “Mahal.”

“That explains why she only speaks through mental link,” Thorin said. His face was expressionless but Fili knew his uncle well enough to see the news bothered him. Thorin took the existence of slaves in Moria personally. Moria was a dwarven kingdom and many of the slaves within were dwarves or dwobbits. The fact he could do nothing to drive the orc scum out or free his people enslaved within rankled.

Oin continued. “And I believe Dwalin was correct as well. Many of the scars appear to have been made by weapons. I could attribute it to her lifestyle but for the fact she bears an Arena brand over her right shoulder.”

“An Arena brand?” Kili asked blankly. “What’s that?”

“Nori’s reports suggest most slaves in Moria are treated as communal property by the orcs,” Thorin said. “The ones who cause problems are thrown in the Arena where their life is usually measured in seconds.” His lips twisted in a grimace.

“Unless you’re branded,” Dwalin took over. “Branded slaves have proven themselves in the Arena. Their reward for not dying is being taken and owned by one of the orcs, typically one of fairly high rank. After that they’re fought in bouts, usually with the orcs betting on the outcome.”
Fili felt a rush of nausea at the thought of Bilba being owned by an orc as though she were little more than a pet or of being forced to fight for her life as a sick form of entertainment. “Do you know who the orc was that had her?”

“I’ve only seen two brands before this,” Oin said, “and both were different. I have no idea who uses this brand. We’d have to ask her.”

“Or we could ask Syrath,” Fili said. “If he even knows.” The two didn’t have a soul bond for whatever reason and she’d clearly kept things from him. It was quite possible Syrath knew very little about Bilba’s time in the mines.

Oins shrugged. “Might be preferable. She’s still unconscious.”

Fili frowned. “She hasn’t woken up yet?”

“She’s exhausted,” Oin said. “She’ll wake up when she’s ready.” At Fili’s doubtful look he sighed and said, “I know my job, Your Highness. The girl will be fine.”

***

Bilba wasn’t fine, at least not immediately. She developed a nasty cold and, a few days after that, infection set into her shoulder and leg. Oin commented on the fact she’d been soaking wet when they came in contact with her and postulated she’d been in an underground river or lake. Given it was in goblin territory the water had most likely been polluted with Mahal only knew what, all of which had leached into the wounds and now waged war within her body.

She grew delusional and, though she could not speak, she could vocalize and spent long hours screaming until her voice grew hoarse.

When her fever grew worse her shields weakened, allowing the raving in her mind to leak through. Any rider in proximity with lowered shields, or too young to be fully trained, could feel her pain and fear radiating through the halls.

With their mental link, Fili could actually hear her.

She seemed to relive the same moment over and over and over again. She would beg someone to live, plead with them; promise them she’d be good if they would just wake up. He didn’t know who she’d lost, or when, but it always ended the same way, screaming. Syrath could hear it as well and though he said he did know of people she’d lost he didn’t recognize the particular event she seemed to be reliving. As Fili had suspected, she’d kept her life before she met Syrath private. The young dragon tried to extend his shields as best he could to cover her and stop others from being affected by her pain but he was several levels below and, with his age and without a soul bond, his abilities were limited from that distance. To properly shield her without a soul bond he would need to be in her physical presence and she was much too ill to be moved to where he was.

He couldn’t help her.

So Fili did instead. He set up a chair next to her bed and built a mental wall around her mind, not touching her but keeping her thoughts and emotions private as he had no doubt she would want. It didn’t stop him from feeling and hearing it himself but it gave her some privacy. He had his meals brought to him and slept in a second bed that Oin placed in the small room.
About the third day his parents returned and, as expected, his mother was less than pleased at the news that the dragon her son had waited years for came with an angry, reckless dwobbit attached.

They loved Syrath, even though the dragon spent his time curled in a tight ball of misery over Bilba’s illness and barely acknowledged their visit. Not even being surrounded by other dragons, and his father, for the first time in his life, could draw him out of it.

Through it all Bilba continued to fight the phantoms of her past in her mind. Fili had no doubt she would be horrified at how much of herself had been revealed through her illness but he couldn’t help feeling an odd sort of gratitude, even if he would have wished for a different method for it.

He understood her a little more, or thought he did. Hopefully, it would be enough to forge some sort of friendship.

That or at least enough of a relationship to get her to take him off the “Kill Him When He’s Not Looking” list.

He couldn’t do anything, however, until she recovered.

So he waited.

***

Bilba felt exhausted.

She lay still, eyes closed and breathing relaxed as confusion raced through her mind.

Where was she?

What had happened?

Her body felt heavy with fatigue, aching and a dull pain in her shoulder and leg spoke to healing injuries.

When had she been hurt? Fuzzy memories floated through her mind. Riding Syrath, the burn of acid racing through her leg.

Orcs, that was right. There had been orcs. There were always orcs.

Clearly she’d been hurt. How badly? She ran a mental check over her body but couldn’t find any further sign of injury, which was odd. She could feel the sink of a mattress under her, the feel of blankets on top. If she wasn’t that injured why was she in a bed? Usually she just crawled under the nearest tree and waited out Syrath’s griping until she recovered. He’d only taken her to Rivendell or Gondor twice when her injuries had proven so severe he’d worried over her life.

He worried too much.

She reached out with her mind, intending to call him, and ran against what felt like a solid wall of mithril in her mind, locking her in.

What?
Her stomach started fluttering and her breathing quickened slightly. New memories swam to the surface, falling, pain blooming in her shoulder, a dark cave.

Azog.

Her eyes snapped open.

There was stone overhead.

Her breathing sped up to where she was nearly hyperventilating.

She was under stone.

She was under stone.

She’d been recaptured.

She was in Moria.

Her heart turned into a hammer, going so fast it was a wonder it didn’t burst in her chest, and her breathing caught in her throat. Her body started shaking as full blown panic ripped through her mind. She lunged to the side. Her body tangled in the blankets and she fell onto the floor, pain cracking through her knees and hands as they impacted.

She curled in on herself, wrapping her hands around her head, panting. Dizziness swam through her and she shuddered.

Her mind screamed at her to Run Run Run but her body was locked, every muscle frozen in place.

Arms grabbed at her suddenly and she screamed, lashing out in blind panic. Panic made for poor tactics, however, and the arms easily dragged her to her feet.

She couldn’t breathe. Her airway had nearly closed. Every breath she dragged in made a horrible grating noise as it struggled to fit through the small opening left in the throat.

An arm slid around her waist. The other held her arm and pulled her in some direction or another. Bilba’s eyes were open but she was bent over so all she could see were her own blurry, unfocused feet as they scraped across the floor.

A door opened…and fresh air washed over her.

What?

The hands released her and she staggered forward until she caught against a stone railing at about waist height. She leaned on it, gripping the edges until sharp spikes of pain radiated through her palms. She shut her eyes and put her head down, focusing on trying to control her own body.

A balcony, her mind supplied. She was on a balcony. Moria had balconies but the slaves weren’t allowed on them.

So why – her mind began to calm down slightly and, as it did, the rest of her memories began to return.

Oh.
She wasn’t in Moria.

She was in *Erebor*.

She cursed in Black Speech, using every last word she could think of as well as a few new ones she’d come up with over the years.

The air around her was cold and crisp and perfect for clearing her head. She opened her eyes to see a dark night stretched out before her. Stars glittered overhead and a fat moon tracked lazily across the sky. Below her she could see the landscape spread out, awash in silver light and shadow.

Her heart rate was slowing and her throat finally released. She sagged on the rail, the edges cutting in a line across her stomach, and focused on breathing. She still felt rattled, her nerves on edge but at least she could breathe again.

“I’m sorry,” a voice said quietly behind her. “I should have realized you wouldn’t react well to waking up inside a mountain.”

Bilba shut her eyes and started up a new round of swearing. Of all the people to see her like this of course it would be the idiot Princeling. The wall around her mind had vanished at some point and, now that she was calming down, she could see the holes in her shields. She gathered them up and restored them, locking them down into a solid bulwark.

*I don’t have a problem inside mountains*; she threw at him before slamming shut the last of her shields, locking him out where he belonged.

It was the truth. She didn’t have a problem inside mountains. She’d made sure of it. She’d realized the issue the first time it had rained and they’d needed shelter. The second she had set foot inside a cave she’d started shaking and her breathing and heart rate had increased.

It had been pathetic.

She’d began to purposefully spend times in caves after that, as much as she could. It had been ugly at first but, slowly, over time it had gotten better. She had no problem, so long as she was prepared for it and wasn’t waking up confused, hurt and caught off guard.

She wasn’t weak.

She glanced over her shoulder to where the bastard Princeling was standing near the door.

She reopened her link. *You saw me with the goblins. Did I LOOK like I was having problems?*

He raised an eyebrow. “You mean aside from the fact they were about to slaughter you?”

Bilba blinked, startled at his quick comeback.

The feel of cold stone under her feet caught her attention and she looked down at herself with a frown.

She was dressed in a loose pair of cotton pants, a light shirt and nothing else.

A light *short* sleeved shirt. Bile rose in her throat at the sight of the moonlight shimmering off the thick bands of scars wrapped around her wrists, the mangled mess of old mutilations marching up her arms. Without having to look she knew the collar of the shirt was low, leaving the marks left by the manacle on her throat visible for anyone to see.
Visible for Syrath’s other rider, the Crown Bastard, to see. His body was undoubtedly flawless and unmarked. She could only imagine the disgust he must feel at seeing hers.

The shaking started again. She wrapped her arms around her torso and whirled to face the bastard. *Where are my clothes?*

He stepped back and angled toward the door. “In there. They were cleaned and mended--”

She marched past him, ignoring the rest of what he said. The room inside was massive, easily as large as the chambers Azog held in Moria. It was richly arrayed with furniture, lush rugs and tapestries hung on the wall.

Princeling had followed her. “Once your fever broke we moved you to your own quarters.”

Bilba caught sight of her clothing, neatly folded on top of a dresser and nearly ran to grab it. As soon as she did she went behind a large privacy screen in the corner of the room and quickly began undressing. Her hands were shaking so hard she could barely work the fastenings but she managed, quickly stripping down to her undergarments. She gave no thought to the Princeling being in the room just on the other side of the screen. The last thing he would ever want to see would be more of the disfigured mess that was her body.

He was still talking, his voice oddly level. He was different, more confident in how he held himself and in how he spoke to her but she couldn’t understand why.

Her hands paused in the act of pulling her pants on. *How long was I unconscious?*

“Over a week and a half,” his response came immediately. “You developed a bad infection.”

That explained why her injuries were already well on the way to healing. She swallowed past a rock in her throat at the thought of Princeling having a week and a half of uninterrupted time with Syrath. Had they soul bonded yet?

She finished getting her pants and boots on and grabbed for her tunic and vest.

“You were delirious at times,” Princeling’s voice went on.

He said something else but Bilba didn’t hear it. She’d frozen on the word “delirious”. She knew what happened when she got delirious.

She fought against a sudden burning in her eyes. She hadn’t cried in years. She certainly wasn’t going to start now.

Weak, her mind taunted, so very weak. She bit her lip, hard. Of all the people to see her at her weakest…of all the people…why did it have to be the bastard?

She finished getting dressed, pulling on her gloves and cloak. She clipped the pin Aragorn had given her on and immediately felt relief rush through her. No one wanted to see her scars. *She* didn’t want to see them.

She still felt jittery, like thousands of insects were crawling under her skin. Her body was nearly vibrating and it was with reservation that she let her shields down enough to call Syrath.

Would he even care to answer?

*I’m here. Come on.*
Another wave of relief raced through her. She put her chin up, eyes ahead and strode out from behind the screen.

Princeling was seated on a couch on the other side of the room. He got up when she appeared and started to say something but she walked right past him, her eyes fixed on the balcony. Every step was pure torture as she struggled to hold herself together.

By the time she reached the door she had broken into a run. She burst out onto the balcony, cold mountain air wrapping around her, and ran for the edge.

She heard the Princeling shout something behind her but she ignored him. She planted her hands on the cool stone of the railing, pushed up, and vaulted right over the edge.

The Princeling screamed something, most likely because he was an idiot, but she didn’t bother to listen.

Her feet landed solidly on Syrath’s back as he soared past, just under the balcony. She slid down to a seated position and grabbed the straps, tying them in place with shaking fingers.

It was only as she got the last of them done that she realized they’d banked and were heading back toward the mountain.

*What are you doing?*

*Fili wants to come too.*

Bilba frowned. *Who?*

Syrath sounded amused as he answered. *Our second rider. Do I even want to know what nickname you came up for him?*

*Probably not,* Bilba answered. She looked back toward the balcony and saw Princeling standing on the railing, a mere silhouette in the dark. She raised an eyebrow. Did he really intend to jump? She wouldn’t have thought he had it in him.

Why not? A voice whispered in her mind. You had it in you and you’re pathetic. He’s a Crown Prince. He can do better than you in his sleep.

The shaking grew worse. She felt as though she’d been stripped naked and paraded through Erebor. The fact the Princeling had seen made it a thousand times worse.

And what about her father? Cold settled in her gut, along with a horror so profound she almost wanted to throw herself off Syrath’s back then and there rather than face the possibility the chief bastard had heard even a single one of her delirious ravings.

Bone deep humiliation settled in and she gripped her pant legs in agitation, gritting her teeth until her jaw ached.

Syrath flashed by the balcony again and, a second later, Princeling was sitting behind her. She felt him fumbling around and realized a second set of straps had been added to Syrath.

*Are you ready?*

*Please,* Bilba responded. She didn’t know if Princeling was strapped in yet but if Syrath were asking her then he probably was.
Syrath shifted, and then shot straight up into the air. Bilba was thrown back, ending up pressed against Princeling’s chest. She could feel his nose pressed against the back of her head and shifted to avoid touching him as much as possible. She felt the briefest brush of his hands alongside her hips as he grabbed the straps and tangled his hands in them to anchor himself. She had already done the same with her own.

She looked up, watching the stars overhead.

They shot higher and higher still, past where anything or anyone could reach her. Finally, when the air began to noticeably thin, Syrath evened out. Around them was total silence. The moonlit landscape was far below them and all around was nothing but a wide field of stars.

Bilba sighed, her shoulders relaxing minutely and her shaking beginning to lessen. There was no Azog up this high, no chief bastard, no humiliations.

There was the Princeling, unfortunately, but he was silent behind her. He’d untangled his hands and, were it not for the barest feel of his body behind her, she wouldn’t even have known he was there.

They could only stay up a little while. The air was thin and Syrath needed it more than she did so they could never stay, not that any length of time would be long enough for her.

*Are you ready?* Syrath’s voice came again.

Bilba hesitated. Finally, she turned and checked the Princeling’s straps, ensuring they were properly and tightly secured around his legs, thighs and waist. She saw him give her a questioning look in the dim light but continued to ignore him. She turned to face the front again, reached behind her and grabbed his hands, making sure they were secure in the straps again before doing the same for her own.

Syrath made a sound that she’d decided was the dragon version of a shout of excitement…and then proceeded to fold his wings in against his side and drop like a stone.

Bilba felt her stomach plummet to her feet. Her entire body lifted, the straps digging into her flesh as they became the only thing keeping her in place. Wind roared past them, shattering the quiet, and rippling through her hair and clothing.

Princeling’s voice shouted in her head. *ARE YOU INSANE??????*

Bilba laughed as the air whipped past her. Syrath began to spiral, the stars swirling around them so fast it became a near vortex of light. Vertigo washed through her and she let her body go lax, spinning with the stars.

Syrath snapped his wings out again and they started to slow. He spiraled once more, ending up horizontal to the ground instead of vertical, and then they were speeding over the tops of the trees of Mirkwood, so close their passing rustled the tops.

She turned and was grudgingly impressed to see Princeling had somehow managed to keep his food down.

Maybe he just hadn’t eaten in a while.

That was probably it.

He was breathing hard and his eyes were wide but when he looked up at her, to her surprise, he didn’t look scared.
He looked exhilarated.

He just kept refusing to behave in the way she expected him to.

It was pissing her off.

“That,” he gasped, “that was…AMAZING.” He laughed, grinning and, to her everlasting horror, Bilba felt the sudden urge to grin back.

She jerked around and slumped as she relaxed. It no longer felt as though she were in the process of unraveling, her nerves fraying at the edge.

Syrath shifted suddenly, his muscles tightening under her legs.

I smell orc.

Bilba stiffened. Where?

Syrath’s response was to angle to the left, his speed increasing until they’d shot passed the forest and were over the main road that ran through Mirkwood to Dale and Erebor. Within seconds she heard the distant sound of metal clanging and voices shouting. A woman screamed and she tensed.

It’s a caravan under attack.

Syrath agreed. It’s odd they would attack here.

Bilba agreed. The orcs were between Mirkwood, Dale and Erebor with Lake-town not that far away. It wasn’t safe for them to be this close to civilization.

Not that any help seemed to be coming.

I’ve raised the alarm, Princeling’s voice sounded in her head. They’ll be here soon.

The woman screamed again, sharp and piercing and Bilba felt her blood ignite. Not soon enough.

She began to undo her straps, sliding out and moving until she was crouched low on Syrath’s neck.

“What are you doing?” Princeling asked in shock. “You barely woke up! You don’t even have a weapon!”

Bilba rolled her eyes. Having a weapon was a luxury, not a necessity. As for the rest, at her most exhausted and ill she was still in better health than she’d ever been in Moria and she’d fought nearly every day in the Arena there.

Syrath banked low. The caravan came into view. It was large, probably more than twenty or more. They appeared to be humans, the males currently locked in combat with a large orc pack. She caught sight of several women huddled in the back of one of the wagons.

Syrath opened his maw and let loose a roar that echoed through the valley. The sound startled the entire group, humans and orcs alike, and they all looked up as Syrath whipped past. He banked, turning easily and began a second run. He couldn’t actually attack without the risk of hurting an innocent but that wasn’t why he’d flown over them.

Bilba locked eyes on the orc she’d picked out on the first pass, a large, stocky one standing off to the side as the rest battled. He was the leader, watching the carnage casually, a large sword held loosely in one hand. He glanced up at them as they neared, sneering. She sent one brief glance back at the
Princeling, noting the light tunic, pants and boots he wore.

*Stay here,* she ordered.

Then she jumped.

She landed squarely on the shoulders of the orc leading the attack. Wrapping her legs around his throat, she threw herself backwards, feeling him come with her as he was knocked off balance. She twisted her legs sharply and a loud crack sounded. Bilba felt her hands impact the dirt and pushed off, sending her body into a perfect backflip and landing in a low crouch.

She lunged forward into a roll and when she came up she held a sword in her hand.

*A sword may not be a necessity but it was always nice.* She barely spared a glance at the now dead orc beside her and launched herself into the fray.

It scared her sometimes how comfortable she was with fighting. She understood it, felt at ease with it, was good at it.

The orcs had made her into who she was.

What did that say about what she was?

An orc loomed in front of her and she dropped, swinging the sword in a wide arc that slashed across the front of his legs. He fell and she drove the sword through his chest.

Two more came, from both sides. Balancing her weight on the sword hilt she sent a booted foot into the chest of the closest one, driving him back a few feet. She wrenched the sword out of the chest of the fallen orc, swung it into the throat of the third one and then spun, sending the sword behind her and driving it deep into the chest of the second one.

She wrenched it back out and turned to see Princeling had apparently ignored her order and joined the fight at some point. So much for his whining about not being prepared to fight.

Not only had he gotten himself a sword, he’d managed to get himself two, because he was a showoff, and was dual wielding them. His shirt had been torn open at some point, from collarbone to hip and was nearly falling off him. She frowned, checking him over but couldn't find any evidence of blood or wounds suggesting he'd been sliced by a sword.

She did see that, as she'd suspected, his body appeared completely free of scars or other marks.

She continued to fight, fending off blows with ease. As she did she found her eyes, almost of their own will, being continually drawn back to Princeling and his stupid bare chest. It wasn’t as though it was anything she hadn’t seen before. Orcs barely believed in clothing at all and most slaves had little more than rags. So she didn't understand why she kept getting distracted by him.

She did know it was annoying her, and that being distracted was a very good way to get killed.

As if summoned an orc nearly beheaded her and she cursed, dropping low and driving her sword through the creature’s stomach before ruthlessly twisting the blade and wrenching it back out. It had been years since an orc had almost gotten the drop on her like that.

She shot a glare in the Princeling’s direction and mentally cursed him.

It was his fault, the bastard.
Bilba turned her attention back to the task at hand, joining alongside the humans as they made quick work of the rest of the orc pack.

When the dust settled there were six dead humans and thirty dead orcs.

Bilba was breathing heavily. Her arm and leg ached but she didn’t appear to have reopened anything so she ignored it.

Syrath landed with a thump nearby. *Xalanth is coming. His rider isn’t happy.*

Bilba didn’t care how the Chief Bastard felt. She caught sight of Princeling, standing near the edge of one of the wagons. He was breathing as heavily as her and was splattered with blood but none of it appeared to be his. Her eyes snagged on his bare chest again, watching as it rose and fell with each breath before she caught herself and shook her head in irritation. With extreme annoyance, she opened the link and snapped, *Princeling!*

*Princeling? Really?*

She raised an eyebrow. *I could go back to calling you Bastard.*

He barely even paused. *Princeling is fine.*

*Glad we got that cleared up,* Bilba sent back, her mental voice dripping with sarcasm. *Your shirt is ripped.*

*What?* He looked confused and then glanced down in surprise. *Oh, yeah. I’m not quite as experienced jumping off a dragon as you are. I think I caught it on the edge of one of Syrath’s scales. I’m not hurt though.*

Bilba sputtered, her hands clenching. She hadn't mentioned it out of concern. She'd mentioned it because she wanted him to close the Valar. Cursed. Thing. Up.

One of the humans started to head toward her and she moved, stepping back into the darkness off the road. The human changed direction, toward Princeling instead. Bilba relaxed and went to stand with Syrath.

The women were starting to get down from the wagons. As she watched one reached up and grabbed hold of several small children, handing them down one at a time to sit on the ground.

One of them was a young girl with light brown hair and dark eyes. She studied the carnage with wide eyes, clutching her mother’s skirts with both hands.

Bilba watched her, trying to imagine her in the mines alongside her mother.

*You saved her,* Syrath said, lowering his head over her shoulder.

*One more child who doesn’t have to grow up to be me,* Bilba responded.

Syrath shifted, angling his head so one massive eye studied her. *I like you.*

*You’re an idiot,* Bilba replied dryly.

Xalanth shot past overhead and landed a few dozen feet away with a loud thump, the ground shaking under her feet with the force of it.

Chief Bastard strode up, hands clenching into fists at his side, face set.
Bilba raised an eyebrow. *The coward almost looks intimidating. There’s a surprise.*

**Why do you call him a coward?** Syrath asked.

Bilba didn’t respond. She merely leaned back against Syrath’s side, crossed her arms over her chest and waited.

***

The girl was trying to bait him.

Dwalin could see her, back in the shadows, leaning against her dragon with her eyes fixed on him. She wanted him to come and try to berate her for her actions.

He wasn’t in the mood for playing games with children. He found Fili, speaking to one of the humans, and checked him out visually. The young prince held himself loose and easily, his face animated and clear of pain or distress.

He was uninjured.

He was lucky. After the thousands of hours of training invested in the boy over his lifetime, Dwalin would have been greatly annoyed if the Crown Prince of Erebor gave a poor showing, in front of humans, against so paltry a number of orcs.

Fili had finished speaking to the human and turned now to face him. Dwalin caught the rebellious look in the young dwarf’s eyes. Fili expected to be berated but Dwalin wasn’t an idiot. There was no possible way he could do anything in front of the girl, or the humans for that matter. It would only humiliate the boy and ensure the rebellious streak he’d picked up grew wider. The last thing they needed was Fili acting like Kili. One was bad enough.

Besides, the boy was less than a month from his majority, had been well trained his entire life and would naturally want, and expect, to be able to make his own decisions.

On the other hand, however, the boy was a Crown Prince, heir to an entire Kingdom. He’d survived multiple assassination attempts over the past five years and knew his safety was at risk. He also knew he had an obligation to his people, one that put their needs ahead of his own. He was not free to simply run off and recklessly endanger himself trying to impress a girl.

Dwalin sighed. It was on nights like this he didn’t envy Dis and Vili their sons. It was next to impossible to know what the right course of action was.

His eyes went back to the girl, hidden in the dark. He had no doubt what her expectation was of his reaction.

He really hated playing into expectations.

It was quite possible Fili and the girl weren’t the only ones with rebellious streaks.

“Are you all right?”

Fili nodded, his eyes suspicious. “I’m fine.”
Dwalin gave a curt nod of his own. “And the girl?”

Fili shot a look in her direction. “I think so. I never saw her take a blow.”

“Too bad,” Dwalin said dryly, “She seems to be less trouble when she’s in the Healing Wards.”

Fili gave him a wry look. “Aside from traumatizing everyone who walks by the Wards that is.”

Dwalin grimaced. The boy had a point. Before Fili had locked her down mentally he’d heard the girl’s screams, and felt her fear, as loudly as anyone else.

She blustered and postured a lot but, underneath it all, she was a scared, traumatized kid who hid herself behind a wall of rock so thick it was possible she wouldn’t be able to let someone else in even if she wanted too.

And therein lay the problem.

It wasn’t that she was traumatized or that even that she had some kind of irrational personal hatred for him.

It was that she was in Fili’s life now and the boy was clearly infatuated with her. With the way he’d stayed by her side throughout her illness rumors were already circulating that he believed her to be his One.

Dwarves usually knew their Ones on sight, even if they didn’t sometimes didn’t recognize it right away. The same was true for Dwobbits. Dwalin hadn’t understood Belladonna was his One for months, even though he’d felt drawn to her every time she crossed his path.

He didn’t know if that was what was going on with Fili. It was possible that Fili had longed for his dragon so long, and so intensely, that he was now transplanting that emotion onto Bilba.

It was possible he was just an infatuated kid who’d seen a pretty girl, who happened to be a capable warrior at the same time, and had developed a crush.

It might fade over time.

It might not.

Regardless, it would be a fine line between trying to keep Fili from getting himself killed and not making it look like they were trying to keep him from his dragon or second rider. He knew enough to understand doing so would simply drive Fili closer to the girl in an act of rebellion.

Fortunately, Dwalin thought, he had a bonus in his favor.

He wasn’t Fili’s father.

He indicated Syrath. “Think we can head back now? I imagine your uncle might have a few thoughts about your late night escapades.”

The grin on Fili’s face faltered slightly. “Uncle’s awake?”

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. “You raised the alarm, kid. Everyone’s awake.”

“Oh,” a look of horror was slowly dawning on Fili’s face. “Even my mother?”

“Especially your mother,” Dwalin said. He turned as he said it and began to head back to Xalanth.
He could still feel the girl's eyes boring into his back so he turned just enough to give her a nod of acknowledgement.

It seemed to piss her off. Good, might as well establish now he was someone to be reckoned with.

As he turned back to Xalanth he heard a telltale giggling from behind him and turned back with a frown. A handful of teenage human girls were leaning out of the wagon, blushing and fawning, their eyes fixed on Fili. He remained as oblivious as always but Dwalin fought back a groan. Having a crop of young, and eligible, royalty to deal with was enough to make him consider early retirement. It seemed every girl within a several hundred mile radius had been raised on fairy tales like "Opal and the Mithril Slipper", "The Cursed Prince" or a hundred more like it leaving them all enamored of the very notion of princes and convinced they were destined to marry one, if they could just get his attention. Nori, thankfully, got the pleasure of sorting through the piles and piles of letters from young girls who'd set eyes on one of the princes and decided they were perfect for one another and destined to be together. Dwalin got the task of escorting many of those same girls out of the mountain when they were caught trying to sneak into an event or the royal wing. Hearing them insist he was thwarting fate had gotten old the first dozen or so times he'd heard it. It was particularly bad after parades or days when the boys decided to visit Dale or Lake-town.

It had been even worse once with Thorin and Frerin added to the mix but then they'd lost Frerin in Moria and Thorin had been crowned and adopted a permanently constipated look. The number of starry eyed girls trying to sneak into his quarters had lessened dramatically and, of course, there were none trying to sneak into Frerin's at all.

This was not the case with the princes. Even some of the noble women had a penchant for trying it from time to time, hoping to land themselves even greater status and wealth than they already had.

As he passed the idiot prince, Dwalin absently pulled off the shoulder cape he'd been wearing and threw it at him. Fili caught it and looked at Dwalin questioningly.

Dwalin kept walking, "Cover up your assets, Princess. I got enough problems without you attracting more."

He heard something that sounded like a snort and looked just in time to see the girl turning away to hide what looked suspiciously like a smirk.

So the girl had a sense of humor after all. Dwalin filed it away for future reference. Nice to know she wasn't stone and liquid hatred all the way through after all.

Fili wrapped the cape over his shoulders, doing nothing at all to cover the remnants of his shirt as Dwalin had intended, and remounted Syrath. The girl mounted in front of him and the small dragon lifted off, circling lazily in the air until Xalanth took off. The girls came out of the wagon below, one or two of the braver ones waving and calling out to Fili, while the rest glared daggers at Bilba. She didn't seem to notice though Dwalin figured it was more likely she did notice and simply didn't care.

Dwalin sent word back to Erebor via Xalanth to have a couple of drakes sent out to escort the caravan the rest of the way to Dale. He also made a note to talk to Nori. He wanted to know why there were orcs this close to the mountain and the spymaster was his best resource for finding out the answer.

The girl's humor had apparently passed and she was glaring daggers at him from her seat but he ignored her.
It was the middle of the night for Mahal’s sake, far too late to have to deal with dream addled little girls, rebellious teenagers or hormonal princes.

He was going back to bed.
Chapter 10

Dis glowered at her eldest. She’d been rudely awakened, as had most of the royal wing, when Fili, who should have been asleep in his room had suddenly called out an alert and request for aid.

Not, mind you, because someone was trying to kill him in his bed, where he should have been, but because he was outside, without an escort, without having told anyone…FIGHTING. BLOODY. ORCS.

Dis had tried to be calm. She really had. After hearing her idiot son had returned she’d ordered him to her room and then taken her time getting dressed in an attempt to settle her anger.

It hadn’t helped. The second Fili had walked through the door she’d lit into him, fear giving fire to her anger. She’d lost her grandfather, her father and her brother. In the past five years alone she’d nearly lost Fili to assassination three times; Kili twice. Even Thorin had survived an attempt making for a total of six in five years. The constant fear of one of them not surviving the next attempt, and there was no doubt there would be a next attempt, ate at her. Now, as if it wasn’t bad enough that death sought him, he had to go looking for it?

“You,” she said now, her voice cold and nearly hoarse from yelling, “are a Crown Prince, not a member of the guard! What were you thinking?”

Her son remained expressionless, his eyes fixed on the large couch that dominated her sitting room. He’d long given up trying to defend himself and had gone into the “bear it until it’s over” state that she despised. Dis had always struggled with her eldest, in spite of how responsible and well behaved he generally was. Most of the time she couldn’t read him at all, even with the soul bond. Her youngest, though generally more reckless, was easier. Kili wore his emotions on his sleeve. They reverberated up and down the soul bond they shared, vibrated along the mental link when they spoke. As a small child if the boy so much as stubbed his toe the entire mountain rang with the force of his cries.

Fili was the complete opposite. He had always been quiet, introspective, his emotions and feelings hidden carefully away. He took his role of older brother seriously believing, wrongly, he needed to present an image of absolute strength to his little brother at all times. She could still remember an incident when they had both been children and a training session had gone wrong. She’d barely felt the slightest flicker in their bond but, coming from Fili, it might as well have been a scream. She’d gone running to find Kili in near hysterics while Fili had tried desperately to comfort him, even as his arm hung at an unnatural angle at his side.

Dis sighed at the memory, a rush of love and affection at last replacing some of her anger. She stepped forward and grabbed him, wrapping both arms around him and squeezing tight enough to hurt.

He flinched in surprise but then she felt him respond, his arms going around her easily to return the hug.

She pulled away after a moment and stepped back to sit on the couch, Fili still standing in front of her.

Fili shifted, moving from the rigid at attention stance his father had taught him to a more relaxed one, legs slightly apart and hands clutched behind his back. “I’m sorry,” he said finally, and for about the twentieth time before he’d given up, “It wasn’t my intent to upset you.”
Dis gave him a wry look. “Sometimes I just want to lock you and your brother up and call it a day. At least then I’d know you were safe.”

The edges of Fili’s mouth twitched and he ducked his head. “Probably wouldn’t work. You know how Kili and I get when we’re bored.”

“True,” Dis agreed. “It’d probably end up making things worse.” She leaned back, dropping her head against the back of the couch. Idly she opened her mental link to her husband and swore at him for not being there to help berate their eldest. After marrying, Vili had insisted on remaining a part of the guard which meant he was currently on shift.

His response came a moment later, laughter followed by Sorry, Love, but I’d rather take on a cave troll than be present in a battle of will between you and Fili. I’ll handle Kili the next time he does something idiotic.

Of course he would, Dis thought sourly. Kili couldn’t handle parental disapproval, particularly from his father. One sharp look and he folded like a cheap deck of playing cards. It didn’t stop him from immediately doing something else idiotic of course but it at least made reining him in somewhat easier.

Fili, on the other hand…

The couch dipped and she lifted her head as Fili settled next to her. He leaned forward and rested his clasped hands on his knees. For a split second she saw her husband instead of her son and wondered when in the world he’d gone and grown up. Fili had cleaned up as best he could before responding to her summons but hadn’t changed his clothing. His shirt was torn and she resisted the urge to jerk it aside and check him for injuries like she’d used to do when he was a child.

“It was much easier when you were a child,” she said out loud.

Fili snorted. “Comparatively speaking. I can remember some pretty bad scrapes Kili and I got into.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I wasn’t planning to get into a fight, Amad.” His eyes flickered toward a corner of the room and away again. “Bilba didn’t react well to waking up and Syrath took her on a ride to help her calm down. I asked to go too. When we saw the caravan…” He shrugged, “there was no time to wait for help. They were being slaughtered, women and children. I couldn’t just watch.”

“No,” Dis said dully, “you never could.” She pressed her thumbs into her temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on.

Someone cleared their throat and Dis suppressed a groan. She’d spent so long yelling at her son for endangering himself, deservedly so, and had gotten so caught up in finding out what insanity had overtaken him she’d completely forgotten they weren’t alone in the room.

She sat up. The girl, Bilba; and Dwalin were both leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the room, each with one foot braced against it, wearing nearly identical expressions of extreme boredom. The only difference between the two was that Dwalin had his arms crossed over his chest while the girl idly toyed with a simple gold ring on her finger.

She hadn’t met the girl yet. She’d heard of her certainly and seen her unconscious in the Healing Wards but this was the first time Dis had laid eyes on her awake.

She pushed to her feet and approached. After hearing Fili of all people, and not Kili as she would expect, had been out in the middle of the night fighting orcs with his new ride partner she’d asked to
see them both.

Bilba studied her as Dis approached. Dis had worried that, given the girl’s apparent recklessness; she would be rebellious or ill-mannered and had been prepared to put her in her place at once if she tried to mouth off. There was no sign of defiance in her eyes, however, and her body language was relatively relaxed, not the ridiculous posturing she’d seen in some of the children of the other nobles.

She reached out mentally and requested a link with the girl.

The girl accepted it. *I told him to stay on Syrath.*

Dis raised an eyebrow. *Excuse me?*

Bilba shot an irritated look in Fili’s direction. *I told him to stay on Syrath. He had no armor or weapons. He doesn’t listen.*

She sounded personally offended and Dis surprised herself by laughing, drawing a raised eyebrow from Dwalin but no comment. *I’m well aware of that, believe me.* She studied the young woman, assessing. *You had no armor or weapon either.*

She shrugged. *They needed help.*

Dis frowned. On first impression, the girl was not what she had expected.

*How do you reach the knife?*


Bilba nodded toward Dis’ leg. *The one strapped to your leg. How do you reach it with that heavy dress on?*

Dis’ eyes narrowed. *What makes you think I’m wearing a knife?*

*The way you hold yourself,* came the immediate response. *You keep your leg angled toward me no matter how you move.* She shrugged. *I assumed you must have a weapon of some sort and a knife makes the most sense.*

She seemed utterly nonplussed by the notion that Dis might see her as a threat, even unconsciously.

Dis hesitated and then reached a hand down to the thick, emerald green fabric of her dress. *The dress has hidden pockets,* she explained. *I have a hole in the bottom of one.*

She slid her hand in the pocket and came out a second later holding a wicked looking dagger.

Bilba’s eyes widened and she straightened off the wall, her eyes fixed on the weapon.

Dis slid her hand under the hilt, laid the blade across her palm and held it out toward her.

Dwalin promptly made a strangled sound but Dis rolled her eyes. They couldn’t just tiptoe around the girl forever. If they wanted to find out if she was trustworthy the best way was to start trusting her.

Not only that but she’d be cursed if she was going to allow any kind of breach to open between her and her son. If Bilba was trustworthy then Dis would have a new friend. If she proved not to be then Dis would be close to her and, hopefully, able to protect her son.
Bilba’s eyes widened in awe as she took the weapon almost reverently. The hilt was carved from wrapped bands of silver and gold. The blade itself had been etched with flowing vines and flowers and a flawless, smooth emerald was embedded at the top.

Fili stood up from the couch and strode over to stand behind Dis, watching Bilba study the dagger.

Finally she looked up, her eyes huge. *This is gorgeous*, she said, *and perfectly balanced. It’s a masterpiece.*

Dis smiled. “Thank you,” she said, speaking out loud for Fili’s benefit. “It was a birthday gift from my sons.”

Really? Bilba looked startled. *Where did they get it?*

“They made it,” Dis replied. “They are both master craftsmen.”

The look Bilba gave Fili very nearly had Dis laughing out loud again. If she had to put a name on it she’d probably say the girl was impressed and outraged at the same time, or possibly outraged at being impressed.

Fili gave a tentative smile. He didn’t know exactly what had been said but got the gist from his mother’s words and from the way Bilba was clearly fawning over the weapon. “Kili did the hilt and I created the blade.”

Bilba swallowed, her eyes studying Fili. A second later Dis suddenly saw her son’s eyes widen with pleasure and he ducked his head.

So, the girl could be gracious and offer praise when deserved even when she wasn’t entirely thrilled about the person deserving it. Dis felt something inside begin to settle.

Bilba flipped the dagger easily on her hands and presented the hilt back toward Dis. She in turn replaced the knife in its sheath strapped to her thigh.

*Do you think that trick would work with trousers?*

Dis gave a short nod. “I don’t see why not.”

The girl looked delighted and Dis decided that, on first impressions at least, she quite liked her.

This whole situation might well end up not being near as dire as she’d first feared.

***

Bilba had been quite surprised to learn that the Princeling’s mother was a warrior. The woman dressed as well as any noblewoman, with a heavy dress of velvet trimmed with fur and a matching cloak trimmed in gems. Even so late at night she’d worn jewelry and her hair had been done up in a mithril net studded with diamonds.

She hadn’t expected her to be anything different than the majority of the noblewomen she saw in Gondor.

There was only one exception she’d ever seen and that was Aragorn’s fiancé, Arwen, the daughter
of Lord Elrond of Rivendell.

It would appear she may have found a second exception.

Her mind went to the dagger again. She could appreciate beauty in useful objects. The things Primula always sat on her shelf served no purpose, they just gathered dust and took up space. Daggers, however, served a very real purpose and the fact one could be made both practical and beautiful was impressive. She’d been more than surprised to find out that Princeling and his brother had made it. Princeling could fight, he could create incredible weaponry, his body was unmarked and he was a Crown Prince surrounded by people who loved him.

Rather than prove he was useless he was fast demonstrating there was little he couldn't do.

A bone deep despondency coupled with resignation settled over her at the thought of how poorly she was measuring up to him after having barely met him.

She's really been hoping he'd be a pompous, egocentric, useless noble.

She’d known she couldn’t measure up to his rank or status, that she couldn’t offer Syrath even a fraction of what he could.

So she'd hoped perhaps, just perhaps, he’d prove so useless overall that Syrath would want nothing to do with him.

Instead he was turning out to be almost obscenely flawless.

Bastard.

She couldn’t even fake being better than him because she'd babbled while sick and no doubt already revealed the truth.

A fresh wave of mortification rose up making her wish dearly she could vanish right through the floor. She wished she knew what she'd said but the only way to find out was to ask him and, to be perfectly honest, she’d rather have to deal with Syrath when he was sick than do that.

Syrath was a terrible patient.

Still, no one had asked her to leave yet and Syrath was treating her no differently than he ever had. She’d been unconscious for over a week, plenty of time for Princeling to bond with Syrath and for the two of them to shut her out…but they hadn’t.

Maybe they didn’t plan to.

The thought was an odd one. The orcs had been very clear on what her worth was. Her mother had believed differently but then she had died and all there had been were the orcs…until Primula.

Primula had been like her mother and, for a time, Bilba had actually believed her. But then the orcs had come as they always seemed to come and that had ended. There had been a few since then who seemed to accept her, the elves and Aragorn chief amongst them, but she never stayed long enough for them to tire of her and, always, the belief she’d carried with her from the mines held firm in the back of her mind. In many ways she was little different from the slave girl who’d expected to die, alone and unmourned, in the Arena.

She treated those who rejected her as the norm and those who accepted her as the exceptions.
Except now…now those who accepted her, or at least appeared to, were starting to outnumber those who did not.

What if it was real? What if Sryath really did plan to stay with her, regardless of how poorly she measured up to his other rider? What if Princeling really did intend to let her stay?

What if it was real?

Bilba groaned and dug the heels of her hands into her eyes, allowing her body to sag into the thick rug of the room she’d been assigned. After she’d returned the dagger Dis had ended the meeting. Princeling had escorted her to her door, since Bilba had no idea how to get there from inside the mountain, and had left for his own room. She had no idea, or care, about where the Chief Bastard had gone.

She sighed and dropped her arms to her sides, going limp and staring blankly up at the dark ceiling overhead.

Life was so much simpler when it was just her and Syrath and orcs. Kill the orcs, don’t die, repeat.

She’d tried something else once, just once, in the Shire, and look how that had turned out.

What if it happened again? What if she stayed and the orcs came?

Erebor was vastly different than the Shire, her mind reasoned. The dwarves were warriors inside a kingdom well-fortified against attack. If her presence brought orcs they would be able to defend against them.

But wouldn’t that be her fault? If the orcs followed her like they had in the Shire? Wouldn’t bringing them down on an unsuspecting kingdom make her no better than the person the orcs always insisted she was?

What if she stayed and it all went wrong?

What if she stayed and it went right?

Fear churned in her gut, though of what she wasn’t sure. With an almost angry movement, she pushed to her feet, shooting a glare at the bed as she did. Not only was it too soft but she wasn’t tired anyway. Slaves weren’t exactly allowed to sleep for long periods in the mines and she’d found the routine hard to break once she’d escaped. Because of that she only slept a fraction of the time most people did.

Syrath needed his sleep so she couldn’t call him. Out in the wild, and the Shire before that, she’d usually spend the hours when everyone else slept walking or training. Since the dwarves had taken her weapons, and she’d stupidly lost her sword; that took out training.

The thought of her sword gave her a brief pang. She’d had it since Moria. It was the sword she’d carried from the mines and it had seen her through many adventures and dangers since then.

And she’d dropped it.

She shook her head in disgust and then again as she tried to dislodge the whirlpool of thoughts and fears swirling about her head. She would drive herself insane if she stayed in her room trying to think out every single possible outcome and road she could take and all the possible ramifications. Instead she strode to the door and pulled it open to reveal the quiet hall outside. As she stepped out her eyes took in the narrow stone walls and low ceiling. The sight made her gut churn and a light shiver
started up on her arms. Maybe she could find out how to get out of the mountain and explore outside.

She wandered down the halls, idly running her hands along the stonework. Unlike Moria, it was clean here, free of debris, orc filth and blood. There was no screaming from orcs or otherwise and the air wasn’t heavy and foul.

Hallway after hallway she walked, until she was well and truly lost. Every so often she’d pass others who were awake, most of them guards but a handful who, like her, simply weren’t sleeping for whatever reason. Most of them nodded to her and she acknowledged them with a simple nod in return.

She assumed that, like Moria, the exit was probably much further down, away from where the royal quarters were located, so she followed the halls and corridors that had a downward slope. She eventually ran into a set of ornately carved doors guarded by two imposing dwarves in full armor. They allowed her to pass without question and she continued her trek.

The level she entered after that was simpler though no less opulent by any standard. She soon found another set of doors and, again, was allowed through.

It continued, each level getting more and more simple in design, the doors leading to dwellings becoming closer and closer as the homes within grew smaller.

Finally she went through a set of doors and paused as she found an entirely different scene laid out below her. The mountain opened into a massive area. Many levels over her head she could see bridges leading into the center where a large circle of stone hung suspended. Ringing it on all sides were buildings, most of which she’d probably walked behind on her way down.

The area where she stood was the beginning of a path that trailed lazily down to what looked like a large marketplace, set up with booths of varying shapes and sizes. Off to one side she could see a great chasm with stairs leading into it, no doubt going to the mines under the mountain, while the other side of the market led to massive gates. There was a gap between the top of the gate and the rest of the mountain and, through it; she could see the dark sky beyond. Guards were stationed on the walkway up there, marching back and forth as they kept watch.

She started down the path, meandering slowly until she reached the silent market. Most of the stalls were open but she could see locked trunks and boxes behind them that held the goods they sold during the day. With the guards so close it was probably one of the safest places to be.

As she passed by one booth the hair on the back of her neck prickled and she stopped, one hand resting lightly on the wooden counter.

It was at times like these she really missed the ability to speak.

“Sorry,” a voice said. “It wasn’t my intent to startle you.”

No, Bilba thought, it was his intent to keep following her without her knowing. She reached out to touch his mind but felt nothing in return. He wasn’t a rider so she couldn’t form a mental link with him.

She turned as she heard him approach.

The dwarf coming from around the corner of a stall was about average height and weight and wore simple, non-descript brown clothing. As he drew closer she saw he was older than her, probably the same age as the Chief Bastard. He wore his hair in an odd star shaped pattern and his beard was braided elaborately.
As he drew to stop in front of her, he swept into an exaggerated bow. “Nori, my Lady, at your service.” He straightened. “And you must be Orcrist, or Bilba to those who know you well.”

Which he did not, Bilba thought sourly. She leaned against the stall and crossed her arms over her torso, leveling a disbelieving look on him. She wasn’t an idiot. He didn’t happen to know who she was and accidentally ran into her in the middle of the night in the marketplace and she wasn’t buying his carefree attitude.

He had straightened and looked around the market. “I have to say this place is much more interesting during the day, when it’s open.”

Bilba shrugged. Personally, it was probably better as it was. She wasn’t a fan of crowds. They tended to unnerve her so she generally avoided them at all costs.

He was studying her, a calculating look in his eyes. “Not buying it in the slightest are you?”

Bilba gave a shake of her head and he grinned.

“Allright.” He bowed again. “In that case, allow me to properly introduce myself. Nori, official Spymaster to the King.”

Bilba wasn’t surprised to find she was being watched. She would watch her too. She was always watched at Gondor as well, though she wasn’t entirely sure Aragorn knew of it. A number of the nobles in Gondor felt they were far more important than they were and took it upon themselves to send their own people to watch her as though it was their personal duty to see to it that she wasn’t doing anything wrong while there. Though, more likely, they hoped she would do something wrong so they could have her accused and thrown out from Gondor entirely.

It was the second time she’d heard his name and, as it permeated, a memory sparked and she frowned at him. He raised an eyebrow inquisitively. She hesitated and then raised her hands, struggling to remember the Iglishmek Bofur and the rider before him had so painstakingly tried to teach her. She was ashamed to find that, after having not used it in five years; she’d forgotten almost all of it.

Met…dwarf…named…

She frowned, struggling to remember the letters she’d learned. She’d barely managed to remember the finger placement for the letter “D” and “O” when Nori broke in with, “Dori?”

Bilba nodded and the other dwarf grinned. “My brother. You must have met him near Rivendell I take it?”

She nodded again and something in his face relaxed. “I thank you for the news. I hadn’t heard from them in quite some time. My little brother was with him. Did you happen to see him?”

Bilba remembered the young dwarf who’d wanted her signature. She didn’t remember if she’d been told his name but seemed to recall Dori identifying him as a brother.

She gave the sign for yes and Nori grinned broadly. “He must have been thrilled to meet you. He’s a pretty big fan. He’ll be excited when he returns to find you here.”

Bilba frowned. Why? He’d already gotten her signature. What else could he want?

“Would you be at all interested in learning more Ighlishmek?” Nori asked suddenly. “It must be annoying to only be able to speak to other riders not to mention tiring having to constantly open and
close links. I usually skirt the issue by keeping a rider with me at all times who can receive and send out reports for me but you probably don’t have the same luxury, unless of course you use the Crown Prince for the job.” He gave an odd smile she couldn’t interpret. “I imagine he’d probably be quite happy to fulfill the task if requested.”

Bilba shrugged. It was annoying and frustrating sometimes when trying to speak to more than one person, when she’d either end up repeating the exact same thing over multiple links or be forced to rely on someone else to relay the information, but it was what it was. There was little she could do about it.

She most certainly wouldn’t be using the Princeling for anything if she could help it.

Nori indicated for her to follow him. “Come on, then. I’ll show you the library.”

Bilba brightened at that news. Erebor had a library? There had been one at Bag End and often, when she wasn’t at the garrison or on an escort mission; she could be found curled up in there with a book. She’d grown much more confident in her reading, and writing, skills over that year as well as discovering a near voracious appetite for the written word. A few times she’d even gone so far as to pack a book with her on her escort missions out from the Shire. Aeran had used to tease her about it in fact on some of the trips they’d gone on together.

He started off and she hurried after him, keeping pace easily in spite of the soreness and stiffness still evident in her leg.

He led her back up several levels and then through a small door she hadn’t paid much attention to when she’d first passed it. It opened onto a long, narrow hall that had her tensing as old memories crowded in. She gritted her teeth and clenched her hands into fists, digging the nails into her palms to ground herself.

They reached a massive set of carved doors; the dwarves seemed to have an obsession with them, that Nori calmly threw open before stepping back and ushering her forward.

Bilba stepped through, and stopped dead in awe.

The library was…it was…honestly she couldn’t think of a word that would do it justice.

The cavern it was in stretched as far back as the eye could see and so high it vanished into shadow overhead.

Stone bookcases in neat rows marched across the entire room, there must have been hundreds upon hundreds of them, all filled to bursting with books. More shelves had been carved into the walls and were equally filled.

Large fireplaces had been built at various locations and plush looking tables and chairs had been arranged around them creating cozy spots to read or work. All of them were lit as, even that late, there were a handful of people browsing the shelves or curled up in chairs reading.

Nori’s chuckle snapped her attention back and she tried to blank out her expression, though she imagined it was already far too late to hide it from the dwarf.

“Wait here just a second.” he said and hurried off, vanishing into the stacks of books. He was back only a few moments later, a heavy book in his hand. He gave it to her, the weight of it unexpected and forcing her to adjust quickly to avoid dropping it. The book was bound in leather, the pages a thick vellum. It must have been expensive to produce, for that matter the books in the room together must represent an absolute fortune in production cost.
The cover of the book was stamped with hand signals, ones that looked familiar in fact.

“This is a good one to start,” Nori explained, “and I can help you with more in the future if you want.”

Bilba looked at him, suddenly shy, and gave a short nod. She knew she should give it back; it was far too nice, what if she damaged it?

She should give it back but, instead, found herself wrapping both arms around it and clutching it too her chest. She would be careful, she promised herself, really careful.

Nori looked amused. “Would you like to read it here or in your room? I can escort you back if you like. You probably won’t be able to get back onto the royal wing otherwise. We’ll need to get you a pass. You’ve been here so short a time I doubt all the guards know you and it’ll get you back through in case of a shift change while you’re gone.”

Bilba was barely paying attention, her eyes turned toward an empty chair near a fireplace.

Nori followed her gaze. “I guess that answers that question.” He gave her a low bow. “I’ll take my leave then so you can get to your reading. Feel free to look at any book you wish. If you decide you want to go back to your room you can always wake up the Prince and have him show you up. I’m sure he won’t mind.”

Bilba bowed back politely, trying to push away the instinctive gut churning feeling at the thought of owing him for his kindness. Primula had worked hard to teach her that sometimes people were kind with no expectations in return and she shouldn’t always look for an ulterior motive. Primula had been big on trying to convince Bilba it was alright to trust, sometimes. She’d trusted Primula because the woman reminded her so much of her own mother. Trusting others, however, hadn't come nearly as easily.

She tried though. She really did try.

Nori left and Bilba went to sit in the chair, finding it was as plush and comfortable as it appeared to be. Settling the book on her lap she opened it to the first page and started to study the images. She recognized many of them and, the more she read, the more of what Bofur had taught her came back.

She wasn’t aware of the passage of time, easily losing herself in the book, to the point where she flinched in surprise at the feel of the Princeling trying to speak to her through her link.

Bilba? Are you there?

She looked up, her mind sluggish as she dragged it back to reality. Around her the room was more populated than it had been before, several people in loose, beige colored robes moving about the stacks and sitting at small desks.

What time was it?

She responded. What do you want?

Where are you?

In the library, Bilba replied.

Hold on, Princeling replied. I’ll come to you. They want you to go talk to Syrath.
Syrath? Bilba tried to call him but all she got back was Syrath’s version of an aggrieved sigh. She bit back a grin as it washed over her. He didn’t like it when he got upset and she laughed at him over it.

Princeling appeared in the doorway a short time later and headed toward her. Several of the dwarves started bowing and scraping toward him but he didn’t seem to notice.

Bilba didn’t know if she was expected to bow to him but, since he hadn’t demanded it, decided to just continue not doing it.

Princeling’s face was pinched as he reached her. *They’re worried Syrath might be sick. He won’t talk to them though, or me, so they’re hoping he might respond to you.*

*He’s not sick,* Bilba replied dryly. *And he’s probably not speaking to you for fear you’ll just laugh at him. He assumes I know better.* She carefully closed the book and placed it on the table. Princeling held out a hand to help her up and she frowned at him.

*Is that like the hand shaking thing?*

He blinked in confusion. “The what?”

*Hand shaking thing,* she repeated, *where everyone always wants to shake your hand for some reason when you meet. You keep wanting to help me up, which makes about as much sense. My legs aren’t broken.*

To prove the point she stood, forcing back a wince as her injured leg revealed it had betrayed her by stiffening up while she sat.

If Princeling noticed he pretended not to. “Your legs aren’t broken but you are hurt,” he replied, “I was just being polite.”

Bilba glowered at him, challenging him to suggest she couldn’t stand up again. He wisely chose the better course and raised his hands in surrender.

“Allright, alright, I concede.” Stepping back, he proceeded to sweep into an elaborate bow. “I beg your pardon for assuming you might not be able to get up easily on a burned leg.” He straightened again, eyes shining with amusement. “I promise not to do it again.”

Bilba could feel the corners of her lips twitching and struggled to keep them in line.

*You’re acting like Syrath.*

He looked positively delighted. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She’d meant it as one but that didn’t mean she had to admit it. The last thing she needed was Princeling with a giant ego.

They headed out together, through twists and turns that very quickly got her lost once again.

*It’s to show you come in peace.*

Bilba dragged her eyes from studying the wall carvings as they walked and frowned at Princeling.

*What?*

*Handshakes,* he said, *it’s supposed to show you come in peace. Most people are right handed. You both shake with the right hand, showing you aren’t carrying a weapon.*
What if you’re left handed? Bilba asked. Or you can fight with both hands? Or you’re just flat lying?

He looked stumped for a minute before he shrugged. *I never said it was a good custom.*

They rounded a corner and entered a colossal cavern. Notches had been cut deep into the rock at various intervals and several tunnels had daylight at the end of them, suggesting they were very close to the outer wall of the mountain.

There were a number of drakes lounging about in the area, some she’d seen before and others she hadn’t.

Syrath was sprawled over a ledge some yards away, blocking the path for any dwarves who wanted to get further into the lair. He looked like he’d just collapsed in place, his wings spread out and his tail hanging over the edge of the ledge. Xalanth was standing over him, rumbling deep in his throat, but Syrath had his head turned away, ignoring him.

Bilba strode toward them. She had no issue with the black and gold dragon, it wasn’t his fault his rider was a bastard.

*Do you think he’s alright?* Princeling’s voice sounded in her head, taking on a worried tone now that he was actually seeing Syrath. *Maybe he was hurt last night and we didn’t see it?*

*He’s fine.* Bilba replied. *He’s pouting.*

*He’s what??*

Bilba knelt down in front of Syrath. He gave her a sidelong look, huffed and looked away again.

*Really?* Bilba asked. *You’re worrying your father.*

And the Princeling but, whatever. She still didn’t like him, at all, really…even if he did make amazing weaponry…and fought well…and had a sense of humor like Syrath did…and somehow distracted her when he didn’t have his shirt entirely on.

Seriously, they didn’t need him and she definitely did not like him.

At all.

Bastard.

Syrath heaved a long suffering sigh. *I am being mistreated.*

*Are you now?* Bilba replied, amused. *In what way?*

He glared at her, refusing to be baited. *You’re not taking me seriously. I’m not going to talk to you if you aren’t going to take me seriously.*

With that he pushed to his feet and picked her up in one clawed hand, before turning and grabbing Princeling in the other. He looked startled but didn’t react. Syrath then whirled and stomped toward one of the tunnels leading outside, leaving a surprised Xalanth following behind. Holding her in one hand and Princeling in the other meant he had to do it quite awkwardly but he was nothing if not committed.

They exited the mountain and she threw a hand up for a moment to block out the early morning sun


as it stung her eyes. When her vision had adjusted she reopened them, just as he set her and Princeling down carefully.

They’d come out on the back of the mountain, overlooking a valley that stretched away below them until it reached the borders of Mirkwood in the far off distance.

There were two adult drakes lightly dozing in the sun. One was the gold colored drake she remembered the other Princeling riding. The second was an onyx drake she hadn’t seen before.

In addition to them there were seven other dragons in the valley. One or two were the same size as Syrath while the rest were smaller. All of them were…frolicking, running to and fro, chasing one another and generally having a good time.

What’s wrong? Bilba asked in confusion.

Syrath gave her a disgusted look. They want me to go join them.

Bilba shrugged. So why don’t you?

He growled in annoyance. Do I look like a child? When Bilba simply raised an eyebrow he huffed in annoyance. Don’t answer that.

Princeling was taking in the scene beside her. “What’s wrong?”

He wants to play but doesn’t want to admit it. Bilba reached out to lay a hand on Syrath’s side, patting him lightly.

Ah, Fil - Princeling’s voice floated through her head, the perils of being old enough to want to be treated like an adult but young enough to still want to play. He gave Syrath a considering look. Though, with him, it’s more like being young enough he should want to play but he’s behaved like an adult so long it’s hard to find his footing.

There was no censure in his tone, nothing directed at her, just observation. Bilba frowned, watching the younger dragons. She didn’t understand the concept, but Syrath had always seemed to be happy when running around with Primrose.

The thought of the small dragon gave her pause. She hadn’t kept in touch with the Shire after leaving, feeling the farther away she stayed the safer they were. She wondered, though, what had become of Syrath’s little friend, or of Primula or Bofur or any of the others she’d come to care about. Did they remember her well or had they since come to curse the day she’d first set foot in Hobbiton?

She’d left them before they could leave her. She’d seen the censure in the eyes of some of the hobbits and had assumed if she kept in contact she would eventually see it in Primula and Bofur’s eyes. She limited her visits to Rivendell and Gondor for the same reason.

Primula had wanted her to trust and she thought she’d been trying.

What if she hadn't though? What if the way the things the orcs had told her she was, things her mother had insisted were all lies, had still been controlling her even years after she’d left Moria?

What if...

She shoved Syrath, not that it actually moved him. Go play.

He’d been watching the other dragons, clear longing in his eyes, but now he turned to glare at her
I don’t care. Bilba shot back. *Go do it. You can tell them I made you.*

That thought had clearly not occurred to him. He gave her a considering look then a sidelong glance at Princeling. He, in turn, got that far off look riders always got when speaking to dragons. He snorted after a second, breaking into a grin that did inexplicable things to her stomach, that or she had food poisoning, and gave her an amused look.

Syrath leapt off the ledge, his wings snapping open to allow him to glide over to where the group was.

“Syrath is quite put out by your insistence he play with the other dragons,” Princeling said mildly; “I told him he could pretend they were fighting orcs. It seemed to make him happier.”

*You may regret suggesting that to him,* Bilba said.

In the field Syrath had already taken charge and was lining up the other dragons in regimented rows, much to the consternation of the two adults.

Princeling shook his head and smiled. “Come on, the others are waiting for us at breakfast.”

Others? Breakfast?

He started off and, having nothing else to do, she followed him, back up the tunnel into the lairs and through various halls and narrow corridors.

Eventually they reached a set of open doors. As they walked in she saw a large room with a long, wide stone carved table dominating it. Tapestries and sculptures decorated the walls and corners, nearly hiding the guards stationed throughout the room.

The dwarf king was already there, as was Dis, the other prince, and a blonde dwarf who looked quite a bit like Princeling. To her surprise, Chief Bastard was also there as well as the human she’d met in the goblin tunnels.

He stood up as she entered and approached her. “Ah, my dear Bilba, I haven’t had a chance to properly thank you for your aid.” At her confused look, he chuckled. “I am afraid I have not had the pleasure of personally meeting you before but tales of you and your deeds have gone far and wide.”

Bilba rolled her eyes and made a mental note to tell the elves to knock it off with the storytelling.

“I am Gandalf the Gray,” the human continued with a slight bow of his head, “at your service.”

Bilba noticed he was carrying a staff and raised her hands to awkwardly sign, *Wizard? Like Saruman?*

“Ah,” Gandalf said, a knowing look in his eyes. “I see you have met one of my order before. I hope I can make a better impression than he probably did.”

It was certainly possible. The wizard in the tower was something of a pompous ass. She generally went out of her way to avoid going anywhere near his dwelling.

Bilba nodded awkwardly to the wizard and started to move past him. She never knew how to respond to the people who insisted on thanking her, it was why she always left as soon as possible after aiding them.
Most of the rest of the people in the room were already seated. The dark haired prince was giving her a vaguely hostile look that immediately made her relax.

She had always valued honesty.

_You can sit anywhere you want_, Princeling’s voice sounded in her head.

Bilba gave a short nod and proceeded to sit next to the dark haired Prince. He gave her a startled look and then frowned at Princeling, who looked equally confused.

Bilba ignored them both. The seat put her across from Dis and also as far from Chief Bastard as possible. Princeling sat on her other side, which was acceptable, she supposed.

Why couldn’t he just be accommodating and behave like an ass so she could feel better about disliking him? If he kept behaving like this she might end up actually thinking he was _nice_.

She was starting to think he was.

She’d assumed he wanted to take Syrath from her and, after that, had assumed he was no better than the worst examples of nobility she’d met in Gondor. Nobles who were masks and hid behind masks and veneers of civility.

But she knew that untrue. There were members of the nobility, Aragorn chief amongst them but also Arwen and Elrond.

And what of the rider? The dwarf king had claimed that dwarf as his brother meaning the one responsible for her freedom had been a noble himself, prince no less, and uncle to the Princeling.

Princeling. The word had already lost the heat she’d given it when first meeting him, when she’d been convinced he was the embodiment of all her worst fears.

She’d prejudiced herself against him, to the point all she’d seen was who she’d already decided he was.

But he hadn’t rejected her. He’d come after her when she’d run off, promised not to take Syrath. He’d stayed with her when she was sick and even protected her in spite of barely knowing her and her not exactly treating him with kindness.

Her mother would not have been happy with her. She had been like Primula.

She’d wanted Bilba to trust.

Bilba suppressed a sigh. Why couldn’t things just be simple?

It was simple being Orcrist.

Being Bilba was anything but.

At the opposite end of the room a smaller set of doors opened and servers began to walk in, carting enormous platters and bowls, piled high with food. As they began to lay them out on the table, conversation started to flow amongst those seated there.

Bilba had no idea what most of the stuff that had been put down was or if she was allowed to eat any of it. She ended up staring at her plate for about ten seconds or so before Princeling, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, began recommending things to her. He even offered to get servings for her, saying she was probably still recovering and not up to lifting heavy bowls or ladles.
She couldn’t help herself. As he grabbed a pot of stew and filled a bowl for her she shot him a glare and thought. *Stop being so nice!*

He frowned. *Why?*

*Because I like disliking you.* She shot back. It was easier to dislike him.

She could never be rejected, or hurt, if she rejected him first.

But, even as she thought it, her mother and Primula's faces flashed through her mind. She didn't have to ask what they would want her to do.

She already knew.

Fil – *Princeling* gave her a decidedly amused look and didn’t answer, simply sliding a now loaded bowl of food in front of her. Bilba told him a stiff thank you and got a half smile in return that caused her stomach to give an odd jump before he was distracted by the other blond dwarf, who apparently was his father, and turned his attention away.

Bilba scowled again, on principle’s sake, and started eating. It had always been a little difficult to eat without her tongue, forcing her to take smaller bites and angle her head back further to get the food toward her throat. She ate tensely for a few moments, waiting for the disparaging looks she’d often received in Gondor before she started insisting on eating in her room or, better yet, not visiting at all, but no seemed to even notice.

Relaxing minutely, Bilba began to study the people at the table. The family that Princeling belonged to was quite animated when they talked. At the head of the table the king was speaking to Gandalf, their heads bowed close.

As they did some of the king’s hair fell over his face, casting him in partial shadow and, with a start, she suddenly realized why he’d felt familiar before.

She must have been staring because the dark head suddenly lifted and she had piercing blue eyes locked on her.

“Is there a problem?”

He had a deep, vibrating baritone and she tensed immediately at the authority in it. Her hands gripped the edge of the table, all hand signs suddenly gone entirely from her mind.

“She can’t speak, Thorin,” Dis broke in suddenly, “or had you forgotten?”

The dwarf king, Thorin scowled at his sister, or maybe it was his natural look. “I am aware.”

He looked back to Bilba and suddenly she felt the light brush against her mind that signified someone requesting a mental link.

A mental link.

The king of dwarves wanted a mental link.

With *her*.

She accepted hesitantly and heard his voice immediately vibrating through her head. *Was there something you wished to speak to me about?*
I’m sorry, Bilba replied. I had thought you were familiar when I saw you earlier and finally realized where I’d seen you before. It was at Moria, when you fought Azog.

His eyes widened, startled. “You witnessed the battle?”

Suddenly she had the eyes of the entire table on her and she shrank slightly, trying to make herself smaller. It was difficult, even years later, to break the habits of Moria where gaining attention could, and had, landed her in the Arena.

I did, she said. Were you the one who chopped off Azog’s arm? It was greatly hoped among the slaves that he would die from the wound.

He grimaced. “I was and I can assure you my hope was the same. It’s an oversight I plan to fix the next time we meet.” He hesitated for a moment in the way someone might before asking a question they aren’t sure they want the answer to. “I wondered if you might be willing to tell me of my brother and Quenth, our dragon. How they were captured and how…” He swallowed, one hand curling into a fist. “I would ask if you would tell me of my brother.”

Bilba did; starting from the moment the dragon had been dragged in with her rider, Frerin she knew now, screaming alongside her. The others couldn’t hear what she was saying but stayed silent as though they could, their eyes fixed on Thorin’s face, watching the play of emotions as Bilba recounted the story - pain at the description of Quenth and Frerin’s suffering, pride at their defiance, anger at what Azog had done to them, grief at the last moments of his dragon’s life.

When she had finished he was silent, his head down.

My brother, she heard finally, he was alive when you last saw him?

He was, Bilba affirmed. If I had been able to get the key to his chains I would have saved him, even if it meant sending him out with Syrath and staying behind myself.

It was the truth. It had been the truth then and remained it still. Frerin had been kind to her, the first kindness she’d received since her mother had died. He’d given her a reason to look forward to getting up every day. He’d needed her like no one ever had, had reminded her she was a person and not just a tool to be used and discarded when broken.

And then he’d given her Syrath.

In return, in spite of how short a time she’d known him, he possessed her loyalty in a way that no one ever would. She would have died for him and been glad for it.

She realized Thorin was staring at her, his gaze intense.

I believe you. He sighed, his eyes flickering to Dis for a moment. Do you think it’s possible he still lives?

No, Bilba responded honestly. Azog only wanted him for the dragon. Without her there was no further use for him. Not only that but Azog would have been enraged at the loss of the dragon and the baby.

So Azog killed him?

If he was lucky.

And if not?
He was sent to the Arena.

Thorin frowned. You survived the Arena. He said it as a statement, leaving Bilba to wonder how he was so sure she’d been an Arena fighter.

She shrugged. I was an exception.

He could have been as well.

Anything is possible, Bilba agreed, but not probable. Azog would not have wanted him to live.

Thorin’s face tightened but Bilba didn’t back down. It did no good to give him false hope. She could imagine the rage Azog would have had. He’d had his arm cut off, lost his prize fighting slave, a dragon and the dragon’s young. He would have taken it out on the nearest target and that would have been Frerin. She could not imagine any scenario in which he survived. It grieved her as much as the losses she’d suffered in the Shire but it didn’t change the truth.

She saw Thorin’s eyes go back to Dis again and guessed he was passing on the information. Bilba sighed and focused back on her plate again.

A maudlin hush settled over the table, broken only by the clinking of utensils on silver etched plates.

Beside her, Fil -- Princeling cleared his throat and addressed Gandalf. “Where do you plan to head after you leave the mountain?”

“Rohan,” the wizard replied. “Hobbits once lived in that area. It will be a somewhat safer search for the lost key I believe.”

“The lost key?” Kili said in surprise. “What’s that?”

Bilba was wondering that herself but was glad the younger prince had said something first.

Across the table, Dis rolled her eyes in exasperation. “I can see you paid close attention in your history lessons.”

Kili gave an unapologetic grin. “History never was my favorite subject. I always preferred weapons training.”

At the end of the table, Dwalin snorted. “If that’s the case I’d have thought you’d have been better at it.”

Kili looked suitably outraged, while Princeling starting laughing in the middle of eating and nearly choked.

Gandalf merely waited them both out, amused, before continuing. “I assume you at least know the story of how the races and their dragons were created?”

Bilba perked up at that. She knew that one. Her mother had told it to her. Eru had created the elves and humans and their dragons while two of the Valar, Mahal and Yavanna, had created the dwarves and hobbits and their dragons respectively. Melkor, another child of Eru, had grown jealous and requested the right to create his own children and dragons. He’d been given permission but, unwilling to do the work, had instead stolen hobbits, men and dwarves and their dragons and corrupted them, twisting them into something tortured and hideous.

These he had presented as his children; orcs, and their dragons. Eru, according to her mother, had
been so horrified by his child’s actions he had banished Melkor to Middle Earth, hoping as he did that the experience would lead to Melkor developing compassion for the races that lived there.

Her mother had never told her much about what had reportedly happened after that. Bilba couldn’t remember why.

“I know enough,” Kili groused. “Melkor was banished to Middle Earth where he grew embittered and angry at the Valar and Eru. One day he came across a clutch of orphaned firedrakes in the wild. He took them and used them to form an entirely new creature.”

“Sauron,” Fili took over, his voice taking on a monotone that suggested he was reciting something. “The greatest and deadliest drake the world has ever known. It’s said his fire burned stronger than the hottest forges of Moria.”

Kili’s eyes lit up as recognition flooded him. “Oh, I remember now! His teeth and talons were more unbreakable than mithril and his roar was so loud it vibrated the very earth when he unleashed it.”

Fili grinned, clearly getting into it now. “He was so large that when he flew he blotted out the sun and when he landed on a mountain he left it a pile of rubble when he left.”

*That seems a little ridiculous,* Bilba broke in.

Fili shrugged. *It’s a legend; they get a little blown out of proportion as time passes. Makes for interesting bedtime stories though.*

*Bedtime stories?* Bilba asked. *Why would you have stories told to you only at bed?*

Fili had no chance to respond to that as Gandalf broke in from across the table, easily cutting off Kili’s current extolling of the size of Sauron’s urine stream, much to the exasperation of his parents.

“Yes,” he said dryly, “I’m happy to hear you’ve regained your memories, Your Highness. As you no doubt also recall the destruction Sauron caused was so great that the Valar themselves were forced to intervene, lest all of Middle Earth be laid waste.”

“The War of Wrath,” Thorin broke in. “A war so devastating it almost destroyed the very land they fought to save.”

Gandalf agreed, his face grim. “When Sauron was finally cast down he destroyed much of the Iron Mountains, splitting the Red and Blue mountain ranges from one another forever.”

Thorin grimaced. “It took centuries for the dwarves to recover. Some would argue we never did.”

“After Sauron’s defeat,” Gandalf continued on, “Melkor, now called Morgoth, the dark enemy; was captured but, as he was a Valar, could not be killed. As the Valar exist in spirit form it was decided he would be imprisoned in the corpse of his most corrupted creation and then sealed away for eternity in a location now lost to us.”

Bilba raised an eyebrow. *You’d think that’d be a place they would want to remember.*

*You would think,* Fili, no wait, Princeling, Princeling agreed. *But the world was in turmoil after Morgoth fell. Kingdoms were being overthrown all over the place. It was hundreds of years before things settled down and, by that time, much history had been lost or outright destroyed. We’re lucky to have what we still do.*

“Four keys were created to his cage.” Gandalf was clearly getting into his role of storyteller, leaning
forward in his chair, his plate utterly forgotten. “Each with a different shape, presented to each of the four races of Arda, Men, Elves, Dwarves and Hobbits.”

“If you believe that,” Thorin cut in. “Many say only three were created as the Hobbits were considered unable to protect a key and that possessing one would merely serve to make them a target of orcs seeking to release their master.”

Where are the keys now? Bilba asked Fil – Prince – oh, sod it, she might as well start thinking of the him by his name. It wasn’t as though she had to tell him she now thought of him as Fili instead of Princeling.

She had a reputation to maintain after all.

The dwarven one is here in Erebor, Fili explained. We’re the only true dwarven kingdom left so it has to be here. The human one is either in Gondor or Rohan and the elven one is either in Mirkwood or Rivendell. The Hobbit one, if it existed, has been lost for centuries. The story, again if true, is that the caretaker went insane, becoming increasingly paranoid and convinced enemies were surrounding him. He eventually disappeared, fleeing into the Wild with the key never to be seen again.

And they aren’t actually keys?

They serve the function of a key, somehow, Fili explained, but, no, they don’t look like keys. It’s another way of keeping them safe. No one but their keeper knows what they look like or where they are and all of them are needed.

And then you’d have to find out where this Sauron is.

Exactly. The odds of someone being able to find the cage, and get all four keys is absurd.

What would they even do if they did find them?

Fili crossed his arms across his chest, watching Gandalf as he answered questions Kili was currently throwing at him. Some legends suggest the keys can be used to control Sauron, or Morgoth I guess trapped in Sauron’s corpse, and use him to take over the world. Others suggest the keys do no such thing and Morgoth will simply slaughter you as an expression of his gratitude. I personally lean toward the latter.

Bilba thought that made the most sense as well. It always served better to err on the side of caution, particularly when dealing with something that could kill you with extreme prejudice.

“I still question why you suddenly care about the lost key now,” Thorin said, “to the extent you would follow rumors of it into the midst of the goblins.”

“As I said, Your Majesty,” Gandalf said, “It is merely suspicion, rumor as you say.”

“That someone is searching for them?” Thorin asked. “Someone is always searching for them. Fools and the insane, chasing after legend. No one has ever gotten control of even one, and no one ever will.”

Gandalf inclined his head respectfully. “Then we’ll simply leave it at the whim of an old man who doesn’t like leaving objects of power unprotected and finally has found some time to deal with it.”

Thorin didn’t look entirely convinced but shrugged. “As you wish, wizard. We will see to it that you are properly outfitted before you leave.”
After breakfast, Fili walked out alongside her. He planned to go see the wizard off but Bilba had expressed interest in rejoining Syrath and he’d offered to escort her. Bilba walked alongside him in silence. Now that she no longer had the wizard to distract her, her thoughts had returned to their previous course.

Why did interacting with, and trusting, others have to be so cursed hard?

Finally she stopped dead in the center of the hall. Fili continued a few feet before noticing. He turned to face her. “What’s wrong?”

**How much did you hear?**

**How much did I hear when?** He asked in confusion.

Bilba took a deep breath, her gut churning. *When I was unconscious and delirious. How much did you hear? There was a shield around me when I woke up. That was you.*

He nodded. *It was. Your shields were weak. I can help you learn to strengthen them so that sort of thing won’t happen again but, at the time, of course there was no way to do that. I did what I could to protect your privacy. His jaw tightened. That being said, I didn’t realize it was happening at first and, by the time I did, some damage had already been done. The halls outside the Healing Wards cleared almost immediately but many had no idea what was going on and inadvertently heard some of what you were broadcasting.*

Bilba nodded, swallowing hard. She’d already guessed that. What’s done was done. She couldn’t do anything about it now and, as embarrassing as it was, there was no blame to be assigned. She’d simply have to deal with it.

Fili had indeed done her a great service, however. He’d basically placed the mental equivalent of a bubble around her mind. Anything that leaked out would have impacted that bubble, bouncing off his shields and vibrating along them.

*I didn’t hear as much as you may think,* Fili said suddenly. *If I had to describe it I would say it was as if you were at the bottom of a deep well, or the end of a very long hall. All I could hear were faint, reverberating echoes, snatches of feelings and words. His face grew serious, his eyes intense. You seemed to relive the same moment over and over, the loss of someone important to you. That was all.*

She could well imagine what specific moment she’d been reliving.

*And, given what you heard, what do you think of me?* she asked, trying desperately to calm her nerves which were currently trying to vibrate right out of her skin.

She tensed, waiting for the disgust or, even worse, the pity.

She hated pity.
Fili never hesitated, not even for an instant. *That you are strong, my Lady, stronger than anyone I have ever known and that it is a profound honor to have one like you as my ride partner.*

Bilba was literally struck speechless, her mouth gaping slightly.

She stared at him, her mind so stunned it had apparently shut down entirely.

Time stretched, so long in fact that Fili’s face changed to one of concern and he moved until he was standing in front of her.

“Bilba?” He reached out and, as gently as possible, placed his hands lightly on her shoulders. “Are you okay? Bilba?”

*I'll attract orcs,* Bilba said, her tone almost frantic, *they'll come after me.*

*I would imagine so,* Fili said, *but they would come anyway. My uncle isn't exactly on their favorites list. My entire bloodline isn't. We'll be ready, as we always are.*

He was right. She hadn't thought of that.

*I'll put you in danger.*

His eyes narrowed as he seemed to realize she was desperately trying to convince herself of something.

*Crown Prince* he said with a shrug, *being in danger kind of comes with the title. If anything you'll be in danger just from associating with me.*

*I can handle myself,* Bilba said.

Fili grinned. *Tell you what. You kill my enemies and I'll kill yours and we'll call it even. How's that?*

Bilba studied him for several minutes, searching for any hint that he was false.

She found nothing.

*You,* she said, finally. She shut her eyes and took a deep breath, grounding herself. When she opened them again they were sharp once more. She stepped back, away from Fili, but reached up a hand and very deliberately pointed a finger at him.

*If,* she said, *and that is a very big if,* she paused, took another deep breath to calm her nerves, and tried again, *if I start liking you, you better promise me you won’t die because if you do I swear to Mahal or whatever Valar you pray to I will hunt you down in the afterlife and personally kick your ass, do you understand me?*

It was Fili’s turn to look dumbstruck. *I’ll do my best.*

Bilba gave him a calculating look. *You won’t promise?*

*I never make a promise unless I know for sure I can keep it,* Fili answered. *So all I can honestly say is I will do my best.*

*Good,* Bilba put her finger down and stepped away. They were near the tunnel she remembered that led to the lairs and she started toward it, planning to go join up with Syrath. *I appreciate honesty.*

She started down the hallway only to stop a few feet in and pivot to face him again.
Thank you, she said sincerely for watching over me when I was ill.

You're welcome, he replied at once.

Bilba hoped her mother was watching, wherever she was.

She was trying.

She stepped forward suddenly and raised a hand.

Fili snorted, amused, and took it, clasping it in a firm handshake.

Bilba felt an odd feeling in her stomach again

She definitely must have eaten something at breakfast that didn't agree with her.

Hopefully, if she actually had food poisoning, it would stay mild.

No one liked food poisoning.

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Fili wasn’t sure how long he stood there after she had left before he finally headed off to see Gandalf on his journey.

He wasn’t entirely sure what had just happened but was choosing to see it as a good thing, a step forward in his quest to get Bilba to possibly accept him, if not outright like him.

Fili saw the wizard off at the front gates with a horse and plenty of supplies and then headed back inside. The market was just beginning to show signs of life, merchants setting up their wares and preparing for the day. They greeted him as he passed and Fili nodded back.

He hoped Bilba was calming down Syrath but was a little afraid to check. The last he’d heard the dragon had taken the suggestion about training the others far too seriously and was actually trying to lead them out to go hunt down orcs, much to the horror of the adults. Fili was fairly sure Bilba had gone to personally stop them but, from what he already knew of her, it was just as likely she’d gone to lead them.

He really, really hoped she’d gone to stop them.

He would have gone with her except Uncle had informed him that he’d already missed far too many council meetings while taking care of Bilba when she was ill and now that she was up and about it was high time for him to take back the responsibility.

Kili, who’d been forced to attend the meetings in Fili’s absence, wholeheartedly agreed.

Realizing he was running late, Fili sped up, jogging lightly through the halls. His personal guard, that he had picked up the second he set foot into the market, fell into an easy pace behind him, their eyes searching for any sign of an attack. There hadn’t been any in months but, given the regularity and apparent commitment of whoever had been trying to wipe out the Durin bloodline the last five years, no one believed the attacks had stopped entirely. Someone very much wanted them dead, someone with the money and resources to continually send assassins and with the intelligence to use intermediaries who themselves had never seen their employer’s face and had only heard his voice disguised thus making it, so far, impossible for even Nori to track down.
A feat the other dwarf was both impressed by, and took personal insult at, at the same time.

As he rounded the last corner to the Council Chambers, Fili spotted Nar heading in. The other dwarf stopped and waited as Fili approached, a broad smile on his face as he bowed low.

“Your Highness, it’s good to see you back.”

“Thank you,” Fili said. “How have things been for you, Nar?”

“Oh, fantastic.” Nar clapped his hands together, his face animated. “I’ve just received word by raven from my dear Beryl. She’s already left Rivendell and is on her way home.”

“That’s good,” Fili lied, suppressing a shudder at the thought of the woman returning. It had been such a quiet and peaceful few months without her there trying to gain his favor by passing on gossip he either already knew or didn’t care to know. “Did she find what she was looking for?”

Nar stumbled, his eyes widening in surprise. “I’m sorry, my Lord?”

Fili frowned. “No offense intended, but your daughter is not exactly one I would have expected to see going off on a months long journey through the Wild. I assumed she had a specific reason in mind for going.”

“Ah, yes,” Nar turned as he spoke, lifting a hand to indicate the chambers and Fili politely fell in alongside him as they entered. “You know my daughter, gets her head full of ideas and dreams and such. I believe she heard tale that the Crown Prince of Gondor often frequented Rivendell and hoped to meet him.” Nar hesitated. “Not that she has in any way lost interest in you of course, Your Highness.”

“Of course not,” Fili muttered. “Isn’t Aragorn engaged, though? To Lord Elrond’s daughter?”

“I am not sure,” Nar said. “I just know Beryl wished to go and I indulged her. As I understand it the Prince was not in residence when she arrived so she mentioned she might visit Gondor on her way home.”

They had reached Nar’s chair now and Fili raised an eyebrow in surprise. “She’s planning to turn the entire convoy that far out of their way?”

Nar was saved from having to answer by the arrival of Thorin who took his seat and indicated for Fili to come stand beside him.

Fili obeyed but idly studied Nar as he did. Aragorn would be at his coming of age celebration in a few weeks time, meaning there was no reason for Beryl to go so far to try and meet him. All she’d have had to do was wait for his birthday. As a member of the council Nar would have known the guest list but had apparently forgotten, or perhaps hoped Fili would.

Regardless, Nar had lied to him.

The question was why. What purpose could Beryl have had to go to Rivendell that Nar would not want him to know about?

He made a mental note to bring it up to Nori later. If Nar was up to something the spymaster would find out.
Chapter 11

Fili woke with a start. Adrenaline surged through his veins and his heart rate sped up even as his brain tried to figure out what it was that had awakened him.

He kept his body still and eyes closed. His hands, under his pillow, tightened on the hilts of his two favorite daggers. They were sheathed so he wouldn’t embarrass the line of Durin by accidentally stabbing himself in his sleep but the sheaths were attached to his bed so he could draw the blades with ease.

“I’d say not bad,” a voice said mildly, “if it weren’t for the fact it took you a full thirty seconds to react to someone being in your room.”

“He hasn’t bothered to raise a single alarm,” another, gruff voice, said. “Clearly he’s in need of more training.”

“Oh, clearly,” the first voice agreed cheerfully. “You know his ride partner probably would have gutted us both by now.”

“She would have at least tried.”

Fili groaned and buried his face in his pillow. His heart rate slowed and the adrenaline bled off, leaving him simply annoyed rather than ready for battle. Distantly he felt a vague question from his brother, still asleep but subconsciously reacting to his initial distress. Fili sent back a feeling of peace and waited until he felt Kili settle again. Then, with a sigh, he released his daggers and pushed up on one elbow, wincing as his eyes adjusted to the light from his fireplace.

Nori was lounging in a chair a few feet from his bed. Dwalin stood just behind the Spymaster’s right shoulder, arms crossed across his chest and a scowl fixed to his face.

Fili tried to copy his uncle’s look of disapproval. “Want to tell me why you’re watching me sleep?”

“Not for the entertainment value, that’s for sure,” Nori said dryly, “I heard you wanted to speak to me.” He spread his arms out theatrically. “Here I am, my Prince.”

Fili resisted the urge to throw a dagger at him.

Nori would only catch it and thank him for the gift and Fili would be out a dagger.

A dagger he happened to like.

He sat up entirely, shoving the blankets off and grimacing as cooler air cut through his shirt and trousers.

His mother would prefer he wear full armor to bed or, at the very least, chain mail but while he would like to avoid assassination as much as the next royal there were limits to how far he was willing to go.

He’d left word he wanted to speak to Nori over a week ago. The Spymaster was rarely available. Nori wasn’t content to sit back and wait for news, choosing instead to get out himself and run down rumors and leads, ever trying to stop attacks against the royal family before they happened.

Fili, in turn, had found his own time increasingly taken up by preparations for his Coming of Age
ceremony. Kili had mocked him over it until Fili had pointed out there were only a few years left until it was his little brother’s turn.

Kili had responded by pouting to Lyth, the only one who would put up with it. Kili had a pout that rivaled Syrath’s.

His mood soured further. That was another sore point. With his time so taken by his duties he’d had almost no time at all to spend with Syrath or Bilba. He knew the two spent a lot of time together, often outside the mountain. He’d worried about them until he’d heard Xalanth was practically glued to their side, desperately trying to forge a bond with his long lost son.

It annoyed Fili that he wasn’t with them but, until the ceremony was over, he barely had time to think let alone bond with his dragon or fellow rider.

He suppressed a yawn and let Nori know his suspicions about Nar.

Nori, proving why he was the Spymaster and Fili the prince, immediately picked up on a portion of the conversation Fili hadn’t.

“So,” he said slowly, “Nar claims he was in contact with his daughter via raven?” He leaned his head back to look at Dwalin. “That’s odd seeing as how I was only just able to make contact myself.” He turned his attention back to Fili. “I initially lost three ravens trying to keep in contact with the caravan.”

Fili blinked in surprise. “Three? Why didn’t you send a dragon?”

“That would be a little obvious,” Nori replied. “Everyone knows how dangerous the route over the mountains is. Best to let the other side simply think we believed them lost naturally.”

“How do you know they weren’t lost naturally?” Fili asked.

“It’s my job to always go with the more paranoid option,” Nori said matter of factly. “After the first three were lost I sent three more, simultaneously, by different routes. Two made it. The only one who didn’t was the one who took the same route as the missing birds.”

Fili winced at the news of even more lost birds but Nori shrugged. “They volunteered and I made sure they understood the risks before I sent them out.”

“So the main route is being watched,” Dwalin said, cutting in for the first time.

“That and Nar has a method of communication that I don’t,” Nori said, sitting forward and clasping his hands, “and it’s certainly not by raven. They aren’t like humans.”

Fili nodded. Ravens weren’t like humans or dwarves or any other race. They didn’t betray those they were loyal too. The ravens of Erebor were loyal to the line of Durin, period. He frowned. “How do you know he wasn’t just lying about being in contact with Beryl?”

Nori grinned. “Now you’re starting to think like a Spymaster. The answer is I don’t, of course, at least not yet.” He leaned back in the chair again. “Though, if it is true, I imagine Nar would be horrified if he realized he’d given it away.”

“What about the rest?” Fili asked. “Are they going to Gondor after they leave Rivendell?”

“Oh, that part was definitely a lie,” Nori said. “Dori reports Beryl claims to have suddenly taken ill but is refusing all treatment from the elves. Rather convenient that, it’ll require them to stay much
“What do you think they’re up to?” Fili shifted forward, clasping his hands in his lap.

Nori shrugged. “Who knows? Several of Nar’s people are out at the moment. Beryl is at Rivendell, another of his agents is in Rohan and a third appears to be in Mirkwood though there’s no word he’s been seen in the palace and the elves haven’t seen him in the woods.”

“It doesn’t matter what they’re up to,” Dwalin muttered. “Whatever it is we’ll stop it.”

Nori rolled his eyes. “If you had your way you’d throw him in prison, which would immediately result in us losing the chance to find out the names of everyone loyal to him. It might be nice to know if there are other nobles in on this whatever-it-is or if it’s just him.”

Dwalin scowled. “It’d be safer than allowing him free access to the mountain. As far as we know he’s the one behind the assassination attempts.”

“It’s possible,” Nori agreed. “We’ve long believed the attacks were tied to Moria, given how soon after it they started. Nar certainly has the means and opportunity and he has motive.”

Fili nodded absently. There were many who held his great-grandfather and grandfather directly responsible for the losses in Moria. Since they were dead, however, some had redirected their ire toward the bloodline instead.

Nar had lost both his sons at Moria. One of them had been a rider, the first in Nar’s line. “A lot of people lost loved ones at Moria,” he said, “many of them nobles.”

“Precisely,” Nori said, shooting a triumphant look at Dwalin. “Which is why we can’t just grab a noble and throw him in the dungeon with no evidence. As far as we know Nar really is simply trying to secure an advantageous match for Beryl. There are unmatched princes in both Rohan and Mirkwood after all and Elrond’s sons possess power in their own right.”

“And Nar mentioned Gondor and Prince Aragorn,” Fili said with a frustrated sigh. “Though I doubt anyone could tear him away from Lady Arwen.”

“Agreed,” Nori snapped his fingers suddenly. “Speaking of which. I’ve reports that Gondor has been searching rather committedly for your dragon and ride partner.”

“Really?” Fili slid forward and stood up, his feet sinking into the plush rug that surrounded his bed. “Why would Aragorn want her?”

“Apparently she’s one of his Rangers, though marginally.” Nori replied. “They’ve offered a rather large reward for information regarding her and Syrath’s whereabouts.”

Fili considered it. Erebor had never had a problem with Gondor and, though they’d only met a few times, he’d always felt Aragorn was an honorable man. “I’ll have my uncle send word that she’s here,” he said. His Coming of Age celebration was in a week. Aragorn had already indicated he would be coming. He’d be able to see Syrath and Bilba for himself then.

A thought occurred to him. “Most of the royalty of Middle Earth has been invited to Erebor for my Coming of Age. If Nar is really after a match for Beryl why would he send her away now? She’ll miss the celebration.”

“She will indeed,” Nori said, “which lends credence to the notion that she’s gone on a different mission entirely.” He raised a finger, as though punctuating a point. “Until you take into account that longer than first planned.”
Elrond has already sent word his sons will not be attending, and Nar will be here.”

“So they may just be covering multiple areas,” Fili said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Beryl in Rivendell with the twins and Nar is here with the rest of Middle Earth’s royalty.” He shook his head and grinned. “I am glad I’m not you.” His eyes went to Dwalin. “Either of you. I’ll take a straight forward assassination attempt any day over all this subterfuge.”

Nori stood up. “It’s a dance. Once you learn it it’s not so bad.” He nodded at Dwalin. “And he just solves the problem by killing it.”

Dwalin was unapologetic. “Can’t be a threat if it’s dead.”

Nori stepped toward the door, only to pause and turn halfway back. “On an unrelated note, Your Highness. I must say I’m rather surprised you haven’t been spending more time with your dragon and young Orcrist. I would have thought you three would be nearly inseparable.”

Fili glowered. “I haven’t had time. If it’s not a council meeting it’s working on my speech or being fitted for the ceremonial clothing or a thousand other things.”

“True enough,” Nori said. “But that shouldn’t stop you.” He grinned. “Tell me, Your Highness. How much sleep would you say you needed?”

***

Bilba sat on the ledge over the top of Erebor’s gates and watched as the merchants came in to set up their wares. The sky was just beginning to lighten on the far horizon, the sun promising to come up in its own time.

She was seated between two short columns of rock. The columns repeated at intervals the entire length of the wall. She had a vague understanding as to why it was designed that way but, for the moment, only cared that it provided a good backrest. Her legs dangled over the sides, one inside Erebor and a few feet above the walkway running over the gate, the other over a sheer drop leading to the ground outside the mountain.

Guards strode past her in staggered rotations. They paid her little mind, already used to her showing up each morning to watch the merchants straggle in.

Movement drew her attention and she looked up in surprise as Fili slung a leg over the edge and took a seat across from her, leaning against the opposite column. Behind him, Bilba saw the guards that always followed him about. One made a strangled choking noise at Fili’s choice of position but didn’t protest it.

Bilba frowned at him. She hadn’t seen him much in the past week, mainly just at meals which she continued to take with the family, in spite of the fact it forced her to spend time in the presence of the Chief Bastard.

Why are you here?

“I didn’t realize you were up so early,” he said. “I thought I’d come see how you were doing.”

She shrugged. I’m fine.
He nodded. “I hear you and Syrath have been heading out into Mirkwood a lot.”

_They had a problem with giant spiders._ Bilba replied. _Now they don’t._

“Well, that should help improve relations,” Fili said dryly. “I’ve been told Prince Aragorn of Gondor has been inquiring about you. He’s worried. I had Nori send word that you and Syrath are fine.”

Bilba frowned in surprise. _Why was he concerned?_

“If I had to guess,” Fili said, “he may have received word of your and Syrath’s altercation with the orcs. You haven’t really been seen since then. I would be worried if our positions were reversed.”

_I can visit._ Bilba said. _And let him know I didn’t get myself or Syrath caught._

“He’ll be here within the week for my Coming of Age,” Fili said. “There’s no reason to go out of your way.”

Bilba turned to look over the wall again. She knew about his Coming of Age. He’d be expected to form a soul bond with Syrath.

She honestly didn’t know how she felt about that, the two of them being bonded, leaving her on the outside.

The easiest solution to not being left out of course would be to bond with them both herself.

The mere thought, however, brought nausea and a deep seated terror.

She was trying to trust. _She was._ There was still a part of her though, a very large part, that held back and would undoubtedly continue to do so.

Yes they seemed to accept her now. Yes they were willing to get to know her and let her stay.

But that was only because they didn’t really know her, a small voice whispered at the back of her mind. They didn’t know what she’d done in the Arena. They didn’t know the sheer volume of hate and anger that raged through her veins, at times so strong it left her gasping for breath.

They didn’t know about…

She wrenched her mind away from that train of thought, old guilt welling up in her mind. She swallowed and let out a deep breath.

“Are you alright?” Fili asked in concern.

_I’m fine._ Bilba lied before he could press. She really, really didn’t want to discuss his Coming of Age whatever-it-was or soul bonds or anything of the sort.

_I want to start going out again, after orcs._ She saw his eyes widen and sighed in exasperation. _I’m Orcrist, Orc Cleaver. It’s what I do._ She could feel the tension in her body as she spoke. The spiders in Mirkwood had only taken a day or two. Since then she’d spent her time in the library or with Syrath. Her nerves had started up immediately, her skin crawling, her very bones vibrating with energy.

She’d started running, inside and outside the mountain. She’d run herself into the ground and then run some more, trying to calm the maelstrom that forever swirled within her.

It had helped, a little, but not enough.
She fought.

She’d always fought, even before she’d been handed weapons in the Arena. She’d fought to protect her mother, fought to find food, fought to stay alive. Now all she did was read or walk around. Every moment that she did all she could picture were caravans under attack, people dying because she wasn’t there to save them.

She was being useless.

They didn’t need her in Erebor. She would stay because that was where Fili was and Syrath deserved to have both his riders.

But they didn’t need her. They had guards and soldiers. They could fight and protect themselves. Orcs didn’t come as close and if they did the guards of Erebor or Dale dealt with them before she even knew about it.

It was the same problem she’d had in the Shire. The hobbits there had been peaceful. They didn’t understand her desire to fight, not for the sake of fighting but from a need to be involved in pushing back the darkness.

Here the dwarves were warriors. They understood the need to fight but they didn’t understand the want to fight. They only wanted to fight evil if it was right in front of them. They didn’t go looking for it. They didn’t want to stop it before it ever started.

They didn’t blame themselves for every single life lost.

*I need to fight.* She said. *I don’t want to leave Erebor,* she added hastily as she caught the worried look in his eyes. She’d told him she would stay, so she would. She wouldn’t hold the threat of possibly leaving over his head like some kind of hammer. She wasn’t cruel.

Still, she spoke again, hesitant. *All I’ve ever known is fighting. I don’t know how to just sit.*

She was half afraid she’d seen disgust or concern in his eyes. Instead she saw only understanding.

She had a feeling Primula and the Crown Prince of Erebor would find they had more in common than they might think.

“Maybe I can help you with that,” Fili said. He slid off the ledge, onto the walkway. “Come on.”

***

Bilba trailed behind Fili as he led her through the winding tunnels and passageways of the mountain.

The day had risen enough that people were beginning to get up and the halls held a number of people going about their morning routines.

*Bilba!* Syrath’s voice suddenly sounded in her head. *Do you need me for anything? Anything at all?*

*Not right now,* Bilba replied. *Maybe in a little bit.*
Okay, Syrath responded, sounding resigned. *I'll just…go fishing with my father I guess…again. He really likes to fish.*

Bilba bit her lip to keep from laughing.

Fili caught it and raised an eyebrow in question. She explained and he laughed.

“I don’t think it’s he likes to fish so much,” he said. “I think he’s just trying to find something for them to do together. He wants a relationship with Syrath but hasn’t quite figured out how to relate to him yet.”

*He could go orc hunting with him. Bilba said.*

Fili snorted. “I think he’d prefer something slightly less dangerous.”

Bilba frowned. *Syrath wants to hunt orcs. If Xalanth wants a relationship with him shouldn’t he do the things Syrath likes?*

“Xalanth was incredibly close to Quenth,” Fili explained, “and blames himself for not being able to save her.”

Bilba nodded, her perspective on the older dragon shifting. She could understand that feeling, more than he knew.

“Syrath is not only his son,” Fili went on, “but a small piece of Quenth returned to him. He doesn’t want to let her down, again.” He gave her a light grin. “Aside from that, he’s a parent. You know how they are, overprotective.”

Bilba felt a pang of sadness dart through her. *My mother was always overprotective.*

Fili flinched, catching the past tense. “What about your father?”

*He was a coward, Bilba said shortly. I doubt he could be protective at all, much less overprotective.*

Some of her anger must have leaked out over the mental link because Fili didn’t ask any further questions.

In the distance Bilba began to hear a familiar sound, metal clashing against metal. Her heart sped up and she walked a little faster. Fili grinned and matched her easily.

They turned a corner and moved through a low doorway cut into the rock. Beyond it was a large, flat area filled with dirt. Racks lined the side, filled with weaponry.

In the center of the area a number of dwarves of various experience levels moved through drills while, in another corner, more groups sparred.

Bilba clenched her hands into fists and felt her stomach start to churn.

The area reminded her, just a little, of the Arena.

“Are you okay?” Fili asked, his voice anxious. “We can leave. The Vanguard meet here but we can wait until they’re somewhere else.”

Bilba looked out over the floor and caught sight of the Chief Bastard, taking a group of dwarves through their paces.
Anger surged through her at the sight of him holding an axe in one hand and acting like he knew what he was doing. He probably just had it for show, trying to convince others he wouldn’t run at the first sign of battle.

He might run, but she would not.

Keeping an eye on him she let the anger flow through her, chasing away the anxiety and fear.

*I’m fine,* she growled at Fili. *Let’s go.*

He still looked uncertain but he turned and led her to a set of stairs that went down to the floor.

One of the dwarves broke away from out of a larger group, comprised of dwarves her age, and came toward them. Bilba recognized Fili’s younger brother, Kili.

“Hey,” he said, “finally decided to join training again?”

“It’s not my fault I keep getting dragged away,” Fili grumbled. “You could do my appointments for me if you’re so concerned about my skills getting rusty.”

Kili looked appropriately horrified. “I’d rather listen to Gloin tell the story of how he and his wife met, again.” As he spoke he turned his attention on Bilba, his gaze guarded but significantly less so than when she’d first awakened. He seemed willing to entertain the notion at least that she wasn’t a threat to Fili, deliberately or otherwise. “Bilba.”

Bilba nodded back at him in greeting.

“I thought she’d enjoy the Vanguard,” Fili said. “She’s like Uncle Frerin. She doesn’t like just sitting around.”

Bilba’s eyes widened at the comparison. He thought she was like Frerin? A warm feeling flooded her at the compliment.

“If you two would chat less and fight more,” a gruff voice called out, “you might stop getting your arses kicked by trainees ten years younger than you.”

Bilba stiffened, her lip curling at the sound of the Chief Bastard’s voice. Fili rolled his eyes and slapped Kili on the shoulder. He ran back into the crush of other trainees and Fili nodded at her to follow him where the bastard was standing with the other group of dwarves at the opposite side of the are – training ground, Bilba corrected swiftly. She couldn’t bring herself to call it an arena, even if that was its basic shape.

As they neared the group she noted most were male though a few women were sprinkled in as well. Two of the men were dwobbits, the rest dwarves. All of them were older with hard looks in their faces she recognized. They were warriors, every last one of them, used to constant battle.

She saw a blonde dwarf talking to one of the other males and recognized him as Fili and Kili’s father. He was more easygoing and laid back than the others and she already knew he had a personality closer to that of his younger son.

The Chief Bastard broke away from the group and approached them.

“Bilba wanted to try out for the Vanguard,” Fili said before the other could speak. “She isn’t happy sitting around in the mountain all day.”
“Who would be?” The bastard asked. He frowned at her and Bilba glared back. “You know what the Vanguard does?”

The very last thing Bilba ever wanted to do was form a mental link with him but, fortunately for her, she’d spent the last week relearning much of the Iglishmek that Bofur had taught her in the Shire and Frerin had taught her before that.

She lifted her hands and signed the negative, her gestures a bit sharper than absolutely necessary.

He grunted. “We keep the area around Erebor and Dale safe. Orcs, wolves, bandits, and the like. We’d have dealt with that group that attacked that caravan once we knew about it.”

Which would have been after the entire caravan had been slaughtered, Bilba thought sourly. She raised an eyebrow at his “we” comment. Surely he didn’t expect her to believe he was part of this Vanguard group?

“I don’t think she needs to try out,” one of the males called, “her reputation precedes her. She can clearly fight.”

“She can fight orcs and bandits,” the bastard corrected, “and whatever half-dead fighters unfortunate enough to land in that pit in Moria.” He studied her, “Were you ever trained or do you do it by instinct? Have you ever fought against someone trained? Healthy and trained?”

Fili answered before she could. “Why does that matter? She can fight.”

“It matters,” the bastard growled, “because she’s around Durins and someone is determined to wipe out the whole lot of you.”

Bilba frowned. Someone was targeting the royal family? She turned to look at Fili and saw his face had twisted into an irritated look.

“The last three attacks were by trained assassins,” the bastard continued. He nodded toward Bilba, “what happens if one of them goes after her by association? Or if she just happens to be in the vicinity when the next one happens?” His attention turned to her. “Orcs are hive fighters and frenzy fighters when they’re on their own. They either overwhelm their foe by sheer numbers or in a beserker rage. Everyone else you’ve faced has fought by instinct or panic, no doubt putting you on the same level.”

A small voice in the back of her mind was informing her the bastard had a point but Bilba rebelled at having to listen to a single word he said.

I can fight fine, she signed sharply.

He frowned and then looked at Fili. “Fine, tell you what. You can join the Vanguard if you can beat Fili in a sparring match.”

Fili started to protest but the bastard held up a hand to silence him, his eyes focused on Bilba. “Well?”

Fine. Bilba signed. Her anger at him was rising again. How dare he question her? She could still hear the warning going off in the back of her head, pointing out the annoying fact that nothing he’d said was wrong, that he was only trying to help her in fact, but she suppressed it savagely.

Fili retrieved two training swords from the rows lining the near wall. The weapons were real so trainees could get used to the feel and weight but had been blunted so there would be no accidental
limb amputations.

That didn’t mean they couldn’t cause damage though.

He handed her one and she shifted, turning it absently in one hand. It felt like forever since she’d handled a sword.

Fili squared off across from her and, at a nod from her, they began.

He disarmed her in less than twenty seconds.

Bilba stared at the point of his sword, resting lightly on her breastbone, in disbelief.

She honestly wasn’t sure what had happened. She’d stepped forward, blocking the blow he’d sent at her, went to return one of her own…and he’d done some odd twisting thing, under her blade. The next thing she’d felt was his elbow striking her ribs, throwing her off balance enough that her grip had loosened on her sword…and now it was lying in the dirt.

Fili stepped back. “I’m sorry. I probably didn’t give you enough time to get ready.”

He’d given her plenty of time and they both knew it. Bilba retrieved her sword, embarrassment surging through her, and got back in position.

The second bout went better.

She lasted thirty seconds.

Her sword hit the dirt again and Bilba grit her teeth, her hands clasped into fists. She looked toward the bastard, expecting to see him gloating.

He wasn’t.

His arms were crossed over his chest and he was silently observing. Behind him the other members of the Vanguard were also watching. There was no censure on their faces, no judgment, just observation.

Bilba swallowed, her throat dry, and picked the sword up again.

Fili was hesitant in their third bout, his blows significantly weakened, his guards halfhearted.

Bastard made a sound of disgust and stepped forward, where he proceeded to disarm Fili barehanded.

Bilba stared at him, stunned.

He didn’t notice, his focus on Fili who, in turn, didn’t appear surprised at all.

“You think you’re helping her with that half-arsed garbage?” Bastard snapped. “You think the next trained assassin who comes after you is going to hold back on her?”

“I don’t see any reason to humiliate her,” Fili growled back.

“And I don’t see any reason for her to die because she hates me too much to take my advice!” Dwalin shot back.

He moved past Fili and faced off against her. “Alright,” he said, facing her. “You’ve certainly tried
“...to glare me to death enough since you arrived.” He spread his arms. “Here’s your chance. Have at it.”

Bilba didn’t need to be asked twice.

She lunged at him, her sword swinging low, intending to take out his legs.

A second later she was flat on her back, the point of his sword at her throat.

“You’re too emotional,” he said, his voice flat. “That’s another thing training will help you with.”

That was a fluke, Bilba thought. It had to have been. She hadn’t even seen him move. There was no way he’d been that fast.

She reached for her sword, and then surged up from her seated position, hoping to come up inside his guard.

She was flat on her back again an instant later.

Bastard stood over her with the point of the blunted sword at her throat again.

Bilba felt the floodgates open.

With a near scream of rage she went at him again.

This time he let her. She could feel it with every blow and every swing. He was pulling back, even more than Fili had been. He was letting her fight him.

It made her even angrier, the world blurring in front of her as tears of pure hatred leaked out.

He could fight.

She’d told herself he couldn’t. That he was a coward.

But he wasn’t.

He could fight.

He was part of Vanguard, a force whose sole purpose was to fight the darkness in the world.

He was a warrior…and

Hadhn’t.

Come.

Her sword hit the dirt, spinning away from her.

She collapsed to one knee, bracing one hand on the dirt, her chest heaving.

Anger pulsed through her like a live thing, electrifying her nerves and causing her entire body to tremble with the effort to contain it. Her head pounded.

A shadow fell over her and she looked up as the bastard knelt next to her.

“That’s a lot of hate and anger for someone your age to be carrying around,” he said, his voice low and for her ears only. “You want to just tell me what it’s about already?”
She couldn’t bring herself to tell him. She’d wanted to, many times already, wanting to see him hurt as much as she did, assuming he’d care at all.

Every time she’d tried, however, the words had lodged in her throat.

Deep down, past her barriers, past the gaping scars a lifetime of pain had carved on her soul, far enough that she didn’t have to look, she knew why.

_I have no problem with you_, she sighed, her gestures short and jagged.

He nodded. “Now I know what you look like when you lie.” He stood up. “When you’re ready to tell me you know where I am. Try to do it before that anger burns you into ash.”

Noise caught her attention and Bilba looked away from him. On the other side of the area, where they’d entered, the majority of the dwarves her own age were still going through their paces. Four of them, however, had broken away and were clustered in a group facing her. As she watched one of them mimicked her getting disarmed and the other three broke into laughter.

Humiliation raced through her and Bilba pushed to her feet.

Bastard’s voice suddenly snapped out a command. All four of the dwarves shut up instantly, their faces paling. The bastard said something else and the four walked forward, their steps dragging.

“What’d I teach you about mocking others?” The bastard growled.

One of the dwarves, stocky with short cropped dark hair, answered, “That no one mocked us when we were beginners and we should show others the same respect.”

“And,” a second one, taller with dirty blond hair and stubble instead of a beard, added, “that if we were going to mock someone we better be sure we were better than they were and capable of protecting ourselves when they took offense.”

“Which we are,” the third one cut in. He was the tallest of the four with a large frame and long, ash blond hair he clearly put a lot of time into. He gave her a cocky look now and Bilba had to struggle to not punch him. She saw his eyes move over, and his look falter slightly as he caught the answering look in Fili’s eyes.

“Well if you’re so sure,” bastard said, “why don’t we test that?” He stepped forward and grabbed the youth’s arm in a tight grip and led him and the rest to a point several yards away. He headed back and stood next to Bilba and Fili. “I’m going to count down from twenty. When I hit zero I want you to attack her.” He shot her a look. “Just think of them as orcs.” He paused and then added, "Don’t permanently maim them.”

The arrogant one raised an eyebrow. “At the same time? Don’t you think that’s a bit dishonorable? She might get hurt.”

“What I think is dishonorable is you shooting your mouth off, Garn,” bastard responded shortly, “and I think Orcrist should have the right to defend herself. So--” He started counting.

Bilba frowned, her mind absentely calculating how far away the dwarves were from her.

_Am I allowed to use my surroundings?_ She asked Fili.

_Of course_, He responded immediately. _Dwalin believes in fights being as realistic as possible. You’d expect a real attacker to use anything at his or her disposal. The ability to adapt is one of the most_
important aspects of our training.

He sounded like he was reciting something. Bilba nodded. How fast do you think they can cover the distance from there to here? She asked Fili.

His eyes narrowed for a few minutes, studying the other dwarves. He must have fought with them before, Bilba thought, so he should have a good idea of their speed.

He answered her and Bilba nodded. She moved and grabbed Fili’s arm, turning and walking him away from bastard and the others, absently counting in her mind and explaining her plan as they went.

They stopped where she wanted him and she headed back, walking past bastard and putting herself closer to the group of four.

The arrogant one sneered at her but she ignored him. Hand to hand against multiple foes had always been her element, a fact she suspiciously felt the bastard had figured out. She’d never felt as comfortable with a sword, the weapon always feeling slightly clunky and awkward in her hand.

She felt her mind calm and her body relax.

Maybe she wasn't trained in weapons.

Maybe she couldn't beat Fili or bastard at the moment.

But a group of orcs, or four arrogant upstarts her own age if not younger?

That she could do.

Behind the four she could see the rest of the trainees had stopped what they were doing and were watching. The Vanguard members were as well. The entire area had fallen silent in fact, but for the steady cadence of the bastard counting down.

He reached zero.

The four charged.

Bilba spun and ran, back toward Fili.

Behind her the arrogant one started wasting his breath. “What’s wrong? To scared to face us?”

“That’s right,” one of the others said, clearly emboldened by his leader’s idiocy, “Run back to the Prince. Maybe he’ll protect you!”

Fili dropped smoothly to one knee. He laced his hands together and lowered them almost to the floor.

Bilba reached him and slid one foot into his hands. He shoved up instantly, even as Bilba pushed off with her other leg.

A second later she was soaring through the area, her face looking up toward the stone ceiling high overhead.

She wouldn’t go far…but she wasn’t planning to.

She spun, rotating her body until it faced the floor, and curled into a tight ball.
She shot straight over the heads of the arrogant one.

She’d misjudged a bit. She’d wanted to pass up the first two at least, and hopefully come down on top of the third one. She could see now though she’d land between the first one and the other three. That was alright though.

She could adapt.

Her feet hit the ground with a jar that shook her body and she went into a crouch, her back to the three behind her.

She was barely down before she came up again. She spun as she did, snapping her hips around and putting the full force of her body into the left fist she drove into the face of the second attacker.

His nose gave way under her hand, blood spraying as he went down.

The third one hadn’t even fully registered she was there. Bilba was already twisting at the waist, her right elbow snapping up and connecting solidly with his face.

Two broken noses.

The fourth one flailed, trying to stop himself before he ran into the collapsed bodies of his peers.

Bilba pivoted on her right foot. Her left leg flicked out and the top of her foot connected solidly with the side of his head.

He fell and she drew the leg in, allowing the motion to turn her to face the first attacker.

He’d only just skidded to a stop and was still in the process of turning around.

To find his three friends lying on the ground, in various states of holding their noses or heads and moaning in pain.

From the moment she’d hit the ground the entire thing had taken ten seconds.

His eyes widened in shock and his mouth fell open.

Then he dropped to his knees, his hands up. “I give up! I give up! I don’t want to fight.”

Bilba made a disgusted sound, one that was mirrored by bastard who came up and cuffed him sharply on the back of the head.

“You think someone in a bar or inn will let you just give up after you insulted them?” He dragged the dwarf to his feet. “You disgrace the honor of Erebor.” He gestured to the other three who were slowly getting up. “The lot of you get out. Go to the Healing Wards and consider yourselves lucky this lesson only left you with broken noses and damaged egos. The last thing I want to hear about is a soldier getting killed in a bar fight because he was too fool to keep his mouth shut.”

He shoved the dwarf at his friends and turned his back, dismissing them.

On the other side of the area, Bilba saw the other trainees slowly returning to their own routines, though not before shooting her looks of admiration and respect. Even Kili gave her a nod and pleased smile before getting his own weapon and returning to his training.

“So,” Fili said, stepping alongside her. “This is not how I expected this to go. I just wanted to help,
find something that would let you get out.” He studied her, his eyes anxious. “I’m sorry, Bilba. I didn’t mean—”

*It isn’t your fault,* Bilba said, and she meant it. Fili had been trying to help her.

As had the bastard.

As much as she hated to admit it, and make no mistake she *hated* it, he was right.

Footsteps crunched in the dirt and the bastard appeared, holding her practice sword.

“You have natural talent and perfect instincts,” he said, "With training, you could be the best warrior Erebor has ever seen." He studied her, his face expressionless, "Let me train you, personally. “You get to join Vanguard and spend every morning doing your best to kick my arse. How’s that?”

Bilba nodded tiredly, reaching out to take the blade.

He was right about one other thing too. The level of anger she carried around *was* hard to sustain. It had burned out entirely for the moment, leaving exhaustion and an old, deep pain behind.

She didn’t like that pain, or the feelings that came along with it.

“Don’t you worry Bilba,” her mother’s voice said in her mind, “Your father is coming, you hear me? He’s going to come save us both. Just you wait.”

And she had.

She’d waited, and waited…and she’d *waited.*

The bastard had taken position in front of her and, at his gesture, she copied his stance, trying to hold her sword the same way he was.

She’d believed he would come.

She’d believed he hadn’t because he couldn’t.

Because he was a coward.

She was quickly finding out that wasn’t true.

“He’ll come,” her mother’s voice repeated, the words blending into the hundreds, thousands of times she’d said it over the course of Bilba’s lifetime.

“He’ll come.”

She’d *believed* that.

He’d been her hero.

Her champion.

She’d imagine scenario after scenario in her mind of him charging to the rescue, bursting through the walls to carry her and her mother out of Moria.

She’d told the other slaves, over and over again, don’t worry, it’s fine, my father is coming.

He’ll rescue us.
He’ll save us, all of us.

But he hadn’t.

Not her mother.

And not her.

Why?

The only answer she could think of was one that cut deeper than any blade.

He hadn’t come, not because he was a coward, not because he couldn’t fight.

Her champion, her hero, her father hadn’t come…………because he simply hadn’t wanted to.
Fili strode through darkened hallways, heading toward the dragon levels. It would be another ten minutes or so before Bilba would head out to start wandering the mountain, eventually ending at the battlements to watch the merchants come in.

He didn’t meet her at her bedroom because she didn’t sleep there. She slept with Syrath.

He didn’t have to ask why. The night watch had been alerted by her screams multiple times and had rushed to her room, convinced an assassin had made their way in.

The nightmares made it impossible for her to sleep alone and Dwalin had added a new layer when he’d commented the fact she was under stone, as she had been in Moria, probably amplified them. It had occurred to Fili after Dwalin had pointed that out that none of the other Moria survivors lived within Erebor. The realization she did it because it was where he lived ate at him. He’d had an idea about how to help, at least a little, but hadn’t had a chance to speak to his uncle about it yet with all the chaos going on over his Coming of Age and his uncle dealing with the dignitaries streaming in.

In the meantime, Bilba had begun going to Syrath. Once she did the nightmares seemed to have stopped.

In the week since Nori had given him the idea of giving up sleep to spend time with Bilba, a more than worthwhile trade in his view, Fili had fallen into the habit of going to the dragon levels and waiting against the wall until she came out. He didn’t go in; instead treating the massive room beyond almost like it was her bedroom and giving her privacy until she’d woken up.

He felt the shift in his mind that signified Syrath's presence, the dragon undoubtedly smelling his approach.

*She left already.*

Fili stopped in surprise.

*She did? Where’d she go?*

*The training room.*

Fili frowned in confusion. *There’s no one in there yet.*

*I think that was the point.*

Fili walked through the door as Syrath finished the sentence. The dragon was near the entrance, curled in a ball with his head resting on his tail. Xalanth was sleeping near him, his head tucked under a wing and his sides moving in the slow rhythm of sleep.

*She had a bad day yesterday,* Syrath continued, *so I think she went to try and work it off before she saw you. She didn’t want to take it out on you.*

Fili hadn’t seen her the day before, with the exception of training in the morning of course. He saw her during the night of course, sometimes earlier, sometimes later depending on his own exhaustion. In the week he’d been doing it, he made sure to be there in time to watch the merchants come in with her at the very least.
She was out with Vanguard yesterday wasn’t she? She hadn’t been at lunch or dinner. Vanguard didn’t go out every day, sometimes they didn’t go out during the day at all but went during the night, evening or morning.

It would defeat the purpose, after all, if they kept to a routine that the orcs could learn and then avoid.

Yes, Syrath responded. Dwalin went. They ran into some orcs and Bilba did a good job so Dwalin told her so.

Okay? Fili said in confusion. What’s wrong with that?

Syrath huffed, lifting his head to arch over Fili and forcing him to look up. She liked the praise but it came from Dwalin.

The tone of voice he used made it sound like what he was saying should be obvious and, really, Fili supposed it should be.

Even though she’d barely been with them a month, everyone was well aware of Bilba’s feelings toward Dwalin. According to his mother, the open hate she displayed toward Erebor’s Captain of the Guard could only spring from something deeply personal. It wasn’t that Dwalin reminded her of someone else; it was Dwalin specifically that she despised.

Which made no sense as Dwalin swore he’d never met her. The best theory anyone could come up with had to do with Bilba’s hobbit heritage. Dwalin’s wife had been a hobbit and not just any hobbit but the favorite daughter of the Thain of the Shire, the closet thing the hobbits had to a king. When she’d been killed the Thain had blamed Dwalin. He’d never approved of the marriage, believing it pulled his daughter away from a respectable, peaceful, and safe life.

Her death, in the Thain’s eyes, had been the proof he’d been right.

Dwalin had not been welcome back in the Shire in the Thain’s lifetime and, though the hobbit had been dead for years now, Dwalin had not returned. It was possible Dwalin’s name had been muddied in the Shire, due to the old Thain’s grief and anger. Bilba was the right age to have been born right after Belladonna’s death. What if she’d been born to one of Belladonna’s sisters or another relative and then had been raised listening to the Thain rage against Dwalin?

Fili didn’t personally buy into that that theory and was fairly sure his mother at least and possibly Dwalin didn’t either. The grudge Bilba carried seemed too personal to be one that ultimately belonged to someone else. They’d also met other hobbits from the Shire, and dwobbits who’d chosen to come to Erebor upon reaching their majority, and had never heard of anything of the sort. Most didn’t seem to know who Dwalin was, much less that he’d ever been married to a hobbit woman now decades dead.

The only way to know for sure was to ask Bilba but she’d refused to speak about it and no one wanted to push and raise painful memories just to satisfy their own curiosity. At some point she’d ended up in Moria after all. Most likely the same way all the slaves in Moria ended up there, through raids on caravans. She’d spoken of her mother in the past tense and the fact she made no mention of any other family, and had been on her own for years with Syrath, suggested there was no one else, though whether it was because they’d died in the attack, in Moria, or had never been around at all was unclear.

Fili personally went with the second given the nightmares he’d heard her having when she’d been ill. In any event, there was no reason to try and force her to remember better times before she’d been a slave in Moria just to satisfy their own curiosity.
She hadn’t made any move to try and harm Dwalin after all and he, in turn, had simply stated it was his problem and he would handle it.

Fili had yet to see Dwalin doing anything of the sort but the rest of them had respected his request and left it alone.

For the most part.

*She still hasn’t told you why she’s so angry at him?*

Syrath heaved a sigh. *She doesn’t tell me lots of things. She thinks I’m a child.*

Fili raised an eyebrow. *You are a child.*

The dragon moved so he could stare at Fili with an eye nearly the size of Fili’s head. *You are not helping.*

Fili snorted. *Tell you what. I’ll go let her kick my ass for a bit. That should make her feel better.*

Syrath put his head down again. *She doesn’t want to kick your ass. She wants to kick Dwalin’s. It makes Xalanth upset. He wants to be mad at her but then that would make me upset so we both end up upset.*

**Have you tried talking to her about it?**

*No,* the answer came back immediately, *then she’d feel guilty and her nightmares would get worse. They’re bad enough as it is.*

Fili hesitated. Syrath had never mentioned her nightmares before. She hadn’t either. They both tended to act like they simply didn’t happen.

*From what the guards have reported, I can’t picture what worse would look like.*

Syrath’s head shifted, still lying on the ground but moving to look away into the main cavern. *They can get worse. She could start crying. I don’t like it when she cries.*

*I can’t imagine her crying,* Fili said. A pang ran through him as he tried to picture it.

Syrath didn’t change his position, still looking off at something only he could see. *Everybody cries. She’s cried enough though.*

*On that we can both agree,* Fili said.

He bid his dragon good-bye and left after that, heading toward the training room.

As he did he thought about the fact that, even after a month, he still barely knew Bilba. She gave away little of herself, not to him, not even to Syrath.

About the only thing anyone did see of her was her hatred and anger toward orcs and Dwalin.

He’d seen glimpses of another side of her. The way she acted toward Syrath, the way she appeared to value honor, integrity and honesty and readily gave the same in return. Syrath said she was trying to work off her irritation to avoid taking it out on him, a sign of how much she valued and attempted to protect those she chose to let in, even if it meant protecting them from herself.
He picked up his pace toward the training room.

He wanted to get to know her better. He was beginning to suspect the anger had become, in part at least, a shield she held between herself and the world around her. It kept everyone else out but also kept her locked inside.

She’d lowered it a little for him, a fact for which he was eternally grateful. He’d assumed, given the lack of a soul bond, that she hadn’t completely lowered it even for Syrath but he’d believed it would be farther down for the young dragon than anyone else. To find out she kept herself back even from Syrath was disquieting.

Having not even a single confidant, someone she could tell anything to, could talk to when she needed it…it had to be lonely.

The training room came into view and he entered to see Bilba in the center. She was wielding a practice sword and working diligently to slaughter a few of the training dummies with it.

Fili made his way forward to join her.

He didn’t know if he could get to the point where she would allow him as a confidant.

He did know two things, however.

One, that he would never know if he didn’t try.

Two was that Bilba was more than worth the effort.

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Bilba slashed viciously at the wooden dummy, barely remembering to adjust her feet to the proper stance as she did.

The last thing she wanted to do was anything that bastard had taught her but she wasn’t fool enough to ignore legitimate training just to spite him.

She still couldn’t believe she’d smiled at him. They’d been set upon by a sizable group of orcs just outside the borders of Mirkwood, between the forest and the mountain. It was unusual, the second such group since the one she and Fili had destroyed, and the first real challenge she’d had since that fight.

Once the attack had begun the orcs had fled under the trees into the woods. That had made it impossible for Xalanth and Syrath to help without risking damage to the forest, something the elves would not appreciate.

Bilba and the rest of Vanguard had followed and the ensuing fight had been as intense as it had been exhilarating. Bilba had watched Dwalin’s back as much as she had anyone elses. Fighting in a group required trust, she couldn’t expect Vanguard to watch her back if she wasn’t willing to do the same for every last one of them, no matter her personal feelings.

After it was over her adrenaline had been racing, her battle senses on edge. She’d felt a sense of
camaraderie with them even though she’d barely spoken to any of the others yet. When Dwalin had complimented her on her fighting she had reacted without thinking and smiled at him.

At the bastard.

It made her sick.

She swung the sword savagely, watching as it struck the practice dummy. Wood splintered and cracked, pieces flying off into various directions.

It was his fault her mother was dead.

His.

Fault.

Not hers. It was his.

Tears burned at the back of her eyes and she viciously stabbed the dummy so hard her wooden sword broke. She threw it down to the right where it joined the shattered pieces of four other swords, and grabbed a new one from the pile of swords she’d dumped on her left.

Fili passed her on her left. She’d sensed someone enter and he’d sent a light brush against her shields, just enough to let her identify him.

He grabbed a practice sword of his own and twirled it easily in one hand as he turned to face her. “It’s always more effective to train against a live opponent.”

*I’m really not in a great mood,* Bilba growled. *I don’t have the best control sometimes.*

As the bastard had so helpfully pointed out on her first day training. She struggled to get herself back under control, her rage boiling just under the surface with a severity that made it feel like her skin was itching.

Fili grinned. “I helped train Kili. I’ll be fine, believe me.”

Bilba was still hesitant but squared off against him. When it became clear she wasn’t going to start, Fili did, moving forward and sending a light blow at her that she easily parried.

The next one was slightly harder and faster, as was the one after that, until Bilba finally started responding. They settled into a cadence after that. Bilba knew from the first time he’d sparred with her that he was holding back, but he was by no means going easy on her. The shock from the blows he landed vibrated along her arms and she was soon breathing heavily, sweat beading on her forehead and trailing down her face.

She appreciated it. She didn’t want to be coddled. The orcs would certainly never coddle her. She let herself go after that, allowing the anger still flowing through her to give power to her blows.

“You’re still not controlling your emotions,” Fili said with a grunt as he blocked a blow, only to twist suddenly and send a leg sweeping at her knees. Bilba jumped, clearing the attack and returned one of her own, managing to land it hard enough that it drove him back a step.

*I told you I wasn’t in a good mood.*

He grinned. “True enough.”
He shut up after that and let her fight him, the anger and rage siphoning off little by little until, finally, it was gone entirely. By that time they were both drenched in sweat and breathing hard. Bilba’s arms were shaking so badly she could barely lift her sword but it was Fili who stepped away and raised a hand to call a halt, his chest heaving as he fought for breath.

“You’ll just keep going until you drop won’t you?” he gasped, leaning forward to catch his breath.

*It’s a habit from the Arena,* Bilba answered. *If you stopped you died, so I never did.*

She honestly wasn’t sure she would know how to stop even if she wanted to.

Fili gave her an unreadable look before straightening and heading toward a bench. There was a fountain next to it and he leaned over to get a drink, before splashing water over his face and sitting down with a heavy thud onto the wooden seat.

Bilba followed and copied his actions before sitting next to him.

The area still reminded her of the Arena. She could almost see the dark stains coating the floor, smell the stink of sweat and fear, and hear the din of orcs roaring for her blood.

She shivered and forced herself to take a deep breath, pushing the memories away.

What’s the worst thing you’ve ever fought? She asked Fili.

Fili grimaced. He was still fighting for air so he switched to speaking via link.

*You’ve heard about someone with a grudge against my family?*

Bilba nodded. She’d heard. It was the reason Fili went around with a personal escort all the time. They tended to hang back when he was with her but they were always there. At the moment they were probably just outside the door leading to the training area.

A pair of professional assassins managed to get in, Fili went on. *They actually scaled the backside of Erebor and came over the balcony into my room, a problem which has since been fixed by the way. When I retired for the night they waited for me to go into the bathroom and blocked my bedroom door. Then they tried to kill me.*

He reached up as he spoke, absently rubbing at his shoulder as though remembering an old injury.

No one could get to me through the door because they’d blocked it but they didn’t take into account the secret passages built into each room. Only the royal family knows how to open them. My mother, brother and father happened to be out of the mountain but, fortunately, my uncle was present. He came in along with Dwalin and a large number of the guard. By that time I’d managed to dispatch one of the assassins but the other... his jaw tightened, it was a close thing. He looked at her. What about you? What’s the hardest thing you fought?

*Cave troll,* Bilba said instantly.

Fili’s eyes went wide. *By yourself?*

*The orcs aren’t exactly fair,* Bilba said, *but they usually want to watch a fight, so they’ll take some care about what they pit you against.*

*And the other times?* Fili asked. *When it’s a cave troll?*

Bilba shrugged. *Then they just want to watch you die.*
You didn’t though, Fili responded. He shifted on the bench, his breathing slowly starting to return to normal.

I couldn’t, Bilba said. Not yet. There was an orc I had to kill first.

Just one? Fili asked. I thought you wanted to kill all of them.

Bilba studied the center of the training ring. In her mind the dirt ran red and the sharp tang of iron stung her nostrils. Her body heaved for oxygen and her body shook from fear and adrenaline.

Surrounding her was a legion of orcs. Azog sat in the place of prominence, a seat raised above the others. He looked pleased and she had to resist trying to throw her sword at him.

It hadn’t gone well the last time she’d tried.

Beside him…beside him…

Bilba surged to her feet and stepped away from the bench. Fili stood and came to stand beside her.

“Bilba? Are you okay?”

She grabbed another sword and raised it. Ready for another round?

He nodded and retrieved his own sword. “Sure.”

Your Coming of Age thing is tonight, isn’t it? Bilba asked.

It is, Fili agreed, allowing her to change the subject. You’ll be there right?

I don’t do well in crowds. As she spoke she moved and started the new round. They moved slower, focusing more on technique and form than on trying to work her anger out.

I’ll stay with you, Fili promised, and I’m sure my mother will as well. Aragorn will be there.

Bilba scowled. She did want to see Aragorn.

You’re supposed to form a soul bond with Syrath, aren’t you?

She was pleased that she said it without so much as a waver in her emotions. In the month she’d been there, even with part of it spent unconscious, she’d settled into a belief that Fili’s addition wasn’t going to result in her losing Syrath.

She still…she still felt a slight twinge at the thought of the two of them soul bonded, however. Not because she would lose either of them but because it would give them an added layer she wouldn’t be a part of.

Supposed to, Fili agreed, but won’t be.

Bilba stopped, her sword dropping to her side. What?

Fili lowered his own sword. I already talked to Syrath about it. We’re going to wait until you’re ready. My family knows and is fine with it. As for everyone else – he shrugged. Soul bonding is usually done in private anyway between the rider, dragon and second rider if there is one. I waited a long time for a dragon. I can wait a bit longer to soul bond with the two of you.

Bilba gaped at him. You want a soul bond with me too?
“Of course,” Fili said, his eyes meeting her. “You’re my second rider.”

His words brought an odd sense of disappointment. She didn’t know why and didn’t give it much thought to be honest. She was more concerned with the rest of what he’d said.

He wanted a soul bond with her and planned to wait until she was ready.

_What if I’m never ready?_ she couldn’t help but ask. The thought still terrified her. She would be allowing them closer than anyone had ever been. She wouldn’t be able to hide the true depths of her anger.

She wouldn’t be able to hide who Dwalin was from them.

She wouldn’t be able to prevent her nightmares from leaking along the bonds and infecting them as they slept.

They would see the truth if they bonded with her. Past the hatred, past the anger and rage, past _Orcrist_.

To who she really was.

Useless.

So desperately useless.

A helpless little girl who couldn’t save anyone.

She didn’t want them to see, either of them. Once it had just been Syrath, but now Fili was slowly starting to carve out a place for himself as well. If it kept going the way it was she could see him one day having a spot alongside Syrath.

“I guess I’ll be waiting a long time then,” Fili cut in, bringing her back to the moment. He raised his sword again. “Shall we?”

Bilba nodded and raised her weapon.

She cared about him.

She wanted to keep him, him and Syrath both.

She wanted to run from them and never look back.

He shook his head suddenly and pointed to her feet, moving one of his to correct her stance.

Bilba swallowed and nodded, adjusting as he wanted before engaging him again.

Things had been so simple before coming to Erebor. Since she’d arrived it had begun to feel more and more like she stood in the midst of a maelstrom. She didn’t know which way to go or what to do.

Fili blocked her and then used his forward momentum to shove her back, knocking her onto her back.

His hand came out immediately and she grabbed it, allowing him to pull her back to her feet.

His hand was warm and left hers tingling when he released it.
She hated being touched, but was quickly finding she didn’t mind so much when it was Fili.

Another thing to confuse her.

She went after him again.

She felt like she stood on ground that was crumbling away under her feet.

She didn’t know what the right course of action was.

She didn't know which way to go.

So, in the end, she would do the one thing she did know.

The one thing she was good at.

She would stand her ground.

And she would fight until she found her way.

If she ever did.
Someone had left the girl a courting gift.

Dis stopped in the hall outside Bilba’s room and studied the items sitting forlornly on the floor. There was a small wicker basket with drooping flowers that appeared to have been purchased in the market, along with some kind of unidentifiable candy that appeared to have come from a similar locale.

She doubted Fili would have done something so lazy, if not downright insulting, but just in case her eldest son needed a refresher course in manners, Dis opened a link.

Did you leave a courting gift outside Bilba’s room?

The reply was immediate. Of course not. If I gave her a courting gift it’d be in person.

He went silent and Dis began to count silently in her head. She’d nearly reached ten when Fili’s voice sounded in her head again.

Wait, someone left Bilba a courting gift?????

Dis bit back a laugh. Oh, yes. Flowers and candy no less.

Well that’s just ridiculous, Fili groused, the only way she’d want flowers would be if there were a practical use for them and she’d only want the candy if she could use it to choke an orc.

They also both appear to have been purchased from one of the booths in the market, one of the cheaper ones by the look of it. Dis added.

WHAT? Fili sounded pissed and for good reason. And then they left it outside her room instead of giving it to her in person? Good for nothing bastard.

Dis couldn’t blame him. Their culture had very strict social rules regarding courting and this gift managed to violate just about every one of them. Such an offering, which formally made the giver’s intent clear, was supposed to reflect the recipient while simultaneously demonstrating effort and thoughtfulness on the part of the giver. The most appropriate gifts were handcrafted, but some dwarves went with buying something obscenely expensive instead.

Dis had seen a number of her friends quite content with the second option but she doubted she would have accepted such a gift. To her it seemed too often the giver, or even the recipient, made such a public spectacle out of the gift that it became more a comment on the display of wealth instead of the love that had presumably prompted the gift.

Initially, Vili had given her no gift at all from either category, convinced the Princess of Erebor would never accept the suit of a common soldier. In the meantime, Dis had been entirely lovestruck and dealing with the agonizing conviction that someone else would come along to snatch him up at any second. She’d ended up giving him a gift herself, leather vambraces she had painstakingly decorated with symbols of his house and station. Not her best work to be sure, her nerves had prevented her hands from remaining steady, but no one could say she hadn’t poured her heart into them. When she’d presented them she’d been shaking so hard she’d nearly dropped them at his feet and run.

He’d accepted them and then stared at her, eyes and mouth wide open in shock. He’d stood there so
long in fact that her nerves, already utterly frayed, had snapped altogether and she actually had turned and fled, all the way back to her room where she’d slammed the door and refused to come out. The very next day Vili had been outside her room, not only wearing the vambraces but clutching an intricately detailed courting bead in hand. He’d spent the entire night in the forge working it. A bead such as that was usually reserved for later, effectively symbolizing the couple’s intent to marry, but Vili had stated he was worried she’d come to her senses at any moment. Naturally her family had been less than thrilled to find her betrothed to a solider they barely knew but Vili had survived the interviews by everyone from her Thror to Thorin, and their associated dragons, and she and Vili had married soon after.

The memory of her fear over Vili marrying someone else before she could make her own feelings known brought her back to her oldest son’s burgeoning plight. That he was enamored with the girl was obvious to her and was rapidly becoming obvious to others. Kili had even picked up on it and he wasn’t exactly known for being the most observant when it came to matters of the heart.

You know, she sent almost conversationally, this is only the first of many. She’s a famous warrior in her own right, a dragon rider and now tied to the royal family. Her pedigree is impressive even if she isn’t nobility.

The feeling she got back from her son was as close to pure rage as she’d ever felt from him.

She isn’t a pawn! Fili snarled. They can’t just use her to further their own ambition!

She’s in the royal court whether you like it or not, Dis replied sharply. Fili could deny reality as much as he wanted but it wouldn’t change it. She’s going to get as many self-serving requests as you do. She paused briefly, before continuing. She’ll also get legitimate ones, just like you do.

Fili fell silent.

Bilba would probably, in fact, get more requests than Fili or Kili ever had. Within the dwarven race males far outnumbered the females. Granted there were more now with the inclusion of dwobbits but many of them chose to stay in the Shire or, desiring to live among dwarves but still stay close to hobbit relations, in the Blue Mountains. Very few came to Erebor, leaving the ratio of male to female in the mountain rather out of balance. Even amongst the women there were those who chose to stay single, whether from personal preference, not having found their One or from being hopelessly in love with someone unobtainable. This meant the remaining eligible females were often overwhelmed with suitors.

She was rather surprised it had taken almost an entire month for Bilba to get her first request. She was a legend in her own right, a rider and had ties to the royal family. There would be those in love with the legend, those in love with the idea of adding potential riders to their bloodline and those in love with increasing their own status. Some might genuinely believe themselves in love with the girl but, of those, she wondered how many knew her real name or a single thing about her other than her desire to rid Middle Earth of orcs.

Clearly whoever had left this first gift knew nothing about her.

You could always get your act together and present a gift to her yourself, you know, she sent to her son.

Fili started stammering. I – I mean she’s – she’s barely arrived! And --- and she needs time. I don’t want to pressure her and she might not even be interested and it’d make things awkward and –

And sounds like a lot of excuses if you ask me. Dis said mildly. All I’m saying is if you wait too long
she may accept a gift from someone else. Given that you two share a dragon it means you’ll be seeing a lot of her, and her lover, which could make things decidedly awkward.

It’s certainly not going to happen if it’s something idiotic like flowers and they’re leaving it outside her door like a coward. Fili groused. I haven’t had any time to do anything anyway, not with the way they keep dragging me around to prepare for the Celebration. He paused, suddenly. Why are you outside her room?

That’s a surprise dear, Dis sent back, amused at her son’s clumsy attempts to redirect the conversation. She smoothed a hand over the cloth bag slung over her arm, feeling quite pleased with herself. And the celebration will be over tonight so you’ll have plenty of time. Though, if you have time to speak to me right now then you probably have more than enough time to at least start designing something. It shouldn’t take that much effort to outdo the gift she’s already gotten.

Fili sent the mental equivalent of a strangled, inarticulate noise that had Dis laughing as she stepped around the poor excuse for a courting gift and up to the girl’s door. From what she’d heard, Bilba had spent most of the day out flying with Syrath and had returned a short time ago. Syrath usually dropped her off at her balcony so it was likely she hadn’t even seen the gift outside her door yet. Dis reached out mentally, lightly announced herself and immediately felt an answer inviting her in.

She entered to see the girl standing on the balcony looking outward. Dis joined her and saw the sun just beginning to touch the horizon. The sky around it was changing hue and the clouds nearby were tinged in shades of pink and orange.

Bilba turned her attention to Dis and frowned at the bag over her arm.

What’s that?

Dis lifted it slightly. “Your dress. I had it made for you to wear tonight.”

Bilba scowled. Do I have to?

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss it,” Dis said. “You might just find you like it.”

She walked over to the bed, pulled the bag off the dress and spread it out over the covers. Bilba stepped up behind her and Dis heard her gasp in surprise.

She had to admit the dress had turned out better than she’d expected. It was sky blue, Syrath’s color or as close as Dis could get it. The dress was one piece of satin, designed to fit close to the body, the fabric pulled in tight at the waist in a swirling pattern that made it look like a whirlwind winding about the body. It flared out for the skirt and a triangular panel had been cut in the center to reveal layers upon layers of pale blue lace underskirts beneath it. When worn those layers would dance and swirl adding to the aerial effect, as though the dress were dancing on a breeze. The bodice had small deep blue sapphires sewn in that would flash and sparkle in the light. A few handfuls had been added to the overskirt, scattered about to add a flash of light here and there as she moved. The final touch were the straps, meant to be worn off the shoulder, adding to the fluid, graceful look of the gown.

Bilba hesitantly reached out to touch it, running her hands over the gems on the bodice.

I haven’t worn a dress in ages, she said, and never one like this. When I was invited to something in Gondor I usually wore a borrowed one or just wore my own clothes.

“Well,” Dis said, “now you have one of your own, the first of many I hope.”
Bilba frowned. Dis had been trying all along to build a wardrobe for her but the girl was incredibly stubborn about taking anything that she felt would make her more indebted than she already believed she was. Dis had finally gotten her to take a few outfits by recreating the same thing Bilba was already wearing, in different colors and cuts, and claiming they were uniforms, of a sort, for Vanguard.

Now, before Bilba could reject the dress outright, Dis reached in a pocket and said, “AND, for the finishing touch…” With a flourish she drew out a sheath and dagger and placed them on the bed next to the dress. The sheath was leather and silver, the dagger inside a twin to the one Bilba had loved so much. The knives had always been a set. Dis had just chosen to only wear one at a time.

Bilba was staring at the objects, her eyes wide. Dis took the opportunity to lift part of the dress. “See? There’s a pocket in it like mine. We can strap the knife to your thigh and you’ll be able to reach it through here.”

Bilba turned her gaze to focus on Dis and she suppressed a sigh of amused exasperation. She should have known the girl would like the weapon better than the gown.

_I can’t accept this._

Dis bit back a smile. That might be what the girl was saying but the look on her normally unreadable face was saying the complete opposite. The fact Dis had managed to get her to show any emotion at all was a success as far as she was concerned.

“If you want,” she said, carefully keeping her voice neutral, “you can look at it as a loan. I’m letting you borrow the dress, sheath and knife and you’ll return them if I ask.”

Not that she had any intention of ever asking for them back but the girl didn’t need to know that.

Bilba chewed on her lip, clearly warring with herself.

_It would be nice to have a weapon again. I keep having to borrow a sword when I go out with Vanguard or take one off an orc. It’s annoying. I shouldn’t have lost the one I had._

Dis could hear the irritation in Bilba’s voice and filed the information away for later. She had faith in Fili’s ability to create a proper courting gift but it didn’t mean that, as his mother, she couldn’t give him a tiny prod in the right direction.

“Come on,” she said, hoping to further distract Bilba before she came up with new reasons why she shouldn’t take the items. “Let’s get you cleaned up and ready for tonight shall we?”

Bilba continued to hesitate. She reached a hand out and touched the straps lightly and then the neckline.

_My scars will show._ She shot Dis an uncertain look. _I have a lot of them._

Dis moved forward until she made sure she had Bilba’s full attention. “To dwarves, scars are a sign that you’re a survivor, a fighter. We respect them.” She reached out and lightly took Bilba’s hand, “And, besides that, anyone who is worth knowing in the least won’t care.”

Bilba had gone back to staring at the bed but now looked up at Dis, her eyes wide with something that Dis couldn’t completely define.

_Thank you._

Dis smiled. “You are quite welcome, my dear.”
Vili called while Dis was waiting for Bilba to finish bathing, panicked that he couldn’t find the new tunic she’d made him for the Celebration. Letting Bilba know she’d return soon, Dis left to fix the latest Durin family crisis. She found the tunic and headed back to Bilba’s rooms, letting herself in quietly.

Bilba had come out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, and was sitting on the plush rug before the fireplace, her legs curled under her. She had her hair pulled over her shoulder to allow it to dry and her hands were clasped in her lap. She was perfectly still, her eyes watching the flames.

She hadn’t been exaggerating when she’d said she had a lot of scars. Dis had never seen Bilba without the layers of clothes she normally wore, the boots and gloves, heavy cloak and high collared jacket. She had seen, of course, the few scars the girl bore on her face. A slender one that crossed from her right temple, barely touched the edge of her eye and ended just over her cheekbone. Another ran along her left jawline, just below her ear and arching at one point down to her throat.

They were nothing compared to the ones covering the rest of her body.

There were thick bands of scar tissue wrapping around the base of her throat and both wrists. More scarring snaked along her arms, ran in crisscrossing lines across her back until they vanished under the towel. As she drew closer Dis saw a crudely carved circle over Bilba’s right shoulder blade. Black speech lettering was cut into the center while, below it, was what might have been someone’s idea of a warg or possibly even an orc dragon. The Arena brand she’d heard about, marking her as the personal property of a specific orc. Dis had envisioned it as some sort of actual brand like what might be done to cattle. This, however, had clearly been done with a knife, sliced in so deeply it had probably cut into the bone of her shoulder at points. It had to have been excruciating and she highly doubted the orcs had done anything to lessen the pain.

She swallowed, trying to push down a rush of nausea, and went to retrieve a brush before going to kneel behind Bilba. She lightly pulled the girl’s hair back, surprised to see it fell below her waist. She always wore it in tight braids wrapped around her head. Dis had never seen it down before.

“I didn’t realize your hair was so long.” She lifted it, noting the thickness of the strands. “It’s lovely. You should wear it down more often.”

_It gets in the way_, Bilba replied. _The orcs would grab it._

“True,” Dis said. “You could always wear it down in the mountain though. There are no orc attacks here.”

_Fili was attacked in his bedroom_, Bilba answered. _It’s not safer._

Dis tensed as the memory of that particular incident flooded her mind. She could still remember Lyth relying the information from Xalanth, the panicked race back to the mountain, the sight of her son pale, bloodied and so unnaturally still in the Healing Ward.

“I’m surprised he told you about that,” she murmured, swallowing hard. “He doesn’t generally like to talk about it.”

She lifted a lower portion of Bilba’s hair and frowned to see many of the ends split or jaggedly
uneven almost as though…Dis sighed. Of course the girl cut her hair with a knife.

“Do you mind if I trim it?”

Bilba shifted, turning her head slightly to look back toward her. *You won’t cut it?*

There was a tension in her voice that suggested her hair held more importance to her than simply covering her head.

“No,” Dis assured her. She held up the part she wanted to trim. “Just this much. See?”

Bilba agreed and Dis retrieved a pair of scissors from the desk. She trimmed it quickly, in as straight a line as she could so it hung across the girl’s waist. She replaced the scissors and went back to the fireplace. She repositioned Bilba so more of the heat from the fire was falling on her hair to dry it faster, knelt behind her again and picked up the brush again. She began working on a section of the damp mass, even more grateful she’d come early. She could remember being Bilba’s age and struggling to get ready for a party. She’d had help and a lifetime of training and still found it stressful. She hadn’t wanted Bilba to have to try and figure it out on her own.

Bilba was looking down again, studying her wrists.

*It looks like I’m still wearing manacles. I didn’t put them on and I can never take them off.*

Dis wasn’t entirely sure if the girl had meant to broadcast that but the pain she could hear pulled at her heart in much the same way it would had it come from one of her sons.

“Have you considered tattoos?”

That earned her another side look. *What do you mean?*

Dis set the brush down and reached forward to pick up one Bilba’s wrists, studying the deep lines that marred the skin. “It wouldn’t get rid of them but a skilled artist could work them into an image, make them part of something larger or simply different. When you look at your wrists you’d see the design you chose, not the scars the orcs left.” She set Bilba’s wrist back down carefully.

*Could they do the same for my back? For the brand?*

“I don’t see why not,” Dis replied.

Bilba was silent, considering. *I can’t pay for it,* she said finally.

Dis had already thought of that. She started working on Bilba’s hair again. “Nori has a younger brother, Ori, who’s quite the fan of yours.”

*I’ve met him. Outside Rivendell. He wanted me to sign a paper for him.*

She sounded confused and Dis chuckled. “I’m sure he did. Ori is a scribe in the library. He’s also an amazing artist and Nori trained him on tattoo work years ago, much to the chagrin of their other brother. Nori claims Ori is the best he’s ever seen. I have no doubt Ori would consider being able to say he did tattoos for Orcrist as payment in itself.”

Bilba didn’t look convinced but Dis didn’t let up. “Trust me. Ask him when he returns. Or, if you want to add more, offer him a ride on Syrath.”

*It doesn’t seem like enough. I haven’t done anything.*
“You’ve done plenty,” Dis corrected. “You didn’t just wake up one day to find people calling you Orcrist.”

That earned her a look suggesting that was exactly what had happened. Dis laughed. “What I meant was you were called Orcrist for a reason. Ori is a huge fan of yours for a reason. You and Syrath have done a lot to make Middle Earth safer. You’ve inspired others to follow your lead. They may not be on dragonback but many villages and even cities have set up their own patrols; other groups aside from Rangers now protect caravans. The orc attacks are less frequent and in fewer numbers from fear they’ll come face to face with an armed escort or, worse, you and Syrath.” She gave a gentle tug on a lock of hair to get Bilba to look at her and leaned forward. “You’ve done more than you know, Bilba. Let some of us say thank you from time to time.”

The girl looked startled for a brief instant, then her eyes cut away and she turned to face the fire but not before Dis caught the hint of color rising in her face.

Fili kept insisting there was a young woman underneath the mantle that was Orcrist. Dis had caught glimpses here and there but this was the first time she’d genuinely seen her, past the rage she put on like armor, past the empty expressions and insistence she felt no pain.

Everyone felt pain.

Dis settled back and continued brushing Bilba’s hair. It was beginning to dry, revealing a natural wave and spring to it. If it were short Dis imagined it would have the tight curls that many hobbit women were known to sport. As it was the sheer weight of it pulled the curl out until it was merely wavy with a few rebellious curls sneaking in every now and then.

“Your hair is lovely,” she repeated, absently letting a portion of it run over her hand. It was a golden brown color, almost amber or even topaz. “Did you inherit it from your mother’s side or your father’s?”

My mother’s I think. Bilba replied. Though I never saw her true hair color so I don’t know for sure.

Dis frowned. “What do you mean?”

Even as she spoke a feeling of dread settled into her gut. Fili had mentioned Bilba speaking of her mother in the past tense and many had heard her nightmares from before she’d started sleeping with her dragon. Some of them had been so loud guards had raced in expecting to see her fighting off assassins. A majority of them seemed to revolve around the loss of someone she cared for deeply, leading to the theory that she hadn’t been alone when the orcs had attacked. Her age lent credence to this idea, as most dwobbits her age wouldn’t have been out traveling by themselves.

She lost it in the mines, Bilba responded.

Dis sighed, her heart sinking. It was even worse than suspected. The girl hadn’t lost her mother in the attack. The two of them had been taken prisoner together and enslaved in the mines.

“I’m sorry,” she said, knowing full well how inadequate the words were for the situation. Her own memories of losing her mother surfaced and she felt a surge of sympathy for the younger woman. She could remember how lost she’d felt, virtually drowning in her own grief. She’d had her father though, and her grandfather, and her brothers. Not only that but her mother’s two best friends, women she’d grown up with, had both stepped in. They’d taken over where her mother no longer could, helping Dis through her grief and, later, helping her grow from the girl she’d been into the woman she was now.
Remembering the pain, the confusion, the anger at how sudden it had been, the misplaced guilt of not somehow being able to prevent it, Dis wondered how she would have made it through with no support at all. And not just no support but simultaneously surrounded by the nightmare that was Moria.

“I lost my own mother,” she said, “when I was only in my twenties.”

_I don’t know how old I was_. Bilba said. _There was no way of keeping track of time in the mines. I think… I think I was in my forties. I don’t know though. I don’t know how long she’s been gone. Some days it feels like forever, others like it just happened._

In her forties? Dis thought. Mahal, how long had she been in the mines? The lifespan of a slave was so short it had been assumed she couldn’t have been there long.

But if she’d been there in her forties and was now in her fifties...

"It's not your fault that you don't know," she said.

_I feel wrong, spending the anniversary of her death each year acting as though nothing is different._

“What about her birthday then?” Dis asked. “If you want a special day to remember her on, why not remember the day she was born instead of the day she died?”

Bilba turned completely around, her eyes wide. Clearly the thought had never occurred to her. Dis smiled at her. “That way you’re remembering her on a day uncorrupted by the orcs. They had nothing to do with her birth, it’d be all about her.”

The mask split, for just an instant before it was gone, Bilba twisting away to face the fire again.

_I know when her birthday is. I would like that. Thank you._

The words came across the link so quietly they were almost inaudible, random noise lost in the background feelings from her sons, husband and even her brother who liked to think he was locked up tighter than he actually was.

“You’re welcome.”

There was silence for several minutes until Dis got her courage up to ask the question now plaguing her.

“What about before the mines?” she asked. “Do you remember your mother's hair from when you were in the Shire?”

It was a roundabout way of asking, hoping Bilba might mention her own age and give her a timeline of when she’d been captured.

_I wasn’t in the Shire until after the mines_, Bilba answered. _For about a year until the orcs attacked looking for me and Syrath._

Oh. Dis remembered that attack. It hadn’t been entirely a surprise. Yes, security had been greatly increased in the Shire since the dwarves had allied with the hobbits. Instead of protection being solely in the hands of Rangers it now also lay with the Garrison, as well as with the dwarves who had chosen to live in the Shire with their families.

None of that changed the fact that orcs preferred hobbits for their slaves. They caused the least
amount of trouble, were easier to terrorize into obedience than dwarves, humans or even elves. Unfortunately they also broke faster than the other races meaning the orcs were constantly in need of new ones. So, while it had been unusual for the Shire to be attacked, while it hadn’t happened since the Garrison had been put in place, no one had been stunned it happened eventually. In the minds of many, both in the Shire, the Blue Mountains and Erebor, it had only been a matter of time.

She knew her grandfather had tried for years to convince the Shire to allow him to station drakes on a rotating basis in the area. The hobbits always refused, insisting the drakes would scare off the wildlife, upset their own dragons and destroy the landscape through their sheer size. They had been convinced they were safe, that the presence of the Garrison guaranteed there would never be an attack. Thorin had hoped they would change their minds after the attack but, to his confusion, they had held steadfast insisting the attack had been a one-time thing unlikely to reoccur.

Now she understood why they believed that. The orcs had been looking for Bilba and Syrath, though they had most likely taken the opportunity to supplement their slave population as well. The two had appeared on the scene, based somewhere in the Wild, shortly after the attack on the Shire. They must have left, a young dwobbit and an infant dragon, immediately after the orcs attacked and taken up living in the Wild.

“You know that wasn’t your fault either, right?” she asked. “You couldn’t have known they were coming.”

It doesn’t matter. Bilba said. They came whether I knew it or not and it was because of me.

“They would have come anyway,” Dis countered. “If you were in the Mines you know the orcs like hobbit slaves.”

Maybe, Bilba allowed. But they attacked when they did because of me.

Because of her, Dis thought, not Syrath. In spite of the fact they were both children Bilba put the entire weight of blame on herself.

“How did you end up in the Shire?” she asked. “After you escaped?”

A hobbit found me. Her name was Primula. Bilba looked down at her hands which were clasped tightly in her lap. She probably regrets it now. She lost her husband and dragon in the attack.

Dis flinched. There was so much pain in those words, so much to be untangled and dealt with.

“Did you try to contact your family?” she asked. “Back in the Blue Mountains?” If the girl had never lived in the Shire it was made sense she'd lived in the Blue Mountains. Many hobbits left the Shire to live with their dwarven spouses in the Blue Mountains just as many dwarves left to live in the Shire with their hobbit spouse.

The girl was silent a long time, so long Dis thought she might not answer at all. Finally, though, eyes fixed on her hands once more, Bilba said I have no other family, and I never lived in the Blue Mountains.

“Oh,” Dis said. “Where did you live then, before the mines?”

There was nowhere before the Mines, Bilba said. I was born in Moria.

The brush Dis had been moving through Bilba’s hair froze. She blinked, running the girl’s words through her head.
“You can’t have been born in Moria,” she said finally, lamely.

Why not? Bilba raised an eyebrow, her eyebrow quirking in an unusual way that, for a split second brought a jolt of familiarity, the sensation she was looking at someone else entirely, someone she knew well. The feeling was gone instantly, before she could place who it was she thought she saw.

“A pregnant woman wouldn’t have survived in Moria,” she explained patiently, “much less a newborn. It’s just not possible.”

It’s unlikely, Bilba agreed, but not impossible. I was born early, or at least my mother thought I was. She knows the day I was supposed to be born so I use that as my birthday but I’m probably older, by a few weeks at least if not months. I think everyone was surprised I survived the birth. My mother did everything she could, many of the other slaves helped. The orcs found it amusing. They took bets on how long I would last, at first anyway. Eventually they noticed there were fewer problems from the slaves, the humans, elven and dwarven ones, in the areas I was in. The slaves were afraid any disobedience would result in my being punished, and they were right. After that the orcs started helping, in a fashion. The more obedient the slaves were the more food or rest my mother would be given. Bilba’s face darkened slightly, though her tone of voice didn’t change. The time between when I was born and when I became old enough to work was one of incredible obedience amongst the slaves. They even controlled themselves. Any time a slave acted out the others, the ones protecting me would deal with it themselves before the orcs could. It worked so well the orcs considered bringing in more children to continue the practice. Her eyes cut to the side, her lips twisting in disgust at the thought of it. I don’t know why they never did.

Dis literally couldn’t move. She couldn’t even breathe. Bilba had relayed the entire thing in such a matter of fact manner, she might as well have been reciting the alphabet or speaking about the weather.

All Dis could feel was unimaginable horror. It radiated through her being, every fiber, every part of her. She tried to picture herself in that situation, cradling a newborn Kili in her arms, tried to imagine trying to keep the both of them alive, the constant fear she would wake up to find him gone or, worse, the orcs simply taking him from her and her helpless to stop it.

She couldn’t imagine it. The horror was too great for her mind to even comprehend.

An infant…in Moria.

And past that the realization that Bilba had spent her entire life in the mines, that all she’d ever known had been pain and darkness and the cruelty of the orcs.

How had she survived with any semblance of sanity? By all rights she should be broken, body and spirit both and no one would have blamed her for it.

Still desperately not wanting to believe it, to have it somehow be something, anything else she said, “How are you--” She trailed off, helplessly gesturing at the girl’s body. In her mind the image of a Moria slave was a crippled, broken mess, barely able to walk after the first five days much less after five decades.

Bilba seemed to understand what she was saying because she answered at once. There are no broken slaves in Moria, she explained, not for long anyway. The orcs have no use for them so they’re disposed of. She didn’t elaborate but the way her emotions wavered on the word “disposed” told Dis she probably didn’t want to know. You can’t escape starving or being beaten, sometimes for having done nothing wrong, but, if you’re careful, you can avoid being broken. She hesitated and then continued. Once I was put in the Arena I was hurt worse but I made a name for myself quickly.
I brought in a lot of gold for Azog so he made sure I was treated properly when hurt. He wanted me dying in a fight, not from an infection, and he didn’t want me losing the ability to fight because a broken leg healed wrong. She reached up and lightly touched one of the scars on her face, the one running near her eye. I nearly lost my eye with this one. You don’t see a lot of Arena fighters with facial injuries because most of them are fatal. She shrugged suddenly, looking tired. To be fair, you don’t see a lot of Arena fighters period, not more than once or twice anyway. There were a few prize winning ones like me, but only a few.

Dis barely heard any of what she said after the word Azog.

Azog.

Azog the Defiler.

Mahal, the brand on the girl’s shoulder was Azog’s. She’d been his slave. For how long? What had she been through? Enslaved her entire life, tortured, forced to fight in their sick Arena. She’d no doubt witnessed the death of her own mother if her nightmares were anything to go by and then been forced to keep on going, never having a chance to process any of it. Then as soon as she escaped, as soon as she started a new life in the Shire, the Mahal damned orcs showed up and took it all away again.

Dis was horrified, she was stunned but, most of all, she found she was angry. Not at Bilba but at the orcs. At the monsters who’d taken the girl’s childhood, her innocence, her mother, her safety, her life. The rage burned like a live thing through her veins, coiling along her muscles and, with a sudden clarity, she abruptly understood the true depth of the girls’ anger. Because if this was how enraged she was on Bilba’s behalf then how much worse must the girl’s own anger be having lived through it?

Dimly she became aware of her family, and Lyth, in her head, demanding to know what was wrong. Her emotions had been so deep they had been vibrating along her soul link, traveling out to everyone she had a bond with.

I’m fine, she managed to send. Don’t come. I’m fine.

Fili’s voice cut through the mass, his tone hard. If you’re fine then why is Bilba nearly in a panic and insisting I need to come at once? And why does she think you’re angry at her?

Dis focused on the girl. Bilba was expressionless but, looking closer, Dis could see faint tremors running along her arms. Her hands, still clenched in her lap, were white knuckled and she was breathing in short, quick gasps.

Dis hugged her.

Without hesitating she opened her shields, letting the girl see in further, to feel her reaction and where her anger was truly directed. It wasn’t a soul bond, it was only in one direction from Dis to Bilba and would end as soon as she put her shields back up, but it was close.

She felt Bilba flinch in surprise and then suddenly her arms were going around Dis in turn. Dis felt her eyes start to burn and she gently put her shields back up, not wanting her own sadness to upset the girl but also not wanting Bilba to think she was being rejected.

Outside the window a rushing sound signaled the arrival of Lyth and Syrath, darting past in agitation. Bilba pulled away and looked toward the balcony while Dis did the same for Lyth, both probably saying much the same thing.
I’m fine, Dis repeated down her link to her family. *I was talking to Bilba and,* her voice wavered a bit and she reached up to hastily wipe a few traitorous tears away from her eyes. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d cried. *She’s been through more than we knew, a lot more.*

She repeated her order for them to stay away. The last thing Bilba needed was the entire royal family of Erebor, all of them male, bursting into her bedroom while she was barely dressed. Grudgingly they obeyed her after Dis promised to talk to them later, after the Celebration.

She looked in Bilba’s eyes…and saw the same look she often saw looking back at her from the other side of a mirror.

The look of a child who’d lost her mother. It was a lost look, a seeking one, one used to having a place to turn now suddenly adrift, lost in a sea of blackness with no hope of rescue.

It hadn’t been that way very long for Dis. She’d been surrounded by others, guided, led by the hand out of the dark, and out of her childhood, back into the light.

Bilba had never had the light at all.

She’d been born in darkness, thrust down further still when her mother had died…and had never left. She stood at the bottom of a well and, at some point, had given up trying to climb out, had stopped crying for help, and accepted it.

No one would be coming.

There was no one *to* come.

Not anymore.

Dis felt like someone had given her a key. She understood Bilba, not perfectly of course, she doubted anyone could do that unless they’d lived through what the girl had lived through. But she understood one aspect, a very important one.

She understood what it felt like to be a little girl lost.

Impulsively she hugged her again and, again, Bilba reacted at once, hugging her back in a way so immediate, so instinctive that it suggested once, long ago, it had been as natural as breathing.

It would be that way again if Dis had any say in it.

She thought of her mother’s friends, how they’d stepped in and surrounded her, and her brothers, after the accident. She still remembered asking one of the women about it, about why they’d done it. The response had been that, more than anything, Dis’ mother would have wanted to know her children were cared for and loved after her loss, that someone had come in where she couldn’t, that someone was taking up the burden she’d never wanted to lay down.

They had done it, the woman had explained, so her mother, their friend, could rest in peace.

Dis wondered about Bilba’s mother. Bilba had clearly been everything, *everything* to her. She’d given her all and died knowing she was leaving her daughter behind to face Moria alone.

Dis sent a prayer to Mahal, asking it be given to Bilba’s mother if that were possible. Asking that the woman be told she could now rest in peace. The gap left by her passing would be filled. As others had filled it for her own mother now Dis, a mother in her own right, would do so for another woman.
After all that had been done for her.

After all Bilba’s mother had done to save her daughter.

Dis could do no less.
Chapter 14

It was some time later, after Dis had gotten control of herself and after they’d convinced the dragons to return to their level, that she remembered the courting gift.

She hadn’t mentioned it under the assumption Bilba was more than capable of dealing with such things on her own.

But now…

As she mulled it over, Dis lifted the dress off her bed and helped slide it over Bilba’s arms, taking care to avoid snagging it on the sheath and dagger strapped to her thigh. She eyed it critically as it settled about the girl’s body. She’d had the Bilba’s measurements from her time in the Healing Ward. When it had come time to make the dress she’d given orders to make it a bit larger with more room in a few strategic places. Bilba’s health had greatly improved in the month she’d been with them and she’d filled out to a healthy weight. She’d ended up following the bloodline of hobbits in that respect meaning she was now far curvier than she had been before. The loose fitting clothing she normally wore was accommodating to such things but the dress, designed to be snug in the bodice and waist before flaring out, would be far less so. She hadn’t wanted to ask Bilba to come in for fittings, realizing it would just give her more time to reject the whole thing, so Dis had simply crossed her fingers and hoped for the best.

Now, as she hooked the fastenings and studied the way the fabric lay she breathed a sigh of relief.

The dress fit perfectly.

One crisis averted. She handed over the pale blue satin slippers that went with the dress and returned to her original thought as Bilba put them on.

“Someone left a gift for you outside your door.”

Bilba absently slid the shoes on and then lifted the straps of the dress, trying to put them on her shoulders and frowning as they fell down again. *Who was it? Why?*

Dis moved to stand in front of her and gently moved the straps so they hung low on her upper arms. “I don’t know who it was but I imagine they left it as a courting gift.”

She waited for a response but Bilba didn’t seem to have even heard her, instead focused on glaring at the straps. *Why are they there? They serve no purpose.*

“They serve a purpose,” Dis said. “They’re pretty.”

That earned her an annoyed look.

*Pretty things are useless…mostly.*

The last word was said grudgingly as though it were something she’d only just acknowledged. Dis raised an eyebrow, wondering what it was that had made her change her mind.

“Why were you watching the sunset earlier?”

Bilba frowned. *It made me happy.*

“See?” Dis said. “Pretty things make you happy. Useful.”
The sun is useful for things other than being pretty.

“Yes,” Dis agreed, “But you weren’t watching it to feel warm. You were watching it to feel happy.”

She lightly put a hand on Bilba’s arm and guided her over to the vanity and bench in front of it. Judging by the amount of dust on it the girl had never used it. Dis settled Bilba down and started work on styling her hair. “Do you want your hair up or down?”

Down, Bilba said instantly. Can you make the brand not show?

“We can certainly try,” Dis responded, pleased she was able to keep the sudden rock lodged in her throat from showing. “Did you hear what I said earlier? Someone left you a courting gift. Did you get many of those when you were in the Shire?”

No, Bilba answered. I wasn’t there a lot. Primula helped me get set up with the Garrison. Then I joined the Rangers and helped protect the caravans. Syrath went with me.

Ah, that explained how she’d ended up with a connection to the Crown Prince of Gondor. Dis had wondered how that had come about.

Given Bilba’s age she decided on a simple hairstyle and started sectioning out a few portions. As she did she asked, “Do you know anything about courting?”

Some. My mother told me a little and so did Primula.

Dis started braiding the first of six braids, three on each side of Bilba’s head. She only braided them a short way before putting a clip on each and moving to the next. “Do you understand what it means, though? Courting? Why you might want to court one person instead of another?”

Bilba’s eyes met hers in the mirror. Primula talked about her husband a lot.

Dis made a mental note to write Primula. It sounded like she’d tried to be a maternal influence to Bilba. She’d probably like to know how the girl was doing. “And did you understand it?” Dis asked gently. “Have you ever felt those sorts of feelings yourself?”

No, Bilba gave her a troubled look. Do I have to accept the courting gift?

“No,” Dis said instantly. “You do not. Especially not one that wasn’t even given to you in person.” She began the process of working the six braids together in an intricate pattern. She split the pattern into six individual braids again and brought them under the main bulk of the girl’s hair before bringing them around to the top again and combining them back into one.

As she did she considered how much Bilba might and might not know. The girl knew how to read and write, she knew how to speak and handle herself in most situations from what Dis could tell. She understood the concept of love and courting but Dis doubted she understood all the intricacies of it. The fact she didn’t realize she could reject a gift was proof enough of that.

Worse was the fact she’d never apparently been in love, possibly had never even had an infatuation, didn’t understand what it felt like to feel that way about a particular person. Yes she’d been told by others but practical knowledge of something didn’t necessarily equate to understanding it.

It wasn’t something she could explain in one sitting either, particularly when she didn’t even know where to start. Bilba’s mother, for instance, trapped inside the mines with no hope of rescue, most likely had not considered the need to explain how pregnancies happened or how to deal with a particularly aggressive suitor. Then, later, in the Shire it may have not even occurred to Primula that
Bilba, given her age and clear experience in other areas, might not know such basic things.

In one respect, Bilba was very much an experienced, battle hardened warrior.

In just as many others, some Dis may not even have considered herself yet, she was very, very naïve and, as such, very much at risk of being taken advantage of.

Given what the girl had already been through, Dis would be damned if she let that happen.

She finished the braid and tied it off with a simple silver clasp. If the girl had had family in the mountain their crest would have been engraved on it. As it was Dis had ordered it engraved with a small image of a dragon. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a long, narrow case. Inside were strands of sapphires matching those on the gown. She pulled them out and began wrapping them around each of the individual braids nearest to the girl’s head. Once done she would thread them through where the braids came together and then leave them hanging loose against the curtain of hair still falling down Bilba’s back.

“Bilba,” she said carefully as she worked. “I wondered if you might consider allowing me to deal with your courting requests for you?”

Bilba gave her a wide eyed look. You would do that?

“Absolutely,” Dis answered. She finished wrapping the final braid in sapphires and began carefully working the strands through the larger, combined braid. “I would reject those that were not properly submitted. For the rest, you and I could sit down and talk about them and figure out what you wanted to do, if anything.”

Doing it that way would give her a chance to find out what exactly the girl did and did not understand as well as the opportunity to help walk her through whatever feelings she may have toward a particular suitor. Speaking of which, she would also need to sit her oldest son down and have a talk with him. She had absolute faith that her son would never take advantage of Bilba but it would be a different story if the girl genuinely didn’t know her own self. If he tried to court her and she felt she couldn’t say no or perhaps thought she was in love with him and actually wasn’t while he meanwhile assumed she understood…there were just so many ways it could go wrong, for the both of them. The best way to deal with it would be to simply place herself between Bilba and her potential suitors and walk the road with her until the girl found her own way.

She finished the braid stepped back. “All done.”

Bilba stood and turned to face her. As she did, Dis stepped back to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. With her hair down, in a shimmering dress that accentuated the natural curves of her body, the girl looked like an entirely different young woman.

An entirely different, stunning young woman.

I would like it if you would do that, Bilba said, completely oblivious and referring to the courting requests. I doubt I’ll get many so it shouldn’t be too much trouble.

She was going to get plenty of requests, Dis thought, for all the reasons she’d already listed off to Fili and as soon as anyone saw her in her dress. She took Bilba by the shoulders and walked her over to a large, full length mirror in the corner of the room.

Bilba sucked in a sharp breath. That’s me?

“That’s you,” Dis said.
Bilba turned and spontaneously hugged her. Almost at once she pulled back, a look of uncertainty in her eyes but it lasted only an instant as Dis dragged her back in and hugged her properly.

When she pulled away Bilba offered her a shy smile that had Dis wanting to go personally slaughter every last orc on Middle Earth for the pain they’d put the girl through.

*Is it okay if I go show Syrath?*

“Absolutely,” Dis said. “We have plenty of time. Just no flights or leaving the mountain to fight orcs, alright? At least not until after the Celebration.”

Bilba agreed and then was gone in a swirl of satin and lace.

Behind her, Dis cleaned up and headed out herself. She had time before the Celebration to make brief visits to a few select people. They would be sure to start spreading the word, making it quite clear that, as far as she was concerned, Bilba was as much hers as Fili and Kili were.

And that anyone, *anyone*, attempting to harm or take advantage of her would pay. Dearly.

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Bilba hurried through the halls to the dragon level. Several people she passed stopped and greeted her or gave her startled looks.

Unused to anyone noticing her at all, Bilba put her head down and kept moving.

Why were they looking at her? It felt like something was crawling under her skin. Was it because they could see her scars? She’d felt alright in her room with Dis there but now her confidence was already flagging. She was so used to wearing more that she almost felt exposed in nothing more than a dress. Self-conscious, she crossed her arms over her chest until she reached the doorway through to the dragons. She could feel Syrath only feet away and it was only then that the tight knot in her chest eased.

She stepped through and slowed to a stop at the sight of the dwarf King standing in front of Syrath. He had a hand up, lightly resting on Syrath’s nose.

As she hesitated, Syrath moved his head toward her, eyes zeroing in on her.

*Bilba! You look so pretty! And sparkly!*

The King turned at well, looking at her with a frown. “I apologize, my Lady,” he said, his voice oddly formal. “I didn’t realize you were standing there.”

Bilba gave him a weak grin and moved forward. Immediately Syrath lowered his head and pressed against her. Bilba wrapped one arm up under his jaw and leaned against him, resting her own head against his.

The King looked confused, then his eyes widened. “Bilba,” he said, “I didn’t recognize you.”

Bilba pressed closer against Syrath, the confidence she’d felt over wearing so pretty a dress waning
further. *Is that a bad thing, your Highness?*

The King smiled at her. “Not at all, my Lady,” he said, his voice gentle. “And, please, call me Thorin. You’re my heir’s ride partner. You have the right.”

Bilba nodded, her eyes focused on the ground. *As you wish…Thorin.*

The name sounded odd and she half expected him to correct her but, instead, he looked pleased. He stepped forward again and put a hand back on Syrath, his smile broadening as the dragon rumbled and moved enough to nuzzle his palm.

“I enjoy visiting him,” Thorin explained. “It reminds me Quenth isn’t entirely gone. Some part of her still exists.”

He sounded wistful.

*Perhaps you’ll bond with another dragon someday,* Bilba offered. She knew it wouldn’t be the same. She doubted she could form a relationship with another dragon if something happened to Syrath but she also couldn’t imagine being shackled to the ground after having lived in the sky. A second dragon wouldn’t be the same but at least it would ease some small part of the pain.

Thorin gave her a sidelong, resigned look. “Quenth was my second dragon. When Dis, Frerin and I were very small we bonded with dragons from the same clutch, Dis to one and Frerin and I to another. Soon after an illness swept through the nursery. Where it came from we never found out but we lost an entire generation of infant drakes, among them mine and Dis’.” His voice lowered, barely audible. “‘We never even learned their names. They never grew old enough to tell us.’ He looked to Syrath. “When Lyth, and later Quenth, were born it was a second chance for all three of us.” He lowered his hand, stepping away from Syrath. “There are some who say the bloodline of Durin is cursed. Dis, Frerin and I lost our first dragons, I lost my second. We lost another at Moria, along with my grandfather. I lost my grandmother, mother, father and Frerin.” He suddenly looked far older than she knew him to be. “‘Throw in the assassination attempts over the past few years and even I have to admit the idea of being cursed doesn’t seem so very farfetched.”

You’ve all survived those attempts though, Bilba said. *And the illness wasn’t your fault, neither was Quenth and Frerin being captured. As for your father and grandfather…it was a battle. I was there, a lot of people died. She let go of Syrath and stepped forward until she stood in front of Thorin. I saw you there. I didn’t think you had lived, so many orcs surrounded you. Yet you did and struck a blow against Azog at the same time. You can look at it one way and say that you’re cursed but you can just as readily look at it and say your family is blessed to have come through so much and survived.*

Thorin studied her. “Perhaps you are right, my Lady.”

He held an arm up, crooked so his elbow was out. “I believe it’s about time to head to the Ceremony. If you would allow me to escort you?”

Bilba nodded, a flood of relief washing through her. The last thing she wanted to do was walk through the corridors alone again and there was no way she could walk into the ballroom by herself.

Behind her, Syrath nudged her in the back.

*Are you okay?*

Bilba nodded at him, reaching out to hug his nose. *I’m okay.*
*Let me know if I need to eat anyone*, Syrath said, sounding far too happy at the idea.

Bilba laughed. *I will.*

She took Thorin’s arm, breathed in slowly to try and calm her nerves, straightened her back and allowed him to lead her out.

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Instead of going directly to the ballroom, Thorin led her to a small room behind it. The rest of the royal family was already there waiting for Thorin. Kili gave Bilba a confused look as the two of them entered.

Fili never hesitated.

He was up at once, crossing over to them. He nodded respectfully to his uncle and then reached to take Bilba’s hands as she released Thorin’s arm.

“Bilba, you look amazing.”

Bilba gave him a weak smile. *Thank you.*

Almost automatically she wrapped her hand around his bicep and he bent his arm for her. She grabbed his forearm with her other hand, fingers digging into the vambrace he wore. He was dressed in light ceremonial armor, polished to a high sheen. His hair and braids were immaculate and he wore a sword she’d never seen before strapped to his waist.

He looked amazing too. She wanted to tell him but, for some reason, suddenly felt nervous. She didn’t understand that. She hadn’t felt nervous around Fili since she’d accepted he wasn’t a rival for Syrath. Why did she feel that way now?

She focused on his sword, and the arm she was holding, and frowned. *I'm holding your sword arm.*

*I hope I don’t have to draw my sword at my own Celebration,* his voice sounded dryly in her head, *if I do then Dwalin is fired.*

Bilba gave him a hopeful look and Fili snorted. *No, you can’t attack me.*

*Then you shouldn’t have brought it up,* Bilba groused. *It's not like you’d be in danger. You still beat me in training.*

Fili just shook his head, amused.

*Hand shaking and arm holding,* Bilba muttered. *There seem to be a lot of traditions that involve limiting your ability to reach your weapons.*

*Not something I’d thought about before I met you,* Fili replied, *but you have successfully gotten me to start looking at things with a far more paranoid eye.*

*There’s nothing wrong with being paranoid,* Bilba answered, *especially when people are, in fact, out to get you.*
Thorin stepped away from speaking to Dis and Vili, nodded toward Fili and then headed up the stairs that would lead onto the front stage of the ballroom. The stairs were lined with soldiers and Bilba imagined the ballroom would be as well.

Her stomach was clenching in an impressive way and it was a struggle to not turn and run back to Syrath until the party was over.

She might not have made the depths of her dislike for crowds clear enough. Fili had wanted her to come, however, and she didn’t want him to think she was rejecting him by saying no. The nobility of Erebor also wanted to meet her, for some reason, and Fili had offered to combine her official introduction with his Celebration rather than do a separate party for her.

There was no way she’d have shown up for a party where the only reason it was being thrown was her. She’d have gotten Syrath and gone to find orcs, or the goblins. She was still giving serious consideration to declaring a vendetta against them, more from annoyance at being caught by them than anything else, admittedly, but it didn’t make it any less necessary.

Thorin had gone out, followed by Dis and Vili and then Kili behind them. That left just her and Fili. Well, and a ton of guards but they wouldn’t be walking out into a full room of people staring at them.

Aragorn and Arwen would be there, she reminded herself. She wanted to see them. She really did.

“You ready?” Fili asked.

She was not ready by any means but Bilba nodded at him anyway. She raised her chin and fixed her eyes on a random point before her.

Then, with Fili beside her, she walked up the stairs and out into the ballroom.

She fought orcs on a daily basis after all. She’d survived the Arena. She’d survived a lifetime in Moria. She could handle a room full of nobles.

Right?

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Bilba could have been carved from stone.

It was like some sort of bizarre transformation as they stepped from the door into the main room. Fili was distracted at first, his eyes taking in the crowd. The room was massive, able to fit hundreds if needed and it currently was with most of the nobility of Middle Earth standing in it.

The floor was white marble, the stone walls smoothed down and overlaid with elaborate tapestries, soaring columns and painted panels depicting important scenes from dwarven history. The ceiling overhead featured twisting, coiling drakes of every color, jewels set in their eyes and glittering from their talons giving the paintings a lifelike quality.

The stage they stepped out onto was created from the same material as the floor, rising up at one end of the room. The platform was large, keeping them back from the crowd. A long line of shallow
steps led down into the room itself. Currently his uncle was at the front, turned back to watch Fili approach.

It was at about that time that he noticed the change in Bilba. She was stiff next to him, her head up and eyes focused over the heads of the crowd. To anyone looking she appeared the image of Orcrist, the warrior, fearless, survivor of a thousand battles, many of them now greatly exaggerated by the legend that had sprung up around her.

But the grip she had on his arm was bruising. He could feel it even through his armor. She was also holding onto him with both hands, her body pulled so close she was nearly hugging his arm more than holding it. It wasn't that he minded her so close, especially when she looked so stunning it left him breathless every time he so much as caught a glimpse from the corner of his eye, but he could also see the light, almost imperceptible tremor running along her body, the way her breathing was just a few beats faster than normal.

Syrath, he called, *I understand nerves but she’s terrified. Why?*

As he spoke he stepped up and gave a low bow as his uncle introduced him. Bilba was introduced next, his uncle giving her the title of “Bilba, Orc Cleaver; rider to Syrath, the Foe Hammer; partner to Fili, son of Dis, daughter of Thror, Prince and Heir Apparent to Erebor.”

His uncle always had enjoyed titles.

It would be the last time he would be called heir apparent. The Coming of Age Ceremony would also double as his coronation, officially declaring him as the Crown Prince of Erebor in truth and not just name or expectation.

*She doesn’t like crowds*, Syrath answered and Fili resisted sighing in exasperation.

*I know that but why? Did something specific happen?*

As he spoke he turned and escorted Bilba down the long flight of stairs. His parents and brother were lined along one side and, technically, should have been lined up in order of rank with his mother first, then his brother and then his father. His mother, however, had moved so she was at the end instead of his father. Fili handed Bilba over to her and his mother immediately wrapped an arm around her waist and dragged her close. Bilba, in turn, wrapped her own arm around Dis and stayed closed. Under other circumstances it might have been out of order but people were, or should be, aware of Bilba’s age. They would make allowances.

They would make allowances or have his mother to deal with and Fili couldn’t think of anyone foolish enough to challenge her.

He gave Bilba what he hoped was a look of reassurance and then returned to the center of the stairs, in front of his uncle. He knelt easily on one knee, one hand braced against the floor, the other arm resting lightly across his bent leg.

His uncle started the ceremony. He would make a speech about Fili reaching adulthood, his responsibilities, so on and so forth. Then the Coronation, then he’d be presented to the crowd and then the festivities could begin.

*She can’t tell who the orcs are.*

*The orcs?* Fili asked. *There are no orcs here.*

*There are people who act like orcs,* Syrath explained. *But she can’t tell who they are. It was easier*
in Moria. She knew who the orcs were. There were bad slaves too but they were as worn down as anyone else and easy to avoid. Here she can’t even be sure who they are much less avoid them. She really should just let me eat them.

Some of them have dragons of their own, Fili said dryly. They might take issue with you trying to eat their riders.

Syrath sent something that was probably his version of scoffing.

Fili’s knee was starting to hurt from being pressed into the marble and his back was beginning to cramp from being bent. He absently sent the feelings to his uncle and felt amusement in return. Since Syrath had arrived his uncle had slowly began to open up his bond with them, rejoining the family in many respects. He still brooded, far more than was probably healthy, but he was there again in a way he hadn’t been for years now.

**There’s also the bounty hunters**, Syrath’s voice suddenly piped in his head.

*The WHAT?*

Syrath’s voice took on the tone of it’s-very-sad-that-you-are-so-dumb-and-don’t-realize-obvious-things-that-should-be-obvious-even-though-I-never-told-you-about-them that he’d heard from Bilba a few times, raising questions as to if one of them was getting it from the other or if they simply made each other worse.

*The orcs have a bounty on her, and me too, but mostly her. It was pretty high last time we checked. It's probably higher now since we killed the Watcher and destroyed the Arena. Things like that tend to piss them off.*

*I would imagine it would*, Fili said dryly.

*It’s high enough that there are always bounty hunters trying to collect*, Syrath continued. *They wait in the towns and cities. I can’t go in with her. She has to go by herself and she can’t tell who the bounty hunters are, not until they attack anyway.*

Fili tensed, his eyes fixed on the marble stair he was kneeling over. *How many times has she been attacked?*

**Too many.**

Fili closed his eyes for a second, resisting the urge to swear rather colorfully. At least now he understood why she’d turned down his multiple invitations to visit Dale or Lake-town.

*We would protect her.*

**Who would protect you? She doesn’t like putting others at risk.**

*But she doesn’t mind being at risk herself*, Fili muttered.

*It’s a character flaw. I’m working on it.*

Fili nearly snorted out loud and barely managed to cover it.

*Still there are no bounty hunters here.*
But it is a big crowd. It calls up bad memories.

Fili didn’t have a lot of time to think about Syrath’s words as Thorin ended his speech a few minutes later and the Coronation started. Fili felt his nerves reacting as a thick purple robe was settled over his shoulders. The circlet was brought next. Up to that point he’d worn a simple gold one, his brother’s silver. The one being handed to his uncle now was mithril, the center dipped down to a sharp point over his forehead and bearing a large ruby edged with gold. If one drew near enough they would see the rest of the band bore the crest of Durin, engraved in gold.

Thorin stepped forward, raising it high as he solemnly intoned the ancient words that had once been spoken over him and several generations before him.

Then the band was being settled over his forehead, a cool band of ice quickly warmed by the heat of his skin.

“Rise, Fili,” his uncle stated and he obeyed, turning smoothly to face the crowd, one hand on the hilt of his sword, earning him a hopeful look from Bilba.

I’m not drawing my sword.

The hopeful look turned into a glare.

“People of Erebor,” Thorin said, clear pride coloring his voice, “Lords and Ladies of Middle Earth, I present to you Fili, son of Dis, daughter of Thror, Crown Prince under the Mountain.”

As one the members of the room who ranked beneath him sank to one knee, heads bowed in respect. Those who matched him in power nodded their heads while the few Kings and Queens who’d attended applauded.

Fili was used to some level of respect or recognition of his rank but never to this extent.

He took a deep breath, a level of nervousness he hadn’t felt before suddenly sinking in. He’d tried preparing a speech, he really had. Each one had insisted on turning out worse than the one before.

He should have just asked Kili to do it.

“My Lords and Ladies of Middle Earth,” he said, trying desperately to sound more like his uncle and less like himself, “I thank you for coming and celebrating with me on this day.”

Mahal, he sounded like an idiot. His brain had literally locked down, not a single original thought was making its way in.

He looked at Bilba who was virtually attached to his mother’s side.

He took another deep breath. “Some would say my family has lived a cursed life, others a blessed one. Wherever the truth lies, I know it doesn’t begin to compare to the trials faced, and overcome, by my ride partner.”

What are you doing?

Bilba sounded mildly outraged but she’d also released her death grip on his mother fractionally, her ire replacing some of her fear.

Saving us both, Fili responded and then continued.

“I don’t know what the future holds,” he said, “but I am firmly convinced that if I can face it, and
whatever trials and obstacles it may hold, with even a fraction of the strength, grace and courage Bilba has demonstrated on a daily basis then I will consider it a success.” The crowd applauded and Fili took the opportunity to address his, currently slightly murderous, partner.

*I don’t suppose you’ll dance with me would you? If you don’t I’m going to have to pick someone else and that could go poorly.

There was a large group of young women clustered at the base of the stairs. Most had probably spent weeks scheming to get as close as possible and he was slightly concerned how they would react if he was forced to go down to them and pick one to open the ball with.

*I don’t know how to dance*, Bilba answered curtly. She was looking at him like she was considering putting him back on the “to be killed in their sleep” list.

*We don’t have to actually dance*, Fili responded, *we can go through one of our forms.

*You want to spar in the middle of your celebration?*

*Just the foot placement.* He stepped forward and held a hand out to her, simultaneously eliciting a groan of dismay from many of the women in the group at the foot of the stairs. It also resulted in a few glares being sent toward Bilba, who noticed and simply glared back until they looked away. “My Lady.”

Bilba reached out and took his hand, her grip firm and not shaking as her irritation overrode her fear, for the moment at least.”

Fili turned and led her down the stairs, the crowd parting before them to allow them access to the main dance floor.

*Why did you say all that?*

*Because it was true.* They reached the center and he slid an arm around her waist. *Free arm around my neck if you would and I do repeat, neck, not throat.*

That earned him a faint smile before she reached up and put her arm in the correct position. *I have been to parties like this before you know, in Gondor.*

*Were they as fun?*

*I didn’t have to dance.*

*Not as much fun then. Form 9?*

She raised an eyebrow, fully aware it was the most complicated form, and also the one they’d spent the morning practicing.

She nodded fractionally and they started. Fili knew the form like the back of his hand and easily altered his own pattern, reversing and mirroring it so they appeared to be moving in a slow, graceful dance. The band hired for the evening, set up on their own dais near the stage, caught the cadence and soon began playing, showing their experience by somehow creating, on the spot, a melody that perfectly matched their steps.

*Do I have to start calling you, Your Highness now?*

*Mahal, I hope not. You’ll get Syrath involved and then it’ll be “Your Highness” this and “Your*
“Highness” that in a mocking tone.

Syrath may well start calling you it regardless.

I know. He’s like the dragon version of Kili.

It was over far too soon. Fili found he quite liked the feel of her in his arms. He continually forgot how small she was, the presence she gave off larger than life. He had to remind himself Orcrist was the persona and there was an actual blood and bone girl underneath the façade of fearlessness and invulnerability.

As they turned the crowd, which had been gathered around them watching, applauded and he instantly had Bilba doing her statute impression again.

I can assure you there are no bounty hunters at my Celebration.

Bilba’s eyes narrowed. Syrath talks too much.

You don’t have to go into the cities or towns alone anymore, Fili said. Never again.

Bilba didn’t look at him, her gaze roving through the crowd. And what will you do when they attack?

Probably kill them, Fili said cheerfully. We went over this, remember? We both have enemies, we’re both a danger to those around us. We’ve both decided taking on the other’s danger is acceptable and we’re both more than capable of dealing with it.

The orchestra started playing again and people streamed onto the floor to dance.

Fili absently spun to face her, taking her hands in his and leading her off the floor. In fact it’s far more likely I’ll end up saving you. As you said, I still beat you in training, just did so this morning in fact.

A glint of challenge entered Bilba’s eyes. You cheated.

Of course I cheated, Fili said matter of fact. Bounty hunters, orcs and assassins don’t normally fight fairly or honorably, why should I? His eyes narrowed. You already know that though. You cheat constantly.

Of course I do, Bilba said. But that doesn’t mean I can’t still be annoyed when you do it.

She was smiling as she said it but her eyes were uncertain. With a start Fili realized she was trying to joke with him. He smiled broadly at her and moved to stand at her side again. Grabbing her hand lightly he settled it on his arm and nodded toward the room. “Let’s go meet our fans shall we? We’ll see if we can find Arwen and Aragorn too. They’re sure to be around here somewhere”

Bilba nodded. Alright.

With that they turned to face the crowd.

Together.

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There were so many people that Bilba soon lost track of who even a fraction of them were.

It wasn’t just people from Erebor, though there were plenty of those. She met members of the Council and their families, Lords and Ladies of various houses all swearing they had bloodlines dating back to one of the original dwarven fathers. After that there was the stoic King of Mirkwood, Thranduil, and his far more approachable son, Legolas. There was the King of Rohan, a sour faced man named Thengel and his wife, Morwen along with their no less than seven children. She spotted Denethor, the young Steward of Gondor, standing near Arathorn and his wife Gilraen. She saw no sign of Aragorn and though she thought she caught a glimpse of Elrond she didn’t see Arwen.

She had been told multiple times that her name was a virtual legend and as the night wore on she was quickly finding it to be true. Everyone who approached seemed to think they already knew her and most had stories, many exaggerated, of her various feats. They jostled to get near her, reaching hands out to touch her, something she did not enjoy in the least. She’d barely started getting used to the idea of Fili touching her, having strangers doing it, and so many all gathered in close where she could easily miss a knife or other threat, unnerved her. Fili began moving her, angling his own body to block her from others but there were far too many for him to be able to block them all.

And then, without warning, it suddenly stopped. One moment Fili was pulling her away from the fourth or fifth noble invading her personal space and the next minute, as though by magic, there was a wide berth about them. As Bilba looked out in surprise she noticed that there were more guards than before, many of them close, casually moving about through the crowd. They didn’t say a word to anyone but their mere presence successfully reminded people of their manners.

*Did you do that?* She asked Fili.

*I was about to,* Fili replied, *but Dwalin beat me to it.*

He nodded off to his left and Bilba looked to see the dwarf in question a few yards away. He was standing near a white haired dwarf she hadn’t seen before.

*Who is that with him?*

*His brother, Balin. He’s been on a diplomatic mission to Rohan and returned along with the delegation. Xalanth hasn’t been happy with him gone but Rohan doesn’t allow dragons within its borders, as much as anyone can keep a dragon out anyway. They claim they scare the horses.*

*More likely they eat the horses.*

*Probably.*

Bilba studied the white haired dwarf. Her uncle. Her mother hadn’t known him all that well. He’d been an ambassador then, clearly still was, and was often gone from the mountain when Belladonna visited. Dwalin glanced in her direction, an odd look in his eyes. A few minutes later he did it again and then again moments after that.

*Why does he keep looking at me?*

Fili frowned. *I don’t know. Want me to ask him?*

*NO.* The last thing she wanted was for the Bastard to think she had even the slightest interest in him. Fili stiffened suddenly and when he spoke his voice was cool. “Lord Kairn…and Garn.”

A tall, solidly built dwarf was approaching them. He was dripping with signs of wealth to the point
of being obscene and Bilba wasn’t sure how he got his hair to appear to be one solid block like that or why he felt it was a look to desire. Beside him was one of the dwarves Bilba remembered from the group who’d taunted her during training. She’d seen them from time to time in the training room after that point, three of them sporting braces on their noses. One of them, Nain, had apologized to her almost immediately and subsequently had become quite friendly with her, often greeting her when she arrived and asking about her day. One of the others had also apologized but avoided her while the third one, and Garn, ignored her altogether. Garn, as she recalled, was the only one uninjured because he’d fallen to his knees like a coward and begged for mercy.

Both of them bowed low before Kairn addressed Bilba. “My Lady, I had been hoping to speak with you, in private if possible.”

Bilba tightened her grip on Fili’s arm. She didn’t want to talk to them alone. She didn’t even want to talk to them somewhere private with Fili there. She didn’t want to go anywhere with them at all. They were nobles. Any time a noble in Gondor wanted to speak to her in private it was always a bad thing. Always telling her how her presence was a blight on Aragorn’s reputation and character, how it would be best for him if she would just go away and not return. How no one actually wanted her in the first place, they were just being kind, just tolerating her and hoping she were intelligent enough to get the hint and leave.

“Bilba can’t speak,” Fili said, “and, not being riders, you can’t talk to her through mind link. I also don’t believe I recall either of you knowing Iglishmek so you won’t be able to communicate with her without me and I can’t very well leave my own Celebration.”

Kairn frowned, “Perhaps at a later time--”

“I’m assuming,” Fili cut in, his voice firm, “you wish to facilitate your son’s apology. Seeing as his insult was given in public don’t you think it’d be appropriate for the apology to be given in the same manner?”

Kairn opened his mouth, and then shut it again. He’d been neatly maneuvered into a corner and he knew it.

As he stumbled Bilba tightened her grip on Fili’s arm even further.

*I don’t want to talk to them in private, now or ever. You won’t have to. I’ll handle it.*

Kairn gestured toward his son and the other dwarf came forward and made an awkward bow. “My Lady, I wanted to apologize for the insult I gave you in the training room.”

Bilba nodded shortly.

Kairn nudged his son, clearly pressing him to do something. Garn looked annoyed but then said, “I was wondering if I might interest you in a tour of Dale in the near future? I know of some amazing places to eat and there are a number of booths that sell different…fabrics and…girl…things I guess. *Son of an orc,* Fili’s voice sounded in her head. *I guess we know who the bastard is that left that courting gift outside your room like a coward. Should have figured it’d be him.*

Bilba latched onto that. *Dis said I don’t have to deal with those.*

This time it was Fili’s turn to frown. *She said what?*
She said I could say no, Bilba said, and that I can let her take care of those things. That anyone who leaves me a gift can go to her and she’ll take care of it for me. She looked at him, suddenly unsure. She meant it, right? I can say no?

Of course you can say no, Fili said. Especially to an ass who can’t be bothered to give you a gift in person and who seems to have been put up to it by his father.

Why would he do that? Bilba studied the two dwarves. Both were standing quietly, aware she and Fili were conferring via link.

Status probably, Fili replied. I imagine he wasn’t too pleased when he found out about Garn’s behavior in the training room. He’s hoping he can smooth it over now with an apology. He studied the two. I wonder if he even knows about his son’s botched gift attempt? Kairn isn’t nearly as inept as his son. I imagine he either doesn’t know at all or he told Garn to do it properly.

Out loud, he said, “The Lady declines your offer. She also wishes to make it known that my mother, Princess Dis, has volunteered to be her sponsor and Bilba has accepted. Any future such requests, or gifts, should be made to her.”

He made it sound much better than how she’d said it. He’d been doing that all night in fact, responding to the nobles in correct and polite speech and claiming it was her saying it no matter how tongue tied, or outright petrified she really was.

Garn blanched, actually blanched, his face draining completely of color.

I think I’m insulted, Bilba said, it appears he finds your mother more frightening than me.

You’ve never been on her bad side, Fili replied, don’t let it bother you though. Garn’s an idiot.

He looked past them and Bilba saw his eyes brighten. “Ah, if you’ll excuse me. I see a few of Bilba’s friends have arrived.”

Bilba followed his gaze and found her spirits lifting immediately at the sight of Aragorn and Arwen walking into view. Lord Elrond was striding next to his daughter, talking to her in a low voice.

Kairn and Garn both turned and Bilba saw their eyes widen.

“She’s friends with the Crown Prince of Gondor?”

“She is indeed,” Fili murmured, “As well as the Lord of Rivendell and now the entire royal family of Erebor. Not to mention being a legend beloved by many and a rider.” He gave Kairn a cool look. “You should think about retraining your son, Kairn. He insulted someone who could have been a powerful ally.”

With that he straightened and then he was pulling Bilba away toward Aragorn and Arwen. They had noticed her as well and were making their way in her direction.

Bilba began to hurry, only to come up short as yet another dwarf was suddenly in their way. She vaguely recognized him as someone she’d seen wandering the upper halls from time to time but she’d never spoken to him. He was older, closer to Thorin’s age, and she hadn’t seen any family associated with him.

“Nar,” Fili said. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to make it.”

“Oh,” the other dwarf replied. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He bowed low and then
straightened and addressed Bilba. “And you must be the Lady Bilba. I have a daughter your age, Beryl. She’s in Rivendell at the moment but I’m sure she’ll be most interested to meet you when she returns, most interested indeed.”

There was something…off about the dwarf, Bilba thought. She didn’t know what it was, couldn’t quite put her finger on it but it was…something. Perhaps the way his smile didn’t quite seem to reach his eyes or the way he kept fidgeting and couldn’t seem to stand still.

Nar’s eyes drifted down to where her hand was curled around Fili’s forearm. For a second he stared and then, suddenly, he made an odd, almost choking noise in the back of his throat. His eyes went wide and his entire body actually swayed, almost involuntarily moving forward before he jerked back.

“Nar?” Fili said, “Are you alright?”

Nar looked up and there was a flash of a strange light in his eyes. It was a light Bilba had seen before, in the eyes of the slaves who’d been finally pushed too far, until something inside them had withered or broken entirely. The look was gone instantly but Bilba felt herself still and instinctively slid one hand into her pocket and through the slit in the fabric until she could wrap her hand around the hilt of the dagger strapped to her thigh.

“I’m fine,” Nar said. “I apologize, it’s been a rather trying day.” He nodded at Bilba’s hand, an odd strained note to his voice. “That’s a lovely ring you’re wearing. A family heirloom perhaps?”

“Ring?” Fili said. “What ring?”

Ring? Bilba looked down and realized, with a start, she was wearing a ring, the slender gold band she’d found in the goblin caves nearly a month earlier.

*I forgot I was wearing it,* she said in surprise. *I’ve had it on nearly a month now.*

*Have you?* Fili asked in surprise. *I don’t recall seeing it before. Where did you get it?*

Bilba relayed the story and Fili told it in turn to Nar.

The Councilman responding by looking like he’d just sucked on something exceptionally sour.

“Found it on a skeleton did you? Underneath Goblin Town? Just…stumbled across it, just like that. No searching, weren’t even down there a minute and you just…found it.”

He seemed…angry almost though for what reason Bilba couldn’t begin to guess.

*If he wants it he can have it,* she told Fili. *I don’t particularly care.*

Fili was studying Nar, a speculative look on his face. “Is there a reason you have an interest in a random ring Bilba found?”

“What?” Nar’s face went blank, his eyes widening with surprise. “No, no of course not. I was just thinking, it is a beautiful ring. Some people have all the luck, yes? I go on walks you know, all the time, never found more than a pretty rock here or there. Your young lady falls into a lake and nearly lands on a ring. Funny how luck works.”

“Considering how her life has gone in comparison to yours,” Fili replied, “I would imagine luck had nothing to do with it and that a simple ring is paltry repayment for what she’s been through.”
“Yes,” Nar said contritely, “Yes of course. My apologies. I wasn’t thinking. If you’ll excuse me.”

And, with that, he was gone, hurrying away through the crowd and quickly becoming lost in the crush.

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Aragorn and Arwen arrived an instant later, having hung back until Nar left, and Fili had little time to consider the other dwarf’s odd behavior. He mentioned it to Dwalin via link and heard the Guard Captain respond but he sounded distracted, no doubt busy talking to his brother. Balin had been gone nearly six months after all, he had clearly been missed.

“Bilba!” Arwen dropped to her knees, uncaring of her gown, and threw her arms around Bilba. Aragorn soon joined them as did Elrond.

They pulled away and Fili was stunned to see a broad, genuine smile on Bilba’s face as she surveyed them. Arwen was holding her hands and seemed unwilling to let go, her eyes studying Fili with clear suspicion in them.

“We were worried about you,” Aragorn stated. “The last report we had was of Syrath being run down over Mirkwood. Of you there was no sign.”

Bilba looked down, abashed and there was silence as she no doubt spoke with Aragorn via link.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Aragorn said after a moment. “We were simply worried. I looked everywhere for any sign of you. I even sent riders to the Shire to see if anyone there had news. Primula was ready to ride out herself and start looking but I convinced her to stay and wait for us to send word. The dwarves at the Garrison all volunteered to go as well, particularly Bofur who claimed to my riders he wasn’t about to allow any friend of his to go missing on his watch.”

As he watched, Fili saw Bilba’s eyes start to water. She twisted her hands together at her waist and focused on her feet.

“They were always your friends, dear one,” Aragorn chided gently. “It was not they who left.”

“Come,” Arwen stepped forward and slid an arm around Bilba’s shoulders. “Let’s go sit down and you can tell me all about what’s happened between then and now.” She shot another less than friendly look at Fili and then she was gone, leading Bilba over to a set of couches near one of the walls. Elrond followed, standing protectively near both as they settled on one of them.

“My apologies, your Highness, for neglecting to acknowledge you,” Aragorn said, turning to Fili. “I hope you can forgive my oversight and poor manners, as well as those of my wife.”

“Of course,” Fili said immediately. “I’m glad to know Bilba has others out there as concerned about her welfare as I’ve grown to be.”

Aragorn nodded. “Arwen will come around. She just needs to hear from Bilba that you haven’t been taking advantage of her in some way or forcing her to stay her against her will. Not that I imagine anyone could force Bilba, or Syrath, to do something against their will but Arwen is overprotective, as am I.”
“I understand,” Fili agreed. “I would do the same if our positions were reversed.”

“They’ll be there awhile,” Aragorn said, indicating his wife and Bilba who were both curled on the couch, their heads close together. “Care to join me for a drink? I would like to know how Bilba has been doing as well and I don’t particularly feel like waiting for Arwen to relay the news.”

“Absolutely,” Fili looked around for a server and found one. He gestured in that direction and Aragorn fell into step alongside him. “I admit I’d be interested in hearing more from you about Bilba as well.”

“I’ll tell you what I can,” Aragorn said, “though I’m afraid it will be less than you may think. She keeps a lot of what she’s up to private, not wanting to worry us. You’d have more luck talking to my dragon oddly enough. He and Syrath are quite close. I barely arrived and he was off to find Syrath to catch up.”

Fili checked and found that, indeed, Syrath was currently frolicking in the fields outside Erebor with the other dragon, Xalanth watching them both from the ledge overlooking the area.

He retrieved two drinks and together they took seats on the opposite side of the room from where Bilba and Arwen sat.

And there they talked.

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It was several hours later that Aragorn tilted his head to the side and then said, “Arwen reports Bilba is about near her limit.” He gave an approving nod at Fili. “It’s a testament to how much she likes you that she stayed this long. She’s not one for crowds.”

“So I’ve heard,” Fili replied. He stood and stretched, grimacing as his muscles protested moving after having been locked in place so long. Had he been talking to anyone other than the Crown Prince of Gondor he probably would have had a number of females of every Kingdom trying to drag him onto the dance floor. As it was his brother appeared to be filling the gap well enough, currently dancing with a dark haired elf maid and appearing to be having the time of his life. His younger brother, Fili was convinced, had a personal goal of dancing with every female at the party and was well on his way to achieving it.

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you, your Highness,” he said to Aragorn. The man stood and easily grabbed the hand Fili offered, his grip firm.

“And I you, Prince Fili. You’ve done much to assure me in regards to Bilba’s safety. I’ll admit I was half worried I’d have to start an incident to get her away from you.”

It was no idle jest. Through their conversation he’d learned Aragorn held a deep loyalty and affection for Bilba. He understood how alone she was, at least somewhat by choice, and had made it his mission to ensure she had at least one steadfast ally she could turn to. Her vanishing into Erebor, in his eyes, had been a sign he’d let her down right when she needed him. Had Fili proven to have had ulterior motives, Aragorn would have intervened, even if it meant potentially souring the relationship between the two kingdoms.

“Everyone deserves one person who will have their back no matter what,” he’d said, “just one. I
don’t think it’s too much to ask.”

It wasn’t and if Fili had his way Bilba would have far more than just one.

He took his leave of the other royal and began making his way across to the other side of the room. The crowd had thinned a bit, nobles taking their leave of his uncle and retiring to their rooms or starting their journey back home.

Spotting his mother talking to one of her friends, an older woman who’d been close to Fili’s grandmother, he sent, I’m going to take Bilba out of here. Do you think I’ll be missed?

Dis looked up, finding him quickly in the crowd. No, you’ve been here more than long enough and it’s expected you would slip out at some point to create your bond with your dragon. That your ride partner would be there with you would also be expected. No one will be offended.

Good. The last thing he wanted to do was insult the wrong dignitary.

Fili, his mother’s voice spoke again. Don’t make any courting moves on her, not until I’ve had a chance to speak to you.

Fili frowned. I hadn’t been planning to but why? Just a few hours ago you were practically demanding I do something.

That was before I’d had a chance to speak to her.

Fili stopped dead in his tracks. You’re not saying you now object to a possible match are you?

Of course not, don’t be ridiculous. After talking to her I’m completely convinced you couldn’t do better than her. The girl is naïve in many areas, far more than I would have thought given her age but understandable given her background.

What background is that?

One I cannot relay in a few minutes across a crowded ballroom. I’m not asking you to wait forever, just one night. I need to talk to you about it, that’s all.

Fili thought back to Bilba’s insistence that Dis had said it was alright for her to reject an advance, followed immediately by her questioning him if it was, in fact, truly alright.

I take it that’s why you offered to sponsor her?

Yes. As she is now, she can to easily be taken advantage of, accidentally or on purpose. The fact she was in Gondor’s courts and still retains her innocence and naivety suggests someone there was aware of the problem and was protecting her.

Arwen, Fili said instantly. She was about ready to have my head when she first saw me.

I’ll speak to her, Dis said. That way I can get a better understanding of what areas Bilba may need help in. I have no doubt she’ll be able to handle herself once she learns a bit more but, until then, she is in dire need of someone standing alongside her.

You’ll probably be hearing from Garn then. I’m fairly certain he’s the one that left the gift outside her door.

Good to know, Dis stated, her voice flat. I’ll be having a word with his mother, I think, on her son’s appalling lack of manners. That the girl had no family to take offense is no justification for
neglecting the basic social courtesies. The fact he dropped them the second he thought he could get away with it does not reflect well on his character.

No, Fili agreed, it does not.

He continued across the hall until he reached Arwen and Bilba. Bilba was curled up on the couch, her feet tucked under her. She was clearly worn out, her head resting on the arm of the couch, her eyes weary.

Arwen looked at him as he approached and Fili was heartened to see she appeared happier to see him than the last time.

“Your Highness,” she stated, getting to her feet. “Bilba has been telling me about you.”

She held a hand out and Fili grabbed it and bent over to kiss the back lightly. “Hopefully good things.”

“Indeed,” Arwen said, “and if you knew how hard it is to gain her favor you might realize what a high honor that is.”

“I have a good idea, my Lady,” Fili said. He sat down on the edge of the couch gently, the motion causing Bilba’s eyes to fully open and focus on him. He held out a hand. “Are you ready to leave?”

Bilba hesitated, looking toward Arwen. She in turn smiled and said. “Don’t worry. Aragorn and I plan to stay a few days. You’ll see me in the morning, or I suppose later today as I’m fairly sure we may already be into the next day.”

Bilba smiled at her and took Fili’s hand, allowing him to stand and pull her up with him. Arwen gave him an amused look and turned to look at Bilba. She in turn stumbled, turning her head so fast to look at Arwen she nearly risked hurting herself. To Fili’s astonishment her face went red and she shook her head sharply. Arwen only continued to look amused.

“I’ll leave her to you then,” she said to Fili, “with the understanding that if you do anything to harm her I will have to kill you, quite painfully and slowly.”

She said it with perfect sweetness and a smile on her face but there was a look of steel in her eyes and a quality to her voice that told him she was completely serious.

“I’ll hold you to that, my Lady,” Fili said and she inclined her head.

“See that you do.”

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Bilba sagged as they left the ballroom, exiting back into the nearly empty room behind the main stage. Nearly empty because there were still guards, as well as Fili’s personal guard who’d appeared from somewhere now that he was no longer surrounded by his family and most of Middle Earth’s royalty.

So, Fili said slowly, do you want to go back to your room right away? I wanted to show you something.
Alright, Bilba said. Syrath wasn’t ready to settle down yet anyway. Even if she went back she wouldn’t be able to sleep until he arrived.

Fili grinned and led her out of the room. Outside there were people milling about, those leaving the party and those returning as well as servants rushing back and forth and guards changing rotation. As they moved farther away the amount of people began to thin and the silence grew heavier.

Finally it was just them, and Fili’s guards, moving through dark and quiet halls. They passed homes with dark windows and then even those were gone and it was just tunnels of rock winding and twisting this way and that.

They rounded a corner to see a staircase before them, winding up through the rock. Fili stepped onto it and she joined him. The steps went up and up, and up farther still.

“Almost there,” Fili said finally, “I always forget just how far this thing goes.”

Ahead the stairs flattened out onto a large platform. A set of double doors was set on the far side and Fili jumped up the last few steps and jogged over to it.

He leaned against the door, pressing his palms flat against it and shoving the doors open. Then he turned and grinned at her. “I know you don’t like crowds and I know this was a lot more noise and people than you’re comfortable with. I thought you might like a few minutes of peace before retiring.”

Bilba stepped up to the door and paused.

She was standing on the edge of a massive balcony cut out from the side of the mountain. The floor was a mosaic of small, intricately set tiles. In the glittering light of the full moon she could make out the image of the Durin crest being held by two massive drakes.

“It’s the private balcony for our family,” Fili said. “We don’t have to worry about anyone following us, demanding to meet Orcrist.”

*Or Erebor’s newest heir,* Bilba said dryly. She hadn’t failed to notice that for every person who wanted to meet her just as many wanted to meet him, most of them female. Every time one had approached him she’d felt a surge of anger and a strange possessiveness. She’d mentioned it to Arwen who’d found the entire thing hilarious and had promised to explain it to her when she wasn’t nearly asleep on her feet.

Bilba stepped out onto the balcony, cold night air wrapping around her. She sighed and shut her eyes, breathing in and out slowly. She enjoyed the air outside mountains more than what was inside. It felt free, often carried on a breeze, darting in and out of her body like a live thing before racing off to some new, far off destination.

Anywhere it wanted to go.

She opened her eyes again and moved out farther. The balcony had a massive, curved railing cut from stone and covered with more of the small tiles. The top was wide and Bilba went to climb on it only to pause as she realized it would be difficult to do with a dress on.

Beside her, Fili put a hand on the stone and jumped up easily. Once there he held his hands down and she took them. An instant later he’d pulled her up easily to stand next to him.

Bilba moved to the edge and looked out over the landscape spread out far below. The balcony was in the front of the mountain overlooking the plain between Erebor and Dale. How she’d missed it in
her flights with Syrath she had no idea though she imagined that, from below at least, it probably simply looked like a shelf of rock jutting out from the side of the mountain.

She could see a few torches burning in Dale and, directly beneath, the giant torches at the gates of Erebor, held by massive statues, also burned merrily.

Overhead the moon, already sinking toward the horizon as Arwen had suspected, shone bright and stars glimmered, crystal cut in the sharp clarity of the mountain air.

She could feel the tension that had built up over the last few hours beginning to bleed out of her and she sagged to a seated position with a sigh. Fili sat next to her, close enough that their shoulders touched.

Absently Bilba leaned over until she could rest her head on his shoulder. Her body felt heavy, and her eyes were closing on their own. She yawned and leaned more of her weight against Fili. His arm slid around her waist, supporting her, creating the same weird feeling in her stomach she always got around him, though she was so tired she barely registered it.

*I should probably go to the dragon level,* she mumbled, *you don’t want to deal with me if I have a nightmare.*

*I’ll deal with anything you need me to deal with,* his voice replied inside her head. *I don’t want to be there for you only in the good times. I’ll be there at all times, no matter what.*

She was almost asleep. Part of her wasn’t even sure she was correctly hearing what he was saying, or if he was saying anything at all. It could just as easily be her own mind telling her what she wanted to hear.

She’d figure it out when she woke up.

If she remembered.

Maybe…maybe she’d ask him…about why…she yawned again and gave up on trying to think.

Instead she simply slept.

She’d deal with the rest once the sun came up.

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*Progress report.*

*Princess Dis and Lord Vili have retired for the night.*

*Prince Kili is still dancing though it appears he’s finally starting to wear down.*

*His Majesty is in conversation with King Arathorn.*

*The Crown Prince and the Lady Bilba are on the royal balcony. The Prince’s escort is present and guarding the entrance.*

Dwalin acknowledged the reports with a grunt and continued striding down the corridor. His hands
were clenched in fists at his side and the expression on his face must have been bad indeed for everyone who saw him scrambled to get out of his way, even more so than usual.

He reached a small, simple archway on one of the lowest levels and strode through. Narrow, close stairs lead down and he took them quickly, the air growing still and stagnant the further down he went.

He hated the fact he had to leave her down here.

She would have hated it as well.

If anything she would have wished to stay in the Shire, probably under that oak tree she’d loved so much.

She was here through his own selfishness, he understood that. After his welcome in the Shire had been rescinded he just…couldn’t, wouldn’t leave her there. Not when it would mean never being near her again.

So he had taken her with him and ensured the Thain’s anger against him had turned into an everlasting hate.

He had dealt with it, locked the pain, the grief and the anger away in a deep, dark place. He controlled it, he was controlled, always. The Captain of the Guard of Erebor. He was not ruled by his emotions. They were packed away, obedient, allowed out when he willed it, when he gave permission.

Until tonight.

His hands, if possible, clenched tighter and he ground his teeth until his jaw ached from it.

What was it about that girl?

She showed up out of nowhere, a tiny firebrand wrapped in more layers of hatred and pain than he had, too young to control it, too young to be blamed for it.

Most of it directed straight at him for reasons he still didn’t understand and she wasn’t willing to share.

Her association with Fili meant he would have come into contact with her at some point no matter what, see her at dinners or in the corridors.

But he seemed to be seeing her everywhere.

She was at training, with Vanguard, wandering the gates when his shift rotation came, with the dragons when he went to visit Xalanth. Every time she saw him her eyes would darken and she would leave, walking with a grace that brought an odd sense of nostalgia with it though he couldn’t understand why.

Or he hadn’t understood why.

Not until he’d seen her tonight.

She’d been turned away from him, her hair falling over her back, and for a second his heart had lurched in his chest and he’d staggered to a stop as if a wall had suddenly appeared in his path.

He’d been so sure, for that split second; that one instant that beyond all logic, all thought, all reason
that he’d been looking at Bella.

Then she’d turned around and his breath had left him in a rush and he’d spent the rest of the evening desperately trying to get himself under control.

He should have been prepared for it. Bella had ten siblings after all. The bloodline had endured, it had to have, and here it was staring him in the face fifty years later. Who knew which of Bella’s many siblings she’d descended from, or even a close relative, the family was massive after all, but descend she clearly had and brought the looks that had once graced his wife with her.

He’d forced himself to look at her, cataloging the ways she was different, forcing his mind to understand the difference. She was a dwobbit for a start, Bella had been a hobbit. She was taller, her frame sturdier. She looked at every approaching figure as a threat to be assessed where Bella would have been offering them tea and scones no matter how often he tried to convince her to be more cautious.

The girl bore scars, deep ones, bearing testimony to the harshness of the life she’d lived in the mines. Bella’s skin had been unmarked, her life one of ease and peace, at least until the end.

He was moving past rows of doors now, silent ones. No movement came from the other side, no movement would ever come.

The one he wanted was in the back, in a larger area set off to the side. Thorin had insisted he take one of the rooms there, set aside for members of the direct royal bloodline normally but officially gifted to Dwalin and his bloodline.

A bitter, strangled sound escaped him as he headed toward the room.

His bloodline.

He had no bloodline. It had died, with her, on a road while he’d been a world away fighting a battle to save innocents.

Ironic that. Orc raids had been increasing, the creatures getting bolder in light of past successes. A number of smaller towns and villages near Erebor had been razed and the mountain had teamed with the city of Dale to re-educate the orcs on why this was a poor decision.

He’d been saving people, saving them while his own wife died…in an orc raid.

He pressed his hand against a flat piece of stone, unadorned and little different than any other section.

He spoke a word, and blue light shone, tracing a pattern in the stone, words written in Khuzdul, a poem for the lost written by those left in their wake.

A low rumble sounded and the door swung open, scraping through a well-worn path in the stone.

The room beyond was small but then its occupant had no need of much space.

When Thorin had given it to him the room had been just that, a room, a simple hole cut into the stone of the mountain. The intent was the owner would decorate it and Thorin had thrown open the doors of the Treasury and told Dwalin to take what he needed. Neither Thror nor Thrain had objected, to any of it, instead encouraging him to do just as Thorin said.

And so he had.
He’d recreated the Shire for her, as best he could. A sapphire sky sparkled overhead while jade and emerald stood in for grass underfoot and rolling hills on the walls.

On top of one hill he’d done a small version of Bag End in chips of amber and topaz. It was far, as far as his happiness had fled, as far as Belladonna had gone. Always just within sight, always impossibly out of reach.

The rest of the room was dominated by the vault. He’d set it upon a pedestal ringed by stairs. It was carved from a solid block of marble, a small box containing all that remained of a woman whose spirit had been so large the entire Shire could not contain it.

If one were to remove the lid they would find the casket, built from oak, carved with the crest of his house, inlaid with gold.

He hadn’t decorated the vault itself, leaving it plain and simple. She wouldn’t have wanted the attention on her.

He didn’t want the attention on what she had become. So instead he’d placed a portrait of her on the wall overlooking her casket, directly opposite the door, the first thing someone would see upon entering. It was large, a painting he’d insisted on having done so he’d have something to remember her by when he was in Erebor and she was not.

It had been done shortly after their marriage and she still wore the glow of a newlywed. Her hair was pulled over her shoulders, the combs he’d made her slightly visible on the sides of her head, pulling her hair back. Her marriage braid was prominently displayed, the bead he’d carved her nearly sparkling at the end of it.

He knelt before the portrait. At the base, fitted into the bottom of the frame, was that same bead. One either side of it the combs, a matched pair made from ivory set with a cluster of sapphires, diamonds, emeralds and rubies. He’d presented one to her as a courting gift, the other on their wedding day. All three were blackened, blistered and cracked from heat. Both the combs were missing gems and a number of prongs had snapped or bent.

Dearest,

I have a surprise for you. If all goes well, by the time you receive this I’ll be in the Blue Mountains so you’ll have no reason to rush out and yell at me for being reckless! Well, you probably will do that anyway but at least it won’t be on the road in front of a pack of strangers. It’s not like it’s that dangerous anyway. The road between the Shire and the Blue Mountains is well traveled and protected. It’s not like I’m going out into the Wild!

I can’t tell you why I’m going. It’s part of the surprise. I hope all is going well for you. I love you and I’ll see you soon.

Yours Always,

Bella

He reached a hand out and lightly touched the bead, then the combs.

Dwalin,

I don’t even know how to write this to you.

Bella’s caravan didn’t make it to the Blue Mountains.
You need to come back, at once.
We’ve sent out riders to search.
I don’t know what to pray for.
That we find something, or that we don’t.
Come quickly.
Sincerely,
Isembard Took

His gut wrenched, in much the same way it had the first time he’d read the letters. He’d been in the field. When he’d returned they’d been waiting for him, laying side by side. The panic he’d felt after the first had him nearly ignoring the second, ready to leave at once. Balin had opened it as he rushed out and had called him back to read it.

He’d known before he got back, could hear it in his brother’s voice, feel it echoing along their bond.

His fingers clenched against the wood frame and his eyes burned.

“Damn it, Bella,” he whispered, his voice hoarse, “why didn’t you wait for me? I would have come.”

He allowed his body to sag to the side, twisting until he was seated, his back against the wall under the portrait. He drew his knees up and rested an elbow on one, putting his face in his hand.

In his mind he heard his own running footsteps, tramping through a carefully manicured garden, up a flight of stairs, heard his own hand throwing open a door.

The faint smell of burnt flesh stung his nostrils and the same nausea he’d felt then roiled in his gut once more.

They had all been there, her brothers and sisters, her parents. Silent, stunned, gathered around a door leading into the room she’d grown up in.

Before the Thain had gathered himself and started throwing accusations, casting blame in his grief, Isembard had approached, his body stiff, barely able to move from the sorrow wracking it. He’d held his hand out, combs and bead clutched in it.

“I’m sorry. Dwalin, I’m so, so sorry.”

The first tears fell and, for a time, Dwalin allowed his emotions free rein.

Balin says to leave you alone but you say I don’t listen anyway sooooooo…are you okay?

Dwalin inhaled sharply, lifting his head and running his hands over his face. He clenched his teeth, forcing his emotions back in their box where they belonged.

I’m fine, Xalanth. Where are you?

Watching Syrath. He’s still playing with Aragorn’s stupid dragon. I hate Aragorn’s stupid dragon. We should ban him from Erebor. And Middle Earth while we’re at it.
Dwalin smiled, the barest hint of one to be sure but there all the same.

*Do I detect a hint of jealousy?*

*If that’s what you consider a hint I’d hate to see what you consider obvious.*

*You could always go play with them you know.*

*Maybe. He’s going to come over in a few minutes he said. Balin wants to meet him. You should come join us.*

*Maybe later.*

To be honest he had no desire to be near Xalanth’s son, not right at that moment anyway. He didn’t begrudge his dragon his son, not in the least, but the sight of it cut at him, worried at a part of his soul that he would have thought long since healed.

“Just you wait,” Belladonna’s voice rang in his head. “I am a hobbit after all. We’re expected to have a lot of children. Just picture it, an entire hoard of little Bella’s and Dwalin’s running about.”

And picture it he had. Being a father. Teaching a little boy to hold a sword, ending any young man who dared look at his little girl.

Would he have been a good father?

Bella had believed so. She’d spent hours with him discussing names, going over what their personalities would be like, what they might look like.

She’d promised to come live in Erebor with him during the winter, returning to the Shire for summer, once the first arrived.

“I want them to know both locations and both families. Bag End can become our summer home. You can join us as time permits.”

He hadn’t told her yet that Thror had given him permission to take summers off once a child arrived, allowing him to spend the entire year with his family – winters in Erebor and summers in the Shire.

He’d wanted it to be a surprise.

But all of it was gone now. Taken in an instant. Leaving behind only emptiness and a silent crypt.

There would be no children in his future, no wife waiting for him at home. All of it had died with Bella. His once seemingly bright future had grown dark, becoming a wasteland through which he trudged alone.

It held nothing now, no hopes, no dreams, nothing but a howling wind and blowing ash.

And vengeance.

***

It was some time later that Dwalin pushed to his feet.
He opened the links in his mind he held with a few of his soldiers.

Report.

The Celebration has ended, Sir. All participants have left the ballroom.

The King has retired to his chambers.

The Princess and her husband’s situation has not changed.

Prince Kili has returned to his rooms, finally.

Prince Fili escorted Orcrist to her rooms before retiring to his own. The girl stayed there only long enough to change, however, and is now wandering the battlements.

Dwalin shook his head. Did the girl never sleep? Even as he thought it he found himself chuckling. He was certainly one to talk. He slept as little as possible, his dreams haunted by images of Bella under attack, being struck down, crying to him for help.

He could never reach her.

He headed out, absently tracing a hand along the marble surface of the vault as he did.

He left and shut the door behind him and headed back toward the upper levels.

As he neared the stairs he caught sight of a shadow against the wall. He walked past it with a grunt, his mood souring further.

Nori detached from where he’d been leaning and fell into step alongside him.

“What?” Dwalin growled.

Nori didn’t take offense at his tone, not that he ever did.

“My raven just returned from Mirkwood. Apparently someone broke into the palace Treasury.”

“Yeah?” Dwalin said. “What did they take?”

“Nothing.”

“They get chased off?”

“No. They appear to have gotten away clean.”

Dwalin stopped on the stairs and turned to face the Spymaster. “What are you talking about?”

“I’d love to know myself,” Nori said. “Someone broke into the Mirkwood Treasury without being seen and apparently took absolutely nothing.”

Dwalin glowered. “Are Thranduil’s riches so miniscule he would notice something gone? Especially this quickly?”

A smile played at the corners of Nori’s lips but he merely shrugged and said, “I would not presume to know the size of another kingdom’s treasure.”

That was a lie and they both knew it.
Dwalin leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. “Alright, so what does this have to do with us?”

“I was wondering,” Nori said, “what the odds might be of Nar having an agent in Mirkwood and then someone entirely unrelated breaking in.”

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. “You think they’re connected?”

“They could very well be,” Nori leaned against the wall on the other side. He pulled a dagger out from somewhere and absentely began cleaning his nails with it. “I’ll be interested to see if my other ravens return to inform me that his agents have left Gondor and Rohan or if we find out that Beryl has made a miraculous recovery and is even now on her way home.”

“You think they used Fili’s Celebration to mask something?”

“It would make sense would it not?” Nori put the dagger away, his face lacking the good humor he usually wore. “It would have taken coordination, more than could be gained from mere runners carrying messages.”

“Which goes back to the idea that they have some other form of communication we don’t know about.” Dwalin sighed, leaning his head back against the wall. “Alright, so if your birds do report back that his agents are gone then, what? Were they all treasury break-ins or something else?”

“I don’t know,” Nori groused. “I don’t even have the verification it was anything at all. If it was, though, tonight would be the night to do it. Everyone was here, royalty, nobility and all their security. The various kingdoms would have been on low alert, understaffed even. Perfect for whatever it was they were doing.”

“Except for here,” Dwalin mused.

“It wouldn’t have worked here anyway,” Nori said, “Our Treasury is on the royal level, past multiple doors with multiple passwords. It can’t be accessed by simply waiting for a couple of guards to be off their focus.”

“We’ll alert Thorin once he wakes up,” Dwalin said, pushing off the wall. “That should have given the birds you sent to Rohan and possibly Gondor time to return at least, if they’re returning at all. It’ll give us a better idea of what’s going on.”

“If they do return I’d recommend alerting the other kings to check their own treasuries, as a start at least.”

Dwalin nodded. “You have no idea what they could have been looking for?”

Nori hesitated. “Something kept in the treasuries of each of the kingdoms, or perhaps something kept by a representative of each race and they simply didn’t know which kingdom held it?” He hesitated. “I can only think of one thing. One thing that might be held in a treasury that each race might hold.” He gave Dwalin a dark look. “Something other than gold or jewels because they weren’t touched.”

Dwalin paused in the act of beginning to go up the stairs again. “Are you talking about the keys?” At Nori’s look he scoffed, shaking his head. “That’s a massive conclusion to draw based on one break in. Even if we find out that’s what they were up to, and that’s a very big stretch, they wouldn’t know what they all looked like. I couldn’t tell you what the dwarven key looked like and Thorin couldn’t tell you what the elven or human keys looked like. Then, even if they could somehow get them all, it’d still be a matter of locating the cage and that’s been lost for centuries.”
“Almost as long as the fabled hobbit key,” Nori agreed. He sighed. “I don’t know. It does seem ridiculous but something in my gut keeps bringing me back to it. You remember the wizard? He was interested in the keys too. Why? He was willing to walk into the midst of the goblins to search for it. Why now?”

“I don’t know,” Dwalin replied. “It could just be coincidence. You realize how many obstacles would have to be overcome to make any headway in such a plan? One would have to be a lunatic.”

“Or know something we don’t,” Nori said. “I’m not all knowing Dwalin, no matter how much I may play to it. What if I missed something?”

That admission alone had Dwalin reconsidering. Nori rarely if ever admitted to not knowing something. It was even rarer for him to admit to any level of fear about something.

He was effectively admitting to both.

“We’ll alert Thorin,” he said finally. “As soon as he’s up. We’ll lay the entire thing out, regardless of if the birds are back. Most of the other royals are still here, or at least their representatives are, if need be a council can be convened to let them know of our suspicions.”

Nori nodded. “Alright. Meanwhile I’ll keep a closer eye on Nar, try to see if the agent from Mirkwood makes contact.”

Dwalin snapped his fingers. “That reminds me. Fili was saying something about Nar. He was acting weird around the girl, something about a ring she was wearing.”

“A ring?” Nori frowned. “Why would he care about a ring?”

“I have no idea,” Dwalin said. “If you’d let me arrest the bastard I’d find out for you.”

“We still have no proof,” Nori replied. “We arrest him and everyone he’s working with, everyone working for him is gone. I’ll talk to Fili, find out what exactly Nar did.”

“Agreed,” Dwalin said. “In the meantime I’ll up switch up security rotations again.” He already did it on a regular basis, preventing enemies from learning them, but it couldn’t hurt to do it more often.

Nori agreed, adding he would increase his spies in the field.

The two began walking up the stairs once more, conferring on ways to increase Erebor’s safety.

Behind them the dead of Erebor kept silent in their crypts, their secrets held close to their chest.

All but one whose secret currently walked the battlements far overhead.

And watched the sun rise, where her mother could not.
Chapter 15

The five months following Fili’s Coming of Age and Coronation were quiet. To most of Erebor’s citizens this was a good sign, evidence Mahal was blessing the mountain and giving them a much needed respite from the trials they’d faced since the losses suffered at Moria.

To Dwalin the silence was unsettling, a suggestion the kingdom’s enemies had found a new hole to crawl into and even then were plotting while he went about his business unable to find the threat.

The feeling of unease was compounded by the fact that Nori agreed. Erebor’s Spymaster and her Captain of the Guard rarely saw eye to eye on anything. The last time had been over Moria. They’d gone to Thror together and pleaded with him to call off the attack. Let them go in, they’d offered, with a small force. They’d find Frerin and Quenth and get them out, or die trying.

Thror had refused. He’d seen the capture of his son as a declaration of war and believed anything short of a full out assault in response would weaken Erebor’s image in the eyes of the other kingdoms.

So they’d gone and succeeded only in weakening Erebor in truth.

Dwalin had no idea if his and Nori’s plan would have gone any better, though it certainly would have resulted in fewer deaths.

One thing he did know was that he and the Spymaster had been right.

Just as he had not doubt they were right again.

Particularly about who the threat was.

Nori’s ravens had returned just as he’d predicted, reporting all of Nar’s agents had vanished as soon as Fili’s Coming of Age had been over. Beryl too had experienced a sudden recovery from her illness and had already started back to the mountain. She would have arrived already, in fact, if not for her sudden insistence on visiting Gondor. Dori had reported the change had been unexpected. Nori speculated Nar realized he’d painted himself into a corner by telling Fili she’d planned to make a stop there. If she didn’t then Fili would know Nar had lied to him.

The fact Nar was apparently so arrogant he didn’t seem to know anyone was onto him was one of the few things they had in their favor.

On Thorin’s orders they had sent word to the other kingdoms, asking them about treasury break-ins and, specifically, about the status of the keys.

Word had come back.

No break-ins, or at least none that anyone had noticed.

All the keys were accounted for and undisturbed.

Which meant Nori’s theory had been wrong.

At least about what Nar was up too.

Neither of them had any doubt he was up to something.
Whether Nar was behind the assassination attempts or not remained to be seen but there was little doubt his agents, and most likely his daughter, had been up to something, and had possibly succeeded at whatever it was. In the days following the Celebration Nar had been nearly giddy with excitement, a strange light in his eyes. He’d been nervous as well, constantly watching Dwalin and Nori as though waiting to see if they’d put something together.

The desire to arrest the bastard and beat the truth out of him was…difficult to resist.

Nar had covered his tracks well. The agents he’d sent out were gone, so completely Dwalin imagined they’d likely been killed by other agents, ones Nori had not yet identified. It was aggravating, Nar was constantly two steps ahead of them, possessing layers upon layers of intrigue. Every time Nori or Dwalin uncovered a chess piece he would simply destroy it and move to a new one, forcing them to start all over again. The only other avenue of investigation they’d had after the Celebration was the odd fascination Fili had reported Nar showing in a ring the girl had been wearing. At Nori’s request she’d readily related the story of how she’d come by it and handed it over for examination.

It appeared, for all intents and purposes, to simply be a ring. There was nothing special about it and Bilba reported no ill effects from wearing it aside from continually forgetting she had it on. She wasn’t one to focus much on things like jewelry so that was understandable. In the end they’d returned it to her. It was as safe with her as anyone and keeping it would have tipped off Nar that he’d given himself away with his interest in it.

Speaking of the girl, Dwalin’s eyes cut to the other side of the training grounds. It was empty, the other students wouldn’t arrive for at least an hour. Given the girl’s natural talent, Dwalin had begun throwing in extra training for her, both during normal hours and before. He’d thought she might reject the offer outright given it would increase the time she had to be in his presence but, to his mild surprise, her annoyance with still being unable to best Fili was apparently stronger than her hatred for him, at least for the moment.

The doorway was empty but she was nothing if not punctual and he had no doubt she’d be there soon, both Princes in tow. The day after the Coming of Age, Dis had called them together and informed them of the girl’s past. To say the news came as a shock would be an understatement but the response to it had been swift. Dis and Vili had practically adopted her while Fili, who was with her almost constantly already went to near inseparable, paranoid she’d somehow be taken advantage of if his back was turned. Given how close he already was with his brother this had brought Kili along as well to the point that where one was found the other two were sure to be nearby. The youngest prince had noticeably warmed up to her as well, nowhere near as close as Fili was, or Dis, but Dwalin could see it one day getting that far.

Dwalin still had trouble wrapping his head around the whole thing, particularly the news that no one had ever attempted to save the girl or her mother. What kind of father left his pregnant wife to suffer in Moria? Even if the father had been the hobbit in the relationship, a peaceful people not prone to violence, he could have hired someone to go in. There were many dwarves who would have gone in for free once they’d heard the circumstances.

Dwalin certainly would have had they asked him. There were so many slaves in Moria, many often held more by fear than shackles. Getting one out, even a specific one, without the orcs noticing wasn’t easy but it was far from impossible. It simply involved sneaking in, finding them and sneaking out again.

It carried a high degree of danger but it could be done, had been done, in fact, in the past. It wasn’t often and many of those who went in after loved ones never came back out but just as many others
did, bringing with them stories of the horrors of Moria and its Arena.

So why hadn’t it happened? Even if her husband had been killed in whatever attack had resulted in her capture, it would have been obvious her body was missing. Why had no one been enlisted to search for her? He had no doubt she’d had family capable of doing exactly that. In the five months since the celebration he’d become more convinced than ever that the girl descended from Belladonna’s bloodline. Now that he was looking for it he saw it constantly. It was in the color of her hair, the shape of her eyes, the turn of her head, strongest in the way she’d started to watch Fili when she thought no one was looking.

Belladonna had once watched him in much the same way.

He couldn’t figure out where she fit in the line, however. Fifty years or so put her, or at least her parents, around the time he’d been in the Shire but he didn’t recall anyone else in Belladonna’s line being married to a dwarf. Granted, the family was massive and didn’t all live in the same location so the simple fact he hadn’t heard didn’t mean it hadn’t happened. The marriage also could have taken place after her death, after he’d left and not returned, but he would have expected to have at least been told about it. He’d kept in touch with several of Bella’s siblings after her death and, in typical Hobbit fashion, they’d been thrilled to fill their letters with every last kernel of gossip they could find. He’d never heard of a tragedy like the one that had taken Bella. Surely they would have alerted him of a pregnant family member who’d gone missing after an orc attack?

Or would they? Would they have assumed the woman was dead or beyond rescue? Or that Dwalin would not wish memories of Bella brought up by the news of another tragedy? He’d lost touch with Bella’s family eventually but he was aware that a few of her siblings were still alive, well into their later years, grandparents and great grandparents of huge families of their own. He’d been struggling with whether or not to write them. He had enough on his plate with the assassination attempts and whatever Nar was up to, and the fact that the two might well be connected. What good would it do to dredge up the unchangeable past?

But it continued to eat at him, more than it should. The girl’s looks, her past, it reinforced the belief that the hate she carried toward him was not her own. It couldn’t have been the Thain, not if she’d been born in Moria.

It had to have been passed to her by her mother, the only person with her in Moria who could have logically known his name or who he was. She’d either been a hobbit who’d known Bella enough to hate him for her death or a dwarf with a hobbit husband who’d passed the hatred on. The idea that made the most sense in that respect, on the surface at least, was Bungo Baggins, Bella’s fiancé before he’d come along. The facts didn’t fit that narrative though. Bungo had ended up marrying a girl from another family and, what’s more, had never held any animosity toward him, not for taking Bella or for her death. At least none he’d ever confessed to or shown. Dwalin couldn’t picture him passing any sort of hatred onto anyone in Bella’s family, particularly when he had little to do with them after her loss.

So who did that leave?

And why did he care so much?

It was fifty years in the past, the woman long dead, events set in stone and immutable. Bella’s family had been enormous and the world had been, and still was, incredibly dangerous, particularly for the hobbits. Bella had not been the first of the Thain’s family to die in an attack, Bilba’s mother had not been the last to suffer in Moria.

“You have to stop being so reckless, Bella. You could have been hurt!”
“You worry far too much, my Love. Nothing is going to happen to me on a day trip between here and Buckland.”

“You don’t know that.”

Laughter echoed through his mind, a fine boned, phantom hand resting on his chest for an instant before it was gone.

“No one’s going to hurt me, Love. Not when they know they’d have you to contend with.”

He grimaced. Some warrior he’d turned out to be. He hadn’t been there when his wife needed him the most and, now, he found he hadn’t been there for her family either.

It felt like he’d failed her, again.

Voices caught his attention and he straightened off the wall to watch as Bilba strode through the door. Behind her, as expected, came Fili and Kili, their heads together as they plotted whatever new trouble they’d planned to get themselves into. Dis had planned to go to Lake-town later in the day and had convinced Bilba to go along. The girl had started to venture into Dale on occasion on short visits. The first time she’d gone she’d been nearly mobbed by crowds wanting to get close to the great Orcrist. She’d been confused by it all, even more so when she’d discovered Fili hadn’t been embellishing about small figurines being sold of her and Syrath. The attention had clearly been overwhelming and Dwalin had only been able to do so much in setting up a perimeter and keeping half the bloody city at bay. The day had been saved by the arrival of Syrath landing in the main square and happily shifting attention off her. Fili had feigned slightly exaggerated innocence at the dragon’s sudden arrival and guided Bilba off in the opposite direction.

Syrath, as it turned out, was quite the attention hound and the people of Dale were only too happy to shower him with it. It had allowed Bilba to safely explore the city with the boys, and a legion of guards. She’d seemed surprised to not be attacked while out and had relaxed to an extent after that, agreeing more readily when Fili wanted to go out though she couldn’t be said to have made it a habit by any stretch. Girl had enough sense to have a healthy paranoia about crowds, unlike certain royal family members he could name.

When she left later that day with Dis and the boys it’d be her first visit to Lake-town. Dwalin personally hated Lake-town. It was small, cramped, cold, and had a constant wetness to the air. Dis loved it for reasons beyond his ken and was forever dragging her family off to visit it. Nori did constant sweeps of both Dale and Lake-town and reported both areas were clear, but it still gnawed at Dwalin as it always did when the royal family left the mountain. Lake-town should be safer than Dale, with it being smaller and there being fewer ways to get in or out but he always felt the same amount of worry over both places. The royals had assassins to deal with, the girl had bounty hunters and nothing was ever perfect. There was always the fear they’d missed something.

All it would take would be one mistake, one oversight and he could end up failing.

Again.

Fili moved forward and threw an arm across Bilba’s shoulders, leaning in to talk to her. She immediately went bright red and turned her head to hide it.

Dwalin resisted the urge to snort in amusement. She and Fili had grown steadily closer since the Celebration. She was far more open and no longer seemed to mind physical contact, from him or Dis at least.
She still hated him, but the edges of it had tempered. Several times he’d caught her looking at him not with anger or hatred but with confusion.

It was probably similar to how he looked when he studied her. In some part of his mind he felt as if he held the keys to a great truth but had no idea where to find the door with the locks that fit them.

Bilba got the sword she normally used from the racks and came to stand in front of him, moving with an ease he hadn’t seen the first time he’d laid eyes on her six months earlier, fighting goblins on a narrow bridge.

He nodded and grabbed his own sword where he’d left it leaning against the wall.

“Your form has improved,” he said mildly as he got into position. On the other side of the area Fili and Kili had leaned against the wall to watch. After he’d worked with her a half hour or so he’d probably let her loose on them. Attackers came in all shapes, sizes and numbers, with all manner of strengths and weaknesses and it was important she have experience with a greater range than just him, orcs, goblins and idiots who thought to try and bully her.

Bilba didn’t respond to his comment but he hadn’t expected her to.

“Today going to be the day you tell me what your problem with me is?” It was a familiar question, one he’d asked daily for five months.

As usual, he got no answer to that either.

“Alright then.” He squared off across from her and began a now long established routine.

It was a routine that couldn’t last. One day she would finally tell him, or he’d figure it out on his own. He’d find the right door, the right lock and open it to reveal whatever truth lay on the other side.

The only problem was, somewhere in the depths of his mind, at the very core of his being, he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know.

There were some questions that should never be asked.

And some answers that should never be heard.

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Bilba sat on Syrath’s back, her body tense. Xalanth flew alongside them, the Bastard on his back while Lyth flew on their other side with Kili, Vili, and Dis. Other dragons came along behind them with their security escort.

Behind her, Fili shifted, his knees brushing against her for a brief instant. She felt her face heat, an annoying habit it’d picked up ever since she’d spoken to Arwen.

Arwen who, in the days after the Celebration, had been only too happy to tell her exactly why she’d gotten jealous and possessive every time another woman had tried speaking to Fili.

She’d brushed it off at first, passing it off as the other woman teasing her.
She wasn’t in love or infatuated or anything else she’d seen in Gondor or the Shire. Things like that, like what her mother had told her about, weren’t for the likes of her. They were for others, those who didn’t have blood on their hands, who hadn’t given their lives to vendettas that could, and would, get them killed. She had no room for foolish things like love, only the burning hatred against the orcs, the need to hunt them down before they hurt even one more person.

She wasn’t…allowed…love. Not like that anyway. She loved Syrath and had grown to love the Durins but love, like what her mother had described…no…there was no room for that…not for her. She was a weapon, a monster. Good people, peaceful folk feared the things in the shadows.

The things in the shadows feared her.

She lived in the darkness and love could not thrive there, could not even take root.

And certainly, certainly not with the Crown Prince of Erebor.

It was…laughable. He might care about her, might even love her after a fashion, in the way she loved Primula or Syrath, but he certainly wasn’t going to ever love her in the way her mother had spoken about.

Princes did not fall in love with escaped slaves.

No one did.

Dis liked to claim otherwise. Over the past few months she’d shown Bilba a few courting requests she believed to be from those legitimately interested.

Bilba had rejected them. She understood what Dis had explained to her, that there were those who would be interested in her proximity to the royal family or, as always, who would want Syrath.

That she understood.

She even understood, to an extent, that Orcrist drew interest, though why anyone would care about a random dwobbit killing orcs was beyond her.

Regardless, the idea of someone wanting her because of what she could bring them…she understood that.

There was nothing she could bring Fili. His rank was higher than hers would ever be, he already had a dragon, and he was a better warrior.

There was nothing she could offer him to make him want her. To make him see her as anything other than his ride partner.

She’d seen the way women looked at him and his brother, she always noticed. He could have his pick. Anyone he wanted, from any race, even the elves given how a few from Thranduil’s court had been circling at his Celebration.

He could have anyone he wanted.

He certainly wasn’t going to want her.
She knew better, had thought she was better. Dis insisted on calling her young and naïve and innocent and Bilba knew she meant well but she was wrong.

Bilba wasn’t young, or naïve or innocent, and hadn’t been for a very long time, if ever. She might not know everything there was to know about love or social customs but she knew she was realistic, pragmatic, not prone to the flights of fancy or fantasy evidenced by young women she’d seen in the Shire or Gondor or Erebor. Young girls who’d write their names as if they were the wives of the ones they loved or would linger in areas their crush would frequent, grand fantasies of love at first sight and epic romances dancing in their head.

Things like that did not happen. She knew they didn’t happen. She wasn’t like that, she was grounded, realistic, accepting of her lot in life.

Or at least that’s what she thought until she’d made the mistake of asking Dis what it felt like to be in love, having long forgotten most of the specifics her mother had once told her, and what the other woman had described had sounded suspiciously like her feelings for Erebor’s Heir Apparent.

Damn it all and damn her in the process, more than she already had been and continued to be.

Fili moved again and she resisted the urge to snap at him. It wasn’t his fault she was a fool and it certainly wasn’t his problem that her heart twisted every time she considered the futility of her interest in him.

That had been a surprise, actually, the amount of pain involved. Oh, she could handle it, she’d certainly suffered far worse.

She just hadn’t expected it in the first place.

Her eyes flickered to the Bastard and her lip curled. How badly must it hurt, she wondered, to have actually had love and then to have lost it? Her heart wrenched at the mere thought of a phantom love that had never, and would never, exist.

But he had had it. Her mother had talked non-stop about him. Her entire face had glowed with happiness, even in the depths of Moria, at the mere thought of him.

It had been real, for her mother at least.

Bilba had come to terms with the Bastard not wanting to come for her. She’d been born in the mines. The Bastard had never met her, never even seen her. How could she possibly expect him to care about her? She’d watched him since her arrival. He was a warrior, brave, strong, a leader in all respects.

Everything her mother had ever said he was.

Bilba had assumed her mother had been deceived. That the one quality the Bastard possessed aside from cowardice was the ability to lie convincingly, to appear to be something that he was not.

But that wasn’t true, or didn’t appear to be true.

But, if it wasn’t true, if her mother hadn’t been deceived and he had been all she’d said he was then it meant when her mother said he’d loved her…that was true as well.

He’d loved her…but still hadn’t come.

Why?
If her father had loved her mother…if, together, with a realized love they’d felt even a fraction of what she felt with a doomed love…if he truly was all her mother had said…warrior and brave and strong and honorable and he’d loved her…

Then why hadn’t he come?

And why didn’t he appear to be in any pain?

She was in pain. Every time she saw Fili and knew he’d never feel the same, every time another woman smiled at him and she wondered if that girl would be the one. Every time she thought of how she was tied to him, forever, through Syrath and one day she’d find herself facing the rest of her life having to watch him find happiness with someone else. Understanding life, which had cursed her so many times she’d been confident it had nothing left to hit her with, had indeed managed to find yet another avenue through which to make her suffer.

Knowing she probably wouldn’t have been able to bring him happiness in the first place.

It hurt.

Certainly not more than her mother’s death. Not more than finding out her father wasn’t coming. Not more than the Arena or the deaths in the Shire or the thousands of wounds, physical and otherwise, the orcs had inflicted on her over the course of her life. She could live with it, just as she lived with all the rest of it, every waking moment and often the non-waking ones as well.

She could live with it but still…it was one more pain added to a long litany of pain she carried and was far harsher than she would have expected.

Her mother had been in pain as well. Not all the time, sometimes long stretches would pass where she was happy, an inexplicable joy in her face in spite of their circumstances, but it would crop up from time to time, in her weakest moments. A tremble in her hand when she spoke of her wedding, a crack in her voice when she recalled flying with Dwalin and Xalanth.

Bilba hadn’t grasped the true depth of it, still didn’t, though she had at least a better understanding.

Her mother had been right about Dwalin’s character.

She must have been right about him loving her.

But he hadn’t come.

And she saw no evidence of pain from him.

And, that, she couldn’t make sense of.

Why didn’t he fit?

The image in her head, the excuses she’d created for his absence, the reasons he couldn’t come, wouldn’t come, hadn’t come, none of them fit, not perfectly. Was he a coward, a liar, a deceiver? Was he a hero, brave, a warrior? Was he all of those things? None? Or somewhere in between? Had he, in fact, tricked her mother and and was, even now, tricking her? Every so often she’d be
convinced she’d found the answer and her anger would rage anew only to fall apart again as the holes appeared in her theory.

Most days…most days now she was simply confused.

Dwalin’s head turned, his eyes locking on hers and she jerked hers away.

The lake was rapidly approaching, Syrath starting to spiral down to drop them off before he went off with the other dragons to return to Erebor or do whatever they wanted until needed again.

Syrath would probably fish or run his father ragged, or both. He’d made a game out of it, seeing who got tired first.

Bilba thought it might be nice if Xalanth knew it was a game.

Fili simply thought it was hilarious.

As they dropped farther Bilba carefully packed her emotions away, toward her father and toward Fili.

Dis had said she’d understand life better as she learned more.

So far she’d just ended up more confused.

Not for the first time she felt a twinge of nostalgia for the days when it had been a simple matter of getting up in the morning, killing orcs, going to bed, and repeating.

After her mother’s death it had felt like her heart had shattered into pieces inside her.

If she’d stayed away she might very well have managed to protect what little was left.

But it was too late for that now.

Too late for anything but regret.

And there was always plenty of that.

***

Bilba’s boots hit the wood planking with a thunk and she straightened to study her surroundings. Lake-town was little more than a collection of ramshackle, woodframe homes floating on platforms connected by walkways. A light fog clung to the buildings and she spotted small chunks of ice floating past, testament to the rapidly approaching winter. It had been cold already that day, the sky overcast above them, but Lake-town seemed colder still, the air holding a sharp bite she hadn’t felt even in flight.

Fili landed next to her and she looked up as Syrath wheeled away over their heads, moving aside to allow other dragons to drop off their passengers. The Bastard had landed earlier, along with his soldiers, and stood waiting quietly for the rest of them to disembark.

“What do you think?” Fili asked.
Bilba sighed. *I don’t know why you keep insisting I need to be more social. I went to Mirkwood on my own, didn’t I?*

“You went to kill spiders,” Fili said dryly. “I don’t think you ever visited the palace, did you?”

Bilba shrugged. *There weren’t any spiders in the palace. I’m in Erebor and I go to the training grounds and with Vanguard and I go to Dale. That’s social.*

“You never go anywhere in Erebor other than your room, the royal and dragon levels, the training ground and the ramparts. Training doesn’t count when you only talk to me or Kili and Vanguard has a bizarre habit of not talking at all, you just kill orcs.” Fili responded. “Dale counts but don’t you want to see more of the world?”

*Are there orcs in more of the world?*

Fili’s eyes narrowed. “Not in the places I want to show you.”

*Then why would I want to see them?* Bilba asked.

“Because there’s more to life than orcs,” Fili answered.

Bilba gave him an incredulous look. *Maybe your life.*

“And that’s why I want you to be more social,” Fili said dryly.

Bilba rolled her eyes.

Kili landed in a crouch a few feet away and Lyth soared upward, circling around to let Dis off. Absently, Bilba wondered why the older woman liked Lake-town so much. The walkways were narrow, water lapping on the edges. Two people could conceivably walk side by side but it would put them right on the edges, a mere hairsbreadth from falling off.

It was common knowledge that dwarves couldn’t swim, or even float, their bones so dense they were dragged to the bottom immediately. Dwobbits usually fared better, their bodies taking after their lighter, hobbit ancestors. She’d learned to swim from the Rangers, they considered it a necessary survival skill.

Apparently Dis just liked living on the edge, literally and figuratively.

Dis landed gracefully in spite of the heavy robes, dress and jewels she wore. Her husband was last, his landing heavier due to the full armor and weapons he wore. Bilba felt a stab of jealousy at the shining, engraved and bejeweled gear. She *really* liked his armor and weapons.

*There a reason you’re glaring at my father?* Fili asked with a raised eyebrow.

Bilba tore her eyes away. *I like his armor.* She answered shortly. *And weapons.*

Fili looked toward his father, studying what he was wearing. *You seem to have a preference for mine and Kili’s work.*

Bilba nearly choked. *You made that?*

Fili grinned. *All but the vambraces. My mother made those for him. Kili created the sword, I engraved the blade and did the hilt. Kili and I both worked on the armor.*

Bilba nodded. She could see it now that he’d pointed it out, the same craftsmanship and styling that
was in the daggers Dis had, one of which she now wore strapped to her thigh. *I do like your work,* she admitted. *You’re both talented.*

Fili grinned and passed the information to Kili who beamed at her in thanks.

“We all ready?” Dis asked brightly. They nodded and she turned in a spin of capes and robes and headed into the town. Overhead the dragons circled for a few minutes and then split off.

Bilba followed the others, her own heavy cloak swirling about her. She’d worn the same outfit she always did but made from thicker and heavier material in concession to the cold. She hadn’t bothered with a sword. Several of the soldiers carried multiple swords, she could get one easily enough if needed.

Movement caught her eye and she looked up to see an entourage coming toward them. The man at the front was…large with greasy, lank hair and dressed in so many layers of robes with so much jewelry dripping off him it was a wonder he didn’t trip over himself.

The man next to him was skinny with dark hair and dark clothes. The rest with them must be the wealthier citizens of the town judging by their attire and the haughty way many of them carried themselves.

Fili let out a breath of annoyance. “Wonderful, the Master of Lake-town. He used to show up every time we came until he finally figured out none of us were particularly keen on being used by him for political gain. He usually just ignores us now. He must have heard you were coming and hoped you’d be more willing to work with him.”

Bilba frowned. She’d already been approached by a number of nobles in Erebor who seemed to think she had some sort of influence with Dis or Fili or even Thorin. They all believed they could offer her things, money or status, one had gone so far as to offer her a courtship with his son of all things, as if that were a high honor; in return for her trying to influence one of the Durins in their favor.

She’d refused and told Fili who’d simply laughed and told her to let Nori know, it would help his spy network operate better.

*They aren’t going to ask me for something are they?*

“Probably not right away,” Fili said cheerfully. “They’ll try to gauge the type of person you are first. That and be seen in your presence of course. That way they can tell others how they’re friends of the great Orcrist.”

Bilba scowled. *I’m not their friend.*

“I don’t think they care,” Fili said dryly. He held his arm out. “Shall we?”

Bilba wrapped one hand around his bicep. A sharp tingling feeling shot through her body and her stomach clenched. She sought the urge to growl in irritation. The sooner her fool heart and idiot body got over her infatuation with him the better. If this was what being in love was like she couldn’t understand why anyone would want it or why her mother had spoken in such glowing terms about it. Iteminded her of having the flu.

The group arrived and Bilba suffered through being introduced to the pompous windbag who ran the town. He offered to take her on a tour of Lake-town, without the rest of the royal family as they already knew it and would undoubtedly be bored. Fili smoothly rejected that option before she could get over her initial flash of panic at the thought of having to put up with strange nobles by herself
and, before she knew it, all of them were being dragged on a tour.

Bilba walked alongside Fili while Kili stayed next to Dis and Vili ahead of them. Dwalin and the rest of the soldiers ranged out around them, keeping a loose perimeter.

She’d been right in her original assessment of Lake-town. After being shown homes, and walkways, and...boats, they finally ended at a large square pavilion. One side was the edge of the town and offered a view of the lake. Two other sides were dedicated to the town’s marketplace and the main hall containing the seat of government and the Master’s home. The final side gave way to rows of homes running off into the rest of Esgaroth.

The market was the only source of food and shopping so it wasn’t feasible to shut it down entirely while they visited. Most of Lake-town appeared to have turned out for their visit, pretending to shop in the market or clustered on the side leading off into homes, their voices rising in an excited din as they saw the royals arriving. Some of them were cheering for her as well, their hands holding those figurines they made in Dale or journals or paper. Much like Nori’s brother in Rivendell there seemed to be a bizarre demand for her signature every time she went out, an oddity even Fili couldn’t seem to fully explain.

As she looked closer, Bilba felt her mood sour. As she was already used to seeing in Dale, many in the crowd were young women, their eyes fixed on the Princes. Her eyes caught on one particular young woman near the front, tall and willowy with long dark hair and green eyes. The reason Bilba noticed her was that the girl appeared to be specifically watching her instead of the Princes. It was probably just a momentary thing, in another second or so she’d be staring just as hard at Fili and Kili no doubt, Bilba thought in annoyance. Seeing the looks in the eyes of several girls as they looked at Fili specifically, Bilba tried exceptionally hard to pretend her gut wasn’t twisting inside her.

Another young woman, this one tall with light red hair, struggled to push through the crowd.

“Uh-oh,” Fili said, turning to look at Kili. “Your biggest fan is here.”

Kili blanched. “I thought Nori said she was gone today.”

Fili grinned brightly. “Must have found out you were coming,” he said gleefully. “Seriously, we need to recruit her for Nori’s spy network. Her sources are ridiculous.”

Dis appeared at Bilba’s side, pulling her away and guiding her toward one of the many stalls and booths set up in the market. A number of Lake-town’s residents already there made as if to move toward them only to be blocked by the sudden appearance of several of Dwalin’s soldiers ranging about them.

“The boys can handle themselves,” Dis said brightly. “No reason for you to have to suffer through it.”

Bilba twisted to see the girl trying to dodge around Dwalin who was blocking her with a long suffering look on his face.

Dis stopped in front of a booth carrying various bolts of cloth and picked one up to examine it.

“What do you think of this color, my dear?”

Bilba frowned, chewing on her lower lip. She and Dis went to the market in Erebor sometimes and the older woman was ever asking Bilba her preferences about a certain food or piece of jewelry or article of clothing. Many of them ended up in her room, Dis insisting they were loans though Bilba had figured out the woman had no intention of asking for any of it back.
She’d really never given much thought to her preferences before and, at first, hadn’t been able to answer the question. She understood having a preference for people or dragons. She knew she’d had a preference for her mother, of course, and Primula and the others in the Shire. She also had a preference for Syrath and Dis, and the rest of the Durins and she had a... preference, so to speak, of a different kind for Fili.

In contrast, she had definitely did not have a preference for the Bastard or Azog or orcs.

Things, though, she didn’t understand as much. Food was food, clothing was clothing and jewelry... was simply useless.

Even now it was a struggle to say she liked one thing more than another. She’d never liked things before. Never really had anything to like.

Things were just... things.

Except for weapons, she conceded mentally. She liked those, but then they were useful and necessary for orc killing so that made sense. She definitely had preferences for them. Upon realizing it she’d used the feelings she had for those she liked to help her figure out what she liked in other areas.

She’d waited too long to comment on the fabric. Dis put it down and moved on to another booth and then another after that. Bilba trailed after her idly. Dis loved shopping and Bilba liked making Dis happy so she humored her.

Dis caught a glimpse of jewelry laid out on a booth near the water’s edge and headed over, fast enough that she put a few feet of distance between herself and Bilba.

Bilba looked back toward the main group and saw Dwalin now had an arm around the girl’s waist as she tried to climb over him to get at Kili. She was yelling something but the market was crowded and the din of people’s voices drowned out what she was saying.

Fili was a few feet away talking to Kili and Vili, the three of them doing an excellent job of ignoring the girl.

Bilba shook her head and turned back. Dis was in the process of turning to face her, a necklace held up in one hand. Her mouth opened to say something, an excited light in her eyes.

A soft thwip rushed past Bilba’s ear, loose tendrils of her hair moving lightly in a breeze that hadn’t been there a second before.

Thunk.

Bilba paused midstride, her breath stopping in her lungs. Around her the world fell away, the voices fading.

Complete silence filled the air.

Dis was still staring at her. Bilba caught only a quick glimpse of the thick shaft of an arrow protruding from her shoulder as Dis, in what felt like slow motion, stumbled backward, the force of the arrow’s impact knocking her off balance.

And off the edge of the platform.

Into the dark waters of the lake.
She barely made a sound as she hit the water.

***

She was running before her mind registered it.

Bilba never paused, going straight from the platform into the water in one move.

The shock of the freezing water nearly drove the air from her lungs but she ignored it, forcing herself below. The thick fabric of her clothing immediately filled with water and dragged her down, causing her movements to be sluggish as she struggled against the weight. She cursed and ripped her boots off, then her trousers and the heavy cape, tunic and vest. She kicked free, allowing them to float off into the darkness. It left her in the breastband and the short, close fitting breeches she used for smallclothes. Her body had already numbed to the cold water surrounding her but she imagined she’d suffer once she broke the surface again. She angled down and kicked, scissoring through the water.

*Bilba! Do you see her?*

Fili sounded panicked.

*Call the dragons! Bilba called back. Call them back!*

Even as she said it she knew it was a remote chance the dragons would get there on time. Their best chance was Syrath or Xalanth as they tended to stay close but Syrath had mentioned visiting Mirkwood and some of the elven dragons he’d befriended. If he’d done that he’d never reach them in time.

The water was dark and she could feel the currents sweeping her in whatever direction they wished. Overhead was equally dark, the sun hidden by the clouds.

*Dis! Dis, answer me!*

*Here.*

The voice was faint and came from her left and below her. Bilba pushed in that direction and saw a dark form floating away from her.

She pushed aside her own rising fear and swam to her. Dis’ heavy skirts and cloak were tangled around her legs, dragging her down like an anchor. Bilba pulled the dagger from its sheath on her thigh and slashed at the heavy fabric, shoving it aside into the water until she’d reduced the clothing to little more than tatters, lessening the resistance. It would be better to remove it completely but there was no time. Her own lungs were already starting to burn and she doubted Dis was faring much better.

She slid the knife back in its sheath, wrapped her arms around the woman and surged toward the surface. Dis was heavy, her bones denser than Bilba’s. She struggled to help but, as close as they were to one another, there was little she could do without interfering with Bilba’s movements. Bilba’s lungs ached, feeling as though they were going to blow apart inside her chest.

Her head burst through the surface and she gasped, dragging in air only to choke on water as Dis’
weight dragged her back under.

She managed to shove up again, getting both her and Dis barely above the water, just enough to for them both to gasp a breath before they were down again. As she did she caught sight of the platform where they’d fallen in. The currents had bought them out farther into the lake but she could make out the figures mobbing the edge. The dwarves couldn’t help them.

The humans, however, could. Even as the water closed over her head again she caught sight of a number of forms in the water, moving toward them.

She lost sight as water closed over her once again and she struggled against despair. She tried to push upward again but barely moved. She thrust an arm up, felt it break the surface, cold wind raced across her fingers, but she couldn’t get up high enough to get air.

A dark shadow blocked out the pale light from overhead and then another person was there, grabbing Dis on the other side. Together they made it back to the surface and then more people were there, grabbing them both and holding them above the water.

Bilba gasped and pushed away from the hands helping her, urging them to aid Dis instead. Without the added weight of the other woman she could take care of herself. She was tired and keeping herself fully above water wasn’t exactly easy but she managed. She fell behind as the others got Dis back to the platform, arriving after most of them had already been pulled out.

She reached up to grab the edge and found a hand curling around her wrist. She looked up to see Fili crouching over her, his face tense. “Come on, let me help you.”

She nodded and he pushed to his feet, pulling her out of the water like she weighed nothing. Once out she collapsed to her hands and knees, struggling to catch her breath. She felt the bite of the air on her skin but Fili was already stripping off his jacket. It was made of heavy, dark rawhide and lined with thick fur. On him it fell to just above his knees, the sleeves reaching his wrists. Once he slung it around her shoulders and helped her put it on it was nearly a dress, the hem below her knees and the cuffs needing to be rolled up in order to let her have her hands free. He got her to her feet and pulled it close, belting it around her.

As he did Bilba reached up and pulled her hair free as best she could. It had come loose in the water and was falling in a thick, wet, incredibly cold mass about her head and back, the water soaking through the material of the jacket. She twisted it into a coil, wringing out as much water as possible, and put it back up as best she could. She was beginning to shake, from more than just the cold, and wrapped her arms around her torso, struggling to warm up.

Chaos was going on around them, people shouting for blankets and to bring those who’d gone into the lake into the main meeting house. Braziers were called for to add to the fireplace inside to warm it up faster. A tight knot of dwarves and humans were clustered around Dis on the ground and Bilba swallowed against a tightness in her throat.

Fili followed her gaze. “It’s alright. She’s going to be fine, thanks to you.”

He had his arms wrapped around his chest as well and kept cutting looks between her and the group gathered around his mother. He looked young suddenly, a child who’d just found out his mother wasn’t invulnerable.

Bilba understood that feeling.

The group was getting up. Bilba caught a glimpse of Dis, wrapped in blankets and being urged by
her son and husband toward the main building at the other end of the square. There was no sign of
the arrow anymore, they must have taken it out already.

Bilba nudged Fili, pushing him toward the group. *Go on. I’ll be fine.*

Fili nodded. “Come with me.”

Bilba shook her head. *I can’t help. I’d just get in the way.*

His eyes narrowed. *You were in the water as long as she was and you’re barely dressed. You’ll get
hypothermia.*

Behind him, Bilba caught sight of other people arriving, carrying blankets and the braziers.

*I’ll help the others. I’ll warm up by moving. Inside I’d just be standing around. I prefer to be doing
something.*

She didn’t give him a chance to argue, instead pushing past him and moving to grab some of the
blankets. Fili hesitated but someone must have called him via link because he tensed and then turned
and headed toward his family.

Almost against her will Bilba looked for Dwalin but saw no sign of him. He’d probably gone after
the assassin.

That bothered her. She should be out there, not necessarily with him but simply doing what she did
best, hunting down evil. She started to turn away, only to pause as she caught a glimpse of the dark
haired girl who’d been watching her earlier. To Bilba’s surprise she was soaking wet, she’d been one
of people to go in the water. She was sitting by herself near a booth, curled up and shivering, her
eyes fixed on where the Durins had vanished into the main house.

Bilba felt a surge of compassion for her. Pulling one of the blankets loose she headed over and knelt
down in front of her, holding it out.

The girl looked startled and then smiled, reaching out to take it. “Thank you.” Her eyes focused on
the jacket Bilba was wearing. “That’s the Prince’s jacket isn’t it?” At Bilba’s nod the other girl
smiled. “I’m glad you have him. You deserve to be happy.” She hesitated and then said. “I wanted to
talk to you. You and I…we’ve met before, sort of.”

Bilba frowned at her in confusion. What was she talking about?

Something flickered in her vision, behind the girl and she lifted her eyes.

There was a man standing low on the corner of a roof at the edge of the square, leading into the
residential section of Lake-town. He was dressed in leathers, wearing a cloak and hood and holding
a bow in one hand. As soon as she looked at him he grinned, gave her a mock salute and then turned
and sprinted away.

Bilba didn’t hesitate. She pulled the jacket off, it was too big and cumbersome for her to run in. She
handed it to the girl, who gave her a confused look of her own.

Bilba pushed off, not even registering the renewed bite of the cold or the way the rough wood of the
walkways dug into the bare soles of her feet.

She didn’t try to call Fili. Dis needed him.
And she wouldn’t endanger him.

It didn’t escape her that the man had deliberately let her see him.

He wanted her to follow him.

He wanted to meet her.

That was fine.

She rather wanted to meet him too.

***

Dis jerked away from her husband in agitation. “I got shot by an arrow and dunked in a lake. None of that impacted my ability to walk!”

That wasn’t entirely true. She was shaking, so hard her muscles were tensing up. Her legs felt like rubber and she was having a hard time feeling her hands or feet. Vili, who knew her as well as she did herself by now, simply gave her a look of affection and guided her into one of the rooms the Master had insisted they take for their private use.

No doubt he would expect appropriate “gratitude” in the future but Dis could handle that well enough when it came to it.

The room was small but contained a fireplace that someone had already lit a roaring fire in. Out in the main room there had also been several roaring fireplaces as well as the braziers brought in to increase the warmth. The floor had been a maelstrom of people wrapped in blankets and others caring for them.

Dis had been guided through by her sons and husband and guards and now breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed, shutting out most of the noise.

It was warm inside the small room and so much quieter, giving her a chance to gather her wits about her. Her shoulder burned but she felt nothing suggesting the tip had been poisoned. Not only that but the thick clothing she’d been wearing, as well as the leather breastplate Vili demanded she wear under her clothing when she went out, had done a good job of blunting the impact. The tip had penetrated and the shaft had stuck in the thick leather and her robes but it wasn’t nearly as bad as it looked. Losing her balance in the lake had been the worst bit and could well have killed her if it hadn’t been for…

She frowned, noticing who was missing for the first time.

“Where’s Bilba?” She demanded.

“She refused to come with us,” Fili said, crouching in front of her. His face was strained and his body kept twitching as if part of him wanted to run back outside while the other half wanted to stay. “She said she’d warm up faster helping.”

He wasn’t wearing his jacket, Dis noted, and could guess where it had gone. She reached out, trying to contact the girl and ask her to come in, only to run into a blank wall.
A sharp stab of fear shot through her. “Why isn’t she answering me?” she asked Fili.

Fili’s eyes widened. He got that far off look in his eyes for a moment, and then his own features twisted as he shoved to his feet, half turned to the door already. “She’s not answering me either.”

“Go find her,” Dis ordered. “Now.”

Kili stood up. “Do you want me to go too?”

“No,” Fili said. “The dragons will be here soon. Most of the riders will be busy, someone’s going to have to calm and organize them.”

Dis saw his eyes flicker toward her, clearly trying to communicate with his little brother without clueing her in and she rolled her eyes. “I’m perfectly capable of talking to my own dragon and having her pass orders on.”

Her words slurred slightly as she spoke and it was possible she was leaning a little heavier against Kili than she’d intended because it was obvious neither of her sons were believing a word of what she was saying.

“Alright,” Kili said. “Be careful.”

Fili nodded and, with that, he was gone, striding out the door with a number of the guards behind him.

Dis tensed and looked at Vili, trying to hide the sudden worry rushing through her, for both Fili and Bilba.

He nodded and stood up, drawing his sword in one easy motion.

Then he strode through the door after Fili.

As they both vanished from sight Dis offered up a silent prayer to Mahal that both would come back.

***

Fili had barely stepped out into the main plaza when he heard a voice calling.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

A girl appeared, not one he recognized. He caught sight of his jacket clutched in her hands and felt his heart lurch inside his chest.

He moved past the guards to meet up with the girl, reaching out to grab his jacket. “Where did you get this?”

She was already twisting around, pointing toward the homes leading off into the interior of Lake-town. “I don’t know what happened. She acted like she saw something and took off. I don’t know what it was. I never saw anything.”

A cold chill ran through him. His father appeared beside him, his face grim. “Call Dwalin. He went that way chasing the assassin.”
Fili nodded and obeyed. The answer came back at once.

*What is it?*

_Bilba’s gone. She apparently saw something and took off after it. Have you seen her?*

*No. No idea what it was?*

*No. Could it have been the assassin?*

_Unlikely, considering we already chased him down. Bastard decided death was preferable to arrest._

Fili tensed, his hands tightening in his jacket. *Then what could it have been?*

_Nori and I both cleared Lake-town, Dwalin replied shortly. There’s only one way anyone got in.*

Fili’s eyes narrowed. *Someone was helping them.*

_And we have no idea who that was or why they did it. It's possible the girl saw someone else involved and went after them. We’re in the area. I’ll start a search. We’ll find her._

Fili agreed, not adding he planned to look as well. Dwalin would just reject it and order him to stay in place. As the Captain of the Guard he had the right to issue orders to the royal family in instances of extreme emergency and those orders were to be followed without question.

Which is why Fili had no intention of giving him the option of doing so.

“You planning on waiting around here all day or finding your intended?” Vili asked dryly.

Fili nodded. He slid the jacket on, the inside damp, and unrolled the sleeves down to his wrists again. The young woman who’d brought the jacket over had been waiting nearby, quietly, and now she sent him a small smile.

“Good luck, Your Highness. I hope you find her.”

“So do I,” Fili said, forcing himself to return the smile. “Thank you.”

Vili handed him a spare sword he usually wore strapped to his back, not as flashy as the one his sons had made him but more than serviceable and they headed off in the direction Bilba had gone.

Fili just hoped they weren’t too late.

***

_Bilba ran through the streets, pacing the man who was running along the roofs of homes near her._

_She rounded a corner and caught sight of a second square platform. Unlike the one with the market, this one was significantly smaller, barely large enough to have fit a handful of the booths she’d seen earlier. It appeared to serve as a crossroads, linking different sections of Lake-town and allowing access to each area from a central point._

_She ran into the center, expecting the man to jump down now that the distance between the house he was on and the next one was too great._
He did jump down, landing in a crouch and moving to stand on the walkway she’d just come from.

Bilba started to take a step toward him but a sound had her turning to the side, where another man had appeared. This one was dressed similarly but with straggly gray hair and a grizzled face. The man stood on a second walkway leading into one of the other sections of the town.

A sinking feeling settled in her gut as she turned to the other two exits, already knowing what she’d see.

Two more humans, a slender woman and a young man probably only in his late teens were standing there, blocking the final exits. The area was small, too small for her to move well. In the Arena, or training in Erebor, taking on multiple opponents was dependent upon having enough space to get separation between them. It was about taking them on all at once, it was getting to where they could be taken on one or two at a time. There was no room to do that here, not to mention she was wearing no armor, or virtually any clothing at all, leaving her entire body one giant weak point and her only weapon was the dagger strapped to her thigh.

Bilba took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. She’d messed up. She’d known it was a trap but hadn’t thought it through, hadn’t entirely considered the consequences.

“You’re too emotional.”

She grimaced as the Bastard’s words flowed through her memory. She could see him shaking his head, telling Fili, “What did I say? She’s too rash. It’ll get her killed someday.”

Looked like she’d reached someday.

She really hated proving that bastard right.

Of course if she just killed them all then she could just pretend it never happened or, better yet, tell him he was wrong and her emotions served her just fine.

Yes, she liked that one. She’d go with that.

The man behind her, the one she’d originally followed, took a step forward and she turned to face him while trying simultaneously to stay aware of the other three.

“Come on now, girl. You’re outnumbered. Give up.”

Bilba responded by sliding her dagger from its sheath and going into a crouch.

The main raised an eyebrow. “And what do you think you’re going to do with that little sticker? Take all four of us out?”

Bilba smiled at him.

Then she threw the knife, her hand barely moving before the blade was soaring through the air.

She didn’t aim it at the man talking, he was out of her range.

The older man wasn’t.

The dagger sank into his throat before he had a chance to register it was coming. He collapsed to the ground with barely a gurgle.

Bilba turned on one heel, ignoring the way the wood dug into her soles, and ran to the body, looking
to retrieve her knife.

She got all of four feet when pain sliced through her upper calf. She screamed and fell, white hot fire tearing through her leg, side, arms and hands where she impacted the wood and skidded.

Footsteps rushed toward her.

Bilba was breathing hard and shaking but she pushed it aside. Giving into pain in the Arena, or exhaustion, or fear, or weakness of any kind got you killed and killed instantly.

There was a cheap, short dagger sticking out of her thigh. She looked up and saw the woman holding a matching one in her hand.

Bilba ripped the dagger out and threw it at the young man, who was closer. He stumbled to a stop, looking in surprise at the knife sticking out of his chest before he slowly fell to the ground.

Bilba scrambled and made it the final few feet, grabbing her dagger from the dead man’s throat and forcing herself to her feet, facing the last two. Her leg burned and threatened to buckle under her but she stayed up.

They had stopped in the center of the platform and were studying her.

“Impressive,” the man said. “Very impressive. I can see why Azog put a caution on your bounty.”

Bilba tensed. Bounty hunters. An assassin against the Durins and bounty hunters for her, all at once? Why? What were the odds?

She stumbled back a step, and bumped into a broad chest.

She froze, fear rattling along her nerves.

“Maybe,” a familiar voice drawled, “you should have listened to the caution and left her alone.”

Bilba turned her head slowly and found herself looking at Dwalin standing behind her. He held his axes, his favorite weapons, loosely in his hands.

“Tell you what,” he drawled, absently spinning one of the axes. “How about you lot stop harassing a little girl and pick on someone your own size?”

The man sighed. “I’ve got a better idea. How about you walk away and I’ll guarantee you a cut? Bounty on that girl is massive. There’s more than enough to go around.”

“If I could be bought I wouldn’t be the Captain of Erebor’s guard.”

The man laughed. “Oh, don’t give me that virtuous garbage. Everyone can be bought, it’s just a matter of price.” He raised his hands suddenly. “Just ask our friends.”

Movement came from the shadows and people were suddenly walking into view, from around corners and inside buildings. Their clothing was poor, unsuited for the weather, and the furtive way they walked, unwilling to meet her eyes, suggested they were unused to this sort of thing. Residents of Lake-town, if she had to guess, down on their luck and willing to sell her out to change their fortunes.

There were at least fifteen of them, doubtless untrained but, still, fifteen was fifteen. She and Dwalin would be outnumbered.
One of the men, at the front of the group, caught her eye and she sucked in a sharp breath, recognizing him. Alfrid, the slimy man who’d clung so close to the Master.

Dwalin saw him as well. “Well, I guess that explains a lot. And if you’re in on it then I’d guess your precious Master is as well, yes?”

Alfrid sneered. “It is a lot of money and the Master has been wanting a few…upgrades to his lodgings.” He laughed. “It’s a shame you’ll be dying too but can’t have you running back with word now can we?”

“I’m a rider, asshole,” Dwalin said dryly. “I’ve already alerted my men, and the royal family.”

Alfrid’s entire face went slack, his mouth gaping. “You…you--”

Bilba started to resist the urge to roll her eyes, then decided to screw it and rolled them anyway. The royal family had been going to Lake-town for how long and Alfrid had managed to forget the fact that they could communicate via mind link? Granted there were no riders among the humans in Lake-town. There was nowhere to lodge dragons so bonded riders went to Dale or elsewhere. Still, it was a new level of stupidity for Alfrid to have forgotten such a basic fact about them.

“Who cares?” the man she’d originally followed said, “With the amount of money you’re going to make you can start over anywhere you want.” He twisted slightly to grin at Alfrid. “And if the Master won’t be there then I suppose you’ll just have to take his share.”

Greed entered Alfrid’s eyes and he gave a wicked smile.

The man turned back to face Dwalin again. “You can’t take on fifteen of us, Dwarf. Be reasonable. Take the offer. She’s just one girl. What’s she to you?”

“She’s a person,” Dwalin growled, “not a bounty.” He reached out suddenly and nudged Bilba until she turned around so she was facing him. “And she’s suffered enough.”

Bilba frowned at him and then turned to face the crowd again. A number of the townspeople weren’t looking at her, their faces averted in shame or embarrassment.

The man sighed. “Enough of this. You’re stalling in the hopes your soldiers can get here in time. I can tell you, they won’t.”

He reached into his cloak and pulled out a sword. The woman did the same.

Bilba calculated the odds, and they weren’t good. Even if the townspeople weren’t trained warriors it didn’t mean they couldn’t fight and fifteen would make up at least some of the deficit of training.

She was starting to shiver, hard. She’d been standing still too long, the cold was getting to her. Her leg burned where she’d been stabbed along with a dozen or more different scrapes and cuts from where she’d hit the wood when she’d fallen. Her feet were torn to pieces and her hands were losing feeling, meaning she’d be unable to hold a sword or her dagger soon and wield it with any efficiency.

She could fight, but not well, not at that moment. Dwalin was going to take on an entire group of people, plus two trained fighters…because she couldn’t control herself.

She wasn’t much into people fighting her battles for her, certainly not battles she’d set into motion.

This was her fault.
And she would fix it.

They wanted her.

Not Dwalin.

She locked eyes with the man, challenging him.

Then she slid her dagger into its sheath, darted to the left and ran, down one of the side ramps no longer guarded by anyone.

A glimpse back showed that, as she thought, both the man and woman were following her.

She doubted the ones left behind would prove much threat without their leaders encouraging them. Even if a few of them tried to challenge Dwalin, who was intimidating even without his axes, she highly doubted they’d cause him much trouble.

She spun around a corner, biting back a sharp cry as pain blistered along her leg. She couldn’t feel her feet anymore which was undoubtedly a blessing given how badly they must be cut up.

She’d caught a glimpse of the general layout of the town as they’d flown over and now remembered enough, she hoped, to know where she was going.

Another corner loomed, connected by two walkways and she jumped, leaping over the water to land on the wooden planks on the other side.

Her leg nearly buckled under her but she managed to get up and keep going.

There, she could see it now. Brief glimpses between homes of the long bridge that led from Lake-town to the mainland. It was narrow and long, and wide open, no homes anywhere in sight.

She couldn’t fight. She could barely stand anymore.

But she didn’t plan on doing much of either, not for long anyway.

She bolted out onto the bridge and lengthened her stride, trying to put enough distance to get herself out of range of another dagger.

She made it a substantial way down the bridge before her leg finally gave in and sent her sprawling to the ground. Gritting her teeth, she pushed herself to her feet and held herself upright,

The man and woman, whose names she didn’t know and really didn’t care to know, were casually strolling toward her.

“Well now,” the man said. “I don’t know what you thought to accomplish with that, aside from making sure my friend and I split the bounty two ways instead of fifteen.” He grinned. “I suppose I owe you a thanks for that.”

It had been a long time since this had all started, Bilba calculated, more than long enough.

The man started to step forward, only to have the woman grab his arm.

“Wait,” she said, speaking for the first time. “She’s up to something.”

The man shook her hand off. “She can barely stand. What could she possibly do?”
An unearthly roar of pure rage split the sky.

Bilba smiled.

The two humans both stumbled back, the woman’s eyes wide, the man looking pissed.

Wind gusted, whipping wet strands of hair around Bilba’s face. Her shivering increased and her legs shook under her but she forced herself to stand.

A slender tail slid around her torso, wound around her waist and down to her hips. The end hung down alongside her thigh, giving the appearance of a glittering blue sash.

**Which one of them hurt you?**

Bilba’s eyes widened. She’d never heard Syrath sound so angry before.

He sounded like her.

_The woman_, she said, _but_ –

She didn’t have a chance to get any further.

Syrath shrieked in rage and then fire was belching out over her head, straight at the two.

*Syrath!* Bilba screamed. They needed the two alive. They needed to find out who was behind all this.

The woman never had a chance to react.

Bilba caught a glimpse of the look of horror in her eyes and then the fire was engulfing her and there was nothing left to do anything anymore.

The man was several feet ahead of her and the second Syrath let loose he lunged forward, his boots pounding on the planks.

Bilba was exhausted and in pain and stunned by Syrath’s actions.

And so she made her second mistake of the day.

One that would have been fatal in the Arena.

She stopped paying attention to him, at least for an instant.

By the time his boots registered, and she turned her attention to him, it was far too late.

He slammed into her, knocking her back. Syrath only had his tail loosely wrapped around her and it fell away before he could do anything.

She flew back, off the bridge, and hit the water, the man still holding onto her.

For a brief second she caught sight of Syrath hovering over them.

And then the water closed over her head.

***
Bilba struggled, clawing at the arms wrapped around her waist. She lashed out with her feet, catching him a few times, while simultaneously tearing at any flesh she could find.

His grip loosened and she kicked away, only to have him grab her leg at the last second, dragging her back again. He dragged her up under the unburned section of bridge, keeping her under but trying to move in the direction of the shore. He was still trying to take her to Azog, Bilba realized in shock. He thought he could use the bridge as cover and still get away with her, preferably unconscious given the way he seemed intent on keeping her submerged.

Not that he really had to bother with taking it that far. Her mind was already so fuzzy, drifting, the cold settling deep into her bones and winding along her insides.

She frowned suddenly as she stared at the water several feet over her head.

Why was she under water again?

She’d fallen…off a…off a cliff?

No, not a cliff…a bridge?

Azog had been there…or…or…who was it?

It was cold.

So cold.

Somewhere, some when, her mother started singing and Bilba stopped to listen.

She'd almost forgotten her mother used to sing.

She had too, her voice almost identical to her mother's.

At least until Azog had cut her tongue out.

Or had he? Maybe that had been a dream...maybe it was all just a dream...

**Bilba!**

The voice cut, momentarily, through the fog in her mind and she blinked, clarity returning.

Her lungs were burning.

Something heavy was hanging off her leg.

A man.

That’s right.

She remembered.

She kicked but her body was stiff, sluggish. The kick was ineffective, barely moving in the water.

Overhead a massive object moved, cutting through the water far faster than should have been possible.
She tried...she tried to keep focused but it was already slipping away again, the fog overtaking her.

There were voices babbling in her head.

That was odd.

Usually the only voice was Syrath.

Wasn’t it?

She found him, calling her.

_Syrath_ she managed. _Get away. The orcs will catch you._

**Orcs? There are no orcs.**

Her leg jerked suddenly and the weight hanging off it was gone.

Long, slender talons closed around her and then she was surging upward, breaking the surface almost before she knew it.

She gasped, sucking in air but her lungs felt tight, refusing to expand all the way.

The world tilted and she was being shoved up onto a wooden walkway, part of one anyway. As she sagged onto the wood, she caught sight of a massive portion that was missing, the edges and boards near the gap charred and burned.

_Syrath_, she managed to mumble, _did you burn a bridge?_

Something swooped low. Bilba caught a glimpse of black and gold and then she was being lifted again.

Her body felt far too heavy and she allowed herself to sag backward, tilting her head back to watch things rush past below.

She was really tired.

She was always tired though. It didn’t matter. The orcs liked tired slaves, it made them easier to control. She needed...she needed to keep going...keep going or the orcs would get mad....when they got mad they took it out on her mother.

She struggled to get up, needing to get going, but her body didn’t obey her.

Without warning she was falling.

Falling, falling, into a mine shaft, off a cliff into a lake...always falling, never landing.

Where was Syrath?

He was all she had.

If he’d left...if he was gone...then she was all alone.

All alone...

But she hadn't always been.
Right?

Arms caught her.

***

Bilba felt like a block of ice.

Fili felt fear claw at him at the sight of her in his arms. Her skin was nearly bloodless, her lips tinged a dark color. Her eyes, which were barely open, were glazed and unfocused.

“Bilba?” he said. “Bilba, come on, answer me.”

“We need to get her inside,” Vili said, stepping to his son’s side. “Now.”

Fili nodded. He adjusted his grip, holding her as close as possible and began striding back toward the center of Lake-town. Overhead Xalanth twisted in a circle and raced off, back to help Syrath get out of the lake and back into the sky.

Fili and Vili hadn’t made it that far into the residential section before they’d received word of what was going on. Even now he could see the square in the distance and he moved faster, hoping to reach it just that much sooner. The guards they’d brought with them were still ranged around them but, with news of the Master’s betrayal, Fili had a sudden fear they wouldn’t be enough. There was no way to know how deep the conspiracy went.

They needed to get out of Lake-town, immediately.

In his arms, Bilba shifted suddenly, trying to get free.

Put me down. I’m fine. I can work.

You’re not fine, Fili said. Stop fighting.

She laughed, the sound one of the few vocalizations she could still make without her tongue.

You know better. Never stop fighting. Stop and you die. Then they feed you to the Watcher. If you’re lucky, they’ll wait until you’re actually dead.

Fili tensed, his jaw tightening. Bilba hadn’t talked about Moria, at all. They knew about the Arena from the brand on her shoulder, generally about her mother from what she’d told Dis, and could guess the rest from her scars.

But she never talked specifics.

The square came into focus. At the edge, watching for them, was the young woman who’d brought him his coat. Catching sight of them she ran forward to meet them.

“She needs to be inside,” she said, staring at Bilba with wide eyes, “right now.”

“We’re taking her to where the others are,” Fili said.
“There’s no time,” the girl said sharply. “She’s suffering from hypothermia. She needs to get in, now.”

She grabbed his arm, turning him to the side. “My house is closer. Come on, hurry.”

Fili hesitated, his eyes going to the building where the others were and then to Bilba in his arms. He shot a questioning look at his father who nodded toward the girl.

They followed her to a house a short distance away. Like most of the others he’d seen it was multi-story. From past experience Fili knew the bathroom would be on the lower level while the upper level would hold the kitchen, living room and a small bedroom.

She hit the stairs and ran up them, pausing at the door to unlock it.

“It’s so damp and cold here all the time most of us keep a fire going so it’ll already be warm.”

She vanished inside. Fili started to follow only to have Vili’s hand on his shoulder, stopping him. He gestured to the other guards who took up position at the foot of the stairs.

“Wait a moment.”

Keeping a hand on the hilt of his sword, he stepped forward and vanished into the house.

Fili waited, his body tense. He understood his father’s reticence but it didn’t make it any easier when Bilba was nearly unconscious and his father had just stepped into an unknown situation, alone.

Dwalin, he called, we need more guards.

Where are you?

Fili described the location as best he could and got a confirmation in return.

Lyth took your mother and Kili back to Erebor. I’ll send some of the guards that were with them to back you up. How’s the girl? Xalanth said she didn’t look good.

I don’t know yet, Fili replied.

Vili appeared in the doorway and nodded at him. “Come on.”

Fili strode into the room, past his father who stayed at the doorway, watching. As soon as he was inside, Vili shut the door and stationed himself in front of it.

It was warmer inside, a fire going merrily in the small fireplace. It had fresh wood on it, it must have been banked while she was out.

There were several blankets laid out on the floor in front of it and the young woman was standing over them. She gestured toward Bilba and said, “Put her on there. Then turn around. I’m going to get her dried off and dressed in dry clothes.”

She was holding a small bundle in her arms but Fili shook his head. “She’s half dvarven and a warrior. She’s small by our standards but larger than you, your clothes won’t fit.”

As he spoke he went and crouched, gently transferring Bilba to the blankets. The movement served to wake her up and she frowned at him.

Frerin?
“No,” Fili said. “It’s alright. We’re going to help you.”

The girl crouched down as well. “Give me your shirt and jacket again then. We’ll put those on her. After I get them on her I want you to hold her. Body heat is a good way to get her body temperature back up and dwarves run hotter than humans, right?”

Fili nodded. He didn’t know as much about hypothermia as someone who lived out in the open on a lake but he had a general understanding, enough to know she made sense.

He stood up and turned his back, stripping off the jacket he’d put back on and his shirt after that. He held them behind her and, after a few seconds, felt them pulled out of his hand.

“Okay,” the young woman said. Fili turned to see Bilba was relatively dry, dressed in his shirt and jacket with thick blankets wrapped around her waist and lower body and her head. The girl frowned and then said, “Sit here,” she indicated where she wanted. “You can hold her with her back to the fire, hopefully it’ll warm faster. It’s important to get her body warm first, before we worry about her arms or legs.”

She tugged Bilba over, making room for Fili to sit on the floor. She grabbed a heavy chair from the kitchen and set it up behind him to give him something to lean against. After that she helped him get Bilba settled on his lap, tucked the blanks more securely around her and then started layering blankets on top of them.

“Wouldn’t it be faster to put her in a warm bath?” He asked.

The girl shook her head. “No, her body wouldn’t be able to handle the shock. It could knock her heart out if its rhythm.” She paused. “Speaking of which, keep a hand on her chest. Make sure she’s breathing and her heart is working properly.”

Fili obeyed, sliding a hand onto Bilba’s chest and grimacing at how slow and shallow her breaths were. “Her breathing is pretty slow.”

The girl frowned. “Is she still shivering?”

Fili nodded.

“That’s a good sign,” the girl said. “She’s also not entirely unconscious, just mostly, so that’s good too. Is she saying anything to you?”

“She’s confused,” Fili said. “I don’t think she knows where she is.”

“That’s normal,” the girl said, “She’s actually doing better than I thought she would be.” She stood up. “I’m going to go make tea. It’ll help, if we can get her to drink it that is.”

She started to walk away only to stop as Fili said, “Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Oh,” she spun around and dropped into a low curtsey. “I’m sorry! My name is Cassandra, Cassie for short.” She hesitated and then said. “Orcrist saved my life a few years ago. It’s just been me and my dad …or it was I guess. Anyway, he had to go on a trip to the Blue Mountains a long time ago and he took me with him so we wouldn’t be separated.” She shrugged. “The caravan we were traveling with was attacked. My dad didn’t make it but I did, because Orcrist and Glamdring saved us. She escorted those of us that made it to Rivendell and made sure we were okay before leaving.”

She gave him a slightly strained smile. “So I’m the one who should be thanking her, really.” She frowned, studying Bilba. “You know, I remembered her as being larger than life. It’s strange seeing her now and realizing we’re probably close to the same age.”
“She’s just a person,” Fili said. “Her name is Bilba. She’s not a fan of the Orcrist title.”

Cassie nodded. “Bilba. It kind of makes her even more heroic, in a way. Knowing she was just a person back then, just like me.”

She gave him a nervous smile, a second awkward curtsy and darted into the kitchen as though it had just really sunk in that she was addressing the Crown Prince of Erebor, and not just addressing but had actually been ordering him around.

At the door, Vili snorted, then leaned back to look out the window.

“There are other soldiers showing up. I’m going to have them set up a perimeter. No leaving.”

Fili rolled his eyes. “You think I’m going to leap up with Bilba half unconscious and jump out a window?”

Vili shrugged. “Does seem more like something your brother would do but you never know. He had to get it from somewhere after all.”

Fili snorted. “Yeah, from you.”

Vili left and Fili settled back, holding Bilba carefully.

_Frerin? Frerin? Why won’t you answer me? Are you mad?_

Fili scowled. He’d avoided talking to her because he didn’t want to encourage her thinking he was his uncle. Her voice in his head was beginning to sound more and more distraught, though, and he couldn’t handle that.

_No, he said, answering her finally. I’m not angry. Why would I be? I couldn’t get you out, her voice sluggishly responded. I wanted to. I did, but I didn’t know where the key was.

It’s okay, he said. I don’t blame you. I gave you Syrath didn’t I?

You thought he was a girl. He was…very affronted.

Fili chuckled. I imagine he was.

He reached out as he said it, searching for the dragon and found him nearby. _Syrath, are you doing alright?_ I did a bad thing. I killed that woman and Bilba said not to but she hurt Bilba and I was really angry and I burned the bridge and all the townspeople are going to be mad at me and I killed that man too but I’m not sorry about it because he was trying to drown Bilba.

Fili frowned and shut his eyes for a moment, struggling to help both his dragon and ride partner at the same time. “Cassie?”

She appeared in the door to the kitchen. “Yes?”

“Syrath…Glamdring, says Bilba was hurt.” He’d seen cuts and gashes on her but nothing as serious as what Syrath was making it sound. Then, again, she’d been in the water, any blood would have been washed away and he’d been so worried about her overall health he hadn’t paid much attention to anything else.
Cassie nodded. “Her feet are torn up pretty bad and she must have fallen on the wood some because she's all gashed up. She's got a pretty bad cut on her leg too. It wasn’t bleeding much because she's so cold. I bandaged it but she’ll probably need it sewn up. I thought to maybe suggest it after the tea is done. Hopefully she’ll be warm enough to be out of danger but still cold enough it’ll be mostly numb.”

“Thank you,” Fili said. In his arms, Bilba had started to move a little bit, her eyes more open but still glazed. He tightened his grip and tried to reassure her. She seemed to be jumping around in her memories, one minute convinced she was still in Moria, the next fleeing from Azog during the incident where he’d met her, another fighting orcs in a series of never-ending battles that all melded into one long scene.

*It’s not your fault, Syrath, he sent. I would have done the same thing.*

*Really?*

*Absolutely,* Fili responded, flinching at how young Syrath sounded. *He was young, after all. Is Xalanth with you?* he asked, mentally praying the other dragon was.

*Yes.*

Fili relaxed fractionally. *Good. Stay with him, okay? He’s not blaming you, is he?*

*No, he says I did the right thing.*

*Okay, well, there you go. Listen to him, and me too.*

*I feel bad but I also kind of wish that man and woman were still alive so I could kill them again. They were bounty hunters. They wanted to give her back to Azog.*

*I understand that feeling, believe me.*

*I’m cursed,* Bilba said suddenly.

*I’m not cursed,* Fili responded instantly. People had been insisting his bloodline was cursed for years, ever since the disaster at Moria.

*I am, Frerin, she repeated. Bad things follow me. People around me get hurt. So many people. Mom, you, Quenth, Drogo, Snapdragon, Daisy, Filith, and so many more. They’re all dead because of me. Primrose lived but she can’t fly anymore. Primula only sort of lived. Now Dis is hurt too.*

Fili didn’t recognize most of the names she listed, aside from Primula.

*Quenth was already hurt before you ever met her,* he said.

*She screamed so loud, Bilba mumbled. It hurt just to watch them drag her in. You kept trying to get to her, even after you broke your arm. And then you did but she wouldn’t wake up anymore.*

Fili swallowed hard, a wave of grief racing through him. Bilba had never gone into great detail about
Quenth and his uncle’s fate, at least not to him anyway. He could see why.

It wasn’t your fault though, he repeated, we were both hurt, badly. As for the Shire, if they blamed you for that then why did Arwen say they were so worried about you? Primula and…Bofur, wasn’t it? They wanted to go out and look for you when they thought you were missing. He sighed. The Shire was going to get attacked at some point, Bilba. That’s why we have an entire garrison there and not just a small battalion.

It didn’t have to happen then, or with such force. It happened because I was there, and Syrath.

You said Primula was hurt. If anyone has the right to blame you it’s her, and she clearly doesn’t. So if she doesn’t blame you and she was hurt in the attack how can you blame yourself?

Bilba was silent. She’d stilled quite a bit in the last few minutes, her head resting against Fili’s shoulder. Her breathing had increased and her heart rate was steady.

Maybe I should just stay away, she said suddenly. Maybe it’s better to be alone.

It’s not better, Fili said. Just lonelier.

People keep getting hurt.

We already went over this, Fili said firmly. He put a finger under her chin and gently lifted it to make eye contact. As he’d suspected her eyes were clearer, her gaze sharper. My mother was already in danger, so were all of us.

There were bounty hunters.

There was also an assassin. Dwalin killed him. I have no doubt the incidents were connected but there’s no way to know which plot came first. Given the Master’s greed it could well have been both.

Why?

I don’t know. I imagine Nori will figure it out though.

Cassie reappeared from the kitchen and came to kneel beside them. She was holding a steaming cup and saucer and offered it to Bilba. “Here you go. This will help you feel better.”

Fili helped Bilba get her arms free so she could take the cup. She was still shaking but it was less violently.

Her name is Cassie, Fili told her as she sipped the drink. She says you saved her life when orcs attacked her caravan.

I don’t remember. There have been a lot of caravans. Is Dis okay?

Fine, Fili replied. The arrow wasn’t poisoned. She’s already back at Erebor with Kili. She was worried about you when we left.

The door opened and Vili walked back in. “I’ve got a perimeter set up. Dwalin is rather cheerfully arresting the Master.” He nodded at Bilba. “After you ran off a few of the townspeople tried to attack him but he dealt with them fast enough that the rest rather lost their will to continue after that.”

Bilba paused, studying the liquid in the cup. Cassie had gotten up and retreated to another chair where she was sitting quietly.
I put him in danger. I knew it was a trap but I let my emotions get the better of me, just like he warned. She tilted her head back to look at Fili. I put myself in that danger. He could have just left me to it, but he didn’t. He protected me, even after how I’ve treated him.

Of course he did, Fili said. That’s who he is.

Is it? I don’t know. As soon as I think he is, I remember why I hate him and it means he can’t be but then I watch him and...he doesn’t fit the picture I have of him in my head.

Then maybe you need a new one. Bilba had never spoken to him about Dwalin, aside from slipping up and referring to him as Bastard a few times. She’d never even verified she’d known who he was, as she seemed to be doing now.

Bilba took another sip of the tea and then leaned against him again. Vili came forward and took the cup and saucer from her, setting it on a table.

I made a mistake today.

You also saved my mother’s life.

Those girls in the square were staring at you.

Fili frowned, startled at the rapid turn in topic, though not entirely surprised. Bilba thought saving people was a matter of course. She didn’t like attention being called to it.

I guess. Most of them were probably staring at Kili.

No, some were staring at you.

Fili went still.

She sounded jealous.

Is it a problem? he asked carefully. Them looking at me?

No. She sounded downright miserable, similar to how he felt every time his mother had mentioned she’d be showing Bilba a courting gift, citing she wouldn’t betray Bilba’s trust by being biased. You deserve to be happy.

Fili felt like he’d stumbled into the middle of a sleeping orc pack and one wrong move would wake them all up. What if I won’t be happy with one of them?

She frowned and looked at him. Why not?

Fili swallowed and looked over at Cassie. “Cassie, I think we can probably get that wound sewed up now. Could you get the supplies?”

She nodded and got up. “Of course.” She vanished into another room.

Fili shot a look at his father who raised an eyebrow, before suddenly looking amused. “I think I’ll go check on the soldiers,” he said, rising smoothly to his feet. “Be right back.”

He left, leaving them both alone for a few minutes.

Fili took a deep breath and mentally kicked himself for how nervous he felt. He took on orcs and testy nobles on a daily basis, he could confess his feelings toward a girl for Mahal’s sake.
Maybe I wouldn’t be happy with one of them because I’ve found someone better. Someone they don’t measure up to.

Her eyes narrowed. Who?

He actually clenched his teeth, as if in preparation for a blow. You.

Her eyes widened. You can’t like me.

What? Why not?

She looked exasperated. Because you’re a Prince and I’m a slave.

You’re not a slave, Fili said, sharper than he intended. You’re so much more than that. You’re Orcrist, slayer of orcs, protector of the common folk. You’re the rider of a firedrake, a royal one at that. You’re a symbol to many, proof the orcs can be defeated, and that even one small person can stand up to them and win.

Her eyes narrowed. You make it sound so flashy.

It is flashy. Why do you think I’ve been spending so much time on your courting gift?

Okay, that he hadn’t meant to say. Fear lanced right through him as she stared at him, her face utterly expressionless in that strange way she had when she’d either been stunned speechless, so to speak; or had shut herself down for one reason or another, usually a bad reason.

You…you made me…a courting gift?

I am making you one, he admitted. Mahal, he was the one shaking now.

Do you want me to finish it?

You can finish it.

***

She said the words so quietly she wasn’t sure he heard her at first. Honestly, she wasn’t entirely sure she’d said them. It had taken all the courage she’d had and had burst from her heart and not the logical part of her mind that quietly informed her she was dreaming and/or simply being ridiculous. Her heart had entirely overridden her and she’d blurted the words out in a sudden rush of fear that he was about to come to his senses and take it all back, as though he wouldn’t be able to do so once she’d spoken. A part of her was convinced she was still confused, or dreaming, or that he’d laugh and tell her he was only joking, that no Prince would ever want someone like her.

Fili made a relieved sound, but then stopped, frowning at her.

Are you okay?

She was most decidedly not What was she doing? Hadn’t she just decided there was no room for love in her life? That she wouldn’t even know how to bring him happiness even if he did want her? And what about her mother? Or Primula? They’d had love and looked how it had turned out for them. And courting was so wildly, wildly different from anything she’d ever experienced. She didn’t have the first idea about what she was supposed to do or say or how to act and, Valar, what was she doing? What if she made a muddle of the entire thing and ended up with Fili hating her?
What if you change your mind? Or what if something happens or you meet someone better or what if I do it wrong or and then you hate me or--

What if I just finish the gift? Fili cut in, his tone calm, and vaguely amused. And we figure it out from there? Slowly. If you change your mind then we’ll just forget it ever happened. I’m never going to hate you so there’s no worry about that.

Bilba frowned at him. That seemed far too simple. Nothing in life was ever that simple. It always involved pain and blood and, more often than not, a near death experience or three. Would your mother be mad at me?

No, Fili said at once. She wouldn’t. Sometimes courtships don’t work out, it’s nobody’s fault. She’ll probably want to talk to you constantly to make sure you’re still okay with it. And if you decide you’re not, that’s fine. We’ll always be friends, Bilba, that I can promise.

Bilba’s eyes narrowed. It can’t be that simple.

He sighed and lowered his forehead for a minute to rest against hers. You have so much faith that life is going to let you down. How about, just this once, have faith it won’t? That I won’t?

Bilba blinked.

He wanted her to have faith?

She’d had faith, once.

Faith in the belief her father would come.

It had been her mainstay, carrying her through her days in Moria. It had been absolute too, so embedded in her that nothing could shake it.

Nothing except her mother’s death.

Everything had shattered in that moment, falling into jagged shards around her feet. For weeks after it had felt as though her soul was made of broken glass, the pieces grating and grinding as she moved, slicing ever deeper into her psyche until all she’d known was the pain.

She’d recovered eventually, the wounds closing, as much as it was possible for them to close.

In their wake had been only silence and doubt.

No love, no companionship, and certainly no faith.

It had shriveled up and died, drifting away like ash on the wind, gone so long now she’d forgotten what it even felt like.

Or, at least she had until she’d stood on that bridge and believed Syrath would come for her.
And come for her he had.

She hadn't thought it possible to feel that way anymore, wasn't entirely sure where it had come from in that final, desperate moment.

She'd forgotten how good it felt to believe in someone, to have someone to believe in.

Could she have that kind of faith in Fili?

Yes.

Bilba sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes wide.

She believed in him.

She believed in him...and...and she had absolutely no idea what to do with that.

_You’re overthinking it aren’t you?_ Fili said mildly, breaking in. _You tend to do that you know._ He shifted, leaning back again as footsteps signaled Cassie returning. _It’s fine. We’re young. We can take as much time as we want._

Bilba ran that through her mind. _Time isn’t ever something I believed I had a lot of. I always assumed I’d die young._

_Not if I can help it._

Cassie knelt next to her and moved the blankets until she’d uncovered the leg with the knife wound. She removed the bandages carefully, grimacing at the wound.

_I can do it_, Bilba said. _If it bothers her._

“You’re not sewing up your own wound,” Fili said dryly.

Cassie looked up, startled. “Oh, no, it’s okay!” she stammered. “I can do it. I just felt bad. I didn’t want to put you in pain.”
Bilba shrugged. It's not like it's anything I'm not used to.

You haven't been used to it in the last six months and won't in the future if I have anything to say about it.

Bilba tilted her head back against his shoulder to study him. You seem to think you’re going to have a say in a lot of things.

He grinned at her. Only the bad things.

Bilba’s brow furrowed and she looked back to her leg, watching absently as Cassie cleaned the wound and then started stitching it, using tight, small stitches. The needle bit, probably more than they thought it did, but she didn’t react.

Time...love...a long life...no pain...those were things normal people had.

Not her...right?

She’d never considered it before, not really. Even in the Shire it had felt like she was only visiting, she hadn’t known how or why but she’d never believed it would last.

Why did she believe that? Why did part of her still seem to think she was in Moria?

She studied the needle, watching absently as it pulled the jagged edges of her skin back together again.

I used to think Azog was invincible, that nothing could touch him.

Oh, I assure you he’s very much mortal, Fili said, a fact I intend to demonstrate one day.

She’d already seen it a little, when Thorin had cut his arm off.

She'd thought he was invincible, but she'd been wrong.

She'd thought it was impossible to escape Moria.

But she'd been wrong.

What else was she wrong about?

Cassie finished her work and began bandaging her leg again.

I think...wrong sometimes, Bilba said slowly, but I don’t realize it until someone points it out, and sometimes not even then.

She’d been in Moria her entire life. So long that even years after leaving the mines were still inside her. She was starting to see it a little, just a little, but it was hard. Like she’d been standing in a dark room without realizing it was dark, or watching ordinary people lead their normal lives on the other side of a river, not understanding she was standing right next to a bridge.

Was there a bridge? The orcs would have said no.
The orcs had said a lot of things. How much of the way she thought came from them?

And why, if it was from the orcs, was she listening to it?

Just talk to us, Fili said, tightening his grip. Any of us, me, my parents, Kili, Nori, even the dragons. Visit Gondor and talk to Arwen or Aragorn, or back to Rivendell and speak to the elves. Let us help you.

Let someone help her.

Understand there were people who wanted to help her.

Who cared about her.

Who didn't see her leaving as protection but as simply her running away. Who, if she'd turned back as she left, may well have been standing with hands outstretched, trying to stop her.

Wanting her to stay.

Had they?

Primula and Bofur’s faces rose in her mind and she felt her perspective shift. She’d left assuming she was protecting them, never considering they would care she was gone.

But…Aragorn said they had.

Aragorn had cared, as had Arwen.

She knew, logically, people cared about her, or said they cared at least. She tended to assume people thought about her when she was in front of them and practically forgot she existed as soon as she left.

But they’d been looking for her.

She assumed no one would miss her once she was finally killed in battle.

But all those thoughts, all those beliefs…they’d all been given to her by the orcs.

Every last one of them.

Her mother had never said those things but she’d been gone so long and the only thing left had been the orcs and sometimes…sometimes their voices drowned everything else out.

She’d been someone else once…even in Moria…even as a slave. She rarely thought about that person anymore. She'd died, in many ways, alongside her mother inside the mines.

She'd always believed she would one day leave Moria but, really, she hadn't.

Instead it had been Orcrist who'd left, who'd stepped out in that girl's place, carrying the bones of who she'd once been buried somewhere deep inside her.

Except...maybe...just maybe...that girl wasn't as dead as Bilba had always believed.

Perhaps...all this time...she'd simply been lost.

I used to be different, she found herself confessing to Fili. I wasn’t so...pessimistic…
Pessimistic, not realistic, not pragmatic. Not really. She’d given it that label but it wasn’t what she’d been.

*I used to have something else but I can’t remember it anymore. I used to believe things could get better. I had –*

*Hope,* Fili said. *You used to have hope. You can have it again.*

*Can I?*

*Yes. We can help you find it. You just have to let us.*

Was it that easy?

Stop listening to her tormentors and start listening to those who cared, who looked for her, came after her, protected her, stood alongside her and caught her when she fell.

They all stood in the light, Fili possibly the brightest among them next to Syrath.

Could she join them?

She didn’t know.

But she *wanted* to.

More than anything she’d wanted in a long time.

She was so damn *tired* of trying to do it on her own.

She didn’t want to anymore.

***

Dis returned to Lake-town several hours later.

No one was happy about it but there was really no way to stop her, not when her oldest son and surrogate daughter were still there.

It was a far different place she returned to.

Thorin had requested, and received, aid from Lord Bard of Dale and he had personally come, along with a large contingent of human and dwarven soldiers. Thorin wanted answers but he didn’t want it to appear that the dwarves of Erebor were moving in on a human settlement and taking over. Historically Lake-town and Dale had always been linked. Technically the Master of Lake-town answered to the Lord of Dale, a fact never before enforced by any of Dale’s Lords.

Dis imagined that would be changing.

She strode through the plaza, surrounded by guards, ignoring the edge she’d fallen off after being shot. It was swarming now with guards from Erebor and Dale, as was most of the town. They were collecting the fifteen who’d attacked Dwalin and the girl, the Master and his sniveling sycophant, and the corpses of the assassin and two of the four bounty hunters. They’d also be starting work on
repairing the bridge. She’d caught a glimpse of Syrath curled up next to Xalanth on the banks as they’d come in and her heart had gone out to the young dragon. She had no doubt Xalanth would look after him, and that he’d feel better as soon as he saw Fili and Bilba, but it still hurt to see one so young so upset.

She didn’t see very many residents from the town. When they’d arrived the people had either gathered to see them, or her sons, or had been in their homes avoiding the whole thing. Now they were all in their homes, not by order, more from a desire to stay out of the way or, she would imagine, embarrassment from the actions of their fellow townspeople. She’d have to come back at some point, let them know Erebor didn’t blame them all for the actions of a few but, for now, she had other things to focus on.

Kili, who’d insisted on coming with her, gave her a concerned look but she merely returned an exasperated one and he looked away again. Her shoulder ached but, aside from that and a general fatigue, she felt fine.

She was pissed off more than anything else.

Bilba had been doing so well coming out of her shell, actually getting out and becoming involved in the world instead of behaving like someone only allowed to observe it.

Something like this could completely undo every positive step the girl had taken.

And thinking of how far the girl had come, how hard she’d been trying, and how far back she could end up now thanks to some bastard’s personal vendetta pissed. Her. Off.

And that was before she got to the looks of fear in her sons’ eyes or the fact they couldn’t even have a nice day out to Lake-town without idiots trying to attack them.

The house where Fili and Bilba were came into view, surrounded by guards and she picked up her pace, pushing through them and heading up the stairs.

At the top she took a deep breath before opening the door and striding in.

Vili was near the door so she barely got a step before he was there, hugging her. Fili was less than a step behind. He was missing his jacket and shirt but, having already seen Bilba when they came out of the water, she knew where they’d gone. She approved.

“You shouldn’t be back here,” Vili chided, stepping back. “You nearly drowned and you were borderline hypothermic.”

Dis responded by kissing him, a reaction he returned energetically enough to probably traumatize both their sons, and then pulled away to look further in the room, trepidation gnawing at her spine.

She spotted the young woman that had owned the house and had helped her family. She’d reportedly been saved by Bilba several years earlier and was trying to repay the debt.

Seated next to her nearly lost in Fili’s shirt, jacket, and blankets, was Bilba, cradling a cup of steaming liquid.

She looked at Dis as she walked over…and smiled at her. Her eyes were clear and instead of the crushing weight of misplaced blame and guilt Dis expected to see, the girl looked…fine.

A massive weight fell off her and relief flooded her.
Bilba struggled to her feet, trying to hold the blanket around her and also clearly favoring her leg. The report had been she’d taken a knife to her thigh, though she didn’t appear to be in any danger from it.

Dis stepped forward and hugged her, wrapping both arms around her tightly and sighing as she verified the safety of the last of her family.

Bilba hugged her back and then stepped away. *I’m so glad you’re okay.*

*All thanks to you,* Dis responded.

Bilba looked away, pretending to want to get another sip of her drink. One day Dis would get her to accept praise but, for now, she was thrilled with how well the girl was doing and was more than happy to accept it.

She held up a small bundle she’d brought with her. “You’ll be happy to know I brought you a change of clothes, and shoes.”

Bilba twisted around to stare at her. *Really?*

*Her feet are shredded,* Fili told her, *we’ve got them wrapped but she’ll need to be careful putting her boots on.*

Dis nodded absently to let him know she’d heard. “Come on, let’s go get changed, shall we?”

*Can Cassie come too?*

“Of course,” Dis said, hiding her surprise easily. She turned to ask the young woman who positively beamed with joy at being asked. She’d been trying, and failing rather miserably, not to gawk at Kili, who’d been too busy catching up with his brother and father to notice, and was only too happy to get out of the room.

Dis had brought the warmest clothing she could find, knowing Bilba would have to endure the wind on the ride back, and it took a while to get all the layers on the girl. She endured it quietly, carefully setting Fili’s clothes aside, only to reach back after and grab his jacket, sliding it on again with a slightly nervous look at Dis.

Dis smiled, amused, already thinking of the adjustments she could make so it would fit the girl's smaller frame. She rather imagined Fili would not be getting that jacket back.

She also rather imagined he wouldn’t mind.

Bilba sat on the edge of the small bed to carefully get her boots on. Afterward Dis slid a hand under her arm, half expecting Bilba to shake it off and insist on getting up herself. Instead Bilba allowed the help, getting up and sending a quiet thank you as she did.

*Where’s Cassie’s family?*

Dis asked the young woman who said, “Oh, it’s just me. We moved here from Rivendell, no one there has even met me. My mom died having me and my dad—” She stumbled suddenly, “Well, it’s just me.” She smiled brightly at Bilba. “It’s fine though, it really is. I wouldn’t be here at all if it wasn’t for you.”

Dis studied her, suddenly noticing the girl’s slender figure and slightly pointed ears, things she’d overlooked initially. “You’re half-elven?”
Cassie nodded. “Yes. I don’t get to be immortal but I definitely get to live a long time. I’m already in my forties, but I still look like this so I’m guessing I have a long way to go.”

*I didn’t save her so she’d have to be lonely all the time.*

There was a slight questioning tone in that statement.

Well, Dis said, *you two are probably equivalent in age, or close at least. I’m sure she’d love to have a friend.*

*Would you ask her? If she wants to be friends?*

Bilba seemed hesitant, like she was half-afraid she’d be rejected and Dis mentally applauded the fact she was even trying. She made the request and the resulting shriek from Cassie brought the others running.

Bilba looked startled while Dis was struggling very hard not to laugh as she explained what had happened.

“I think,” she explained to Bilba, “that means yes, she would like to be friends.”

Bilba grinned. Fili walked past her to retrieve his shirt, pulling it on and lacing it up loosely. Vili handed over his own jacket, he had on enough armor to keep him warm, and Fili pulled that on. He slipped an arm around Bilba’s waist, taking on enough of her weight that the lines of pain in her face eased slightly.

“Ready to go home?”

She nodded, looking at him quickly and then away again in embarrassment. Dis narrowed her eyes, shooting a questioning look at her son only to get an overly excited, and more than slightly smug, one in return.

Clearly she’d be spending a lot of time with Bilba in the coming days explaining feelings and courting and the like. She hadn’t failed to notice how the girl had been staring at her son, but if Fili had actually gone and moved things a step further she’d need to take a more active role in making sure the girl understood her own heart.

Personally, she was positive the girl *did* understand her own heart. She just wanted *Bilba* to be as confident about it as she was.

The way it looked right then, though, she was certainly on the right track.

Dis could only feel gratitude for that.

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Dwalin strode through the streets, hands clenched at his sides.

Assassination attempt less than six hours in the past and how did the bloody Durins react? By every last one of them deciding to rush back to the place where it happened.

Bloody, reckless, damn fools.
There a problem? You seem a bit agitated.

Dwalin responded by opening his shielding more, letting the soul bond he had with his King show him just exactly what he was feeling about the current situation.

I’m needed here.

The entire royal family is not needed here. You have a Captain of the Guard and a Spymaster to bring you back news. Balin’s back from Rohan and more than capable of taking care of things between us, Lake-town and Dale.

You take too much on yourself, my friend. This was not your fault.

Dwalin grimaced, annoyed at Thorin’s ability to cut at the root of his irritation, as always.

Security is my responsibility.

It’s the responsibility of a lot of people, as you just pointed out, Thorin corrected. And nothing can ever be fully prevented, as you well know.

Dwalin’s eyes narrowed. Don’t throw my own words back at me.

He recognized them well enough. He’d said them to Thorin enough times over the years, especially in the days and weeks following Moria.

It hadn’t made Thorin feel any better then and it wasn’t making him feel better now.

He spotted his men gathered around the house where the greatest concentration of stiff necked royalty was currently congregated.

The door opened at the top and he watched as Vili and Dis came out with Kili following them. Fili was last, his arm wrapped around Bilba.

Dwalin’s heart had nearly stopped when the girl had sprinted off, leading the two bounty hunters after her. He’d called for Xalanth, directing him, and undoubtedly Syrath, in her direction as soon as they arrived. He’d have gone himself but a few of the idiots left behind had decided to try him.

They had lost.

By the time he’d dealt with them and properly cowed the rest, the dragons had already gotten to Bilba.

He’d seen her briefly as Xalanth had soared over, taking her to Fili who was closer to help than he was.

He understood her, better than she probably thought he did. She was a protector. Had she been born in Erebor, she’d have been a warrior and a natural born leader. He’d have sought her for the guard from an early age, ensuring she was paired with a dragon and a partner who, along with her, would have formed probably one of the strongest teams in all of Erebor. She’d have undoubtedly ended up the private guard of one of the members of the royal family, perhaps even as high as the King.

Instead she’d grown up in Moria where the orcs had taken her natural strengths and twisted them, breaking down her confidence and sense of self-worth, turning her desire to protect into a belief that she should throw herself at danger until she shattered because she was the only one whose loss would leave no impact.
The Durins had been working to change that and it had been changing, little by little, over the past few months. He’d been working with her as much as she would let him, trying to build her confidence, help her to feel pride in herself, trying to redirect her skills in a more productive, and less self-destructive, path.

He felt no blame toward her for her reaction. It was her first emergency since she’d been with them. In a situation like that, where emotions ran high and decisions had to be made in an instant, the natural inclination was to fall back on what you were familiar with, instincts that you’d followed all your life. Bilba had fallen back on bad habits, but they were habits she’d carried her entire life. She couldn’t be expected to have completely changed them in six months and certainly not in the middle of her first crisis, where she was already traumatized and had no time to think.

Now, if she was still doing it in a year or two, after a few more emergencies that would undoubtedly come along because they always came along, then he might start getting exasperated.

Fili was helping her down the stairs and he saw the moment she looked up and spotted him. She stopped dead, staring at him. Dwalin moved to the bottom of the steps, far enough that he wasn’t blocking her in, but still there.

Her face was blank, none of the usual anger, or even the confusion.

She started moving again, her eyes locked on her feet.

As she and Fili reached the bottom step, drawing alongside him, she stopped again. She kept her eyes focused downward, her head turned away.

For several long minutes she simply stood there, Fili next to her. Ahead of them the others had stopped as well and were turned back. No one said anything.

The lightest touch, barely a graze, brushed across his shields. It was hesitant, and drew back almost immediately but Dwalin reached out and accepted it, settling back immediately and not pushing, like picking up the end of a rope but holding it with two fingers.

There was silence for several minutes more and then, finally, words, spoken so quietly he had to strain to hear them.

*I'm sorry I put you in danger.*

*You’re forgiven,* Dwalin replied at once. *But I’m going to be working doubly hard with you in training now, until I’m satisfied you’re not going to run off and get yourself killed the next time something happens. You deserve a better epitaph than ‘died stupid’.*

She was silent, then gave a short nod. She started moving again and Dwalin found himself watching her go.

She was trying. He could see she was trying and, as long as she was, he could deal with everything else.

She was wearing Fili’s jacket, he noted. It nearly swallowed her and brought back the image of her standing in that square by herself.

He’d never seen the scars before. He’d heard about them of course, knew what they were, but it was far different from seeing them in person. And seeing them on her, from the back like that…

She was small. Not as small as Bella had been, the girl had dwarven blood in her after all and Bella
had been a hobbit, but still small, her frame considered petite by dwarven standards. He’d meant what he’d said. She’d been through enough. He couldn’t make up for not being there when Bella needed him. He hadn’t known about Bilba’s mother. But he did know about Bilba, and she needed him whether she wanted to fully admit it or not. So he’d help her where he couldn’t help her relatives. He wasn’t failing Bella again.

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“So,” a voice said behind him, “this has been an exciting day, hasn’t it?” Dwalin turned to give an irritated look at Nori. “You wanna tell me how we missed this?”

“What?” Nori raised an eyebrow. “We already knew the Master was a weasel. We just underestimated the depths of his stupidity.”

“We get anything from him yet?” Nori snorted. “Of course not, and I doubt we will. He was approached by the bounty hunters, one of whom was apparently the assassin masquerading as a fellow bounty hunter. He has no idea who hired them.”

“And they’re all dead so we can’t very well ask them,” Dwalin growled. He scowled at Nori. “So why, in the name of Mahal, do you look so damn pleased with yourself?”

Nori grinned and leaned against the bannister of the stairs. “Because unlike you, my surly friend, I haven’t been convinced my theory is wrong.”

“About the keys?” Dwalin asked. “So what? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Bounty hunters and an assassin?” Nori drawled. “Townspeople being dragged into it, the Master being bribed for aid? All in broad daylight when the royal family is surrounded by a full security force and has dragons nearby? All rather…noisy, wouldn’t you say? It certainly got Erebor’s attention focused on Lake-town.”

Dwalin’s eyes narrowed. “You’re saying this entire thing was a distraction?”

“Oh, I doubt the bounty hunters thought so, or the assassins or the Master,” Nori said, still looking inordinately pleased with himself. “The right hand didn’t know what the left hand was doing.”

“And what,” Dwalin said shortly, “was the left hand doing?”

Nori grinned. “Trying to break into the Treasury. He’s now waiting in the dungeons. Poor guy didn’t
“even have time to kill himself before I caught him. I thought you might like the chance to question him before I did.”

“It’s about damn time,” Dwalin growled. “We may finally get somewhere.”

“Indeed.” Nori clapped his hands together. “I was worried we’d have to wait until Beryl got back to get things going.”

Dwalin grimaced. Nori had speculated the quiet they’d been experiencing the last few months had been because Nar was waiting for Beryl to get back. She’d gone the farthest and would take the longest to return. He’d wanted to simply fly out and pick her up, or at least search the caravan, but Nori had worried it’d force Nar’s hand and cause him to do something desperate.

“She’s due back in a week,” he said now. “You think that’s why today happened?”

“I would imagine so,” Nori said. “In a strange way, it’s good news. It suggests Nar doesn’t have all the pieces yet.”

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. “All the pieces? He doesn’t have any of them. We checked, remember?”

“Hmmm,” Nori said. “I have a theory on that too.”

“Care to share?”

“Not yet,” Nori replied.

“So what happens when Nar finds out his man failed, and we’ve got him locked up?’

“I don’t know,” Nori admitted. “I imagine we’ll have a week to figure something out.”

“Until Beryl gets back.”

Nori pushed off the railing. “Never thought that would be a point of trepidation, did you?”

Dwalin snorted and joined him as they began to head toward the square again. “I’m getting sick and tired of being a step behind on this.”

“Then take heart,” Nori said, “because I’m pretty sure we just took a pretty big step forward.”

“I hope you’re right,” Dwalin muttered, “and it doesn’t bite us in the ass.”

Nori grinned. “It won’t. I have a good feeling about this.”

Dwalin grunted.

They had a piece, but Beryl was still returning shortly and they had no idea what she’d been doing in Rivendell.

They had a piece, but it was only one piece.

Dwalin prayed it would be enough.
Bilba drove the point of her sword into the orc’s chest, dragged it back out before the creature realized it was dead and spun easily on one heel to lop the head off another. As it fell a voice barked an order and she obeyed it, dropping to a crouch as Grasper, or perhaps Keeper, spun past overhead, embedding in the torso of the orc that had been trying to sneak up on her.

Already low, Bilba took the opportunity to put her sword down and reach for the bow strapped to her back. It had been Kili who’d recalled she’d been using archery when they had all first met and had offered to train with her. He’d given her a bow that rivaled her dagger in its craftsmanship, a fact that had annoyed Fili for some reason, and had taught her to make her own arrows instead of needing to buy or scavenge them.

He’d also taught her the trick of keeping the quiver at her waist, tying the top to her belt and anchoring the bottom with another strap around her thigh. It lessened the risk of the arrows bouncing out when she ran or fell and created a more natural, and therefore quicker, motion for her as she reached to get one out.

She wasn’t anywhere near as fast as he was, and it would probably be a long time before she mastered firing four or more arrows at once as he could, but Kili said she was quite good.

More than good enough to send six arrows into six different kneecaps before anyone recognized it and pinned down her location.

*Someone cover me.*

A shadow fell over her and she looked up to see Dwalin looming above her. He held both axes again, having reclaimed the one he’d lodged in an orc’s rib cage.

He gave her a short nod and Bilba drew another arrow and nocked it to the string. Kili, becoming increasingly more excited about the prospect of someone sharing his passion, had wanted to give her protective equipment but Fili had beat him to it. He’d shown up at Bilba’s door in a ridiculously quick fashion to provide her with leather gloves and a bracer, intricately decorated with the image of a dragon in full attack, flame spouting from its mouth to form a border on the edges of the leather. She loved it so much she was almost loath to use it for fear of damaging it.

She sighted along the length of the arrow, exhaled slowly, and released.

The arrow zipped out, flashing between two other members of Vanguard to find its home in the throat of the irritating orc who’d been giving orders. He fell with a gurgle and Bilba grinned, pleased with the shot. She slung the bow onto her back again and retrieved her sword, standing up still under Dwalin’s protection.

Bilba ducked under his arm and took up position against his back. It was still early morning, the sun not yet up and the air cool but she was already sweating from the exertion, her clothing sticking to her body, the hair at the base of her head damp and curling about her neck. She was beginning to breathe heavier as well, her chest rising and falling as she caught her breath.

*Is it just me or are these attacks getting worse?*

*It’s not just you,* a shape flashed by overhead, briefly blocking out some of the stars glittering overhead as Syrath shot past over the treetops. This particular group of orcs, nearly fifty in total, had
attacked a caravan in the early morning hours, before they’d completely left the passes of the Misty Mountains. The intent had most likely been to massacre them before they could get to a location where they would be seen and aided.

Unfortunately for the orcs, Nori had the pass watched by ravens who’d raised the alarm.

Still, it had taken time to reach them.

When Vanguard had arrived the dead had already been littering the ground, one of the wagons in flames just off the road. When the orcs had seen them coming they’d fled into the outer boundaries of Mirkwood, deep under the trees where Syrath and Xalanth couldn’t easily go.

Vanguard had followed. Currently they were spread out, weapons flashing as they cut down the orcs. Many of the faces were unfamiliar to Bilba, or only vaguely familiar at best. Since the group worked primarily at night, and was volunteer based, it operated on a rotating basis, allowing people the opportunity to work and have a life with their families while giving up a few nights at a time to protect those outside the mountain.

Bilba and Dwalin were the only ones out almost constantly. For Bilba it was because she couldn’t sleep. Even Syrath’s presence didn’t stop the nightmares entirely anymore, simply lessened their impact, or gave her brief periods of peace.

As for Dwalin…she had no idea what it was that kept him up.

She heard a shout and looked to see Hram, an older, grizzled fighter, fall to one knee, his face tight with pain. Before Bilba could react Opal, the other female dwobbit in the group, rushed forward to help him.

Bilba’s eyes flickered over the remaining members of Vanguard, eight in all, making for twelve total with her and Dwalin, Opal and Hram. All were currently engaged with their own fights, no one appearing to be in any particular distress. She knew a few from the group at large, was close to fewer than that, and had never really bothered to make the effort before.

She wasn’t there to make friends after all. She was there to kill orcs.

But in the week since Lake-town…she’d found herself watching them more, taking note of them as people rather than fellow warriors.

What was the story behind Hram’s bad knee? Why did he keep fighting when he was old enough to have earned his rest? Why did Opal choose to live in Erebor and fight when she could have had a peaceful life in the Shire?

Did any of them ever wonder about her? Or did they simply see her as Orcrist, an emotionless killer of orcs and little else?

The elves want to know if you want help.

We’re fine. Bilba answered, refocusing on the battle, where her attention should have been in the first place. We’re almost done.

Mayre says you don’t share.

Bilba rolled her eyes at the mention of Thranduil’s dragon.

I thought Thranduil didn’t want you around Mayre anymore? You’re a bad influence, remember?
I know, but Mayre says Thranduil can just deal with it and we can be friends anyway.

Bilba’s lips quirked and she bit the smile back down. She stepped forward and swung her sword at an oncoming orc. It hit the creature’s chest with a thunk that vibrated up her arms. She opened a cut deep enough to reveal the bones of its rib cage, wondering again as she did why orcs so rarely wore armor but being grateful they didn’t, and wrenched the borrowed blade away. Black ichor splashed up her arms and she grimaced.

If Mayre wants to kill orcs then have her convince Thranduil to start patrolling the pass and road instead of forcing Erebor to do it.

Thranduil says what happens outside his borders isn’t his problem.

Bilba’s eyes narrowed. She really didn’t like that elf sometimes. His son, in contrast, was nothing like the elven king. He was often out patrolling, inside and outside of Mirkwood and fought as well as any warrior she’d seen. His dragon, bonded to him at birth as was the way with elves, was a baby, still unnamed, but could often be seen happily bouncing alongside the young Prince, a glowing spot of light dancing about in the depths of the forest.

I can understand why he and Thorin don’t always get along.

He’s not so bad. He’s just an idiot sometimes.

Particularly when he fails to take into account we’re currently inside his borders.

But you have it under control now.

That was true. Even as he said it, one of the other members of Vanguard, a young male dwarf she didn’t know, cut down the final orc. The others lowered their swords, some leaning over to rest their hands on their knees as they struggled to catch their breath.

Bilba looked up to where the sky was just starting to lighten with the promise of dawn. She pulled a rag from her belt, wiped down her sword quickly and sheathed it.

Then she started back toward the caravan.

As she did she heard a voice behind her exclaim, “Durin’s beard, does she ever stop?”

“Not that I’ve seen,” another voice answered. “She’s almost as bad as the Captain.”

Someone snorted in derision. “I’d say she’s worse than the Captain.”

Bilba ignored them and continued walking.

Dwalin fell in alongside her, replacing his second axe on his back.

Did you see how many dead there were?

“More than I’m willing to accept this close to Erebor,” he grunted. “I’ll start assigning dragon patrols to watch the pass.”

The goblins will take shots at them, so will the orcs closer to Moria.

Dwalin shrugged. “My patrols fly outside the range of the orc dragons, they can’t be reached. You’re the only one who thinks you can take on Moria by yourself.”
I didn’t take on Moria, Bilba replied. I took on the Watcher and destroyed the Arena, at least temporarily. I’m sure they’ve created a new one by now. If you’d seen what they used the Watcher for, and what happened in the Arena, you’d have destroyed them too. Besides, Azog wasn’t supposed to be there. The main force was outside of the mountain at the time.

Dwalin’s eyes narrowed. “That’s not possible. We would have heard if a force that size was on the move.”

Syrath can verify, have Xalanth ask him. We tracked their passage nearly to the Gap of Rohan but lost them. I have no idea where they went. All I know is they showed back up right after Syrath killed the Watcher.

They had reached the caravan and Bilba moved away from him, ending the conversation without consciously thinking about it in favor of aiding the wounded.

After giving in and speaking to Dwalin in Lake-town it had seemed a ridiculous notion to back up and stop talking to him again after. The fact she was speaking to him, however, didn’t mean she was entirely comfortable with it.

It felt like she was betraying her mother, especially after the things she was learning about him now that she was acknowledging him. In addition to what she’d already seen just by observing him, she’d also discovered he was refreshingly practical, quick to the point, easily offering praise as well as critique when needed. He had a sharp wit, an unexpected sense of humor and he valued honor, justice, loyalty, honesty and fairness almost more than she did.

She was finding it hard to not feel respect for him and even admiration for him.

She didn’t want to respect him and she most certainly didn’t want to admire him.

Her mother had always said she was just like him.

At one time that had made her happy.

At another time the mere thought of being anything at all like him enraged her.

Now…now she didn’t know what she thought.

Had things been different she probably would have idolized him.

He wouldn’t have been the father she created in her imagination in the depths of the mine.

He would have been better.

Had things been different.

She understood at least, or was beginning to understand, what her mother had seen in him.

As for her…

As for the way things were instead of how they might have been…

Pain lanced through her leg and she grit her teeth, kneeling clumsily to help one of the injured travelers. The knife wound she’d taken in Lake-town, along with the multitude of other injuries, cuts and scrapes, were far from healed. Her leg was kindly informing her that if she didn’t sit down soon she might well fall down.
“You should head back to Erebor.” Dwalin was suddenly there, standing over her as though he’d never left. How he managed to move so silently and quickly when he was so physically large she had no idea.

*I’m fine.*

“You’re not fine,” he said flatly, “and I don’t have the resources to babysit you. There are enough wounded already, seeing to you takes my attention away from them.”

The words were harsh, earning a glare from the young man Bilba had been helping. Bilba, however, merely gave a short nod and rose to her feet.

She didn’t like being coddled or treated like a child no matter the number of years she had to her name.

As she started to walk past him, she paused and inclined her head toward him.

*There was a second caravan that passed through here just before this one, on its way to Erebor. Why wasn’t it attacked?*

*Why indeed?* Dwalin’s voice came back, one of the rare times he’d spoken to her via mind link since she’d established one with him. *You’d almost think they liked that caravan now wouldn’t you?*

He offered nothing else and Bilba didn’t press. He was the Captain of Erebor’s guard. She was a soldier. He had no obligation to explain anything to her.

She called Syrath and, soon enough, was on her way back to Erebor. Syrath took his time, lazily winding through the air, lifting and sometimes lowering and, occasionally, going in loops and circles. It gave Bilba’s heart time to slow down and her breathing to return to normal. The pain in her leg subsided enough that she’d probably be able to walk without embarrassing herself and her muscles relaxed enough to allow her to sit more comfortably on Syrath’s back.

By the time they landed on the dragon levels she was sore and drenched in dried sweat and liberal amounts of black orc blood but was able to slide down easily off Syrath’s back and land on her feet without even a flicker of pain to give her away.

There was a group of younger dwarves, and a few dwobbits, clustered together in one corner. They’d started spending inordinate amounts of time on the level ever since a clutch had been born earlier in the week. Each one hoped to form a bond with a baby strong enough that one day they might be chosen by that dragon as a ride partner.

Several of them gave her awed looks as she strode past them toward the entrance to the outer levels.

*You could have dropped me off on my balcony.*

*This is way more fun.*

Bilba slowed as she reached the doorway. The very empty doorway.

*Where’s Fili?*

*He overslept. He was up almost all night.*

Bilba frowned. Why?
I’m not supposed to tell you. It’s a surprise.

Bilba shook her head, exasperated before acknowledging to herself it was probably best he didn’t see her at that moment. At least not until she’d had a much needed bath.

She almost headed in the direction of her room, the blood and sweat making her skin itch and causing her to desperately long for the large pool in her private bathroom.

Then the memory of her leg nearly giving out on her in the field rose to the surface and she scowled and turned in the direction of the training room.

Living in a mountain with ready access to food, water and baths was going to end up making her weaker than she already was if she wasn’t careful. She’d clean and return her weapons, sans the bow and dagger of course which were hers and stayed in her room, and then go clean up. The last thing she was going to do was let a stupid little knife wound from a lucky throw by a bounty hunter slow her down.

Training was just getting started as she strode in, many of the students stopping in their tracks to gawk at her. The soldier leading it in Dwalin’s absence barked out a sharp command and soon had them going through their paces again.

Bilba headed to the far corner, away from them, and began pulling off her weapons. After that she sat down, grabbed a cloth and began cleaning her sword more thoroughly than she’d been able to in the field.

She’d barely relaxed when her leg decided to disagree with her choice to go to the training room instead of her room and began to cramp, rather violently. Bilba grit her teeth and focused on her task.

Is your leg cramping?

No.

Really? Cause it sort of feels like it does when you’ve pushed yourself too far and something started cramping.

Don’t make me regret leaving the link between us open all the time.

Don’t blame me. You’re the one with the leg cramping. You should have gone back to your room but nooooooooo, you just have to push it.

Bilba sent him the mental equivalent of rolling her eyes.

As she worked she found herself repeatedly looking toward the doorway, only to feel a stab of disappointment each time she found it empty.

Finally she caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of her eye and looked up, trying her best to come across as casual.

The person in the doorway was not Fili.

Instead it was a woman, probably about her own age, though taller and larger, a full blood dwarf. She was dressed in layers and layers of rich clothing, velvet and silks and lace and wore so many gems around her neck and wound through her onyx hair it was a wonder she could stand or keep her head up under the weight of it all.
It was the gems and the haughty look on the woman’s face as she surveyed the room that sparked Bilba’s memory. She’d seen the woman before, sitting on a bench in the caravan she’d helped escort to Rivendell all those months ago.

She was impressed the woman had made it back. She’d been sure she’d either be robbed for her jewels or be thrown out of the caravan entirely for being useless and endangering them all with her obscene display of wealth.

Bilba refocused on her sword, ensuring she had every speck of gore off it. The last thing she wanted was Dwalin calling her out for causing a sword to start rusting.

A shadow fell over her.

“When someone told me you were the legendary Orcrist, and then later when they said you were Fili’s new ride partner, I must admit I laughed. I was expecting…more.”

Bilba closed her eyes for a brief instance and let out a sigh. She should have known she’d run into this sooner or later. Nobility was nobility no matter where she went. Not all of them were bad, Fili and Kili for instance, Legolas and Aragorn and Arwen and more beyond that. Still, there was always a segment who took her presence as a personal affront and believed it their purpose in life to put her back in her place where she belonged. That she hadn’t run into it here as much as she had in Gondor was probably a result of being around the royal family more than she’d ever been around Aragorn or Arwen, who’d always welcomed her but had been far too busy to spend as much time with her as they might like.

She looked up to see the woman standing in front of her, the expression on her face similar to what one might have when viewing a slug or a nasty bit of sludge.

“I’ve been hearing a lot about you,” the woman continued. “Apparently you and Fili are quite close, yes?” She sneered. “How quaint. I suppose I should have expected it though. Fili always has been kind. He’d be just the type to allow someone of your…station to hang around him no matter how it might make him look.”

Bilba swallowed, her throat dry. The woman was somehow managing to hit upon every single one of her insecurities, even those she thought she’d gotten better at but was quickly finding were just as strong as ever.

What’s wrong? Why are you upset?

I’m fine.

She said it but, at the same time, she shifted toward him, mentally pressing against him through the link.

The woman wasn’t a rider so, wanting to deflect her, Bilba lifted her hands and signed, How did you hear anything? I thought you were on the road.

The only communication would have been through Nori’s ravens and she doubted he’d spent much time exchanging gossip about her.

“Sorry,” the woman said, lifting her nose slightly so she was looking down it at Bilba. As her leg was still cramping badly, Bilba had no option of getting up to face her, though she imagined she’d be shorter than the other woman even then. “I don’t know the hand speak the miners use.” Her voice twisted on the word “miner” making it sound almost vulgar. “I’m not surprised you know it though,” her eyes raked along Bilba’s clothing and Bilba found she suddenly regretted not returning to her
room to clean up first, “you do appear to like to play in the muck like the commoners do, don’t you?”

Bilba’s hands were clenched on the hilt of the sword and the cleaning cloth, so tight her knuckles were bloodless. She couldn’t react, the woman couldn’t understand or hear her anyway. If she let the anger, boiling just behind the pain the woman’s words had caused, out she’d risk making the same mistake she’d made back in the Shire. There they’d forgiven her but there was no telling what they’d do here in Erebor.

Fili appeared at the entrance to the training room, looking like he’d run the entire distance and skidded to a stop just before reaching the door. Unlike her, he’d clearly taken the time to bathe before coming. He’d done an incredibly fast job of it for some reason, or had been interrupted by something, as his hair was still wet and his shirt was clinging to his body in areas suggesting he hadn’t bothered to get entirely dried off before dressing. His tunic wasn’t tucked in either and the laces at the top were undone, allowing the shirt to gape open and reveal his throat and at least a portion of his chest just under his collarbone.

Bilba couldn’t help the flood of relief at seeing him. He looked at her, then the woman still standing in front of her and started in their direction.

Bilba felt her face go hot as she realized she’d gone completely still and had been openly staring at him. She wrenched her eyes away and found she’d also dropped the cloth she’d been using to clean the sword with.

She heard a derisive chuckle and looked to see the woman looking between her and Fili. “Oh, please,” she said, “I understand how someone of your…class…and…background might develop an infatuation with someone so clearly your superior but you don’t really think he’d ever want _you_, do you?” A cruel smirk crossed the woman’s face and she turned her back on Bilba with a flourish, tossing her hair over one shoulder as she did. “Especially when he has someone like me waiting for him?”

With that she flounced toward Fili with a cry of “Fili!”

Bilba’s leg had no intention of letting her up any time soon so she was forced to sit still as the woman stood in Fili’s way and stepped right up to him, forcing him to take a step back to put any kind of distance between them.

What did she say to you?

Bilba looked back down at the sword, her hand shaking as she ran the cloth along the blade. Stupid, she was so stupid. Why had she come here without getting cleaned up first? People already saw her as some sort of monster, there was no reason to go and look the part.

Nothing. She didn’t say anything.

You’re a terrible liar.

And you’re late, Bilba snapped back, before immediately regretting it. It wasn’t his fault. He couldn’t be there every second of the day. She had to learn to take care of herself, to not let the vipers affect her. She handled orcs every day, surely she could learn to handle nobility. Still, she already felt the words settling deep into her soul, happily finding companionship in the similar thoughts she’d been struggling so hard to overcome.

I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped.

I shouldn’t have been late.
He looked down at the woman and said something in a low, cold voice, to which she responded by putting a hand to her chest and gazing up at him, responding with an innocent look on her face.

The sword was the cleanest it had ever been but Bilba kept at it, trying not to shoot looks at Fili as she did, trying to ignore the way her heart kept twisting in her chest.

She couldn’t deny the woman had a point. She wasn’t as pretty as the noble women, didn’t dress or act like them and, what’s more, had no idea how she was supposed to act. She’d hoped, after Lake-town, her heart would relax and her stomach would stop acting like she had food poisoning every time she was in Fili's presence.

Instead it had gotten worse. That couldn’t be right, could it? And, not only that, but speaking to him had suddenly gotten…awkward. She had no idea what she was supposed to say. Was she supposed to acknowledge the courting thing or ignore it? Was she supposed to talk to him in a different way? She knew how couples who were married behaved, had seen it often enough in the Shire, saw it now between Dis and Vili.

She and Fili weren’t like that. Were they supposed to be? They weren’t courting though, or at least not officially, so was she supposed to just act like everything was normal or was there some sort of pre-courting ritual or action she should be taking?

She was doing it all wrong, she just knew it. She looked to where Fili was still talking to the woman, his expression annoyed while the woman just looked smug.

He was probably already regretting saying anything to her at all.

**You could just ask someone you know.**

*Shut. UP.*

**Stop leaking all your weirdo thoughts through your link then! I’m just trying to be helpful.**

*Oh, like you have any more experience than I do.*

**Xalanth does. I could ask him.**

*NO.*

**Fine. See if I try to be helpful. Oh, by the way, can I eat the stupid woman who was being mean to you?**

*Did you tell Fili to come down here?*

**If I say yes can I eat her?**

*No. She’d probably poison you.*

**I could just step on her. Just a liiiiiiiittle bit.**

The woman laughed as though Fili had said something funny, shot a look back at Bilba, and then reached out to place a hand almost possessively on Fili’s chest.

Bilba nearly choked. Anger, liberally mixed with pain, rushed through her veins.

**Fili doesn’t like her. And he’s not being funny. He’s telling her to leave you alone or he’ll make**
her regret it. She’s just crazy so she’s not getting it.

Bilba froze. What? How do you know that?

He leaves his link with me open all the time too, because he’s nice like that.

Fili reached up and removed the woman’s hand before taking a step back to put himself out of her reach.

The woman stepped forward, putting herself right next to him and Bilba found herself seriously considering Syrath’s offer.

Dwalin strode in, looking deeply annoyed.

“Beryl,” Dwalin drawled, walking straight to her. “Come to start training have you?”

Beryl spun to face him, a disgusted look on her face. “Of course not. Do you honestly think I would be caught doing something so vulgar? I’m a lady, not a--” She made an absent gesture with her hand, toward where Bilba sat.

You can eat her. Please come eat her. I will love you forever if you eat her.

You love me forever anyway but I’ll still eat her for you.

Beryl turned back and caught herself up short as she found Dwalin in her personal space.

“So if you’re not here to train then why are you here? You know training grounds are off limits for anyone not actively participating. “

Beryl scoffed and faced Fili. “Are you going to let him speak to me that way?”

“Yes,” Fili said shortly, “Since you seem incapable or unwilling to listen when I speak to you that way.”

Footsteps heralded the arrival of Kili who crossed his arms and said, “You’re looking rather tired Beryl. Perhaps you should go get some rest. I’m sure it’d do wonders for your mood.”

Beryl sneered at him. “You should learn to be nicer to people, Your Highness. You never know when you might find yourself needing their favor.”

Kili raised an eyebrow. “And under what circumstances, exactly, do you see me needing your favor?”

“You never know,” Beryl said, a triumphant look on her face as she turned to look at Fili again. “Anything is possible, and some things sooner than you think.”

And, with that, she was gone, brushing past Dwalin and vanishing out the door.

“That was different,” Fili said.

“What was different about it?” Kili asked. “She’s always acted like that.”

“No,” Fili insisted, “not like that. I’ve never seen that level of aggression before. She couldn’t care less what I or anyone else thought. Something changed.”

Dwalin grunted, his eyes narrowed as he studied the doorway through which she’d exited. Then he
turned to Bilba. “I thought I told you to head in.”

I did, Bilba shot back in irritation. You never said I had to do anything in particular when I got back.

“You’re no use to me if you end up lame in that leg.”

Bilba gave him a look that, by all rights, should have incinerated him on the spot. I’m not going to go lame from a pathetic little knife wound. And even if I did I could still fight, even if I had to cut the damn thing off and strap a wooden one on in its place.

“You would do something like that,” Dwalin muttered.

Fili dropped onto the bench next to her. What did she say to you?

I already told you, Bilba replied. Drop it.

He reached out and put a hand over hers where she was still clutching the hilt of her sword. Her hand was still shaking, hard enough he had to feel it.

I’m sorry, he repeated. I should have been here.

I’ve heard worse.

That doesn’t make it any better. She won’t bother you again. I promise.

Bilba scowled at his hand where it lay over hers. Syrath didn’t need to call you. I can take care of myself. His constant need to report on everything I do to you is starting to get annoying.

He worries about you. For some reason he seems to think you don’t take proper care of yourself.

There was sarcasm practically bleeding across the link.

Dwalin frowned at her. “Go lie down before you fall down.” He turned away, missing the brief look of gratitude Bilba sent at him. As much as she might still dislike him, he was the only one who seemed to understand her hatred of being coddled or of appearing weak. Her leg had loosened up but she couldn’t leave without it looking like she was running away. Dwalin had given her an out, a way to leave without looking like a dog scurrying away with its tail between its legs.

Dwalin gestured at the Princes. “You two get to your training.”

Fili stood up and grabbed one of the swords. As he did, Bilba thought of something. The caravan that came back, did Ori come with it?

“Ori?” Fili asked in surprise, turning back to her. “He did. Why?”

Bilba hesitated. I just was wondering if I could speak to him, after he’s had a chance to rest.

Fili shrugged. “I don’t see why not. I’ll let him know.” He grinned. “I imagine you’ll have to remind him to breathe every few minutes as you’re talking to him.”

Bilba frowned in confusion. Why?

“You’ll see,” Fili said dryly. He waved off Kili, who headed back to the training area while Dwalin went over as well to take control of the class.

“Are you going to be alright making it back to your quarters?” Fili asked.
Bilba sent him a look showing what she thought about that comment to which he backed away, eyes wide in mock fear. “Alright, alright, forget I said anything!”

He threw her a mock salute and left to join the others.

Bilba put her borrowed weapons away, pulled her bow over her shoulder and headed toward her room. She tensed as she left but the woman, Beryl, was nowhere to be seen.

**You should accidentally stab her.**

**I’m not going to stab her.**

**I didn’t say you had to kill her. Just in the leg or something, or the shoulder, or the leg and shoulder.**

**Who have you been hanging around? You’re getting a bit bloodthirsty.**

**You.**

Bilba shook her head, amused at his new burst of self-confidence. Syrath, being a baby, had been utterly swamped by dragons and riders after Lake-town, all wanting to assure him he’d done the right thing. Even Thorin had gone personally to speak to the young dragon. As a result Syrath’s confidence in himself had increased substantially and he spent much of his time embellishing the story of how he’d heroically saved his rider from a legion of assassins.

The fact Bilba supported his story, and Fili was too busy laughing to deny it, probably didn’t help but it was what it was. If Orcrist deserved any accolades then Glamdring deserved a thousand more as far as she was concerned.

Bilba didn’t fully relax until she was back in her room. She put the weapons away, got clean clothes and headed into the bathroom.

Or what Fili insisted was a bathroom anyway.

The room was massive. The center was dominated by a pool sunk in the floor, fed by a hot spring and set up so that the water constantly circulated out to be replaced with clean water. How it was set up she had no idea and, to be honest, she didn’t much care.

There was a ramp cut into the stone of the floor that led into the pool and she quickly undressed and headed in.

She washed as quickly as she could…well, almost as quickly as she could.

Afterward she got out, dressed and put her hair up and headed back into her bedroom. The bed dominated the room, piled high with furs, blankets and pillows but she ignored it in favor of dropping to the rug next to it.

And then she tried to sleep.

And pretend that woman’s words hadn’t gotten to her.
“What about the dwarf who was trying to break into the Treasury?”

Dwalin glowered. “Still insisting he never met anyone other than the assassin who hired him, same
as the Master and his sycophants.”

Thorin scowled. He was lounging behind his desk in his private office, one hand idly balancing the
tip of a dagger on the stone surface. He was still dressed in the robes and the crown he wore when
overseeing the Council or in matters of open court, but there was an ease to his body that wasn’t
normally present in such situations.

“So Beryl’s actions would seem to prove out Nori’s theories then? That she and Nar are up to
something?”

“There certainly seems to be something going on,” Dwalin agreed. He was standing on the other side
of the desk, boots sinking in the thick rug the lay before the desk. It bore the crest of Durin in gold
thread, dragons swarming around the edges. “She was completely different, almost outright rude to
Fili and Kili and didn’t seem to care.”

Thorin looked up at him. “And what she said to Kili?”

“Sounded rather like a threat to me.”

Thorin nodded. “I want a watch on Nar and Beryl at all times. And I want you to keep working on
the fool in the dungeons.”

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. “You think he’s holding out?”

“Someone let him onto the levels where the Treasury is. I want to know who.” He leaned back in his
seat, the leather creaking as he moved. “And have the orc movements Bilba mentioned investigated.”

“It’s been over five months,” Dwalin said. “I doubt they’ll find anything.”

“Do it anyway,” Thorin ordered.

Dwalin gave a short nod. “As you command.”

Thorin frowned and then stood up, tossing the dagger onto the table before walking to the small
window cut into the wall, allowing a view outside. He placed his hands on either side and leaned
forward, studying the small slice of sky and the rocky slope of the mountain falling away below.

“Something troubling you?”

“We’re missing something,” Thorin said shortly.

“What?”

“I don’t know.” Thorin straightened and turned to face his friend. “But I can feel it. There’s
something…not right about this entire thing but I can’t put my finger on what it is.”

“It’ll come to you.”

Thorin grimaced. “Perhaps, but will it be in time?”

Dwalin had no answer.
Thorin sighed and waved a hand at him. “I want the guard doubled, extra shifts if you have to.”

“Nar will know we’re suspicious.”

“Good, maybe he’ll do something stupid to tip his hand.”

“As you command.”

Thorin dismissed him and returned to his seat, picking the dagger up again and idly turning it in his hands.

Outside, the window, the sun slowly rose bringing with it light, but little clarity.

Thorin could only hope the latter would come, before it was too late.

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Bilba woke up screaming.

The first thing she became aware of was a hand on her shoulder and she reacted without thinking, grabbing the arm and wrenching. A heavy body passed over her and hit the ground hard next to her. She lunged upward, still not entirely awake, and moved to straddle and pin them down.

Before she had a chance the body under hers twisted sharply. A leg wrapped around her back, the world rotated violently and then she was the one on her back and …and Fili…Fili, it was Fili…was over her, braced on his hands and knees.

“Sorry,” he said, looking sheepish. “I should have known better than that. Next time I’ll just lob something at you.”

Fili, Bilba said, still trying to catch her breath. *What are you doing here?*

Idiot. He was lucky she hadn’t been armed. Actually, reverse that, she was the idiot for *not* being armed.

“Syrath said you were having a nightmare and wouldn’t wake up.” He stood up reached down to grab her hand and pulled her to her feet. “So, ready to tell me what Beryl said yet?”

He didn’t ask her what the nightmare had been about for which she was grateful.

Instead of answering the question she shook his hand off and went to sit at the desk, putting an elbow on it and resting her head in her hand.

Fili came to stand beside the desk, leaning one shoulder against the wall and crossing his arms.

“Alright, if you won’t tell me then how about this. Want to tell me what’s going on yet?”

Bilba angled her head to study him. *Nothing is going on.*

“No really?” Fili said. “Because it seems to me you haven’t slept since Lake-town. Your nightmares are twice as bad, you’re throwing yourself at the orcs like your life depends on it and you’re so on edge I’m surprised you’re still functioning.” He lowered his voice, his eyes narrowing. “I thought you
were going to let us help you.”

Bilba crossed her arms on the desk and put her head on them. *I’ll get over it. I just need time.*

Fili sighed. “My mother is fine, Bilba.”

_But she almost wasn’t!_ Bilba jerked her head up to glare at him, irritated at how fast he cut to the core issue. _She could have died and we could be sitting her having an entirely different conversation. How can you possibly be okay with that?_

“I’m not,” he said shortly, “but I’m not going to let it destroy me either. You’re letting this eat at you and it isn’t healthy.”

I’m trying. I’m trying but I can’t get it out of my head. All the ways it could have gone wrong, picturing her dead or you dead, it just keeps getting worse.

She lifted her head enough to run her hands through her hair. She gave a short laugh. _You must be tired of going over this again and again._

Fili put a hand under her arm and tugged her to her feet. Then he very calmly wrapped both arms around her and hugged her, resting his chin lightly on top of her head.

*I’ll go over it with you as many times as you need me to.*

Bilba swallowed past a sudden thickness in her throat. She reached up, hesitated, and then slid her arms slowly around his waist. She stepped forward an inch, pressing even closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder. She sighed and felt herself relax.

They stayed like that for several long, quiet minutes.

Finally Bilba took a deep breath and pulled away, slumping back into her seat. As she did Fili hopped up so he was sitting on the surface of the desk next to her. The action caused him to lean forward for an instant, his shirt gaping to reveal a clear, unobstructed view of his naked chest and Bilba felt her face go red hot.

_You need to lace up the top of your shirt,_ she said sharply.

He raised an eyebrow. “I need to what?”

_You heard me._

A slow grin broke out on his face.

_You also need to stop being so damn happy. It’s too early in the morning for it._

“Sorry,” he said, looking entirely unapologetic. “I’m in a good mood today. Or I was until Beryl showed up at least but it’s beginning to return now that she’s gone and you’re here.”

Bilba crossed her arms and tried to look disinterested. _Does it have anything to do with why you were awake so late last night?_

“I see Syrath has been talking.” Fili said. “He does like to make sure each of us knows what the other is up to doesn’t he?”

_He considers it a personal service he offers_ , Bilba muttered. Her line of sight was at about his waist and she raised her head to look at him. This, unfortunately, drew her eyes naturally to his collarbone
and her heart jumped. *Lace up your shirt already!*

His grin, if possible, widened. “Bilba, do you have a problem with my shirt being undone?”

*No, Bilba said, you have a problem with your shirt being undone. Fix it.*

Fili obeyed, pulling the laces tight with one quick pull and tying them off. Then, looking inordinately please with himself, he asked, “Happy now?”

*No.*

Yes, Bilba said. *Stop smiling like that. You look like you’ve lost your mind.*

“So demanding today,” Fili said, still looking happier than anyone had a right to be so early. It was contagious too. Already she could feel her own mood improving in spite of her best efforts.

Fili’s eyes went past her. “What are those?”

Bilba twisted to look and saw he was indicating two unopened letters sitting in a corner, liberally coated with dust.

“They’re letters.”

“I can see that,” Fili said dryly. “Why haven’t you opened them?”

“They’re from the Shire, Bilba said. *They were given to Aragorn after he went back to report I’d been found and he sent them on to me.* She chewed on her lower lip before making a sound of exasperation. _I don’t want to open them because I’m afraid of what they say, alright? There, I talked. We can all be happy and move on now, hopefully to killing something. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about the goblins._”

“Nice try,” Fili reached past her and snagged the letters. He then reached behind him, drew a dagger from a sheath on his belt and slid the blade along the top edge of the envelope, just under the flap.

Fear shot through Bilba and she stiffened. *What are you doing?*

“They were ready to come after you themselves when they thought you’d been captured.” He pulled the first letter out, opened it and began scanning through it. “They didn’t do that only to turn around and write you something cruel.” He held the letter out to her. “Here, see for yourself.”

Bilba took the letter with the same trepidation she might have had if he’d been trying to hand her a venomous snake.

She looked down and sucked in a sharp breath.

The letter was from Primula.

“She apologizes for not being able to speak to you the last time she saw you,” Fili said, “and wants you to know she’s doing much better now. She says she has a son, Frodo. She was pregnant with him at the time of the attack. The reason she wanted to go out was to speak to the same midwife who’d delivered her when she’d been born She says Frodo saved her. She also says she’s been worried about you and hopes to see you again, and she ends by saying you’re always welcome.”

Bilba’s hand shook where it held the paper. She kept her head down but reached up to wipe at her eyes, pushing the few tears that leaked out away before they could mar the page.

“Bofur?” Fili muttered, looking at the other letter. “Who’s Bofur?”
A friend. Bilba snatched the letter from him and opened it. Like Primula’s, the letter spoke of worry for her and a hope to see her again. Bofur also told her about how much easier his job was now that she was out killing orcs.

Neither letter mentioned Primrose or anyone else she’d known.

Frodo. Primula had a son named Frodo. Bilba wondered what he was like. Had things been different she might have grown up alongside him.

No, it was probably better she hadn’t. She might have ended up sharing her hatred for the orcs with him and no child deserved that burden.

“I think we should go visit them.”

Bilba gaped at him. What?

“Why not?” He took the letters and set them on the table. “You could use the break and we both know they’d love to see you, especially after hearing about the trouble you went through.” He reached out and lightly took her hands, running his thumbs along her knuckles. “I’ll go with you. We can probably even get Kili and my mother to go.”

We can’t just go to the Shire.

“Why not?” Fili asked. “We won’t be gone forever, maybe a week or two. No one’s visited the Garrison or the Blue Mountains in a long time, it’s long past due for us to check in and let them know they aren’t forgotten. We can do that and make it an official, ambassadorial trip.”

What about the increased orc attacks?

“I’m sure Dwalin can handle it while we’re gone.”

What about the assassination attempts?

“Doubt they’ll be expecting us to go to the Shire so we’ll probably be safer there than we are here.”

Bilba turned her chair so she was facing out into her room. It put her in a natural position to lean against his leg if she wanted. After a short internal battle with herself she did so, lightly resting her head against his thigh and leaning her body along the length of his leg.

I suppose I would like to go back, she admitted. If only to get a few things I left in Rivendell.

Fili rested a hand on her head lightly, absently stroking over her braids and down to the base of her head. His fourth and fifth fingers brushed against the scars on the back of her neck and she stiffened but he gave no reaction, just moved his hand and repeated the motion. Bilba relaxed, leaning farther into his leg.

“You’re sure that’s the only reason you want to go? Not to see Primula?”

Maybe. She reached out to Syrath. Do you want to go back to the Shire? Try to see our friends?

Do you think they want to see us?

I think…maybe. Some of them at least. Fili seems to think so.

Do you think Primrose wants to see me?
I don’t know. We could visit the dragons in Rivendell though. I’m sure Elrond’s would be happy to see you at least.

That’s true. I like Vilya, he’s nice. Not as nice as Barahir but still nice.

Bilba grinned. Syrath’s hero worship of Aragorn’s dragon had not dimmed since they had come to Erebor. The dragon had been the first large one Syrath had seen and he’d been impressed for days, and now years, after.

Okay, she said, switching back to Fili. Syrath is interested too so let’s go. Let’s go visit the Shire.
Fili studied Ori with worry. “Are you alright?”

They were standing outside the entrance to the dragon level and Ori looked about ready to pass out.

“She’s just a person.” Fili tried again.

Ori gave him a horrified look. “She is not! She’s…Orcrist! She’s a legend! And she wants to talk to me! ME!”

“I’m a Crown Prince,” Fili said dryly. “You don’t get this excited when I talk to you.”

“Of course not,” Ori muttered, barely paying attention. He didn’t elaborate further and Fili suppressed a laugh.

Nori had been Spymaster for as long as Fili had been alive. After his predecessor had passed away, rather violently, Thror had started the process to find a new one. It was legendary in Erebor how a very young Nori, a commoner with a questionable background, had shown up on the royal levels, where he shouldn’t have been able to gain access, with a list of misdeeds committed by various nobility that he shouldn’t have been in any position to know about.

He’d left the list for the King.

In his private chambers.

Many had wanted him arrested on the spot.

Thror’s response had been to give him the position.

Along with the job had come a room on the royal levels that Nori rarely used initially, preferring to remain on the lower levels with his family. He’d spent even more time there after his father had been killed in a tavern brawl. Barely a year later his mother had followed, lost in a cave in. Ori had been a child, a few years younger than Kili. Nori had brought him and Dori up to live with him, requesting, and being granted, a larger suite of rooms suitable for the three of them.

Fili and Kili had met Ori soon after and become fast friends. A friendship which had not only lasted but had apparently caused Ori to forget that the people he was friends with were, in fact royalty.

At the end of the hall movement signaled Bilba’s arrival. Ori saw her and made a sound that was somewhere between a shriek and strangled gasp.

“Don’t fall over,” Fili said wryly. “Your brother would never let you live it down.”

“That’s true,” Ori gasped. He clasped his hands together in front of him. He had a grin plastered so wide on his face it was a wonder he didn’t hurt something.

“If you keep smiling like that she’s going to think you’re insane.”

“I know,” Ori said. “I’m trying but it doesn’t seem to want to go away.”

Fili shook his head, amused.

Who’s with you?
Fili turned to watch as Bilba approached. She was wearing his jacket, or what had once been his jacket, now taken apart and remade courtesy of his mother, to fit her smaller frame. She’d taken to wearing it almost constantly, a fact that Fili would admit made him more than a little smug. The smugness stemmed from the looks he’d started getting from other dwarves and dwobbits who’d been hoping for a chance to court her.

Bastards.

_Ori, you wanted to talk to him, remember?_

_I didn’t mean he had to come this early._

Fili shrugged. _I may have made the mistake of telling him too soon. He couldn’t sleep from the excitement._

She didn’t respond but he caught a vague impression of exasperation across the link. He doubted Bilba would ever be comfortable, or accepting, of the fame she’d garnered across Middle Earth. She hadn’t started killing orcs and protecting the innocent in order to gain attention. Not only that but there were other people doing the same thing who didn’t get the same fame as she did, a fact she found patently unfair considering she had a dragon and they didn’t.

Bilba stopped next to him and Fili grinned at Ori. “Ori, I’d like to introduce you to Bilba, rider of Syrath, and my ride partner.”

Ori blinked. “Bilba? Syrath?”

“Of course,” Fili said, his face perfectly innocent. “You didn’t think their names were actually Orcrist and Glamdring did you? I mean, who looks at their daughter and thinks, I’ll name them Orc Cleaver?”

“Oh, of course, you’re right,” Ori said, wringing his hands nervously, “It’s nice to meet you, again, I mean you probably don’t remember but we met before and--”

_I remember_, Bilba signed with her hands.

Ori nearly fainted. “You DO?” He turned to Fili, awed. “She remembers me!” He hissed.

“She also hears just fine,” Fili said, amused. He addressed Bilba. _You should probably ask him whatever you wanted before he starts hyperventilating._

Bilba looked startled but raised her hands and started signing. _Dis said you can do tattoos? I wondered if maybe you could do some for me?_

Ori gaped at her. Literally, just gaped.

Bilba gave Fili an uncertain look. _Does he not want to?_

_No, he does_, Fili responded.

“Oh, Ori!” He snapped his fingers in front of the other dwarf who started and then blinked rapidly. Fili raised an eyebrow. “You have to actually say your answer out loud. She can’t read your mind.”

“I wasn’t speaking out loud?” Ori asked in surprise. He nodded at Bilba, hard enough it was a wonder he didn’t snap his own neck. “YES! I mean, yes, yes, I absolutely – wow, yes, I mean – it would be an honor! I mean--”
“She gets it, Ori,” Fili said gently, cutting him off. Bilba was looking more and more confused.

Ori snapped his mouth shut, his eyes wide.

He took a deep breath and then said, “What I meant to say was, yes, of course, I’d love too. Do you know what you want? Or where?”

Bilba gave Fili a hesitant look and then reached to tug her ever present gloves off. She hooked them to her belt and then rolled her sleeves back. The action revealed the vicious, thick scars wrapping around both her wrists, evidence of long, long hours spent in manacles. He’d seen them and the ones on her neck before, had seen the lash marks on her back from Lake-town along with a multitude of other scars crisscrossing her arms, legs and torso.

The sight always made him want to personally walk into Moria and slaughter every orc inside. Every time he thought of the horror she’d endured, the torture that had led to the scars, the ones he could see and the ones no one could, it made his gut twist. Just to imagine her in there alone, suffering, while he’d been what? Going to training? Eating with his family? Visiting Lake-town or Dale? Sitting in a Council meeting?

_I’d like to get these covered_, she signed, and then I have a – one on my back.

She stumbled mentioning the brand, changing the word “brand” mid-sign, her hands shaking slightly as she finished getting it out. Fili frowned and made a mental note about it. Bilba had an easier time talking to his mother about things that made her emotional, believing she had to present a strong front to him and everyone else at all times. He’d mention the stumble to his mother and let her decide if it was something to talk to Bilba about. If he tried Bilba would just glare at him and then go kill something.

Ori grinned, showing zero reaction to the scars for which Fili felt a rush of gratitude. Bilba despised pity or sympathy of any kind. Fili had been trying to help her to understand the difference between sympathy and empathy but, so far, he hadn’t gotten very far.

“Do you know what you want?”

She shook her head.

“That’s okay,” Ori said, finally starting to relax. “We can sit down and discuss it.”

Bilba nodded, lifting her hands again. _I can’t pay. Dis said maybe I could trade something? She suggested offering a ride on Syrath. I don’t know if that’s —_

She stopped, looking startled again. Fili sighed, already knowing what he’d see. Ori had gone stock still, his eyes wide and his mouth gaping.

“Ori?” Fili asked. “You should probably breathe.”

Ori let out a rush of breath and said, “YES. Yes, that would be--” He shot a look at Fili and paused to take a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “Yes, that would be fine, more than fine actually. We can start any time you want.”

“We’re heading out to the Shire as soon as I can make arrangements,” Fili said. “Perhaps when we get back from that?” he addressed Bilba. “That way you don’t have to worry about them healing while you’re supposed to be relaxing.”

She agreed and Ori headed toward the library, nearly dancing with glee.
Bilba watched him go and then shook her head. She headed off toward the battlements and Fili fell in alongside her.

*How long do you think it will take? To make arrangements?*

“Hopefully only a few days, a week at the most,” Fili said. “It’ll just be a matter of telling Dwalin.” Bilba frowned. *Why would that matter?*

“If all goes well then it’ll be me, Kili and my mother going,” Fili explained. “That’s the entire royal family sans my uncle, and both heirs to the throne. Stuff like that tends to make Dwalin a bit… paranoid let’s say, particularly with the assassination attempts.” He put on what he hoped was a winning smile and said, “I’m sure it’ll be fine though. Since it’s relatively unplanned our enemies won’t have time to put anything in place, not unless they have dragons of their own capable of making it to the Shire before us, which is unlikely. I’m sure Dwalin will agree, we’ll probably be safer in the Shire than here. He’ll probably want uncle to go as well, just to give himself a break. You’ll see, he’ll be fine with it.”

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Dwalin was not fine with it.

They already had evidence that Nar had a method of long distance communication that they were unaware of. This meant that if Nar happened to have operatives on the other side of Middle Earth it was very probable he could contact them and have them in place to do something.

The only thing Fili hated more than Dwalin being paranoid about people out to get them was Dwalin being right about being paranoid about people out to get them.

In the end, by some miracle, Fili was able to get his uncle’s permission to go in spite of the risks but only if Dwalin was allowed to set up any security he wished, without complaint.

Which meant it took a solid two weeks of preparation before they were ready to go.

His mother and Kili both agreed to go while Dwalin added in a truly ridiculous number of dragons and soldiers.

While they waited for everything to be ready, Fili managed to get Bilba to relax and recover, somewhat. She wasn’t about to sit or, better yet, lay down to get pressure off her leg but he at least managed to redirect her by reminding her of Cassie, the young woman she’d met in Lake-town.

The first few times they visited Fili went with her. Dwalin wasn’t happy with that either but Thorin intervened. Relations with Lake-town, and Dale, had been damaged by the actions of the Master. Thorin felt it was important to restore them, to make it clear Erebor didn’t hold the actions of a few against all of them.

The first time Fili went he was met by the new Master of Lake-town, Varr. Lord Bard of Dale had allowed the people of Esgaroth to select their own Master, trusting them to know their people better than he did. The man they had chosen was young, a fisherman by trade who was used to hard work and long hours. Varr was known to be sociable, honest and fair and though he’d only been Master a short time had already proven his dedication to doing the job right.
Fili was impressed and even Bilba acknowledged she liked him which Fili took to be a good sign.

Cassie was delighted to see them, a fact that put Bilba at ease and also encouraged her to continue visiting. The two of them spent most of the next two weeks running about Lake-town, visiting Dale or Erebor or even Mirkwood with Syrath.

In effect, Bilba got to act her age for a little while. Her leg healed rapidly and some of the stress lines vanished from her face. Her sleep quieted down as well according to Syrath, as much as it ever did. She still rarely smiled, and he’d yet to hear her laugh, but he had hopes that would come one day as well.

By the time Dwalin was finally satisfied with their escort Fili was not in the least surprised to have Bilba ask if Cassie could come along with them.

Cassie’s reaction to being asked was somewhat similar to Ori’s over the tattoos.

In the end they left on a beautiful, if crisp, sunny morning. The dragons were loaded down with enough supplies to last them a month rather than the two weeks they would be gone. Bilba, proving she and Dwalin thought eerily alike, had loaded Syrath down as well, but with weapons rather than food or other necessities. Though their route would not take them by Moria she had insisted on strapping on the rows of bows and quivers Syrath had worn the first time they had met, just in case.

Fili didn’t argue. Dwalin had initially demanded that he, Kili and Dis all wear heavy plate armor for the duration of the trip. Dis had merely laughed at him while he and Kili had managed to argue him down to light armor instead.

Heavy armor would have been miserable and since Dwalin had placed his father in charge of the soldiers, and them, for the trip they wouldn’t have been able to get out of wearing it once they were away from the mountain.

Dis and Kili rode Lyth while Cassie rode with one of the other soldiers. She would have ridden with them but Syrath’s age had to be taken into account. He was technically large enough to carry more than two riders but the bones of a dragon his age were still fairly delicate and it was always best to put as little weight on them as possible. This mean he, Bilba and the weapons were more than enough.

Not that Fili minded the thought of it being just him, Syrath and Bilba all the way to the Shire.

Xalanth was also going, leaving both his riders behind to look after Thorin and the mountain. The dragon had been worrying over Syrath so much that Dwalin had finally ordered him to go. This had led to an argument between them about Dwalin not being Xalanth’s boss. Xalanth had then spent the rest of the day pouting in a fashion worthy of Syrath before finally agreeing to go, but not because Dwalin had ordered him. Honest.

Because he wasn’t carrying any riders, and was enormous even for a drake, he’d been loaded down with more supplies than the others leading to the complaint that he wasn’t a pack mule. Watching him as they left, however, he seemed to have put his grievances aside and was enjoying getting to fly alongside his son.

Syrath, Lyth and Xalanth stayed close while the rest of the riders spread out about them in a circular formation, protecting the royals in the center.

Bilba was exasperated but allowed it. She seemed half excited and half nervous about the trip so Fili did his best to distract her, hoping to get her to see the positives in going and none of the possible
things that could go wrong.

In hindsight, considering who he was talking to, he probably should have left out mentioning how much fun it would be to get to fly almost exclusively for the couple of days it would take to get to the Shire.

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My mother wishes to pass on a question from my father. It’s, and I quote, does she ever plan to sit down?

Bilba shifted slightly, adjusting her stance as Syrath moved. She was standing behind Fili, practicing aiming with her bow as they traveled.

I haven’t done this in a long time. I don’t want to get out of practice.

My father is worried you’re going to fall to your death.

Bilba rolled her eyes. You Durins worry too much.

When it comes to you I’m fairly sure we don’t worry nearly enough.

Bilba knelt and slid the bow back into one of the straps meant for it.

Are you strapped in?

Yes? Why?

She grinned. Turning away from him, she lay down on her back and slid her arms through some of the straps, hooking them around her elbows. She grabbed ahold of the thick leather and then called to Syrath. Syrath! Want to have some fun?

Yes! I am bored. You know how much I hate being bored.

That I do.

Without warning he flipped upside down. Fili shouted in surprise while Bilba laughed. Her body fell away from Syrath until she was held in place only by the straps around her arms. Far below her mountain peaks and hidden valleys raced past her.

Oh! Syrath’s voice sounded. There’s a lake! Can we go swimming?

Ask Fili.

He’s busy swearing.

Ask Xalanth then.

I think he’s swearing too.

Syrath turned back right side up and Bilba sat up and looked across to where Lyth flew nearby. Kili looked stunned while Dis was shaking her head.
Really, Dear?

Sorry, Bilba said. You never know what a fight is going to entail. I like to be prepared.

That and it was fun but there was no need to mention that.

Syrath wants to go swimming. Do you think we could stop for a little while?

I’d rather not stop in the mountains. There’s not really enough room for everyone to set down. We’ll be at Rivendell soon. How about we stop between there and the Shire and find a lake?

Bilba agreed and moved to sit with her back against Fili’s. She must have ended up dozing off after that because the next thing she became fully aware of was Syrath banking and heading down.

She spun around to wrap her arms around Fili’s waist, yawning as they circled down lower and lower.

You’re lucky you didn’t fall off.

You’d be a pretty terrible ride partner if you let that happen, Bilba replied.

I can only do so much, he responded.

They landed a few minutes later, outside of the valley that Rivendell sat in. The area around the Last Homely House was open and empty fortunately, and probably deliberately, giving ample space for the dragons to spread out.

Bilba’s boots hit the ground just as Cassie came running over.

“That was amazing!” she said, grabbing Bilba’s arm. “I can’t believe what an amazing a rider you are!”

“Don’t encourage her,” Fili groused, jumping down beside her. “She’s bad enough as it is.”

Cassie grinned, then flushed and looked away as Kili approached.

“Why are we here again?” he asked.

“Bilba wanted to get some things she’d left behind,” Fili reminded him. “We aren’t staying long.”

“Good,” Kili muttered. “I didn’t come all the way out just to be bored to death.”

It seemed to occur to him who was there about a second after he said it and his eyes widened as he turned to Cassie. “Not that I have any problems with Elves! It’s just Rivendell is, well it’s pretty boring.”

Cassied was bright red. “It’s okay,” she said, her voice so quiet it was nearly a whisper. “I know what you meant.”

Kili nodded. “Okay.” He clapped his hands. “Let’s go then, shall we?”

“There’s no need for us all to go,” Dis said, coming up to join them. “I doubt Lord Elrond would appreciate an enormous group of dwarves dropping in on him. Bilba, why don’t you, Fili, Kili and Cassie go? We’re close enough you probably don’t need an escort. I doubt anyone is going to attack you between here and Rivendell and sending armed guards in would probably be as bad as sending all of us in.”
Vili had come up with her and looked about ready to argue but then thought better about it and said nothing. Unlike his sons he knew when to pick his battles.

Bilba nodded and set out. It took a few minutes for the others to catch up but soon all four of them were heading toward the road that led into Rivendell.

Just as they reached it the thunder of horses heralded the arrival of Elrond and one of his idiot sons.

She should be grateful there was only one to deal with, but it would be like being grateful there was only one orc pack instead of two, it didn’t make much difference.  

Don’t you ever have anything better to do than lounge about Rivendell? She sent toward Elladan.  

Nope, he sent back cheerfully. Not a thing.

Elrond dismounted and came forward. “Bilba, we are pleased to see you back.”

Bilba raised an eyebrow. Sure, now they called her Bilba.

Elrond nodded toward Fili and Kili. “Your Highnesses.”

Both acknowledged the greeting, with Fili turning toward Cassie to introduce her. “Lord Elrond, might I introduce Cassandra—”

“Daughter of Idrilay,” Elrond interrupted. “Of course. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Cassie blinked, her eyes wide. “You know me? I – I didn’t think anyone knew me from here. We left when my mother was still pregnant with me.”

“So you did,” Elrond agreed. “And though we were not given the chance to get to know you there were many who knew your mother and still many more who know her name. There are few, after all, who have chosen to give up their immortality. Your mother was one of them.”

As was his daughter, Bilba thought, thinking of her friend in Gondor. Arwen, she knew, did not regret her choice but she did miss getting to see her family every day and Bilba knew Elrond mourned the fact that his daughter’s life would no longer stretch on into eternity.

“If you wish,” Elrond continued, “there are still some of your kin left in Rivendell. I’m sure they would be happy to meet you.”

“Really?” Cassie breathed out. “Yes, that would --- yes, I’d like that.”

Bilba sucked in a breath and glared at Elrond. What are you trying to do, keep her?

Peace, Bilba. I wouldn’t take your friend from you. Don’t you think she should have a chance to meet her family?

Why? Bilba retorted. Where have they been her entire life? Where were they when she needed them?

Anger laced her tone, her words bringing her far too close to things she didn’t particularly want to discuss.

Without consciously deciding to do it, she found herself stepping closer to Fili. He, in turn, smoothly took over the conversation, moving attention completely off her as he caught Elrond up to the current goings on in Erebor.
Elrond listened quietly and then said, “I wonder, have you heard from Gandalf?”

“Gandalf?” Fili asked. “No, but he’s usually not very easy to find is he? He goes where he pleases.”

“True,” Elrond agreed, “but we still usually have a general idea of where he is and he checks in from time to time with various friends and allies. No one has heard from him in nearly four months.”

“Four months?” Kili said in surprise. “We saw him nearly six months ago and he seemed fine then.”

*Aside from having been captured by goblins,* Bilba said dryly. *Perhaps he was caught again?*

Elrond frowned. “Gandalf rarely makes the same mistake twice. I doubt he would have been caught again.”

“But we did check into it anyway,” Elladan piped in helpfully.

“We did,” Elrond said, shooting a glare at his son who immediately shut up with a guilty look. “We found nothing to indicate they had him.”

Bilba thought back to the elderly Man, wizard. She hadn’t known him long but she’d liked him, and more than that she owed him. Had he not been captured, and still willing to fight in spite of his exhaustion, it was highly possible she wouldn’t have made it until Syrath arrived.

*He’s a wizard,* she said. *What about the other one? The one in the tower? Could he know something?*

“We have sent word to Saruman,” Elrond said. “He was unaware Gandalf was missing but promised to look for him. So far there has been no further word.”

“I’ll alert my uncle when we return,” Fili said. “Gandalf has always been a friend to Erebor. I’m sure my uncle will send out search parties of his own.”

“It would be appreciated,” Elrond said. “I’m sure it’s nothing but…” He cut off and made a clear effort to shake off the worry clouding him. “Enough of speculations though.” He glanced at Bilba. “Elladan will walk in with you and can introduce Cassandra to her kin. I believe I’ll go speak to Erebor’s Princess.”

“I’m sure my mother would appreciate that,” Fili said, his own voice grave.

*Is Vilya around?* Bilba asked. *Syrath was hoping to get to speak to him.*

*He is,* Elrond responded. *I’ll let him know.*

Bilba thanked him and then he was moving past them and the rest of them were heading into Rivendell itself.

Fili and Kili walked behind her and Cassie while Elladan strode ahead of them. She could hear them still discussing Gandalf.

“You don’t think he’s really missing, do you?” Kili asked. “Surely he’s just out of touch for one reason or another.”

“Or course he is,” Fili responded. “He’s a wizard after all. I’m sure he’ll turn up when he feels like it.”

Cassie was nearly bouncing with excitement, her hands clasped together and a bright look in her
Why are you excited? Bilba signed. These people weren’t there when you needed them. Aren’t you angry?

Cassie shrugged. “I don’t know them yet so I have no idea why they weren’t there. I want to give them a chance to explain themselves before I get angry.”

But you’re not starting out angry?

“My entire family is dead,” Cassie explained. “And now I found out I might have more. That’s a pretty big thing. I’d like to…hope I guess? I choose to believe they’re going to be nice, until they prove otherwise.” She grinned at Bilba. “I am nervous though, can you tell?”

Bilba shook her head and Cassie looked relieved. “Great, thank you!” She took a deep breath. “I think I’m going to go talk to Elladan, alright? Maybe he can tell me about them before I meet them so I don’t sound like a total idiot.”

With that she was bounding ahead to walk next to the tall elf.

Fili drew up next to her and Bilba wrapped both arms around his bicep, pulling him closer as she did.

What’s wrong?

Bilba scowled. I think Cassie’s going to want to stay, once she meets her family.

So? You have a dragon. You can just visit more often.

Bilba tightened her grip on his arm, annoyed. She shouldn’t be so happy. They weren’t there when she needed them. Why isn’t she angry?

She doesn’t know the circumstances. She’s giving them a chance to explain.

What explanation could they possibly have that would be forgivable? Bilba snapped. She needed them. They weren’t there. What else does she need?

Fili frowned. My parents weren’t there for at least one of the assassination attempts against me. I told you about that one. Should I be angry at them for it?

You said they were out of the mountain, Bilba responded. They didn’t know you were going to need them.

Maybe Cassie’s family didn’t know either.

Bilba stopped dead in her tracks, so hard that Kili, walking behind them, nearly ran into her. Ahead Elladan and Cassie continued a few steps before looking back and noticing they’d stopped. Fili waved them, and his brother on. “Go ahead. We’ll catch up.”

The others agreed and, soon enough, it was just the two of them. Bilba let go of Fili’s arm and stood across from him, facing him.

Fili raised an eyebrow at her in question. “What?”

Bilba didn’t hold back. How could they not know? Her mother died! Wasn’t she their family?

Fili looked startled at the depth of her anger and hesitated, clearly hoping for an explanation. Bilba
didn’t provide one.

“They aren’t all knowing,” he said slowly, finally, “no one is. They may not even know she’s dead, have you considered that? Maybe all this time they’ve been wondering about why she hasn’t contacted them.”

Bilba crossed her arms over her chest, fingers digging into her biceps.

Fili took a step closer, looming over her and forcing her to look up at him.

She really hated looming. Syrath was the only one allowed to loom and then only because he’d do it regardless of what she thought.

“I didn’t come rescue you when you were in Moria,” he said. “Are you angry at me for that?”

_Of course not. You didn’t know I was there._

He raised an eyebrow. “And perhaps her family didn’t know she was in need either.”

_And what if they did?

“They could lie. Bilba insisted. _They could say they didn’t know when they did._

“Perhaps,” Fili agreed, “and in that case I imagine time will tell. People are rarely all that good at hiding who, and what, they truly are. If they turn out to be false she’ll see it.”

He slid an arm around her waist, tugging her forward to start moving again. “Not to mention Cassie has friends looking out for her. If there’s a problem we can help her see it, it’s what friends do.”

After a few moments of walking the road curved and dipped and there, before them, was the valley where the Last Homely House sat.

Bilba barely saw it, Fili’s words still running through her head.

Maybe they didn’t know.

They didn’t know?

Didn’t.

Maybe.
Maybe he didn’t know.

She stumbled, Fili’s arm around her waist the only thing keeping her from falling.

She knew the story of her mother’s capture. She’d heard it multiple times through the years, could recite it verbatim if needed. She knew her mother’s trip had been spur of the moment, knew her mother had felt a tremendous amount of guilt over it. She even knew that, according to her mother, her father would have been completely against it no matter how safe it should have been.

Which was why her mother had sent him a letter about it knowing full well he wouldn’t get it until well after she’d left. By all rights when he read it she should have already been safe at her destination.

He hadn’t been there. He’d been in Erebor fighting orcs, ironically enough. He hadn’t been anywhere near the Shire or known anything about her mother’s trip, would have stopped it if he had, according to her, or would have taken her on Xalanth.

Bilba knew all that.

But, even so, the thought that he might not have known? How hard was it to see a group of corpses and not realize your wife’s was not among them?

Except…Bilba found herself thinking of the numerous caravans she’d failed to save, the ones that had refused her aid or that she’d never run across in the first place until it was already too late. The orc were notorious for burning those they didn’t take as slaves, piling them up and using the guts of their own convoy, the wood and clothing and other material, to light them in one giant fire. She didn’t know why they bothered to go to the trouble, it was possible there was no reason aside from added cruelty. She could usually see the smoke from miles away, would never get the stench of burned flesh out of her mind.

It was often impossible to identify anyone, just a mass of blistered flesh, burnt wood, charred clothing and hair.

Impossible, but still, would he have just assumed she was in there?

Belladonna had been the only one taken as a slave from her convoy. The others had fought, and died. Her mother, however, had been pregnant with Bilba and hadn’t resisted.

So when the convoy had been found…there would have been a lot of bodies…and her mother was so small…and if they’d all been heaped in a pile…it might have looked as if the entire convoy had been slaughtered.

But…still…would he have just accepted it? Never thought to look just to be sure? When being wrong meant his wife was a slave in Moria he’d never even tried?

And what of her mother?
Don’t you worry, sweetheart. Your father is coming for us. You’ll see.

She’d been so sure. Not a doubt. She’d believed he would come.

Where had that come from if she hadn’t been convinced Dwalin would know they were in Moria?

They were entering Rivendell itself, the sound of waterfalls thundering in her ears. She’d never particularly liked all the waterfalls, the noise was too constant. She could barely hear herself think.

There were leaves scattered on the ground, whirling away in a light wind as they walked through them. The buildings were clustered back farther in, surrounded by trees and other greenery. The ones in the front were kept for guests and other visitors while farther back sat the homes the elves lived in or used for important functions such as entertaining visiting dignitaries.

Elladan and Cassie had already vanished, Kili having apparently gone with them.

Bilba pulled away from Fili and moved toward one of the buildings that sat a bit farther in, between the outer and inner courts. She hadn’t visited all the much over the years but it didn’t mean she didn’t remember where her room was.

As she walked her mind continued working, going over the puzzle in her mind. It felt closer, almost complete but something…something was still missing.

If Dwalin was who her mother had said he was...if he was who he appeared to be to her…was he the type to accept his wife was dead without evidence?

She’d barely known him a few months but, even so…she didn’t think so.

And her mother…why would she have been so utterly convinced in her father’s coming unless she’d believed the same thing? That he would see her body wasn’t there and would realize she was in Moria?

But…wait…a new thought occurred to her, one she’d never considered before.

It hadn’t been speculation on her mother’s part, it hadn’t been belief in her husband’s ability to make the logical deduction.

It had been conviction.

Where had that come from? And how had it lasted so long? If Belladonna had been counting on her body not being there then surely she’d have realized, as time passed, that something had gone wrong.

So why had she still been convinced?

Bilba jumped up to the landing of one of the buildings and strode toward a door at the end, her hands clenched at her sides.

She was missing something.

Damn it all, what was it?

By all rights, her father should have come.

Her mother had never doubted even though, by all rights, she should have.

What were the missing pieces?
She reached the door and pushed it open. The elves didn’t have locks on their doors, they didn’t believe in them. They had some strange philosophy about integrity and rising above and blah, blah, blah. Bilba was fairly sure they got stolen from quite regularly and just refused to acknowledge it.

Granted no one had stolen from her yet but it wasn’t as though she had a lot to steal.

She entered the small room. There was virtually nothing in it, a pile of blankets in one corner and a trunk pushed against the far wall.

Bilba went to the trunk and knelt before it, pushing the lid up and reaching inside.

Fili knelt on one knee beside her just as she pulled a bundle out. Laying it on the floor she unrolled it to reveal a line of six wicked looking daggers.

“That’s a lot of knives,” Fili said dryly.

Bilba gave him a cocky, only mildly shaky, grin and then went about putting the knives where they belonged. Two slid into sheaths built inside her boots, two more in similar sheaths in her vambraces. The final two, already in sheaths, hooked to her belt at the small of her back.

“So,” Fili said casually, “why didn’t you have all of these when you went after the Watcher?”

Bilba fumbled putting the daggers at her back. *I didn’t need them. It was supposed to be a quick mission, in and out.*

“Really.” Fili sounded unconvinced. “And you, of all people, decided that less was more when it came to weapons?”

*That’s right.* Bilba said. *Problem?*

Fili’s eyes got that faraway look and Bilba felt a jolt rush through her.

Syrath! Don’t –

Fili’s eyes widened and he grinned. “You forgot them?”

*Oops, sorry! You didn’t say I shouldn’t tell him!*

Bilba growled and gave a moment’s consideration to rethinking her decision to not kill Fili in his sleep.

*It was a once in a lifetime thing, alright? I was a little excited.*

“Yes,” Fili said. He frowned. “Didn’t you guide a caravan back before you headed out? Why didn’t you – oh,” he gave her a knowing look, “because then the elves would have wondered why you came back and you’d have had to admit you forgot half your weapons.”

Bilba glared at him. *Shut up.*

She reached back in the trunk and pulled out a sword, longer than the one she’d lost on that mission all those months ago.

“What’s that for?”

*I fight with two sword sometimes, this one and then the one I had with me. I prefer the throwing daggers though, or one sword, so I don’t use it a lot.* She stood and strapped the sword onto her belt.
She couldn’t use it in conjunction with her shorter sword anymore since she’d gone and lost that one but it was still serviceable and would keep her from constantly having to use a borrowed blade.

Fili reached past her suddenly into the trunk and pulled something out. He held it up and Bilba recognized it as her leather armor, or part of it anyway.

“You have armor,” Fili said, disbelieving. “You have armor and you haven’t been wearing it. Why?”

*Because it’s falling apart,* she groused. She grabbed the leather cuirass and showed him where the leather had been cut and patched multiple times, as well as areas stained dark where orc blood had stubbornly refused to wash out. *It was getting to the point where it was useless so why bother wearing it?*

“Because something is better than nothing?” Fili asked rhetorically. He sighed and set the piece he was holding down. Bilba thought it might be one of the vambraces that went with it, the old ones, not the newer ones a dwarf had given her after she’d saved his caravan and family. She didn’t remember the old ones being quite that shredded. Apparently her armor had been in even worse shape than she’d thought. Aragorn had been the one to give it to her as part of her Ranger uniform and she had no doubt he’d have replaced it had she asked but she never had, not wanting to be a burden on him. She hadn’t worn the armor in his presence either, not wanting him to see how bad off it was.

*I do wear some armor,* she reminded him, holding up her arms to show off her newer vambraces.

Fili gave her an exasperated look and indicated his own armor. “This is armor. This is what you wear when fighting orcs, that or plate armor. Not vambraces and clothing.”

*I’ve done fine.*

He held up the cuirass again, indicating a few of the areas where the leather had been heavily damaged. “You’ve been lucky.”

Bilba didn’t dignify that with an answer, instead reaching in to grab the last three items she wanted.

The first was the clasp Aragorn had given her, showing her as a Ranger in full. She tended to not wear it, afraid it’d get lost in battle, but she didn’t want to leave it in Rivendell. Instead she took the current clasp she had on her cloak off and replaced it with that one, keeping it where she would know where it was.

The second item was the dagger Primula and Drogo had once given her. It was a simple weapon, functional and smaller than most of her other knives but she cherished it more than the rest put together. She’d never used it in battle, feeling it would be an insult to the two peace loving, gentle people who’d given it to her.

Fili made no comment as she set it aside and grabbed the final item she wanted to take with her.

It was a bracelet, carved from dark wood. It was a masterpiece, the wood cut into delicate filigree and designed to look more like it was swirling about her wrist more than just sitting on it.

“That’s beautiful,” Fili said. “Where did you get it?”

*Bofur made it for me.*

Fili made an odd sound and Bilba frowned at him. *Are you alright?*
“Fine,” Fili said shortly. “So who is this Bofur again? A dwobbit who chose to stay in the Shire?”

He sounded oddly hopeful and Bilba gave him a confused look. No, a dwarf. He’s stationed at the Garrison. He helped defend the Shire during the orc invasion.

Fili twitched. Actually twitched and Bilba raised an eyebrow, wondering if he’d been bitten by something. The room hadn’t been opened in some time after all and they were surrounded by nature.

“Of course,” Fili said, his voice sounding equally strange. “Of course he’s a warrior. And he made you that bracelet? Did he say anything when he gave it to you?”

Just that he hoped I liked it. It was for my anniversary gift of being in the Shire a full year. Primula and Drogo gave me a knife.

She slid the bracelet on as she spoke. She rarely wore it but, seeing as she wouldn’t be fighting orcs presumably in the near future, she might as well.

Fili twitched again and she frowned. Really, are you alright? You’re acting strange.

“I’m fine.” Fili stood up and grabbed her hand to pull her up. Bilba grabbed the knife Primula and Drogo had given her and got up. “Ready to go?”

Bilba nodded. She shut the lid on the trunk, which now held nothing but her worn out armor.

Bofur had been worried about her, she recalled. So had Aragorn. If she’d been captured by the goblins they would have come for her.

Except they wouldn’t have known where she was.

So they wouldn’t have been able to come.

She spun toward the door, sliding a hand around Fili’s bicep as she did. She felt more confused than ever, like the underpinnings of her world were rattling. With Fili close she felt…grounded, like he was holding her back from spinning apart entirely.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Fili asked, glancing at his arm where her fingers were dug in so hard her knuckles were white.

Why don’t we go with we’re both alright and leave it at that?”

Fili didn’t look satisfied but he dropped it. They left the room and paused just outside.

“Should we go looking for Cassie and Kili?”

Bilba shook her head. We’d just be in the way and I don’t want her to feel like we’re rushing her. Let’s go back.

Fili nodded. “Alright. Kili can catch up. He can take care of himself and I’m not so sure Cassie would appreciate us dragging him away.”

That was true enough, Bilba thought. This was the first real time Cassie and Kili had interacted. It was usually Bilba who visited her or Bilba and Fili. Long lost family or not, Bilba imagined the other young woman was probably beside herself with excitement at having Kili present.

She knew how she would feel if someone barged in on her getting to spend time with Fili.
She certainly wouldn’t do the same to someone else.

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Syrath wasn’t there when they got back.

Bilba saw Elrond speaking to Dis, and Vili was in a group with several of his soldiers. The rest of the dragons were lounging about the area, resting up before the last leg of the journey to the Shire.

“Where’s Syrath?” Fili asked.

*He said he wanted to go swimming,* Bilba replied. *He probably went and found a lake, most likely with Vilya. That dragon loves the water to an unnatural level.*

“We should go join him,” Fili said.

*We can’t,* Bilba answered. *Not while Kili and Cassie are still gone.*

Fili shrugged. “We can split up, part of the group going with us and part waiting for them. I doubt Syrath went far, how dangerous can it be?” He caught the look Bilba sent him and immediately added, “Don’t answer that. I’d like to continue in my blissful ignorance for a little while longer.”

Bilba felt her mouth twitch just a bit. Fili left to go speak to his father and Bilba, looking around the large group, caught sight of Xalanth curled in a ball off to the side looking despondent.

She rarely interacted with him. He spent most of his time with Syrath or Dawlin or, now that he was back, Balin. Unsure if he’d even want her around, Bilba walked over to him. He gave no reaction as she approached, simply continued to gaze out at nothing.

As she got closer his true size became apparent, and also drove home just how big Syrath would one day be.

Xalanth was massive. It was very likely he was the largest drake in Erebor. Living so close with them, even with Syrath young as he was, it was easy to forget the sheer power the dragons possessed. Xalanth was an army all by himself, capable of breaking entire lines of troops if he wanted with one pass, able to incinerate cities if he wished with very little effort.

The dwarves held high respect for their dragons, as all races did. Dragons were treated as equals and as individual beings capable of making their own choices. They weren’t forced to do anything, they were asked. They left the mountain and returned as they wished and no one would dare attempt to ride another rider’s dragon without permission from the dragon. Xalanth in particular was known for not liking anyone aside from Dwalin or Balin to touch him, often warning people off with a rumbling growl so deep Bilba could feel it rattling through her bones from the other side of the level.

Bilba put a hand out and hesitated. One enormous eye rolled toward her, so large and clear she could see herself reflected in the iris. Xalanth gave no other reaction so she continued until her fingers were barely resting on the side of his head. When he still didn’t react she put her entire hand on him, the small, tightly locked scales under his eye pressing against her palm.

She wished she could speak to him but she could only do it mentally and it was unlikely Xalanth would open a channel for her. Dragons rarely spoke to anyone aside from their own riders. They
could do it but preferred not to and their choice was, as always, respected. Had Syrath been there Bilba could have passed on a message through him or, if she could still speak out loud, she could have communicated that way.

Fili arrived, his boots crunching through dried grass and fallen leaves. He stopped beside her and copied her gesture, though easier than she had as he no doubt already had a relationship established with the large dragon.

“Hey Xalanth, why didn’t you go with Syrath?”

Xalanth growled and jerked his head away, looking in another direction. Fili chuckled, a lifetime spent with dragons erasing any fear he might have had of a creature that could crush him like an insect growling at him.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where he went, would you? Bilba and I were hoping to join him.” He gave a knowing grin. “I don’t suppose you might be willing to take us, would you?”

Xalanth jerked his head up, looking down at them from overhead. Bilba, to her own surprise, felt a jolt run through her. She’d been loomed over by Syrath of course but it was nothing compared to having an adult drake, of unusual size no less, over her head. Xalanth’s mere presence, angry or not, held such weight, such an intense presence, it was easy to imagine soldiers running at the sight of him, before he ever had to do a thing.

“I do think that’s a yes,” Fili said happily. “Come on.” He grabbed her hand and tugged her around to where Xalanth’s forelimb rested on the ground. “My father is going to come along with a few soldiers and dragons while everyone else waits for Kili and Cassie.”

He reached out and easily climbed up Xalanth’s forelimb before reaching back down for her.

Bilba gave him a skeptical look Are you sure it’s alright? He’s not been entirely happy with me since I arrived.

She wasn’t an idiot after all, and neither was Xalanth. He was more than aware of her feelings toward Dwalin and she was accepting of his distrust toward her.

Or at least she had been until getting up close to him and realizing how very small she really was.

She might have stopped referring to Dwalin as a bastard and she may have started talking to him somewhat but it didn’t mean she was entirely comfortable with him, or had any plan to be. Dragons were notorious for holding grudges and it was highly possible Xalanth would never like her.

Xalanth’s head moved back to look at her. A second later his nose touched her arm, the barest of grazes but enough to bump her, up, toward Fili.

Bilba gave him a startled look but he simply lowered his head and bumped her again, this time in the hip.

The message was clear, get on already.

Fili’s hand tightened on hers and Bilba allowed him to haul her up. He grinned. “Stop worrying so much. Xalanth likes you. He’s been trying not to but you do have a way of winning people, and dragons, over.”

I can’t possibly see how, Bilba said. She followed him as he got up to Xalanth’s back, an ease in his movements that suggested this was far from the first time he’d ridden the black and gold dragon.
He helped her up and she got herself seated behind him. To her surprise she found Xalanth was wearing his straps, the thick leather tied in tight knots to keep it from coming loose and bothering him as he flew.

Fili caught her look and explained, “He’s still the dragon for the Guard Captain of Erebor. He takes it seriously and insisted on wearing his straps in case someone needed a quick rescue and wasn’t around their dragon or, like my father, has no dragon at all.”

He untied the knots with ease and Bilba strapped herself in while Fili did the same.

*I used to love flying with your father, Bilba. I wish you could experience it, describing it doesn’t do it justice. There’s nothing else like it. Just me, your father, and Xalanth of course.*

Bilba swallowed hard, her throat clogging as she pictured her mother possibly sitting in the exact spot she was currently occupying.

Xalanth lumbered to his feet, the movement far more forceful than it was on Syrath. Bilba’s entire body jerked and she felt her stomach tighten as it compensated for the way she was swaying. She grabbed ahold of the straps at Fili’s waist, thick ones attaching the front and back pieces of his cuirass, and held on.

They moved away from the others, into a more open area and Xalanth broke into a run. Bilba felt the dragon crouch and then he was shoving off, his wings snapping out to lift him into the air.

Bilba gasped in surprise at the sheer power of it, the speed at which he ascended, the way her entire body was affected by the slightest movement he made.

Riding an adult drake was radically different than riding one Syrath’s size and age. It was little wonder she had yet to see any of the other dwarves performing some of the aerial stunts she and Syrath did. The danger of simply removing the straps while in flight was immense, the wind nearly gale force as it surged past her, every adjustment Xalanth made strong enough to cause the straps to dig into her legs and waist.

She and Syrath would have a lot to work on as he aged. Being able to move about on him unsecured was vital with the way she fought, or the way she poked anthills with sticks as Kili called it, and she didn’t want to lose the ability.

She found herself studying Fili’s back where he sat in front of her and tried to imagine Dwalin sitting there while her mother sat behind him.

A burn started in the base of her nose and her vision blurred somewhat as it always did when thoughts of her mother arose.

She wished her mother could have lived, fled Moria along with her to sit now on Xalanth’s back. It didn’t seem fair, her mother had made it so long, for decades, only to miss out on freedom by what was, in comparison, a small handful of years.

*I love you, Bilba. Tell your father –*

Bilba sucked in a sharp breath, fear shooting through her. Her hands spasmed on Fili’s waist as she violently wrenched her mind away from that particular memory. She leaned forward and pressed her face into the back of his cuirass, breathing in the smell of leather and forcing out the smell of blood and death.

*Are you alright?*
Fine, she responded sharply. She lifted her head and saw Vili and several other soldiers falling into formation around them. I don’t know why we even need them. Xalanth is protection enough.

It’s not easy to take down an adult drake, Fili agreed, but it’s certainly not impossible either. Plus I’d rather he not be a target simply by virtue of being our only guard. Something able to take on a drake would be far past our skill levels, we’d be of absolutely no help to him. This way if such a thing did happen he’d have immediate help from other dragons.

Xalanth banked, beginning to lower and Bilba saw a large lake beneath them. Syrath and Vilya were both splashing around in the middle of it. It was always amusing to see Vilya, a large, glowing Elven dragon who was normally as stoic and imposing as his rider, outright frolicking. It had been even funnier when Syrath had still been too small to ride. Vilya had been forced to frolic in an odd, almost dancing manner as he struggled not to step on the smaller dragon who insisted on getting under his feet and generally in the way.

Bilba! Hi!

Hi, Syrath, Bilba responded. Why didn’t Xalanth come with you?

Ummmmm, I may have sorta, kinda, forgotten to invite him? I was excited!

Xalanth landed with a thud, dust rising up about them. Bilba undid her straps and then carefully tied them again in front of her to keep them from sliding about as Xalanth moved. Fili helped her down and she stopped by Xalanth’s head, thanking him as best she could for the ride. Fili did the same and Xalanth made a low rumbling sound that she took to be an acknowledgment.

Syrath scrambled out of the water and came bounding over to them, shaking off cascades of water. Most of it was gone by the time he reached them but there was still a steady sprinkle of water falling as he skidded to a stop.

Wanna go swimming?

Bilba took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Since Lake-town she’d felt a flash of panic every time she saw the lake or any large body of water.

She’d responded to it by forcing herself to go to Lake-town almost constantly, to see Cassie of course but also to get herself over the fear.

She hadn’t yet gone back in the lake, the water simply too cold to allow it.

This side of the world, however, had a much more temperate climate, even when sliding into winter and while the water was undoubtedly cold it wouldn’t be the biting chill that came with the water currently in the lake back at the mountain.

Sure, she answered. She looked at Fili. Want to go swimming with us?

He frowned. “Dwarf, remember? We can’t swim.”

Bilba grinned, cocky. You can the way we do it. No armor though, you don’t want to destroy it.

“Allright,” Fili said, unsure. Then a slow, cocky grin of his own suddenly started to appear. “No armor, huh? Want me to lose my shirt too? I wouldn’t want it to get wet.”

Bilba felt her face go red hot and she smacked him on the arm, an action that hurt her worse than him.
as she hit his armor. *Shut up. Shirt stays on.*

“If you like,” Fili said airily, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “I’m just trying to make you happy is all.”

*Keep it up and I might end up being happy with the thought of killing you in your sleep.*

“If that’s the case I’ll just have to start sleeping without a shirt on,” Fili quipped back. “You’ll be so distracted you’d probably forget what you were doing.”

Bilba shook her head and clambered up on Syrath’s back, grabbing the straps and lifting them to wave at Fili. *Are you coming or do you plan to just stand there shooting your mouth off all day?*

He smiled and gave an elaborate, overly dramatic bow. “As you wish, my Lady.”

Bilba made a note to speak to Kili. She might not kill Fili but that didn’t mean she couldn’t play a prank on him.

Kili had been teaching her about pranks.

He had a lot of good ideas, most of which involved doing something to his brother.

Perhaps she’d take him up on helping with one.

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It was two hours later before the rest of the party arrived.

By that time most of the dragons were lounging about, their riders playing cards, sparring or generally relaxing. Vili was laying on his back with an arm over his eyes but got up immediately when the other dragons arrived.

Bilba, Syrath and Fili were still swimming.

And, by swimming, it meant Fili and Bilba were strapped in on Syrath who was frolicking in the water, occasionally diving down under only to pop up a few minutes later in what he insisted was a perfect rendition of a breaching whale.

Syrath had never seen a whale. He’d heard about them from Aragorn’s dragon, Barahir, and had been obsessed ever since.

He really, really wanted to one day eat one.

Vilya had given up sometime earlier, bidding Syrath good-bye and returning to Rivendell. Xalanth had joined in for a while but he’d soon gotten bored and retired to the shoreline to watch them.

As the others arrived Syrath happily turned toward shore, paddling out where he stood, his sides heaving as he caught his breath.

Fili unstrapped and jumped down, a huge grin plastered on his face. As he did, Kili approached, a hand to his heart and a wounded look on his face.
“I see how it goes,” he griped, “I leave you alone for five minutes and you go and have fun without me!”

“It was hardly five minutes,” Fili said dryly. Kili walked in range as he spoke and, with a quick movement, Fili had him in a headlock, yawning as he did as though it required no effort at all. “Grown a little weak there have you, little Brother?”

“Hardly,” Kili managed to gasp out. He threw himself back, knocking Fili off balance. A few seconds later he had Fili on his stomach with one arm behind his back and Kili’s knee pressed in the small of his back.

Bilba! Help!

That was pathetic, Bilba sent back. I’m not sure you deserve help.

You are a cruel, cruel ride partner.

Bilba snorted but took a step closer, enough to lift a foot and casually shove Kili’s shoulder. It rocked him just enough to let Fili get out from the hold and he immediately launched himself at his brother, the two dissolving into a full on wrestling match.

Bilba retreated to stand with Syrath, absently wrapping an arm under his jaw when he lowered his head.

She understood the trainees in Erebor wrestled and she knew such antics were often common among siblings.

Still, for her at least, thoughts of wrestling brought back far too many memories of the Arena, particularly when she was forced to fight another, usually inexperienced, slave. It was amazing the strength one could call up when fighting for the right to live and more than once Bilba had found herself on the ground struggling to throw off a frenzyed slave who simply wanted more time.

A shudder ran through her and Syrath nuzzled her lightly.

She caught sight of Cassandra standing near Dis and straightened, moving toward her. When she reached the other woman she immediately threw both arms around her and hugged her.

When she pulled away Cassie frowned and said, “Not that I mind, but what was that for?”

Bilba lifted her hands. I was afraid you’d choose to stay.

“In Rivendell?” Cassie asked in surprise. “Why would I do that?”

Your family was there.

Cassie shrugged. “My home is in Lake-town though, not to mention you, Fili and…Kili.” She stumbled a bit on his name, blushing red and ducking her head to hide it. “I’ve started making new friends in town too, after everything happened. I wouldn’t leave now, right when things are getting better.”

Bilba felt a rush of relief. I’m glad.

“It was nice to see finally see Rivendell,” Cassie said. “And I got to meet my aunt and grandmother. They’re nice but we didn’t have a whole lot in common. I didn’t feel any real connection to them or anything. They asked if they could write to me and I said they could.”
Do you blame them? Bilba asked. For not being there when you needed them?

Cassie shook her head. “No. They didn’t know.”

They could have found out. Doesn’t it bother you that they never tried to check on you?

“As they explained it they didn’t really understand how long it’d been,” Cassie said. “They’re immortal, the passage of time has no meaning to them. They can go a hundred years without seeing their kin and it’s no different than if you or I had gone a week. Even though they knew my mother had become mortal it was hard for them to wrap their minds around it. To them we’d barely left, it never occurred to them that anything might have happened. Mortal lives are so short, it’s like we’re barely alive before we’re dead.” Her face darkened a bit on that, as if she were reciting something they’d said to her. “They apologized, for not realizing.”

And you forgave them? Bilba asked.

“I did,” Cassie said. “It wasn’t intentional on their part. They didn’t know.”

They didn’t know.

There it was again. Could her father possibly, truly…not have known?

Could he?

But then why had her mother been so convinced, and held onto that conviction for decades?

Once upon a time it had all seemed so straightforward.

Now she didn’t know what to believe. All her beliefs, all the foundations she’d based the last few years on, that she’d based Orcrist on…they were less sure, suddenly had cracks running through the base of them.

The thought of them falling, and what might be left behind after, was terrifying.

Dis called out to her sons, warning them they needed to get started if they wanted to reach the Shire before nightfall. Fili and Kili broke apart and got up to help get things ready to leave again.

Kili came over and invited Cassie to ride with him and Dis on Lyth, a question which had the young woman blushing and stammering as she accepted. Bilba raised an eyebrow only to hear a chuckle as Fili appeared beside her.

“I guess leaving them together in Rivendell helped them get past knowing each other through us and onto knowing each other on their own.” He slid an arm around Bilba’s waist, pulling her close as he started them both heading toward Syrath. He leaned his head in close to her, dropping his voice. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Bilba nodded. I’m just nervous about going back to the Shire. Just because Primula and Bofur say they wanted to see me doesn’t mean it’ll hold true once they actually see me, and it certainly doesn’t mean the rest of the Shire will be happy to see me.

It was near enough the truth. She was nervous about going back. The fact that the worry over that wasn’t the only thing bothering her wasn’t something she had any intention of telling him, at least not yet. She’d begun to understand it couldn’t stay a secret forever. She’d lost that chance when she couldn’t manage to hide her anger at Dwalin the first time she’d met him. The speculation over what her issue with him might be was rampant in the Mountain and, more than once, she’d caught Dwalin
in particular looking at her with an odd expression, trying to puzzle her out as much as she was doing with him.

They reached Syrath and she climbed up, quietly settling down and strapping herself in. That act alone garnered her another concerned look from Fili but he simply got behind her and strapped in as well.

They left a short time later. Bilba’s stomach was churning and she felt nauseous, her hands white knuckled on the straps around her thighs.

Arms slid around her from behind and Fili pulled her back to rest against him. Surprisingly he didn’t ask her again what was wrong or give her any empty platitudes.

He was simply there.

Bilba put her hands over his and leaned back, the clenching in her stomach relaxing and her shaking easing.

He wasn’t offering to fix things. He was simply letting her know she wasn’t alone in facing it.

It was enough.

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Nori had alerted the Garrison that they were coming via raven so Bilba knew Bofur was aware of it and Primula probably knew as well. They hadn’t sent back word for her not to come so that was a good sign, right?

Right?

They made excellent time, arriving at about supper time while the sun was sinking toward the horizon but hadn’t yet met it.

By that time Bilba had pulled away from Fili and was sitting rigidly, her fingers digging into her legs and her eyes fixed straight ahead.

Syrath wasn’t talking either, having lapsed into silence soon after they took off from the lake.

Now, down below, Bilba caught sight of the Garrison. She could see large areas of the Shire as well and her stomach twisted at the lasting scars still visible from the orc attack. Broken trees, homes she remembered from before now looking vastly different or gone entirely, and of course the Hobbiton cemetery on the outskirts, now far larger than it had been prior to the orcs coming.

Prior to her coming.

The dragons swirled in a wide circle over the Garrison. Syrath and Lyth lowered through the center slowly, heading toward an area on the open field around the building where a large number of dwarven soldiers, in full armor, waited.

So flashy, Bilba sent to Fili and he chuckled behind her.

“So flashy, they expect it, we deliver.”
Before leaving the lake both he and Kili had cleaned up, redoing their braids and changing into clothing that looked less like they’d been rolling around with it. Fili had put his armor back on and both now also wore gold circlets around their foreheads, the metal emblazoned with the crest of Durin. Fili’s bore a diamond in the center while Kili’s bore a ruby. Dis was also dressed in finery and wearing a circlet of her own, also bearing a ruby in the center. Hers was more stylized than the ones her sons wore, thinner and more delicate with the metal filigreed and swirling over her temples and through her hair.

*Sometimes I forget your status,* Bilba said. *I suppose I should bow too.*

*Please don’t. I don’t think I could handle the sarcasm, from you or Syrath.*

Bilba’s lips quirked, the urge to smile battling against the desire to be impressively sick.

The two dragons landed with a thud, Lyth easily dwarfing Syrath.

Fili had already unstrapped and dismounted quickly. Kili and Dis joined him. Bilba got down and met with Cassie who was looking nearly as nervous as Bilba felt.

“I know they aren’t looking at me,” she hissed to Bilba, “but it’s still nervewracking. I don’t know how they handle it all the time.”

Bilba looked at the three Durins, all of whom looked utterly at ease and relaxed.

*They’re probably just used to it,* she signed, angling her body to hide her motions from the crowd.

Cassie glanced upward and Bilba followed her gaze to where the other dragons still swirled overhead. Vili, by rights of marriage, could have landed and joined his family had he wished but he’d chosen to stay aloft, citing he’d rather protect them from the air then lose half his advantage by being on the ground.

Fili had commented that his father simply hated all the ceremonial stuff they had to go through and was making an excuse to stay out of it.

Bilba was beginning to wish she’d come up with the same excuse.

Fili strode forward, his mother and brother taking up position on his right and left. Bilba sighed and moved as well, her back straight, one hand on the hilt of her sword. Syrath put his head by her and she absently ran a hand along his scales.

Cassie stayed close to her, and slightly behind her, as if she hoped Bilba would protect her if the dwarves suddenly lost their minds and attacked.

Which she would, of course, but she doubted such a situation would take place.

A tall, grizzled dwarf she didn’t recognize, stood at the forefront of the ranks of soldiers. As Fili approached he barked a sharp command in Khuzdul, the language of the dwarves that Bilba couldn’t begin to understand, and, as one, the entire company knelt on one knee before the royals.

Fili stopped and addressed the commander in Khuzdul, his voice deeper than usual and holding an air of gravity that Bilba hadn’t heard since his Coming of Age. In his armor, his back straight and arms clasped behind his back, he was every inch the Crown Prince of Erebor.

*Impressive,* Bilba sent, *or it would be if I hadn’t seen you getting your ass kicked by your baby brother at the lake.*
Fili didn’t even pause in whatever speech he was giving. *Fortunately, for me, none of them saw that and, thus, my reputation is intact.*

He finished his speech and the commander rose to give his own, also in Khuzdul.

Bilba sighed.

_We’re going to be here awhile, aren’t we?_

_I hope not, _Bilba replied. *I’m not sure how long the others can go around in a circle like that. It’d probably be bad if they started falling out of the sky from exhaustion and landing on our heads._

_That would probably mess up Fili’s Princey image._

Bilba smirked.

“Bilba!” The shout came from somewhere to her left and Bilba turned. As she did, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fili turn as well, then he was out of her line of sight.

Arms wrapped around her and lifted her right off the ground, before spinning her in a circle. Bilba barely kept herself from reacting, repeating in her head that they were in the Shire and that Syrath, and Lyth behind him, wouldn’t have let a threat get near enough to her to touch her.

Fili’s voice barked a command in Khuzdul and she was back on the ground so fast it took a few seconds to register.

Her mind caught up to what was going on and she focused on the dwarf in front of her, dust covered and weary but there with a glint in his eye and a smile on his face and an extremely familiar floppy hat perched on his head instead of a helmet.

*Bofur!* Syrath shouted happily.

Bilba smiled broadly, her gut easing at his reaction, and threw her arms around him. This resulted in her being lifted off her feet again, until another order in Khuzdul, this one said with a mix of irritation and exasperation, sounded almost directly behind her.

Bofur moved back, his eyes widening. “Your Highness! My apologies. I forget you were – well I mean I didn’t forget -- I just – what I mean is--” He shut up and dropped to one knee, remembering to pull his hat off after he’d hit the ground.

Bilba turned toward Fili and said, _this is Bofur!_

_So I caught,_ Fili said. He still sounded annoyed but, as he looked at her, she saw his eyes soften.

“Stand up,” he said to Bofur, “You’re Bofur, right? I’ve been hearing about you.”

He didn’t sound altogether happy for some reason but he shook Bofur’s hand easily enough.

A loud squawk sounded and Bilba turned to see an adult Shire dragon scrambling over the hill toward them. At first she was confused, trying to place the dragon who was clearly very excited to see them. The only adult Shire dragon they’d really known had been Daisy and she’d been lost, along with so many others, the day the orcs had invaded.

Then it occurred to her that Shire dragons aged at the same rate as Hobbits, which was far faster than dwarves, dwobbits or drakes. Right after that her mind registered the fact that the dragon was
wearing some sort of harness over her back, strapping her wings to her side.

Her heart jolted and her eyes went wide. The dragon barreled past her, her tiny size, small even by Shire dragons, registering just as she skidded to a stop in front of Syrath…and promptly bit him on the nose.

Syrath reared back, startled and gave an injured sounding squawk, though Bilba imagined it was more injury to his ego than physical pain. Beside him, Lyth pushed up to her feet and Bilba heard an angry sounding roar from Xalanth flying overhead.

Fili looked startled as well, nearly gaping at the small dragon.

Primrose, for of course it was Primrose, completely ignored the irritation of the larger drakes, sat down on her haunches, and proceeded to start letting Syrath have it, chattering at him in a high pitched, highly annoyed tone.

“What--” Fili said, dumbfounded, “what was that?”

That, Bilba said dryly, is Primrose. She’s like Syrath’s surrogate sister. Her mother raised him alongside her, until the orcs killed her.

Primrose squawked something, sounding rather imperious. Syrath made an aggrieved sound only to have Primrose squawk again, demanding this time.

Next to him, Lyth had settled down, looking amused while overhead the other dragons had begun to disperse to land in various sections of the empty fields surrounding the Garrison.

Syrath sighed, his head drooping, and then proceed to lay down.

Primrose stood up, her tail and head raised as if she were the queen of dragons. She marched to his side, climbed on his back and sprawled out over him, her legs dangling on either side of his body. She was small enough Syrath could have lifted off and flown without disturbing her but he didn’t move, merely heaved a long suffering sigh and then deflated, shooting Bilba a look as he did.

“What is she doing?” Fili asked. Near the other dwarves, Kili and Dis looked as stunned as he sounded while most of the dwarves, including Bofur, appeared to be struggling not to laugh.

I imagine she’s making sure he doesn’t run off while she’s not looking again, Bilba said.

She walked over as she spoke and carefully raised a hand to Primrose. Primrose turned her head enough to look at her, then reached over and lightly nuzzled her hand.

What? You left too! Why don’t you get chewed out?

I wouldn’t know, Bilba replied. Why don’t you ask her?

There was silence as he did so and then, aggrieved, he said, She says you get a pass because she says so.

Well, Bilba said, there’s your answer then.

“Pwimrowe!” a tiny voice called, “Pwimrowe!”

A tiny hobbit child came toddling over the hill, chubby legs pinwheeling as he struggled to run through the tall grass. He was dressed like a small adult in trousers, shirt, vest and even a jacket that it
would take a few years for him to grow into. He had short, dark curly hair and dark eyes. As he caught sight of the drakes his steps slowed and his eyes widened in fear.

Before Bilba could react, not that she’d really had an idea of what to do, Bofur approached and swept him up, throwing him up in the air and catching him again. The little boy shrieked with laughter and threw both arms around him.

He turned to watch the hill and there…there was Primula, coming up the hill.

Bilba sucked in a breath and felt her heart stutter in her chest.

Primula looked older than she should be, certainly older than she’d been that day when Bilba had first met her. There was an air of sadness around her and her clothing was darker and simpler than the bright clothing of before. Her hair was cut short and pulled back and, when she walked, her gait was just a little off, as if she was unconsciously making room for another person to stride beside her, even though the space there was empty.

Still, when she saw Bilba her eyes were clear and a smile came easily enough to her face. She spoke to Bofur a second, tousled her son’s hair and then came past him to stop in front of Bilba.

Bilba swallowed, her hands clasped in front of her. Seeing her, face to face, would Primula regret the words she’d written in her letter, even retract them?

Primula reached out and she had to resist flinching.

“Oh, Bilba,” Primula breathed, wrapping both arms around her. “I wouldn’t have recognized you. You look beautiful.”

Bilba let her breath out in a rush and wrapped both arms around the other woman.

*I’m sorry,* she sent. *I thought I was protecting you by leaving but I was really just running away. I shouldn’t have left.*

*It’s alright,* Primula said. *You did what you thought was best. I won’t fault you for that.*

She pulled away, keeping her hands on Bilba’s upper arms. “Though, you could have visited once in a while or written.” There was no anger in her voice, only a gentle censure, and a trace of hurt.

*I wasn’t sure I’d be welcome.*

*Which is exactly why you should have done it, to find out. What’s the worst that could have happened?*

They could have rejected her, Bilba thought, which…which was what she already assumed so really the worst that could have happened…would have been nothing.

*You’re right.*

Primula grinned. “Of course I am. Now if I can only convince Frodo of that.” She looked past Bilba and said, “Oh, where are my manners?” She curtsied, saying, “You must be one of the royals we’ve heard Bilba was staying with. I apologize, your Highness. I know your names from Aragorn, but I’m afraid I don’t quite know the faces to put them with.”

Fili stepped forward and, to Bilba’s surprise, bowed, which he needn’t have done given his rank. “Fili, my Lady, at your service. I’ve been hoping to meet the woman who saved Bilba’s life. It’s a
pleasure.”

Primula blushed. “The pleasure is mine.”

By this time Kili and Dis had come over and, along with Cassie who’d been quietly standing back by Lyth during the exchanges, were also introduced, to both her and Bofur who had managed to convince Frodo that Syrath and Lyth wouldn’t eat him, his mother, or Primrose.

Primula went to stand in front of Syrath who immediately lifted his head and began nuzzling her, hard enough to knock her back a step. She laughed and hugged him. “I’ve missed you too. You’ve certainly grown.”

Syrath lifted his head as much as he could without unseating Primrose and preened.

Vili appeared from over the hill and spoke to the dwarven commander of the Garrison, thanking him for the greeting and releasing them all from their formation. They immediately spread out to see the drakes and speak to the soldiers from Erebor, many of whom had once served at the Garrison or lived in the Blue Mountains and had been chosen for that reason to come on the trip.

Primula also introduced Bilba to Frodo who, being shy, immediately hid his face against Bofur’s shirt.

“He’ll warm up to you,” Primula said, “It just takes him a little while.” She nodded up at Primrose and said, “Those two are quite close. She’s practically a babysitter for him, probably all the experience she got watching out for Syrath.”

Syrath gave a huff of wounded pride and Primula laughed. “Don’t think I never noticed the scorch mark on the blankets in my guest room.”

Syrath immediately became interested in Xalanth who’d gotten as close as he could and was pretending to be not at all interested in what was going on.

“I was hoping to invite you all to stay at Bag End while you were here,” Primula said, “if you wanted of course.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t want to impose,” Dis said.

“It’s no imposition,” Primula said, “Bag End is huge, and there are more rooms than I know what to do with. I know Bilba won’t be here all that long and I’d like to spend as much time with her as possible. I’d also like to get to know her new friends as well, if that’s alright.”

“Well,” Dis said graciously, “when you put it like that, we’d be honored. Thank you.”

“Oh, good,” Primula said looking relieved. “It’s nearly supper now. If you’d like to join me I can get you all settled before we eat.”

Fili frowned, looking toward Syrath and Primrose. “What about them?”

_They’re fine_, Bilba said. _Just leave them to it._

That earned her a betrayed looked from Syrath but she just smiled.

Vili told them to go on ahead, promising to join them once he got the rest of the soldiers and dragons settled. Bofur went with them, still carrying Frodo who waved happily to Primrose as they left, “Bye Pwimrowe! We leaving now!”
Primrose made a sound and then purposefully settled down.

The last sight of Syrath that Bilba had was of him heaving a huge, aggrieved sigh before he went into a full on pout, probably in the hopes someone would have pity and save him from the pint sized dragon on his back.

No one did.

***

Although Thorin had given permission to visit the Shire and the Blue Mountains on an ambassadorial mission, he had made it clear it would have to be a fairly short visit, at least this time around. Fili was the Crown Prince after all and both he and Kili had duties and responsibilities around the Mountain, all of which had to be taken on by others while they were gone. Both Dis and Vili were in similar situations as were the soldiers. Erebor was designed to be highly structured, every individual with a job and service to perform. When one or more of those people were gone it added to the burden on everyone else. Given the spontaneous nature of the trip it meant there was little time to spread the tasks out and many in Erebor had found their workloads doubled while the Durins were gone.

In addition to that, with the assassination attempts and concern about Nar, Thorin wanted them on the move as much as possible. Nar clearly had a way to communicate over long distance and the longer they stayed in one spot the greater the risk of him, or another of their enemies, putting something together.

Finally there was also the fact winter was coming on quickly and the longer they stayed the greater the risk of trying to fly through foul weather, particularly on Erebor’s side of the Misty Mountains.

Thus it was that their visit to the Shire, much to Primula’s disappointment, would only last one week. After that they would travel to the Blue Mountains to meet with the leaders there for another week and then would return to the Mountain.

“I’m sorry,” Dis said, seeing how hard Primula was struggling to hide her feelings. “I can assure you, however, that this won’t be our only trip and that future ones won’t be as short. Perhaps after the winter, when the weather starts warming up we can plan a long one.”

*Perhaps sometime Syrath and I could come get you, Bilba said, you and Frodo could come visit Erebor.*

Primula’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that would be wonderful. I don’t get out much anymore since--” She stumbled, swallowed and continued. “Well, I don’t get out much anymore.”

“We’d be honored to have you visit,” Fili said.

Primula gave him an appraising look, her eyes flickering between him and Bilba several times.

“Thank you, your Highness. I’ll look forward to it.”

A knock on the door heralded the arrival of Vili before any more could be said and soon the table had lapsed into standard supper conversations. Primula spoke a little about her recovery, crediting Frodo’s birth with being the thing that finally forced her to move on. Bluebell had continued to live with her and help through Frodo’s first year.
Bofur had been there all along trying to help, believing it was what Bilba would have wanted. After Frodo’s birth he had stepped in as an almost surrogate father figure for the small boy and often would appear to take him fishing, or on day walks or even just down to play at the Garrison so Primula could get some much needed time to herself. When Bluebell had moved out shortly after Frodo turned two it was in large part due to Bofur having taken over as the support system she’d once been.

After dinner they all retired to the living room and continued to catch up on the prior several years as well as get to know one another. For Bilba most of her time prior to Erebor but after the Shire could be summed up as “killing orcs with extreme prejudice” so she told Primula about Fili’s Coming of Age party and about the dragon levels and library.

“That sounds lovely,” Primula said, “You’ll have to wear your hair down, at least once. I’d love to see it.”

Bilba gave a short nod and looked away, embarrassed. She grew even more so when Dis related the incident in Lake-town and then Cassie chimed in after to relate how Bilba and Syrath had saved her back when her caravan had been attacked.

Bofur eventually had to leave to return to the Garrison and Vili went with him to check on the soldiers and dragons. Frodo was beginning to get cranky as well so Primula excused herself to put him to bed. Once she returned she showed them all to rooms and bid them good-night.

Bilba found herself in the same room she’d stayed in before. She stood with her back to the closed door and studied the empty room, picturing Syrath and Primrose racing around it, pretending Primula and Drogo were just down the hall having a late cup of tea before they retired.

Sorrow welled within her. There was no way she could sleep in that room. Normally she wouldn’t be able to anyway, not without Syrath, but certainly not with so many memories crowding in on her. Primula had probably been trying to be kind, hoping the room would make her feel at ease in a familiar setting.

It did the complete opposite.

She removed her weapons and changed into loose trousers and a lightweight tunic.

Then she left the room, her bare feet nearly soundless on the wooden planking lining Bag End’s hall.

Syrath was still being pinned down by Primrose and keeping a continued stream of complaining about how put upon he was in the back of her mind. Bilba didn’t want to interrupt their…bonding time so she decided to try sleeping in the living room. Hopefully if a nightmare started to come on she would be able to wake herself up before waking the entire household.

The fire had been banked in the living room so most of it was shadowed, only a dim light flickering off the walls and furniture.

She stepped out, and paused at the sight of Fili sitting on the rug in front of the fireplace, his back to a chair. He had one leg stretched out in front of him and one pulled up, his arm draped over his knee. He was holding a small block of wood in one hand and a knife in the other and was whittling, pausing every so often to flick the wood shavings into the fire.

The rush of relief was as strong as it was surprising. For a few seconds she stood in the shadows of the hall and watched him.

She almost turned around but that would require going back into that room and, besides, she had no doubt he already knew she was there.
Dwalin would be deeply disappointed if he didn’t.

She padded forward finally, grabbing a pillow off the couch as she did. Reaching his side she knelt, put the pillow on his thigh and then laid down with her head on it. She slid an arm under his leg and relaxed with a sigh, closing her eyes.

*How long are you going to be here?* she asked drowsily, already starting to drift.

His answer was immediate. *How long do you need?*

She opened her eyes again, briefly, studying the low flames in the fireplace. *Wake me up before I start screaming.*

*Did you remove your weapons?*

Bilba rolled her eyes. *Did you?*

*I need them.*

*For what?*

*To fight off your monsters for you.*

Bilba snorted and settled back down again.

A little later she drifted hazily awake to the sound of a door opening and closing and then the low murmur of voices.

A hand rested on her waist and immediately she felt herself relax and began to drift off again.

As she did, she wondered vaguely how it was that in only six months Fili had managed to make himself almost interchangeable with Syrath when it came to stopping her nightmares.

Not that she minded…

Or had any intention of admitting it to him…

She had a reputation to maintain, after all.

***

The week passed quicker than Bilba would have expected.

She spent most of her time with Primula and Bofur and the rest of her friends at the Garrison. Primrose finally forgave Syrath and the two of them could be seen frolicking through the fields as if they’d never been apart.

As Fili had said, it had been a long time since the royal family, or drakes, had visited the Shire and the event was seen as a rather big deal. Each day saw more and more hobbits, many of them the more adventurous Took, heading out to the Garrison to see the drakes. Lyth, in particular, was a favorite. With her bright green scales a number of the hobbits, and their dragons, saw her as a giant Shire dragon and were more than happy to claim her as one of their own, much to the amusement of
her and her riders.

The Durins were also in high demand, finding themselves fielding invitations from the Thain and the wealthier citizens of Hobbiton, all wishing to improve their sterling reputations by being seen as friends of the royal family of Erebor.

Bilba stayed out of it. She found almost immediately that although Primula, Bofur and the Garrison were welcoming, the sentiment did not hold true throughout the Shire. Reaction to her, at best, seemed split. There were some who saw her as Orcrist, defender of the Shire and its inhabitants and these treated her much as some did in Erebor or Bree or even Gondor. They wanted her to sign things or wished to be seen next to her.

Others, however, saw her as cursed and feared her presence would bring bad luck down upon them. They wouldn’t meet her eyes when she saw them, shut their windows and curtains when she walked past their homes, warded her off in the market and dragged their children away lest her bad luck fall upon them. Even a few of the dragons were like that, though none of them were foolish enough to do it in front of any of the drakes.

Bilba didn’t blame them. Many had empty seats at their tables and silent spots in their souls where dragons had once resided. She might not have known the orcs were coming, or brought them herself, but they had come because she was there. The hobbits had suffered great loss through no fault of their own.

They were afraid, not so much of her perhaps but of what she represented, of what she reminded them of, and of what might trail along in her wake.

She could respect that, even if it made the Durins, Primula and Bofur angry on her behalf. Apparently when they went to the Thain’s large dinner, an event she politely declined, someone made the mistake of insulting her in Dis’ presence.

Her response had left the hobbit in question stammering and trying to gather up the shreds of their dignity. By the end of the next day the account had spread far and wide through the Shire and would probably go down in hobbit lore as the years passed, growing bigger and more embellished with each retelling.

Bilba kept away from all of it. She stayed in the Garrison or at Bag End or wandered through the more empty parts of the Shire as she’d once done years ago. Then she’d gone with Sylrath and Primrose, now she had them and Fili, Kili and Cassie with her. Xalanth was often there as well, soaring overhead.

It was more than she would have ever dreamed about back in the Mines. Just being able to feel the sun beating down on her, the wind drifting through her hair, which Primula had convinced her to leave down while visiting; the feel of the grass under her bare feet or the wide open vistas stretching before her, no walls or darkness to limit her sight.

She could do with just a little less of Fili’s sudden compulsion to take his shirt off every time it got warm. The first time he’d done it had been the first time she’d seen him entirely without it on and she’d frozen so solidly that if an orc had appeared out of nowhere she’d probably have been unable to defend herself. After that she’d gotten a little better but still tended to feel like her entire face had caught fire and her mind started stammering and stuttering and utterly malfunctioning.

Fili simply looked smug.

He’d been doing that a lot lately.
She might have considered killing him after all had it not been for the fact that doing so would deprive her of getting to see him without his shirt on.

Bastard.

***

“What are they doing?”

Dis followed where Primula was looking and saw her sons running into view from over a hill. Kili had Cassie on his shoulders, she was laughing and struggling to not be flung backwards from the fast pace.

Fili also had Bilba on his shoulders but, unlike Cassie, she had her arms crossed over her chest and looked exasperated. She was wearing trousers and a light shirt, her hair down and pulled back at the sides with clips and, were it not for her expression, Dis might have mistaken her for any other young girl in the Shire. She made a mental note to commend Fili on his desire to come, if for no other reason than giving Bilba a chance to just be normal, no orcs, no death looming on the doorstep, just…normal.

As she watched the boys reached a tree and both girls immediately grabbed a lower branch and began dragging themselves up while Fili and Kili watched.

“Ostensibly,” Dis said, “I would say they’re having a race of some sort. Practically, it’s probably more along the lines of my sons showing off how strong they are for the girls.”

Primula laughed, “Sounds about right.”

Dis snorted. “I’m surprised my eldest has managed to keep his shirt on this long.” Her son’s sudden fondness for being half dressed was not entirely appropriate, especially with a young woman he wasn’t officially courting, but Dis had left him alone. Fili had become confident that Bilba was his One and, given how fast Bilba seemed to be growing in her feelings toward him, it would appear he was correct. For a dwarf, a One was somewhat similar to a dragon in some respects. Not every dwarf had a One and, for those who did, it wasn’t a guarantee that they would ever meet. Even if, and when, they did a marriage was not required and, though it was rare, there had been instances where two Ones had found each other and, for whatever reason, had chosen not to marry.

Fili and Bilba were clearly proving to both be each other’s Ones and to be more than happy with the notion. Granted, Bilba probably didn’t understand the concept of a One and Dis hadn’t yet explained it to her, believing it would only confuse the girl further and, probably, have her believing wrongly that she was required to marry Fili. She’d talk to the girl about it at some point, or have Fili do it, but the girl wasn’t even of age yet, they were years from anything like marriage even being considered so, for the moment, she was content to allow the relationship to develop naturally without any added pressure or confusion added to it.

Of course, the fact that they were each other’s Ones, and were both clearly content with the idea of falling in love with one another meant that, to many, the two were technically betrothed, or promised, to one another. It didn’t stop hopeful dwarves and dwobbits from offering courting gifts to both and wasn’t binding but the idea was at least there.

That meant her son got a little more leeway in how he acted around the girl…such as his sudden
inability to keep his shirt on.

“He has been having fun with that,” Primula agreed. “I’ve never seen Bilba go that red.” Her eyes softened, “Of course, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her smile so much than when she’s around you all, especially your son, and I’m not sure I ever recall seeing her laugh.” She nodded, as if coming to a decision. “He’s perfect for her. When she was here she was always so worried about us. She doesn’t have to worry about him, he can take care of himself.”

“He certainly thinks he can,” Dis agreed. She settled back on her seat, watching her sons’ antics. She and Primula were currently sitting on the bench at the bottom of Bag End’s steps. It was near the end of the week and one of the first times the two women had really had to sit and talk. Dis had told Primula of Bilba’s life in Erebor while Primula had related her story of finding Bilba and of her year spent in the Shire. Dis found it hard to imagine the girl with barely any hair, so thin and starved she’d been mistaken for a boy. “Speaking of which, Bofur certainly seems to be doing his best to take care of you and Frodo.”

Primula flushed and looked down at where her hands lay in her lap. “He does,” she agreed. Bofur had already come by that morning in fact and had taken Frodo off to go see the drakes.

Dis hesitated. “Hobbits…can remarry, can they not?”

“They can,” Primula nodded. “It’s nothing so unusual.” She sighed. “Bofur has made it clear he would like to be more than friends.”

“And you?” Dis asked. “What would you like?”

“I don’t know,” Primula confessed. “Sometimes it feels like Drogo has been gone forever and other times I expect him and Snapdragon to arrive at any minute.”

“I felt the same way about my mother,” Dis said. And her father, grandfather and brother but there was no reason to bring all that up, loss after all was loss no matter if it was one or two or four. “One thing I do know is she wouldn’t have wanted me to be alone, or unhappy. If you don’t mind my saying, you seem happier when you’re around Bofur.”

“He does make me happy,” Primula whispered. She took a deep breath. In the fields Bilba and Cassie had reached the top of the tree and come back down. Dis had no idea who’d won as both boys seemed to be bragging equally. As she watched, Fili pointed out toward the Garrison and, as a group, they all headed off, probably to drag Syrath, Lyth and possibly Xalanth into their antics.

“What about you and your husband?” Primula said suddenly. “How did you two meet?”

“Vili is from the Blue Mountains,” Dis said, recognizing the question for the deflection it was and easily going with it. “His family is still there in fact so he’s excited about going back to visit. He was the first member of his family to earn a transfer to Erebor.”

“That’s a high honor?” Primula asked and Dis nodded.

“It is.” A few hobbits walked by and she paused as they greeted her and Primula before continuing on. Dis had been startled the entire week by just how laid back and casual the Shire was. Sitting on the bench she could hear the sound of leaves rustling in the trees, birds chirping and far, far off, the distant murmur of voices from the market. “Anyway,” she continued as the two women continued leisurely on their way, “the recruits would come together in caravans a few times a year and it was customary for a member of the royal family to greet them and welcome them to the mountain. It just so happened it was my turn when Vili’s caravan arrived.” A smile traced across her face at the
memory. “Dwalin had them all set up and I was walking the line. Just before I reached Vili another soldier he’d been having trouble with on the journey hooked his ankle and sent him sprawling right in front of me. Without hesitating, Vili leapt to his feet, did a very impressive bow and announced, ‘My Lady, I am happy to report I have vanquished the uneven portion of the ground and rendered it safe for your passing.’”

Primula burst out laughing. “Thinks on his feet, does he?”

“Well,” Dis said with a smile of her own as she recalled the striking young soldier with the blinding smile standing before as if speaking to royalty were something he did every day, “I think in this event he was thinking on his face but the sentiment is the same. He made quite the impression and, after that, I began to find reasons to seek him out.”

She’d also ordered her brothers to befriend him, thereby giving her more reasons to see him. Frerin had taken her up on it, claiming it was his duty to check out this dwarf his sister had her eye on. He and Vili had ended up hitting it off and, over time, had become the best of friends, so close it was sometimes easy to forget they weren’t actually siblings.

They were rarely separated, until Moria. Vili had been in the front lines of the army, one of the first to set out and he’d been one of the last to return, his gaze constantly turning backward toward where they’d left Frerin behind.

He’d been devastated but had hidden it well in light of the losses she and Thorin and the boys had taken, choosing instead to focus on them instead of himself. Over time the smile had returned to his face and the bounce to his steps but every so often she caught him with the same melancholy look she had no doubt the rest of them wore, a look of longing for things long past that could never again be reclaimed.

“You’re probably right,” Primula said. “Perhaps it is time to start moving forward. I can’t promise it will be very fast.”

“I have a feeling,” Dis said, “that, as long as it’s movement, Bofur won’t mind in the least.”

***

The week ended far too quickly and, by the end of it, Bilba found she wasn’t ready to leave.

“You want to what?” Fili said in surprise.

They were at the Garrison, a flurry of activity going on around them as the drakes and soldiers prepared to leave for the Blue Mountains.

_I want to stay here another week_, Bilba repeated. _Then Syrath and I can meet you and go back or I can just go back with Syrath alone._

“You’re not going alone,” Fili said. “You’d probably try to take on Moria again on your way back.”

_Well, Syrath has gotten a bit bigger_, Bilba said with a slight smile, _and they certainly wouldn’t expect it_.

“And that,” Fili said dryly, “is why we don’t let you go places by yourself.”
He sighed, chewing on his lower lip. “The only problem is, I was counting on Syrath coming with me. They’ve heard of my Coming of Age and the fact I have a dragon now, they’ll expect to see him. If he doesn’t come, it’s a good way to start bad rumors. The last thing I need is a colony I can’t see all the time losing faith in me in some way.”

*Oh, Bilba said, her spirits falling. I hadn’t thought of that. She considered for a few minutes before saying, How about you and Syrath go then and I’ll stay here another week?*

Fili gave her an incredulous look. “You want to stay without Syrath? Have you ever stayed anywhere without Syrath?”

*Of course, Bilba said in irritation. I’ve stayed in Gondor and in Bree and Erebor.*

“I meant with him literally gone,” Fili said dryly, “not on another level or just outside the walls.”

He didn’t point out that, Syrath aside, she hadn’t been able to sleep by herself even in Bag End the past week. Every night she’d come out to find him on the rug in front of the fireplace. She’d settle down and fall asleep and wake up the next morning to find them both laying down, back to back. Often a blanket would be over them and she’d hear the voices of the others staying low as they got ready for the day. No one, Fili included, made any mention of the arrangement, a fact for which she was eternally grateful.

“Wait,” Fili said, “I’ve got an idea. The Blue Mountains is only a few hours away by dragonback. How about I go with Syrath, we make a big entrance like they’re expecting, Syrath makes an impression and gets to be the center of attention. Then he can come back with Xalanth and he can stay here the rest of the week?”

Bilba smiled, relieved. *Yes, that sounds good.*

Fili nodded, looking away toward where Kili was helping Cassie onto Lyth. “Alright, we’ll do that then. Then we can come back through here at the end of the week and pick you up.”

Fili only laughed.

***

She did miss them, more than she would have thought possible.

She’d loved the Shire when she had originally lived there but that had been before meeting the Durins. Now, without them there, it seemed…diminished.

“Don’t worry, dear,” Primula said. “You’ll feel better once Syrath comes back and then it’s only a week. When your Prince comes back you can tackle him and tell him all about how much you missed him.”

Bilba scoffed. The Durins had left early that morning and it was now late in the evening and Primula was keeping her company waiting for Syrath to return. The two had spent the day together, watching over Frodo with the help of Primrose. They’d returned for supper and to put Frodo to bed and now
were seated in chairs in the living room.

*He’s not my Prince*, Bilba said.

“Oh, I very much think he is,” Primula said, looking amused.

Bilba drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on her knees.

“What is it?” Primula asked.

*What do you mean?*

“There’s something that’s been bothering you all week,” Primula said. “Not every second but I’ve seen your eyes go distant a few times, as if a shadow fell over you.”

Bilba tightened her grip on her legs. In the fireplace the wood cracked and popped while, outside the open window, crickets kept up a steady song as the night lengthened.

*I’ve been thinking about my mother*, she said finally. *And something Fili said.*

“And what was that?” Primula asked.

Bilba sighed. Primula already knew that she’d been born and raised in the mines. Given her lack of knowledge about even the most basic aspects of life outside the mines it had been obvious she’d never been anywhere else. Primula had sat her down and outright asked her shortly after her arrival, when she’d still been terrified she’d wake up and find leaving Moria had been a dream.

*Can I ask you a weird question?* she finally asked and Primula nodded.

*Of course.*

*If you and Frodo –* She hesitated and then tried again. *If you and Frodo were trapped in Moria and you knew, absolutely knew, there was never going to be a way out – would you tell him?*

“Absolutely not,” Primula said without hesitation.

Bilba jerked her head up, her eyes wide. *Why not?*

Primula’s eyes softened with sympathy. “Because, Sweetheart,” she said softly, “no mother wants to look her child in the eyes and tell them that there is no hope.”

Bilba felt her eyes begin to burn and her throat clogged up. She looked away from the other woman, trying to regain her composure. *But – but if that’s true, then what does it mean for you? That you lived without hope?*

“Of course not.” Primula’s voice sounded right next to her and Bilba looked to see her kneeling down in front of the chair. She reached out and put her hands over Bilba’s, looking her directly in the eyes. “Maybe she understood the chances of her escaping were slim but that doesn’t mean she didn’t have hope in you one day getting out. It doesn’t mean she didn’t look at you and see hope for the future, and light for her present darkness. You kept her going and, in turn, she kept you going by whatever means she could.”

Light. Her mother had called her that. *You are such a light, Bilba. I don’t know what I’d do without you.*”

Her mother…her mother……could she have known?
Could she have realized her father wasn’t coming, couldn’t come, because he didn’t know they were there?

Or was it because he couldn’t be bothered to look?

“Tell your father I love him, and I’ll be waiting, always.”

No, even as her mother’s last word seared into her soul, Bilba knew they weren’t the words of a woman who believed her husband couldn’t be bothered to find them.

But they also weren’t the words of a woman who felt her husband had betrayed her.

Bilba knew that.

She’d known it then, and she knew it now, but her anger had been so all consuming it had swallowed up the truth and covered it over with a lie. A lie that said her father was a coward and a bastard and that he’d never wanted them in the first place.

Primula reached up with and wiped at Bilba’s face with her thumbs. Bilba blinked and realized she was crying, tears streaming down her face in unbroken rivers.

She slid forward, her knees hitting the carpet, and threw both arms around Primula, burying her face in the other woman’s neck.

Primula wrapped both arms around her and held her back. “It’s going to be alright, Bilba. I promise, it’ll be alright.”

Bilba didn’t answer her. Instead she simply cried.

She cried for the mother she’d never really understand as she’d thought she had and for the father she still didn’t understand.

She cried for the pain the orcs had inflicted on her entire family and continued to inflict on the families of others.

But, mostly…

Mostly…

Mostly she cried like a little girl who’d lost her mother.

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Syrath arrived an hour later and if he was concerned about the waver in Bilba’s voice when she greeted him, or the way she ran over the hills to meet him as if a pack of orcs were hot on her heels, or the way she threw her arms around his neck and held him as if she hadn’t seen him in a month instead of less than a day…he never said.
He just curled around her until she was utterly hidden from view, and kept the dark at bay.

As he always had.

***

Bilba spent the rest of the week doing her best not to think about her father, a fact made more difficult by the presence of Xalanth.

She went out orc hunting a few times, usually with Bofur, but once or twice with Syrath. Well, Syrath and Xalanth. She didn’t like the idea of the large dragon feeling obligated to put himself in danger but when she’d had Syrath relay that the answer he’d given back had been that she wasn’t the only one who hated orcs. There had also been something about adults not letting children go off on their own but Syrath had said that one really fast and refused to repeat it.

Aside from that, she, Syrath, Xalanth, and Primrose spent most of their time exploring or spending time with Primula and Bofur. She didn’t revisit any of the places where her mother and father had once gone, for fear Xalanth would recognize them.

The last thing she wanted was to start him thinking about her mother and mention it to her father. If he did…if her father somehow, someway found out…then what?

Would he tell her why he hadn’t come?

Or would he reject her, having no use for a daughter who…her mind fled from that thought as it always did.

She was afraid to tell him.

Part of her was afraid of the answers she might find, answers that could tear down again the image she’d started to rebuild of him, of a courageous warrior and hero, one any child would be proud to look up to and call father.

That was a part, but only a part.

There was a bigger part of her, one that had spent years lurking under hatred and anger and misdirected blame.

A part she couldn’t hide from anymore.

A part that was terrified not of the answers she might learn from him but of the answers he might learn from her.

And so she put it as far from her thoughts as possible and tried to focus on other things.

She was Orcrist after all.

She had been through the fire and come out mithril.
She would not break.
She would not be weak.

And she would pray, for the first time in a long time that someone, somewhere would show her the
road she should walk.

Because she had lost it long ago and had no hope of finding it again.

At least not on her own.

***

“So, you and the Crown Prince of Erebor.”

Bilba tore her eyes away from watching the skies. It was the end of the week, one that had gone both
slow and fast at the same time, and she and Bofur were sitting on the wall of the Garrison watching
for the Durins to return. The weather that day was poor, proving winter came even to so peaceful a
place as the Shire. Thick, dark clouds hung low over the area and a brisk breeze, heavy with the
threat of rain rattled the branches of distant trees.

What do you mean by that? She signed.

Bofur gave her a knowing smile. “You know exactly what I mean. I’m surprised he hasn’t proposed
already.”

He said he’s making a courting gift, Bilba signed hesitantly.

“Well, there you go,” Bofur said. His eyes narrowed in concern at whatever he saw in her face.
“What? Aren’t you happy about it?”

I think I’m doing it wrong.

Bofur looked confused. “You think you’re doing what wrong?”

We don’t act like how Dis and Vili act or like how Primula used to act with Drogo.

Or like how her mother had acted with her father according to the stories Belladonna had told her.

“Those are both examples of married couples,” Bofur said. “You two aren’t even courting yet. It’s
not supposed to be the same.”

Bilba scowled. A gust of wind swept over them, blowing her hair off her shoulders. She caught a
glimpse of Syrath bounding into view with Primrose before he vanished over a hill again. Xalanth
was somewhere overhead. Syrath had relayed a request from him to have his straps removed so he
could enjoy a free morning of leisurely flying before they had to leave again. Bilba had obliged and
hadn’t seen the large dragon since, though Syrath reported he hadn’t gone far and could return
quickly if they needed him.
I see others in Erebor, she said. And I saw them here sometimes. They act different, not all the same but even before they start saying they’re a couple they act different. I’m doing it wrong. She lowered her hands and looked down, glaring at the ground far below her as if it were personally offending her. He’s going to change his mind because I can’t get it right.

Bofur sighed and leaned back, bracing his hands on the wall behind him. In the courtyard the commander of the Garrison was putting the soldiers through their paces. Every so often he too would glance up at the sky, ready to put everyone in formation as soon as the royals arrived.

“All right,” Bofur said. “Let’s look at this logically then. What do you think others are doing that you aren’t?”

Holding hands, Bilba signed, and a lot of them kiss. I don’t know why putting your mouth on someone else’s mouth is a thing to do but some of them do it a lot. She frowned, considering. I don’t know what else they’re doing. Dis says there are things couples do that are private like –

—so holding hands,” Bofur said loudly, cutting her off. “You hold onto his arm, that’s sort of the same thing, isn’t it?”

Bilba considered. Is it?

Bofur shrugged. “You don’t do it with me or with the Prince’s brother do you?”

No, Bilba agreed slowly.

“There you go,” Bofur said. He looked uncomfortable and Bilba wondered if he was tired of sitting on the cold stone. “As for the kissing part…” He stopped and looked around as if hoping for something. “Have you talked to Dis about this? Or Primula? You don’t have to kiss you know, or do anything else for that matter. Some don’t kiss until they’re officially courting, some don’t until they get married. There’s no…checklist so to speak that says you have to do a certain thing at a certain time.” He paused suddenly as if thinking of something and then looked at her sharply. “Bilba,” he asked carefully, “do you want to kiss him?”

Bilba felt her face heat and jerked her head away from him. Every time I see people kissing they seem to really like it.

“Well,” Bofur said, his voice sounding slightly strangled, “if that’s the case I’d say the next time you see your Prince you should get him alone and kiss him.”

Bilba nearly choked. I can’t do that! What if doesn’t want me to?

Bofur laughed. “I can promise you, Lass, he won’t mind. He’s probably been letting you set the pace and decide what happens when.”

Some of Fili’s words from Lake-town drifted back through her mind and Bilba realized that was pretty much exactly what he’d done.

It doesn’t matter anyway. I don’t know how to do it right.

She almost, almost, made the mistake of asking Bofur to show her but stopped herself in time. Dis, and Primula before her, had both been oddly intent on having long conversations with her about romance, far more in depth than anything her mother had ever told her. Courtship, marriage, babies, what liberties couples were allowed with one another that should not be allowed with anyone else.

Kissing fell into the latter category, or at least the sort of kissing she’d been thinking of. That was still
an area she was confused in, how a kiss or holding hands or even a hug could be friendly or romantic depending on how it was done and who it was done too.

Living in a community with all manner of social rules and codes of conduct and things you couldn’t do except for the exceptions when you could was a downright pain in the ass.

Yet another instance where she found herself missing the simplicity in living in the Wild alone with Syrath, killing orcs.

**Bilba! They’re coming!**

Bilba sat up straight, her eyes scanning the skies.

*Bofur!* She signed. *Syrath says they’re coming!*

Bofur let out a relieved breath. “Thank Mahal.” Bilba gave him a confused look and, with a look of innocence, he said, “that they made it safely of course. Nasty weather brewing.” He grinned and stood up, reaching to help her up as well. “Come on then, Lass. Let’s go meet them.”

***

Primula had spent the week trying to encourage Bilba to be a little more expressive.

“I know you like to appear strong at all times,” she’d said, “but sometimes I think you get just a little lost inside Orcrist. If you don’t show someone you care sometimes they may get the idea that you don’t.”

So, in an attempt to be more open as Primula called it, Bilba ran to Vili, who’d been the first to dismount, and threw herself in his arms.

He was startled but hugged her back readily enough, as did Dis, Cassie, and Kili.

Fili was the last to get down. He’d ridden with Kili and Cassie and had helped her get down before following.

His boots had barely hit the ground before Bilba was throwing her arms around him. It was somewhat awkward as, like the others, he was wearing armor, but she managed.

When she pulled back Fili kept his arms around her, his hands interlocked at the small of her back.

*I missed you too,* he said. *How was your week?*

*It was good,* Bilba responded. *I got to spend time with everyone and walk around the Shire. Oh, and I hunted orcs a few times.*

Fili’s eyes widened. *You did what?*

Bilba nodded. *You should have seen it! I used thin twine to tie some arrows into a quiver and then Syrath let me hang upside down from his claws and we flew by overhead a few times and shot them. Syrath wanted to just burn them but I didn’t want to start a fire.*

Fili shut his eyes, sighed and dropped his forehead lightly against hers. *Please tell me you didn’t do that. Where was Xalanth? Or Bofur?*
Bilba raised an eyebrow. *Killing orcs too?*

“See?” Fili said, “This is why I can’t leave you alone. You go and try to get yourself killed.”

*You went out and helped me fight off orcs attacking a caravan, at night, on the first night I woke up in the Healing Wards,* Bilba pointed out.

*That doesn’t count.*

*Why?*

*Because.*

*That’s no excuse*

He just grinned at her.

Kili strode past them, clearing his throat loudly and bumping against Fili’s shoulder as he did. Fili shot him a look and then refocused on Bilba. “Hey, I want to show you something, is that alright?”

*Shouldn’t we be getting ready to go?*

Fili shook his head. “We brought the supplies for the Garrison, saved a caravan a trip. There’s also a good sized storm blowing in and the dragons, understandably, don’t want to fly through it. We’re going to stay the day and try to leave in the morning.”

Kili passed by again and this time Fili, without taking his eyes off Bilba, reached a foot out and kicked him in the shin. “Anyway, come on.”

He slid his hand into hers, interlocking their fingers and pulled her away from the group, toward Hobbiton proper.

Bilba stared at their intertwined fingers in surprise, then tightened her grip and moved so she was alongside him instead of being pulled along.

“I left it in my room,” Fili explained, “I figured we were coming back anyway so there was no reason to drag it all the way to the Blue Mountains and back again.”

Primula and Frodo passed them and Bilba told her they were staying a day longer.

“That’s wonderful,” Primula said. She gave Fili an appraising look and then said, “I think Frodo and I will go see the drakes again. He really likes the green one.”

“Lyth,” Fili said. “I bet she’d even let him sit on her back if he wanted.”

“Oooo,” Primula snuggled Frodo who squealed with laughter. “We’ll have to see.” She smiled at them. “I’ll see you two later. Behave.”

The last was directed more toward Fili who sketched a bow and, with a wounded expression said, “I always behave. You must be confusing me with my brother.”

“I’m sure,” Primula said, smiling.

She left and Fili and Bilba continued on.

*You don’t always behave,* Bilba said. *I talk to your mother.*
“Well that’s suddenly a scary prospect,” Fili said dryly, “and you’re one to talk.”

Bilba shrugged. *She wasn’t talking to me. She was talking to you.* She twisted to look behind her.
*And what did she mean anyway? What did she think you were going to do?*

“No idea,” Fili said quickly.

They’d reached Bag End and he let go of her hand to jog up the stairs, throw open the door with a flourish and gesture her inside.

Bilba shook her head in amusement and walked past him.

Fili jogged down the hall to the room he’d stayed in and pushed the door open. He stood at the entrance and said, “Alright, here it is. I probably should have given it to you before I left but it didn’t occur to me you’d manage to find orcs to get in a fight with during the one week I was gone.”

*Well that was a failing on your part, wasn’t it?* Bilba said as she approached.

She felt the smallest flash of nerves as she said it, still unused to trying to be more self-confident in her interactions with others. She was trying but, as with all things social, navigating the morays of what was proper and what was not was a true pain at the best of times.

Judging by the width of the smile Fili flashed at her, however, suggested she’d hit it right.

She looked past him into the room and saw, in the back corner, a large coat rack Fili had appropriated, along with a small trunk lying next to it.

On the rack, and the trunk, was the single most beautiful set of leather armor she’d ever seen.

Bilba sucked in a breath at the sight of it and went completely still.

Fili entered the room and gestured to her to come closer. Slowly, Bilba obeyed.

The armor was every bit as beautiful up close as it was farther away.

It was black. The cuirass, designed to cover her upper torso and back, was hardened leather with silver clasps under the arms connecting the front to the back and allowing her to adjust it depending on what she chose to wear underneath it. On the right side of the piece, Fili had carved a stylized dragon, coiling back under where the buckles were and reappearing on the back piece. Somehow he’d actually inlaid the carving with brilliant blue sapphire, each piece placed so perfectly she couldn’t see the seams, making it appear like one solid line of blue outlining the design.

Past that he’d created an untold number of small black scales cut from leather. These he’d sewn to a leather backing and attached to the bottom of the cuirass, creating a second piece that would cover her to her hips. He’d created a separate piece for the back of the cuirass and for the front, adding in black leather laces to tie them together along her sides.

He’d created a black gorget to protect and cover her throat and added pauldrons, designing them to look jagged and almost reminiscent of the edges of a dragon’s wing. On each shoulder he’d carved the Durin family crest and inlaid it with Mithril, the white of it gleaming against the black of the armor.

On the trunk lay a pair of black vambraces and greaves, pointed at the ends so the edges of the vambraces would cover the elbows while the ends of the greaves would protect her knees.
Bilba stepped forward and reached out to touch it, her eyes wide as she slowly ran her hand along the leather, touching the scales lightly, picking up a vambrace to get a closer look.

“So I take it you like it?” Fili asked from behind her. There was just a hint of nervousness in his voice. “I got your measurements from my mother. If there’s a problem with the fit though I can--”

He didn’t get any further.

With the armor right in front of her, and Bofur’s words resounding through her head, Bilba spun on one heel, stepped up to him, rose on her toes and kissed him on the lips.

It was over in a second, just a quick peck and then she was back on her feet again, her face on fire.

Fili had gone completely still.

Bilba frowned. Bofur had said kissing was fun but she hadn’t particularly felt anything. *I think Bofur was full of it.* She told Fili. *Thank you, for the armor.* She spoke fast hoping they could just pretend it never happened and move on, *I really --*

Fili’s arm went around her waist and pulled her close. His other hand cupped the base of her skull and then his mouth claimed hers and she completely forgot what she’d been trying to say.

His kiss was *nothing* like hers.

Bilba swallowed a gasp. Okay, *now* she got what Bofur meant. Her stomach started twisting in knots but it wasn’t the same as when it did such things because she was nervous or upset…or had food poisoning.

He started to pull away but Bilba, before she fully realized what she was doing, grabbed the edges of his cuirass and dragged him back again.

Fili was more than happy to oblige.

His hands moved to rest on the sides of her waist and Bilba put her hands on his forearms, her fingers digging in so hard that, had he not been wearing vambraces, she probably would have left bruises.

They tried to break apart several times but the end of each kiss seemed to lead into another one, sometimes started by one, sometimes by the other, and sometimes seeming to happen spontaneously with neither one knowingly initiating it.

By the time they did finally manage to break apart, flushed and trying to mutually catch their breath, Bilba couldn’t say it was her first kiss anymore, or even her second.

It was probably closer to her seventh.

Or possibly eighth.

Fili leaned forward to rest his forehead against hers, his breathing harsh. He frowned. “What was that you were saying? About Bofur?”

Bilba relayed the story, haphazardly as she struggled to regain her composure, ending with, *He told me I should just go for it. He said you wouldn’t mind.*

Fili laughed. “He was certainly right on that. Remind me to offer him a transfer to Erebor.”
"He won’t go," Bilba said. *He wants to stay here, with Primula.*

“Right,” Fili agreed. He knew that, it was the reason he’d stopped glaring at the other dwarf every time he spoke to Bilba. “In that case remind me to offer his family an invite to Erebor. Or a friend, whoever he damn well wants.”

Bilba carefully backed up and Fili released her.

*So,* Bilba started, looking at the armor again. *Is that – is that the gift you were talking about? In Lake-town?*

“No,” Fili answered. “That is my contribution to trying to keep you alive. It shouldn’t be entirely up to Syrath.”

*Oh,* Bilba felt her spirits fall, just a bit, but Fili was already moving, brushing past her to drop to one knee beside the bed. He reached under it and pulled out a large bundle wrapped in layers of blankets and furs and tied with twine. He stood up and placed it on the bed, pulling a knife out and cutting the twine in a couple, swift motions. “That,” he said calmly, “is your courting gift.”

He stepped away and gestured toward it, encouraging her to look.

Bilba approached and started unwrapping the blankets and furs.

The gift literally took her breath away.

The first thing she saw was the scabbard, black to match her armor, wrapped at both ends with silver and etched with swirling dragons bearing sapphires for eyes.

The pommel was a large, perfect sapphire caged in bands of silver. The hilt was silver while the cross-guard was designed to look like upturned dragon wings. Bilba carefully slid the weapon out of the scabbard, sucking in a breath at the etching at the top of the blade, dragons intertwined with the crest of Durin. He’d also added a fuller, lightening it to make it easier for her to wield.

Catching sight of something else in the blankets, she replaced the weapon and found a dagger, identical to the sword and scabbard but in a smaller size.

“I like things to match,” Fili said, moving to stand beside her. “I didn’t realize you had the other six but I can make you a larger set.”

Bilba looked at him, wide eyed. *You can’t do that. You’ve done so much already.*

“I did it because I wanted to,” Fili said firmly. “I like it, it’s a passion of mine, and Kili’s. Why do you think my parents both have weapons and armor from us? My uncle Frerin did too, so did my grandfather and great-grandfather. Even Dwalin and Nori have things we’ve made for them.”

Thank you, Bilba whispered. Thank you so much.

Fili cleared his throat, crossing his arms over his chest. “So…does that mean you accept?”

*What does it mean?* Bilba asked. *What’s different about courting?*

“Well,” Fili said, “it means no accepting courting gifts from other people, it’s just you and me. Also, it'd mean no romance with other people, for you or me.” His voice gentled. “Do you understand what that means?”

Yes, Bilba said. *Dis explained it to me.*
Several times in fact, as had Primula.

She hesitated. Does that mean we have to –

“No,” Fili said instantly, not even bothering to hear what it was beyond the word ‘have’. “We don’t have to do anything, period. In fact, among dwarves at least, anything beyond kissing or hand holding, which, again, we don’t have to do, would be saved until marriage. We’d also probably pick up a chaperone,” here he smirked, “to make sure we behave as Primula said.”

So if we’re courting it means we get married?

“It means we’re on that path,” Fili said. He didn’t seem at all upset by the questions, or by the fact she hadn’t exactly said yes yet, just patiently and completely answered each one. “It’s not a requirement, however. Courtships can, and do end, on occasion. Sometimes people find they just don’t work as a couple as well as they do as simply friends, or even strangers. If things did work out for us we would one day get married but it wouldn’t be for years. I’m barely of age and you’ve still got several years to go. As my mother would undoubtedly say, we’re both far too young to even consider such things yet.”

Bilba nodded. And if the courtship didn’t work out?

“We’d still be friends,” Fili said, locking eyes with her. “I told you before I don’t make promises I can’t keep. I promise you, we will remain friends, no matter what happens.”

So, Bilba said slowly, we’d hold hands, kiss…here her face flushed and she turned to look at the sword again, hiding it from him, and be around each other?

“Pretty much,” Fili agreed.

So then nothing really changes then.

Fili considered it and then shrugged, conceding the point. “Also true.”

Bilba grinned. Okay then. I accept. She turned to face him, her eyes wide. Is that right? That’s how you do it?

“That,” Fili said, stepping forward to put his hands on her waist again. “Is perfect.”

He started to kiss her again only to have Bilba go, Oh, wait, what about your mother?

Fili blinked in confusion. “What about my mother?”

She’s supposed to be looking at my courting gifts.

Fili gave her a cocky grin. “I showed it to her a week ago. She already approved it but I asked if I could surprise you with it.”

Oh, alright then.

He kissed her after that and Bilba stepped closer to him, winding her fingers through his belt loops and pushing up on her toes to press against him. She was sure she wasn’t doing it exactly right but he didn’t seem to mind so she let it go.

When he pulled away she reached back for the sword only to have Fili’s hand on her arm stop her.

“I have a better idea,” he said stepping back. “I’m going to show you how to be reckless and
impulsive in an age appropriate manner as well as in a way that doesn’t get you potentially killed by orcs. Step one, however, involves no armor or weapons.”

Bilba gave him a disbelieving look. *And what happens if we get attacked by orcs?*

“I said reckless and impulsive, not suicidal,” Fili said. “We aren’t going that far and we’ll be in the interior of the Shire. If orcs decided to invade they’d do it from where the Garrison is located, that’s why that location was chosen. The dragons will eat them long before we ever see them. Come on, no weapons.”

Bilba was still not entirely convinced but she obediently removed the weapons from her vambraces, boots and the small of her back, adding the dagger strapped to her thigh as well and the sword she’d gotten from Rivendell. She then removed the vambraces themselves and laid them on the bed as well.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had no weapons or armor of any kind on and it immediately made her feel vulnerable, like an enemy was going to burst through the walls at any moment.

“Tell you what,” Fili said. “We’ll take our swords and have them nearby, how’s that?”

Bilba nodded, her anxiety easing.

Fili removed his cuirass, vambraces and greaves. He unstrapped his sword and then removed a dagger…and another dagger…and another…and still another after that.

Bilba watched in stupefied silence as the pile of daggers grew larger by the minute. *How did you manage to hide all those?*

“Long hours of practice,” he replied cheerfully. He opened his jacket and pulled out a giant one that, by all rights, should have been blatantly obvious but somehow hadn’t been, and added it to the pile. *Your father is going to be angry. He said you had to wear the armor at all times.*

Fili shrugged. “As I said, age appropriate recklessness.” He grabbed his sword and scabbard then got her new one and handed it to her. After that he caught her hand and they headed out the door into the hallway.

Instead of going through the front door he took her through the back entrance of Bag End. That door opened into the back of the hill, looking out over rolling hills and trees. If one didn’t know that Hobbiton lay just on the other side it might be easy to think they were in the middle of the Wild, miles from civilization.

Fili led her out into it, angling toward the large lake that lay in the center of Hobbiton stopping when the hill was still in sight and where, if she squinted, she could make out tiny forms moving about the main stalls in the marketplace.

There was a large willow tree set back from the water’s edge and Fili guided her under the low hanging branches. He set his sword down and Bilba added hers, angling it to stand against the tree in an attempt to protect the scabbard.

Fili sat down with his back to the trunk. He then grabbed her hand and tugged her down to sit between his raised knees, with her back to his chest. He wrapped his arms loosely around her waist…and then did absolutely nothing.
What are we doing? Bilba asked.

“Nothing,” Fili said happily.

I thought you said we were going to be impulsive and reckless.”

“We are,” Fili responded. “We are being responsibly impulsive and reckless.”

Bilba considered some of the stories Dis had told her about Kili and some of the antics he’d pulled. I don’t think you’re doing it right.

Fili’s only response was to tighten his grip and say, “Look straight ahead.”

At what?

“At nothing. Just look.”

Bilba gave a huff of annoyance and looked. The lake was spread out before her and, beyond that, rolling plains and vistas. In the far off distance she could make out a mountain range. It looked like it was close enough to easily walk to but she knew it was just an illusion and that, were she to try, she’d be walking a very long time.

The clouds were still thick overhead and the breeze brisk and cool but, rather than uncomfortable, it was refreshing. Overhead she could hear birds chirping in the trees and, on both sides, the occasional butterfly flitted about the tall grass.

Bilba felt herself begin to relax. She slowly settled back until she was laying against Fili’s chest, her head resting just under his chin.

See? Fili’s voice spoke in her head. Nothing can be fun.

Oh, shut up, Bilba shot back. If we get in trouble I’m telling your mother it was your idea.

Fili chuckled. I can live with that.

Bilba smiled.

It was only later that it occurred to her that she hadn’t been anxious or worried about the question of who her father truly was the entire time she was with Fili.

***

Of course, not even Fili could keep the storm brewing in her soul at bay forever.

Fili had announced their courtship at dinner and both had been immediately flooded by well wishes and congratulations. Syrath too had been particularly excited to hear the news and she’d ended up going to the Garrison to show him her armor and sword.

It was a good way to keep her occupied and too busy to think but it wasn’t possible to stay that way forever and, by the time night fell, there was nothing left to distract her from the maelstrom swirling inside her. Bilba found herself laying on her back on the living room floor, studying the pattern the flickering flames threw on the ceiling and listening to the drum of rain on the ground outside.
Fili was sprawled on his side next to her, sound asleep.

Syrath? Are you awake?

**It's raining!**

He sounded excited and Bilba frowned in confusion. *Are you happy about it?*

**It's not very cold, it’s nice. And I’m a baby so Xalanth and Lyth are letting me stay under their wings so only my stomach is wet…cause the ground is wet.**

Bilba chuckled. Syrath was a baby when it benefited him, the rest of the time he’d be the first to insist he was an adult.

*Sorry you all got stuck in it. If we were back in Erebor you could just go inside.*

There were outdoor shelters built for the Shire dragons but the drakes couldn’t fit in them.

**It’s okay. It’s really not so bad. The weather is much nicer here, even when it’s not. We should stay here for the winter.**

*I’ll let you bring that up with Fili,* Bilba said wryly.

There was quiet for a bit after that. A part of her wanted so badly to tell Syrath what was going on but it would only upset him and ruin his good mood, which she didn’t want. Not to mention he was only a baby and wouldn’t know how to help her any more than she would know how to help him if their situations were reversed. With a sigh she lapsed back into her thoughts, her imagination painting the changing shadows overhead as monsters looming over her, ready to pounce the second she closed her eyes.

She shuddered and rolled onto her side, only to come up short at the sight of Fili’s eyes, open and watching her.

*Why are you awake?*

He raised an eyebrow. *I was going to ask you the same question.*

Bilba took a deep breath, the anxiety inside her welling up to the point it felt like a physical presence trying to force itself out from behind her teeth.

*Can I tell you something?* The words spilled out, followed immediately by a rush of pure terror, easily equal to what she’d felt in the mines.

*Of course.*

She hesitated and then rolled on her back again, reached up to run her hands roughly over her eyes. Fili shifted too, also rolling on his back to face the ceiling. He drew one leg up and interlaced his fingers on his stomach casually.

He didn’t speak to her again. He just waited.

*Can you promise?* Bilba finally said, *Can you swear you won’t tell anyone? Anyone at all?*

*I swear. You have my word as a Durin and as the Crown Prince of Erebor.*

She was going to be sick. She could feel the bile rising in her throat even as she forced herself to
continue. She just...couldn’t hold onto it anymore. There was nowhere else for her to go on her own, no further answers she could find without letting someone help.

She swallowed and locked her eyes on the ceiling, pretending no one else was there, that it was just her going over things in her head, no one else to hear.

When I was in the mines – when I was there, my mother – she used to tell me how we were going to be rescued. She’d – she’d tell me all about who was going to come save us, how he was strong and courageous, and honorable and a warrior. She’d say – She shut her eyes and let a breath out slowly, trying to relax. Her muscles were screwed so tight she was shaking and she’d clasped her hands together so hard the bones were creaking.

It would be okay, she assured herself. It was just Fili. It wouldn’t change anything. He’d promised.

She’d say – one day, Bilba – one day, you’ll see. He’ll come bursting through here with his dragon behind him. Just you wait – just you wait until you see him – he’s a Captain of the Guard – of an entire Kingdom! That’s how amazing he is – how strong. Just you wait. He’s coming.

Dwalin. Fili’s voice said, startled. Your mother was talking about Dwalin? That’s how you knew who he was when you first saw him?

I believed her, Bilba continued, ignoring him. She had to get it out. She had to get it out before she lost her nerve entirely. I had to believe her. It wasn’t just a matter of her being my mother or of my being a child. Maybe it had been partly that, but just a part. When I was younger, especially then – if she said to be quiet or to hide or if she said to go somewhere and do something I had to do it, instantly, without question. It wasn’t just obedience, it was life and death. Angering the wrong orc, being seen at the wrong time – she was the only thing standing between me and death in the mines. My trust, and loyalty --- my faith in her was absolute. It had to be. And she said he was coming – so he was.

But he didn’t, Fili said.

No. Her mental voice wavered, mirroring her emotions. Tears brimmed and she brushed them away. Fili kept still, letting her regain control.

No, she repeated once her breathing had evened out again. He didn’t. My mother...died and he didn’t come. He didn’t come and I didn’t – I don’t know how to reconcile that. And at first I was just so angry and I thought he must have lied to her. He must have deceived her and he wasn’t strong or brave or a warrior. He was a coward who left her to die because he was too scared to come. But then I met him and he wasn’t any of those things and so I thought it must have been on purpose, not that he was afraid to come but that he simply didn’t want to come. But then that didn’t fit either.

She paused briefly, gathering her thoughts and trying to put them in some semblance of an order.

And then – then you said what if Cassie’s family hadn’t known and then my mother said he hadn’t been there when she was captured so he hadn’t known and I knew that but my mother was so, so sure – she was so sure, Fili. Again her eyes started to water and she swore at herself, this time forcing her emotions back under control. Speaking of her mother this way brought her very close to memories she didn’t want to relive. I talked to Primula and she said my mother might have known – that she might have known he didn’t know and just didn’t want me to know there was no hope because no mother would ever want to tell her child they were going to die in Moria. And that makes sense except – except he never looked? He never even tried to find her? I can accept he was who my mother said he was. I can accept she lied to me so I would have hope. I can even accept he didn’t know – but I can’t understand why he never even bothered to look. If he had – if he’d just tried –
She trailed off into silence.

Fili rolled over onto his side and pushed up on his elbow. There was an odd set to his face she couldn’t place, an expression that at the same time seemed to be no expression and many.

Bilba copied his position, bringing her face close to his but tilted down so his head was just above her.

“Bilba,” he whispered, his voice strangely hoarse. “How did your mother know Dwalin?”

Bilba lifted her eyes to meet his.

*She was his wife.* Her voice was barely audible inside her own head.

Fili made a sound like he’d been punched in the stomach.

*She was his wife,* Bilba repeated, stronger this time. *He… Dwalin…* he’s my father.
Bilba sat in the dark and screamed inside her head.

She dug her fingers into her scalp, pressed her face against her drawn up knees and rocked. She’d started crying at some point and it had gotten to where she could barely breathe. Each sob was wrenched out violently, her chest ached and her throat was raw.

She could hear Fili and Syrath calling for her. She’d bolted from Bag End, running into the night before Fili realized what was happening. She’d heard him come after her but he’d had no chance of catching her by then and she’d had no intention of stopping for him.

He wouldn’t find her.

She didn’t want to be found.

A mistake.

A bitter laugh burst out of her only to turn into a sob halfway through.

A mistake. A mistake, a mistake, a mistake, a mistake.

It didn’t have to happen and it wasn’t what she’d believed had happened and it was all wrong and a lie and nothing at all was the way it should be or should have been.

The words kept running through her mind on an endless loop.

“That…that can’t be true, Bilba. Dwalin’s wife is dead. She’s been dead for decades. She’s buried in Erebor. The body…it was burned so badly but it was the right height and there was...some hair had been left and it was the right color and it had her marriage bead and combs.

The foundation upon which her life had been built had fractured. It had been so savage she’d almost physically felt it, the ground under her suddenly going brittle, breaks spiraling out from beneath her feet before finally collapsing entirely. Every truth she’d thought she’d known, every belief she’d held, every hope she’d had, all of it…simply gone.

Again.

A corpse mistaken for her mother’s, wearing her marriage bead and the combs her father had made her.

“You should have seen them, Bilba. They were gorgeous. I was supposed to wear them all the time but, when I traveled, I was so afraid I’d lose one or that someone would see me wearing them and want them.”

The bead and the combs. Losing them had broken her mother’s heart. Granted, their loss hadn’t
broken her, that had come much later, but it had cut her mother in a way Bilba hadn’t understood, still didn’t understand.

“I should have been wearing them, Bilba. What if I’d died and he’d found me without them? He might have thought I was rejecting him, that I only wore them when he was around.”

“Others would have seen you in the Shire, wouldn’t they, Amad? They’d know you wore them all the time.”

“I still shouldn’t have taken them off. I’d still have them with me.”

Unlikely. There was little of value that slaves were allowed to keep. It was doubtful her mother would have been allowed to keep the combs and the bead. Ultimately she hadn’t even been able to keep…Bilba shut her eyes and pushed that memory away. It was one of the ones that brought her far, far too close to things she didn’t want to remember, or relive, ever again.

Two combs and a bead, lost before the caravan was ever attacked. Bilba had always known about them, her mother had told her over and over as if she could change the past simply by the telling. Bilba used to have dreams where she escaped Moria with her mother and somehow recovered the lost items simply to see the look on her mother’s face when she returned them.

She’d always known, the truth had always been there but she’d never seen it, never even considered the possibility.

Never considered the notion that her father might find that one and mistakenly think it was her mother.

Which meant he’d never looked for her.

Because he hadn’t known he needed to.

Because she wasn’t missing.

And that meant…

That meant no one…

No one had ever looked for them.

No one had been coming.

No one would ever have come.

Ever.

They’d always been alone.

Her and her mother…and then just her…and then only Orcrist.

All the days she’d been hoping, dreaming, expecting, it had all been in vain.

She and her mother had been doomed the very moment she’d been taken.

And, by all rights, they shouldn’t have been.

Wouldn’t have been…had it not been for a twist of fate.
That was it. Just…fate. No grand scheme, no conscious decision one way or the other, her father wasn’t a coward or apathetic, he hadn’t chosen to leave them to die in Moria…nothing.

It simply was.

Her father should have come.

Her father would have come.

Her father could have come.

Would have, should have, could have…..

Didn’t.

The end.

Done.

Like her mother was done, like her childhood was done, like she sometimes felt she was done, broken so far beyond repair that hope was little more than the foolish rambling of a deluded child. She tried to have hope, had promised Fili she would, but every time it seemed to be within her grasp it proved little more than an illusion, like trying to take hold of the wind…it was always gone when she opened her hand.

For time and all eternity, unchanging, unending…and all could be traced back to one, simple, mistake.

Just a mistake.

Without it, without that one thing so, so much could have, should have, would have been different. She’d seen others come. It didn’t happen often but she’d seen it. Other people, family members, hired mercenaries, loved ones, who’d come to look for whoever it was they were missing.

Sometimes they were too late and there was no one left to find. Other times they couldn’t find their loved one because time in the mines had changed and broken them beyond recognition but, other times…other times she’d stood in the shadows and watched. She’d seen humans, dwarves, even elves come through, quick and deadly as they killed any orc who saw them.

No slave ever betrayed them because they hoped…prayed…it would one day be their turn.

She’d seen slaves, their backs and spirits transformed at the sight of their rescuer, the knowledge
someone cared enough to risk everything.

She’d seen them leave…or try to leave…but even when they were caught…even when they died in the attempt the slave always seemed to have a look of peace…peace, at the knowledge that someone had tried.

That their hope had not been in vain.

That someone had been looking.

That they hadn’t been alone.

That all that they believed was true…

And someone was coming.

Her father would have looked. She believed that. She’d believed it before, because her mother did and her mother never lied to her. Bilba had taken that belief and woven it into the core of who she was, it was engraved on her heart, emblazoned across her soul, thrummed through her veins and powered the very air she breathed.

Her father was coming.

It was the fundamental principle around which she based her life. It didn’t matter how hungry she was or how often the orcs beat her or the times she woke up to find a friend had died during the night…she could survive it all in the end, continue putting one foot in front of the other, keep moving forward.

Because her father was coming.

And that made it bearable.

Hope, the belief she wasn’t alone, that someone, somewhere out there knew of her and her mother’s suffering and was working to get to them.

And then her mother died.
And everything shattered.

Shattered and splintered into a thousand pieces that had taken her years to gather and put back together. Except, even then, they wouldn’t fit the same way anymore so she’d created herself anew, a new foundation, a new principle around which to base her life…and now it had shattered all over again, come crashing down around her, leaving her standing in a pile of broken, jagged glass…

And she didn’t know if she had the strength to rebuild it again.

She choked back a bitter laugh.

So much for not being weak.

Her father wasn’t weak. If he’d known, if he’d come, he would have succeeded, she had no doubt about it. He would have gotten them both out and then…and then…

Who would she have been?

Who was she now? Bilba had been built on the hope of her father’s coming, Orcrist upon the lie of it.

But the truth was somewhere in between. Somewhere in the reality that her father was the hero of her imagination while simultaneously being fallible enough to lose his wife in Moria through no fault of his own.

She didn’t know him at all, she realized. She’d convinced herself she did. Her mother had told her so much about him it had felt like she’d known him. She’d imagine him coming, bursting through a wall of solid rock because he could do things like that in her mind. He’d recognize who she was right away, despite never having known her mother was pregnant, would scoop her up, take her mother’s hand and walk straight out of the mountain. His dragon would be waiting outside and he would help them both on and they’d fly away, off to his kingdom full of princes and princesses and warriors and they’d live happily ever after and he’d love her and teach her and she’d walk about with pride, letting everyone know just who her father was and watching their eyes widen with amazement and jealousy.

That had been who she’d been, and who she’d thought he’d been, before.

After…after…she’d thought she knew him then as well. In her mind he’d become a small, pathetic creature, cowering from the slightest noise and running at the barest threat of danger. If he ever saw an orc he’d probably lose control of his bowels before running away. She would confront him one day, she’d decided, and he would beg her forgiveness before she ran him through for the crime of leaving her and her mother to die.

That was who she’d been, and who she’d thought he’d been, after.

And then she’d met him and had believed him to be a combination, the warrior from before combined with the coward of after, or maybe just apathetic which was somehow worse but even so, even then…through every incarnation of who she was and who she thought he’d been she now saw she’d made one fatal, horrible, awful mistake.

She’d thought she knew him.
In the end she didn’t even know herself.

She fell over onto her side and curled into a fetal position. Mud from the ground soaked through her clothes, bringing an entire new level of cold and general misery.

She wanted her mother.

She wanted her father.

One had left her and one had never found her and now she was lost and couldn’t find herself.

“Please, please, someone help me. I don’t want to be here”. Words she’d spoken a long, long time ago, back when she was someone else entirely, holding the broken remains of the most important person in her life, standing in the Arena watching orcs coming at her, her hands shaking so badly she could barely hold the dulled knife they’d given her; clapping her hands over her ears to try and shut out the screams of a mortally injured and dying drake, her rider screaming along with her, despair in his voice because as much as he fought he already knew, deep down, it was far, far too late.

It was always too late.

She’d begged, in those times and others, for someone, anyone, to help her…to find her.

No one ever had.

No one ever would.
She was lost.

No one was even looking. There had only been one person, one time and the orcs had taken her and she had let them and now…now it was just her, forever, her punishment for being weak the only time when it had ever truly mattered.

Overhead thunder rolled across the sky, the final vestiges of a violent storm. It had come and passed through quickly, leaving everything, including her, drenched in its wake. Drops of water dripped off the leaves of the tree branches above her, pattering down on her face and body.

Bilba let her eyes close, relaxing into the muck and mire beneath her.

She couldn’t do it again, she decided. She couldn’t pick the pieces up, it was too broken. There were splinters of who she’d been before her mother’s death and who she’d been after and they would never fit together again, would never add up to anything.

She couldn’t do it, not again and certainly not alone.

Fili’s voice rang through her mind, followed by Syrath’s, calling for her.

*Bilba! Where are you?*

*Let us help you.*

*Bilba!*

*Don’t shut us out, Bilba. Please.*

Bilba curled in tighter on herself, waiting for them to give up.

They didn’t.

They kept calling her, kept searching even as the thunder continued to sound and the occasional burst of lightning split the sky.
Bilba rolled halfway onto her back. A sob caught in her throat and she ran her hands over her face, pushing wet strands of hair off her forehead.

*Please.* The word came almost unbidden to her mind, a final plea from a child lost in the wilderness, who’d cried for so long with no answer that they’d long given up hope of being found but, still, something, somewhere deep inside reached out against all reason, hope or expectation of an answer. *Please, please someone help me. I don’t want to be here.*

The response came without hesitation.

*Where are you?*

It was both of them at once, reaching out to her.

Bilba let out another sob, running her hands back into her hair.

*I don’t know. I don’t know where I am.*

*It’s alright.*

*We’ll find you.*

They went silent.

Bilba let her arms fall to the ground, landing with a splash in the water puddling on the ground. Her hair was saturated with water and mud, the extra weight pulling it from its neat, orderly braids into a sodden mess spread out about her.

*She* was a mess. Poor broken Bilba, poor broken Orcrist, walking a road with no beginning and no end, cast into darkness, her entire life founded on a lie twice over.

Something large lumbered nearby.

Boots splashed through the water, running toward her.

Someone dropped beside her and then she was being dragged up to a sitting position. Arms wrapped around her, one around her back and the other around the base of her skull.

Movement surrounded them, coiling around the tree, over her head, between her and the branches.
The water droplets stopped striking her.

Slowly Bilba raised her arms, winding them around him and tangling her fingers in the fabric of the thin shirt he was wearing. He’d run out in his nightshirt and trousers, just as she had, barely pausing long enough to put his boots on. She tightened her grip, digging her fingers into the muscles of his back, and buried her face against his shoulder.

And then she did nothing.

She didn’t cry, she was past the ability to do so.

“Damn it, Bilba,” she heard him whisper. “Your skin is like ice.”

Fili pulled back, took her face in his hands and pressed his forehead to hers. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I handled this completely wrong. I should have waited to speak. I should have thought first.”

The answer wouldn’t have changed. Bilba moved her hands until they were gripping his biceps, holding him as if he’d be torn away from her if she let go. He was on one knee in front of her while Syrath had his head alongside her leg. She let go of one of Fili’s arms and draped it over Syrath’s head, moving to lean against him while still holding Fili with her other arm.

Fili won’t tell me why you’re upset. He said he promised.

I don’t know who I am anymore, Bilba said numbly. I don’t know if I ever did. It’s all a lie, Syrath.

What is?

Everything. Who I thought I was. Who I’ve been. Who I am now. It’s all based on lies. It was more than that, though, so much more. There’s no light in the world, Syrath. It doesn’t matter who you are or what, by right, should happen. It’s all just fate. Tiny, small choices, small actions and everything goes wrong and it can never be fixed. It’s all just…darkness.

Syrath lifted his head and angled it so he could look directly at her. I don’t believe that and I don’t think you do either. As for the rest, I know who you are. If you’ve forgotten, I can show you.

Bilba blinked at him in confusion. What?

Fili was studying Syrath, that faraway look in his eyes suggesting they were talking.

A soul bond, he said, turning to her. Bond with us, now. You don’t have to go through anything alone, let us help you.

You don’t want to bond with me, Bilba said, it’s too dark. You’ll only be corrupted.

“You assume you’re the only one to face darkness,” Fili said intensely, speaking out loud for Syrath’s benefit, “that you’re the only one who has darkness in their heart. You’re wrong. We’ve both seen it, we’ve both felt it. You can’t corrupt us Bilba because you aren’t corrupted, no more than anyone is.”

I’ve been with you for years, Syrath chimed in. You don’t hide things as well as you think you do. I’ve heard the nightmares, so has Fili. We know more than you think but we still love you and accept you. There’s nothing you can show us that’ll make us go away. Don’t shut us out, please.
“I’m scared too,” Fili said, drawing her attention. “Everyone who has ever entered into a bond is terrified, Bilba. You’re letting someone in, to a level few rarely seen. You’re letting them see you as you truly are and not as the person you pretend to be. We’re all terrified the other person will be horrified, we’re all terrified we’ll find out we’re somehow worse off than we thought, that we’ll be rejected for who we are…and we all do it anyway because it’s worth the risk.”

Bilba looked at the two of them and a strange sense of resignation swept over her.

She would do it, she decided. She would do it and they would reject her and then they would leave and she could just…

She sighed and curled back against Fili, sliding her arms around his back again and burying her face against his shoulder.

She was just so tired.

Fili dropped his shields, completely, followed by Syrath doing the same a moment later.

Bilba tensed.

If she dropped her shields she would lose them both.

Or, perhaps, as with her father and her mother and everything she thought she’d ever known… perhaps she’d find she never had them at all.

Perhaps it had all simply been a lie she’d told herself, a grand delusion about to fall apart in front of her, cascading down to join the broken shards of the broken doll that was Bilba, daughter of Dwalin, son of Fundin; rider of Syrath…Orcrist.

Orc Cleaver.

Not a name or even a title but a description, words given to a sword or knife or some other extension of a person but not a person in itself.

Perhaps the elves hadn’t been so melodramatic after all.

She was tired…and she couldn’t bring herself to care anymore.

She took a deep breath, and dropped her shields.

They all reached out at the same time.

White light blinded her and Bilba blinked in surprise, throwing up an arm to block it.

When it cleared and she lowered her arm…she gasped.

Fili and Syrath were standing in front of her, but it wasn’t them, or at least not how she was used to seeing them.

Fili was wearing full plate armor, brilliant silver and gold, polished so blindingly bright she could see her reflection in it. He had a sword she’d never seen strapped to his side, the hilt decorated with diamonds and opals. His braids were longer and his hair seemed lighter, nearly white blond while his
eyes were somehow sharper, their color deeper.

He stood on stone and she could see the walls of Erebor stretching away behind him.

Syrath stood next to him but, somehow, he wasn’t in Erebor. Instead he stood in the Shire but not the one they’d been in just moments before. A bright blue sky shone overhead, puffy clouds floating leisurely past. Thick grass stood under his feet and, behind him, Bilba could see the lane winding its way gently up the hill toward Bag End.

Syrath looked wildly different. He was huge, probably bigger than Xalanth, his talons and fangs alone probably larger than she was. As with Fili, his scales somehow seemed bluer, his eyes sharper.

“This is how our souls look, how our lives and those around us see us and define us, and how we’ve defined ourselves.” Fili said. “And where we stand is the location that’s been the most important to us in our lives.” There was sorrow in his eyes as he spoke, mirrored in Syrath’s.

Bilba started to shift, lifting a hand out toward Syrath, only to stop as a heavy weight dragged her arm down.

She looked down, and felt a jolt of pure horror run through her at the sight of a heavy shackle on her wrist. There was a second on her other wrist, the chains dragging on the ground to lay beside one of the leg irons she’d often wore when left alone in Azog’s chambers. She swallowed and, yes, there it was, the familiar cold weight of metal on her throat. She could feel it now that she was paying attention, that and also the stubble on the top of her head, the itch of dirt and grime covering her body, the never forgotten, constant gnawing hunger. Even her clothing was the same, thin rags barely affording her the barest hint of modesty. It had never bothered her before but now she grabbed at them, trying to drag the thin threads around her.

A jacket, Fili’s, the one she’d absconded with in Lake-town, was suddenly settling over her shoulders. Fili hadn’t been wearing it before and she had no idea where it came from but he was there with it and she pulled it around her, fastening it as she did.

As she did she half turned to look behind her and her legs buckled sending her to her knees at Fili’s feet.

As soon as he’d explained she’d known what would be behind her, had known it would be the long dark of Moria, with its blood stained rocks and halls echoing with pain and misery.

She had not expected the specific area.

A chasm on one of the lower levels. It was one of the mine shafts from before Moria fell, back when the dwarves dug impossibly deep in search of Mithril. It was so far down that none of the orcs bothered to go there, except for special occasions, and the screams of the slaves could not reach it. She’d been terrified of that place when she was a younger, more scared than she was even of the Watcher or the tales she heard of the Arena. Personal enemies of Azog, particularly rebellious slaves, orcs who had gone insane for one reason or another were thrown down that chasm, landing in what sounded like a deep lake far below.

What happened after that gave her nightmares. Azog forced them to listen just as he forced them to go see the Watcher being fed. It was meant to terrify them, to traumatize them and keep them in line…and it worked.

A wind was blowing up from it at the moment, impossible given its location in the real world, but apparently very possible in this place.
Bilba started shaking, tearing her eyes away from that pit and focusing on the ground.

Deep shame flooded her at the thought of Fili and Syrath seeing her in such a state. She’d worked so hard to show she was strong, to put the past behind her only to find out this was who she was all along? When all the pieces fell and all the lies lay exposed was that it? Not Bilba, not Orcrist...just a slave?

Was *that* who she was?

And all she’d ever been?

Fili knelt and grabbed her hands, pulling her back up to her feet. “This is *not* who you are,” he said shortly.

Bilba blinked at him. “Then who am I?”

Her eyes widened and she put a hand up to her mouth in shock. Her fingers encountered the tip of her tongue and she touched it in wonder.

Fili grinned. “I always wondered what you sounded like.” He took her hand and carefully linked it around his bicep. He turned to Syrath and said, “You’re coming, right?”

Syrath nodded and came forward, stopping by him.

“Things don’t work the same way here,” Fili said. “You’ll be fine.” He nodded at Bilba. “Alright then. You want to know who you are? Let’s find out, together.”

Bilba looked up at him. “What if you don’t like who I am?”

“I already know who you are and I have to say, I like that person quite a bit,” Fili said, “This isn’t for me, or Syrath, it’s for you. Come on.”

He tugged her forward gently and Bilba obeyed, her movements the slow, pained shuffle they’d been before she’d escaped Moria.

Syrath came with them and, as they moved on, the world in front of them shifted, and changed.

“It’s your world,” Fili said, his voice quiet. “You can control what we see or don’t see. It’s entirely up to you.”

Bilba took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. If that’s the case--” her eyes burned and she fought the waver in her voice. “If that’s the case how about I introduce you to my mother?”

A low melody started, the voice singing it beautiful but sad and then...there she was. Her mother, forced to clean the refuse out of one of the mine shafts yet insisting to her small daughter that it was all okay, that everything was just fine.

Bilba had believed it then.

Now, looking at it with older eyes, she saw the sadness in her mother’s eyes, the fatigue in her face, the pain in her movements.

“*It’s okay, Bilba. Your father is going to come get us. Just you wait and see, he’ll be here soon.*”

Of course he would. He was her father.
She showed him to her friends too, the child part of her from all those years ago incredibly proud of the dwarf who existed only in her imagination. He was huge, bigger even than Azog or that spawn of his that took special delight in torturing slaves, Bolg. Her father was strong, able to lift huge stones like they weighed nothing and he was smarter and faster and simply *better* than any other father who’d existed ever.

He was the hero of her childhood, of the dreams she had at night, the stories she told herself during the day to distract from the monotony. He was on a pedestal so high that its shadow impacted every aspect of her life.

Her hope and happiness lay in the security of her father’s coming to get her.

As she grew it only strengthened. It didn’t matter that he hadn’t come yet, he was her father and he was flawless and he would come and he would be proud of her and love her and she would follow in his footsteps and strive to be exactly like him and together the three of them, and her father’s dragon of course, would go to his kingdom in the mountain and live there happily ever after and that was that for that was the only outcome that *could* happen. Whatever pain, whatever torture, whatever sorrow, none of it mattered because, in the end, it would be alright.

Her father would make it so.

It was strange, Bilba thought, as she watched yet another scene of her mother fade away, how… happy she’d been. Every memory she called up, every scene she showed them was colored in a positive light, happy even as new scars and injuries appeared on her body and her mother’s, even as the hunger in her gut grew so intense at times she couldn’t sleep.

They’d used to sing together, she’d almost forgotten that. A new scene formed, her and her mother in perfect harmony, singing as they worked in the foulness of Moria. Even the orcs had put up with it, seeming to possibly even enjoy it at times.

But she could see it now, in a way she hadn’t when she’d lived it. Or perhaps she had seen it but simply chosen to ignore it, to pretend it wasn’t happening in the desperate belief that it somehow wouldn’t.

Her mother was growing old.

As the memories progressed so did her mother, white hair replacing the dark stubble, wrinkles appearing and growing deeper, her body slowing.

She was a hobbit and their lifespans were so horrifically short and Moria made it shorter still. Slaves didn’t last long in the mines. Her mother had lasted longer than anyone, hanging on for Bilba’s sake, knowing no one else would be there for her daughter if she wasn’t but even she, as strong as she’d been, couldn’t outlast the ravages of time and the boundaries set upon her by her race.

Her mother grew ever slower, unable to do the same things she’d once done. She began to stumble, trip, drop things…and the orcs took notice.

They didn’t care that Belladonna was old or frail, they punished her just the same.

Every time one approached, each time a whip was raised, Bilba was there to take it instead, standing between her mother and the orc, allowing the blows and the lash and the punishment to fall on her instead.

It grew worse, no matter how much her mother tried, no matter how often she begged Bilba to stop and let her take the abuse herself. The beatings became almost daily and only increased as the
damage caused Bilba to slow down herself, struggling to even get off the ground some days much less do any of the work required of her. She couldn’t eat because the food wouldn’t stay down and she couldn’t sleep because there was no way to lay down that didn’t leave an open wound screaming in pain and it just…kept…getting….worse.

And, through it all, the orcs showed no mercy.

Bilba didn’t let Fili or Syrath see how it had ended, the incident that had finally broken her mother. In the grand scheme of things, in light of all they had suffered, it had been trivial, a small thing but her mother had endured a lifetime of abuse that bit by bit had exhausted her until she finally had nothing left to give and that one, small, simple thing had proven the last thing, the end of her strength…simply the end.

Fili and Syrath were standing beside her, their eyes horrified, Fili’s hands clenched in bloodless fists at his side. Syrath had known her just after Moria, he knew what she’d looked like and Fili had heard her nightmares and seen her scars so he had some idea but it was clear that having it actually shown to them was something else entirely.

The scene faded, leaving them standing in an empty space, bits of light and sound bouncing around them. Her mother and her singing, her mind’s version of her father standing in a corner, threads of happiness darting through, frayed now and fragile but still there.

A scream split the air.

It was horrific, gut wrenching…and it never stopped.

Around them all sound aside from that scream vanished, sucked up inside it and covered over entirely, her mother’s singing, her own, the far off laughter of younger, and more naïve years.

In the corner massive cracks appeared, black shining through the edges. Her father’s image disintegrated and, around her, everything fell apart.

Bilba found herself on her knees, leaning forward to press her forehead against whatever passed for the ground in this place. She clamped her hands over her ears, gritting her teeth as the scream faded, finally, into the sound of gut wrenching sobs.

She’d been so lost…so utterly, utterly lost. The pain had been far beyond anything she’d ever known and the cause of it was the death of the only person she’d ever had to turn to. She’d been awash with emotions, pain, grief, anger…guilt.

If she’d only been stronger…if she’d only been smarter…if she’d only tried harder.

She couldn’t handle it but she couldn’t follow after her mother because she’d promised, she’d promised she’d keep going and she’d survive so she had to find a way. She had to find a way to accept the unacceptable, to deal with a wound to her very soul, to get up and keep going when it felt like her guts had been wrenched out of her and were dragging on the ground with every step she took.

A way to deal with guilt so strong it nearly crushed her.
She had to find a way…and find a way she had.

When they had dragged her mother’s body away from her and those first flickers of anger had coursed through her. It had flowed through her veins, pushed away the guilt and pain and loss and had given her strength.

The strength to get up.

She kept that particularly memory private as well, blocking Fili and Syrath from seeing it.

The next thing she showed them was her first day in the Arena. Her mouth had been on fire, every swallow bringing with it the metallic tang of blood rushing down her throat. She’d held a knife in both hands, shaking with terror as the gates on the other end had opened to allow her opponents to flow through.

It melded into a blur, exhaustion, fear and the ever-present pain…and the only way she’d known to hold it off was through anger.

But it was hard…on days when she turned to talk to her mother and she wasn’t there or days when that last memory pushed to the forefront no matter how hard she tried to keep it away…it was so hard and she needed more anger and more hatred to keep it at bay, to keep it from swallowing her whole and pushing her past a point where she’d never make it back.

And so it grew…from Bolg, to the orcs…and to her father. Hatred, thick and cloying, setting her nerves on fire, blistering through her mind until everything was tinged with it. As happiness had once defined her so now did hate.

It wasn’t her fault that her mother had died.

It wasn’t.

It was the orcs.

It was Bolg.

It was her father.

All of them, it was their fault she was in so much pain, their fault her mother was gone…their fault.

Not hers.

Never hers.

She couldn’t live with it being hers.

She couldn’t live with any of it, not without the hatred, not without the anger powering her steps.

But it had started to wane, to lose its effectiveness.

She couldn’t hurt the orcs outside of the Arena, or Bolg. They were like Azog to her, untouchable. She felt…impotent…powerless.

And that was when her anger had turned solely onto her father. The hero in her mind had changed into a monster. He wasn’t untouchable, not in her head anyway, and so her hatred wasn’t useless, wasn’t a waste.
She had rebuilt her life based upon this new foundation…raised up the person who would one day be called Orcrist…a person who was powerful and strong and would never fail someone they loved, was never weak enough to allow anyone to die…and she had survived.

She let Fili and Syrath see portions of it, the long litany of Arena challenges, fight after fight, all melding into an endless stream of simply trying to make it from one day into the next. She’d settled into a mindless monotony, her hate and anger becoming as natural as breathing, so engrained in her she barely noticed it any longer. She became resigned to her life and its inevitable brevity, to the knowledge that one day it would be her laying on the ground, her blood soaking into the dirt and someone else standing over her, a sword held by another’s hand flashing as it delivered one, final blow.

And then, in an instant, her life had changed again.

A roar resounded in the darkness.

Bilba turned and saw the scene change almost on its own behind them. A massive dragon, glittering gold, as large as Xalanth, Quenth she knew now, chained and being dragged through the halls of Moria. She was badly wounded, her leg shattered, gaping tears in her skin, thick trails of blood and gore left in her wake.

Syrath made a noise next to her and Bilba lifted a hand, prepared to banish the memory at once. **No, don’t.**

Bilba hesitated, looking toward Fili. He already knew what was coming, she could see it in his eyes. He nodded shortly, without looking at her, and Bilba lowered her hand, allowing the memory to continue.

A scream of rage and cursing and there was Frerin, similarly chained, being pulled along behind. He was fighting to reach her, there were so many orcs hanging off him he was nearly entirely hidden by them. Bilba winced when his arm broke just as she’d done then.

He didn’t seem to notice, his entire being intent on reaching the dragon.

But he didn’t, at least not until they’d reached the lower levels and been chained in place.

She went quicker after that, trying to spare them both the worst of it. She didn’t show Syrath his mother’s death or Frerin having to cut him out of her and she didn’t show Fili the worst of his uncle’s torture.

She let them see the battle of Moria, her own escape and everything after, right up until she’d told Fili the truth…and had her world fall apart again.

And then it was done, an entire life passed by and they were back where they’d started, at the strange crossroads with each of them on their own section.
Syrath and Fili both looked shaken, their eyes wide. Fili was breathing hard and Syrath was shivering, his head lowered and his wings drooping.

Bilba swallowed, pain twisting through her at the thought of having hurt either one of them.

She straightened her back and put her head up. She wouldn’t hurt them any farther, she resolved. She would take their rejection without complaint and let them go…

Fili wrapped both arms around her. Bilba jerked in surprise, her arms at her side.

“I can’t give you what you lost,” he whispered in her ear, his voice thick with emotion, “but the least I can do is share what I had.”

And, just like that, the world faded around them again.

Only this time it wasn’t to the mines and pain and sorrow.

It was light and happiness and family.

Fili held nothing back.

He showed her everything, from his earliest memories as a baby and up through his childhood. The birth of his brother and sitting carefully on the couch to hold him, terrified he’d somehow hurt the delicate creature in his arms. Running through the halls of the mountain with Kili, now his permanent shadow, happily on his heels. Hunting with his father, being tossed in the air by his uncles, being told bedtime stories by his mother and getting into trouble with his brother.

He showed her and Syrath the joy of witnessing his brother bond with Lyth, his first heartbreak when a young woman he’d had a crush on had rejected him for another. He took them both on runs through the fields behind Erebor, disturbed butterflies and birds fleeing in their wake.

He showed them all of that…and more.

He let her see his reaction to Moria and the loss of Frerin, Thror and Thrain, watching his uncle fall into despair, the fear of the assassination attempts, the one he’d told her about and the others, coupled with the terror over the ones against his brother and uncle.

Bilba saw herself, for the first time, through someone else’s eyes. Fili didn’t see her as dark or broken or corrupted. He saw her as strong, brilliant, beautiful inside and out. He was proud of her and to be associated with her, in awe that someone like her was his ride partner and, now, hopefully his One.

“One?” Bilba asked as that thought passed through. “What’s a One?”

Fili willingly let her see that as well, showing her rather than trying to explain it with words. He gave
her access to everything he’d learned, through schooling and also through simply living, ways to behave not just in class situations but socially, things Dis and Primula had tried to teach her but she hadn’t understood, not fully, not until now.

The more he showed her the more Bilba began to feel something inside her change…and settle.

Fili loved her.

He knew her, knew exactly who she was, and he loved her regardless.

The person she was to him, the person he saw when he looked at her…she wanted to be that person.

“You already are that person,” Fili said simply. “You just need to realize it.”

He grabbed her hands suddenly, pulling her close. “I have one more thing to show you.”

He turned away from her, she followed his gaze…and found herself looking at her father.

Her real father, not the one in her imagination, not the one her hatred had created but the real, living, breathing, flesh and bone dwarf.

Fili showed her that earliest memory of him, coming into the room with an impossibly small bundle in his arms, the stench of smoke wafting from it. She saw the devastation in his eyes, not just that day but every day after. It was a sorrow that had dampened over the years but had never truly gone away. Even now, now that she knew what it looked like, she realized it was still there, in the depths, hidden, but still clear if one knew to look for it.

She watched as a child Fili toddled happily in the Guard Captain’s footsteps, wearing a tiny set of armor and acting as Dwalin’s second, his face serious and somber even as the soldiers tried their hardest not to laugh at the diminutive Prince.

She saw Dwalin interacting with Vili, with Frerin, with all of them.

He was an honorable dwarf, she thought. Brave and just and loyal and kind.

And he would have been a good father, Bilba thought.

A very good father.

“He can’t know,” she whispered, a quiet grief settling deep inside her. “I can never tell him.”

“He’s your father,” Fili said. “Bilba--”

She shook her head. “You know him better than I do, Fili. What would it do to him if he knew?”

Fili didn’t answer her.
He didn’t have to.

Syrath lowered his head on her other side, nuzzling her. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.

“I didn’t tell you,” Bilba said, winding an arm under his jaw. “It’s not your fault.”

He nudged her. The crossroads reappeared and he gently pushed her toward his own area. My turn. I want you to see how I see you too.

Bilba nodded. Fili took her hand and, together, they stepped into Syrath’s mind.

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Bilba was his first memory.

He had no recollection of Frerin or of being inside Moria. The first thing he could recall was outside the gates, when he’d crawled up to settle around her neck.

Up until they’d met Fili, she had been the single most important figure in his life, more than Primrose or Daisy or anyone else.

He remembered what she’d looked like after Moria, how long it had taken her to recover, but that wasn’t how he thought of her. To him she was strong and smart and capable. He trusted her, followed her lead without question, and trusted her to look after him.

She knew all of his memories, had been present for them, but Fili hadn’t so she held back, allowing him to experience them for himself.

It went faster than the other two had, he was only a few years old after all and, before they knew it, they were all standing on the crossroads again.

Fili smiled at her, relief in his eyes. “That’s better.”

Bilba frowned at him and then followed his eyes down to her body.

Her chains were gone, as were the rags of Moria. She was dressed in trousers and a tunic with sturdy, knee high boots. Over that she had light armor, similar to what Fili had made her but blue in color, the same color as Syrath’s scales. The sword Fili had made her was strapped to her side but she didn’t feel her other weapons. She reached a hand up and felt her hair, tied up in a ponytail and trailing down her back.

She twisted and Moria was still behind her but it was no longer the chasm. It was the gates standing and she was outside them, standing in the open air, free, for the first time in her life. All of Middle Earth lay before her and all the pain and hatred was behind.

Fili took one of her hands and Syrath nudged his head under her other hand.

“You ready?” Fili asked.

Bilba looked at him and saw herself as he saw her and as Syrath saw her and, maybe, just maybe as she was beginning to see herself…not chained but free and not weak but strong enough to get up every time she was knocked down, to step forward and survive no matter what the world did to her.
She smiled.

Seconds later they were standing in the Shire again.

Bilba took a deep breath and felt the most profound sense of…peace she’d ever felt.

The anger that had fueled her for so long was gone and there was no void as she would have expected, no feeling of being lost or empty.

Instead she felt Fili and Syrath in a way she never had before. They were there, not in her mind as before, but in her very soul. They were a part of her, a solid presence that, rather than feeling intrusive felt steadying. She could feel what they were feeling with a thought if she wished, and they her in turn. She could see their love and acceptance for her and…she wasn’t alone anymore.

The gulf separating her from everyone else was gone. It wasn’t a matter of having crossed a bridge to join them, it had vanished entirely.

Everything wasn’t magically fixed. Her mother was still gone, her father could never know who she was…it wasn’t right…it never would be…but she could live with it in a way she hadn’t been able to before. She could face it…accept it.

Accept it *without* needing the crutch of hatred or anger to power her through, to cover over the pain and guilt and anguish. All of that was still there but it was no longer a gaping, infected, wound.

It was…a scar.

A healed scar.

She could remember the pain, and still felt sadness when she thought on it, but it was the dull pain of an old wound, not the sharp bite of a fresh one.

And, with that change, now she could look back and remember the good times without the hate and pain taking over. How her mother looked when she smiled, the sound of her laugh, the way her voice echoed through the halls when she sang.

She threw her arms around Fili, hugging him hard before turning and doing the same to Syrath, wrapping both arms as far around his head as she could before pulling away again.

*You see yourself as an adult? Bigger than Xalanth? Really?*

Syrath reared back, looking affronted. *Of course. I’m amazing. You know that. And, besides, you heard Fili. It’s how others see me too, and so they should.*

Bilba laughed, the action coming easily to her in a way it never had before. Fili and Syrath had never seen her as a slave, it had been her own mind providing that image. She’d felt like she had to overcome it when, in reality, it had never been her at all. Now, finally, she could see past it to what
they saw and how they felt, unmarred by her own fears and insecurities. She turned and slid an arm around Fili’s waist, the hesitation over touching him gone.

He loved her. She could feel it, running in a vein of mithril through his soul and binding to hers.

He was her…One, that was what he had called it. She pulled the memory up, running the explanation through her mind again.

Her One and she was his and Syrath was theirs and they were his and all the fears she’d had over what they would think when they really saw her, or that she would somehow mar their souls with the darkness in her own, all had been unfounded.

They all had darkness, the assassination attempts against Fili and his family, the loss of his uncle, grandfather and great grandfather; Syrath’s pain over the death of his mother and the loss of Daisy, the attack on the Shire; and then her slavery. They already knew the evil of the world, had experienced it firsthand, what she’d shown them had horrified them, made them angry on her behalf, but it had not marred them any more than their own experiences in life had already done.

They had not rejected her, or been harmed by her, and her only regret now was that she’d wasted so much time holding them at arm’s length when she hadn’t had to and when she’d been missing so much in doing so.

“Come on,” Fili said, wrapping his own arm around her. “My mother has some choice words she’d like to say, mainly to me, over us running off in the night.”

Bilba nodded and headed to Syrath, climbing onto his back with Fili behind her.

They lifted off, the ground falling away behind them and she leaned against Fili, mentally picturing the final shards of the shell she’d built around herself falling away below her.

She was neither the naïve girl she’d been before her mother’s death or the well of never-ending hate she’d been after.

She was Bilba, the daughter of Belladonna Took and Dwalin, son of Fundin.

She was Orcrist, Orc Cleaver, protector of the weak and defenseless.

She was the rider of Syrath, the partner and One of Fili, son of Vili, Crown Prince of Erebor.

She was her father’s daughter and her mother’s light.

She was more than what the orcs had tried to make her, more than what she’d made herself and more than the false foundations upon which she’d built her life.

She would rebuild again and, this time, it wouldn’t be on the false hope of a fictional father she’d created in her mind and it wouldn’t be on the twisted lie given to her by hate.

It would be based on truth, on what Fili and Syrath saw in her, what she was just starting to see in herself and what she saw when she looked at her father.

It would be based on allowing people in, not shutting them out.

And, this time, her foundation would be unshakable.
Dis was pacing.

She’d been pacing for several hours, ever since her son’s distress had woken her from a dead sleep.

It had woken all of them, her, Vili and Kili. Dis had come out into the living room and felt her heart wrench in her chest at the realization that it was empty.

She’d been ready to call up the entire Garrison and start a Shire wide search only to stop when Fili had responded to her demands for him to answer. He’d assured her he was fine, that he was still in the Shire with Syrath and Xalanth nearby and had pleaded with her to stay out of it and let him handle things.

And she had. Unwillingly, but she had.

He was an adult, she reminded herself, repeatedly, and a Crown Prince with many duties and responsibilities that he saw to on a daily basis. It was hard, incredibly hard to look past the chubby baby and the toddling child clutching her skirt to the adult he was today and there were times she wanted to order both of her sons to stop growing up and go back to their toys but she was trying.

She was trying, but that didn’t mean she stopped being their mother or stopped worrying or had any intention of going back to bed while Fili and Bilba were out in the middle of the night and not near her where they belonged.

So she paced. Vili and Kili had both come out and sat on the couch and recliner respectively…and they waited.

Waited as the night passed and the sun rose. Waited as Cassie and Primula got up, startled to see them but leaving them alone. Cassie had gotten dressed and quietly gone into the kitchen with Primula, helping her with Frodo as the older woman kept herself busy by making breakfast.

They waited until…finally…finally they heard the sound of the gate opening outside.

Dis made it to the front door first, throwing it open and rushing out.

Fili and Bilba were making their way up the front steps.

Fili looked tired but calm, sending her a fatigued smile as they came up the steps.

Biba looked…Bilba looked like a different person.

She walked straighter but without the tension she normally carried, her movements fluid and graceful instead of tight and bunched. She didn’t look around as if she expected to be attacked at any moment and she held onto Fili without self-consciousness.

As they drew near Bilba lifted her head and Dis sucked in a breath at how clear the girl’s eyes were, devoid of the pain and anger they normally held.

There was an air of calm about her, a steadiness to her spirit, a feeling of being centered.

There was also water dripping down her face, her hair was tangled and matted about her and she was covered in layers of grime and muck, as was Fili.
Dis sighed, a mixture of affection and exasperation flooding through her. “What am I going to do with the two of you?”

She lightly put an arm around Bilba and felt the girl instantly transfer from Fili to her, sliding an arm around her and hugging her. “Go get cleaned up,” she told Fili. “I’ll help Bilba.”

She didn’t ask what had happened. Fili had not offered an explanation the night before and the fact he wasn’t offering now told her it was none of her business.

Fili nodded and vanished inside the house and Dis guided Bilba in as well, past Vili and Kili crowding around Fili, past the clanking sounds of Primula and Cassie getting breakfast ready in the kitchen and down the hall to the bathroom.

She helped draw a bath and then got a fresh set of clothing as the girl cleaned up. Once she was done, she dressed and then sat in front of the mirror, grimacing at the mess that was her hair.

Do you think I could do something different with it?

Dis frowned in consideration. “I’m sure you could. What were you thinking?”

Bilba gave her a questioning look. A ponytail? Would that look good?

Dis raised an eyebrow. A ponytail wasn’t nearly as practical as the braids and she would have expected Bilba to reject it for fear of an enemy grabbing it during a fight, not that they ever got that close to her and, if they did, they’d probably be close enough to grab the braids as well but Dis had never pointed that out.

She stepped forward and picked up a brush and then a pair of scissors from a drawer, her eyes already going toward some of the worst of the tangles and knots in the girl’s hair.

“I think it would. Let’s find out, shall we?”

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Bilba studied her reflection in the mirror.

Dis had pulled some of her hair forward and cut it into long... bangs almost that framed her face, flowing down the sides and ending just below her jaw. The effect made her look her age, Dis claimed, and softened her features.

The rest she’d gathered up into a high ponytail, located just over the crown of her head. It tumbled in a thick mass down her back, in loose waves and curls that swirled behind her when she moved her head. Dis had taken some and braided it, wrapping it around the band she’d used to secure it.

She put her hands on Bilba’s shoulders. “What do you think?”

Bilba smiled, turning her head to look at different angles. I like it. You and Primula said I should start keeping it down. This way it's down but it'll still be out of my way in a fight.

“That’s my girl,” Dis said. “Come on, let’s go eat breakfast.”
No one pressed them for what had happened at breakfast. Whatever it had been they were both clearly fine now, better than fine in fact and the others were more than willing to go with that.

After they were finished eating Fili and Bilba were both ordered to go get some sleep before they had to leave. Fili obeyed, vanishing down the hall toward the room he’d barely used while they’d been there.

Bilba, while admittedly tired, had no desire to sleep.

She helped Primula clean up and politely declined an invitation to take a walk to the market with her, Frodo and Cassie.

Instead she headed out on her own.

It was turning into a beautiful day. The storm had entirely passed leaving only a light bite to the air and the lingering smell of rain. The sun shone down merrily and a breeze cheerfully darted through the trees and ruffled over the top of the grass.

Bilba wandered through a few of the fields just outside Hobbiton, remembering some of the better times from the year she’d spent in the Shire.

As she did she could feel Syrath bounding about near the Garrison with Primrose. As always he had a near limitless well of energy and didn’t seem to be at all affected by the long night.

Fili, on the other hand, was completely out. She could sense him as well but quieter, his presence the barest hum. She knew it was possible to adjust the bond, closing it or opening it as she willed but so far hadn’t been able to bring herself to do so and they hadn’t either.

Syrath sensed her suddenly and called her, not through a mind link but via the soul bond, a feeling more than words.

Bilba obediently began angling toward the Garrison and the activity there as everyone got ready to leave.

As she neared she caught sight of Kili out past the barracks, on the other side of the road near where empty fields and trees abounded. As she watched he easily hopped a fence that lined the road and jogged off toward a large tree in the distance.

Vili watched him, leaning against the rail of the fence. He was holding a bow in one hand and a quiver of arrows was braced at his feet.

Bilba walked up a few feet away from him, leaning against the wood.

Kili returned a few minutes later, two arrows clasped in one hand.

“You win again,” he groused, out of breath, “but barely. I demand a rematch!”

Vili snorted. “If you want, kid, but it’s not going to change anything. You’ve got a long way to go before you beat me.”

“We’ll see about that,” Kili muttered good-naturedly. He clambered back over and grabbed a new arrow from the quiver.
I thought you were the best archer in Erebor, Bilba said mildly.

Kili shot her an aggrieved look. “I am the best archer in Erebor.”

“Second best,” Vili corrected with a grin. “Where do you think he learned it from?”

Kili rolled his eyes. “Less bragging, more shooting, Oldtimer.”

Vili let out a surprised laugh. “Better an oldtimer than an inexperienced puppy.”

As he spoke he lifted his bow, an arrow nocked to the string.

Kili raised his as well, trying to surreptitiously check his father’s stance and copy it without being obvious. Vili held still, longer than Bilba thought he should need to sight if his skill level was indeed higher than Kili’s. Then she realized that he was hesitating not to get his target set but rather so his son could see where he needed to change his own stance.

They released their arrows at almost the same time and Vili clapped Kili on the back. “Better. Now go get them.”

Kili beamed before, again, jumping the rail to go retrieve the arrows.

Bilba turned to watch him go, swallowing against the sudden lump in her throat.

She would never have such an experience with her father.

It was okay, she could live with it but it didn’t mean it didn’t hurt. The memories Fili had shown her made it clear the kind of father Dwalin would have been, had been in a way to the Princes, and it hurt that she would never experience it.

A feeling of sympathy wrapped around her from Syrath and she felt Fili beginning to react, even in his sleep. She took a deep breath, calming herself. The bond would take some getting used to, she thought, and a lot of adjustment.

Kili was returning again and Vili lifted the bow. “Come on, Bilba,” he ordered. “Your turn.”

Bilba started, looking at him wide eyed. What?

“You heard me,” he said. Next to him, Kili grinned broadly at her, encouraging. “You’re up.”

Bilba stepped forward, hesitant, and took the offered bow from him. Kili took up position next to her, his own bow in hand.

“Alright,” Vili said, “let’s see what bad habits Kili’s been trying to impart to you.”

“Hey!” Kili shouted in mock outrage. “My technique is flawless!”

“Yeah?” Vili said. He adjusted Bilba’s stance just a little as she raised her bow, arrow in place, and then moved her hand to a more comfortable position. “If your form is so perfect why haven’t you been able to beat me yet?”

Kili sputtered but Vili just stepped back and indicated for them to proceed.

Bilba released her arrow an instant behind Kili’s and knew at once hers would miss the tree by inches. The large oak was farther than she was used to, her use of archery usually involved orcs actively trying to kill her at fairly close range.
“Good,” Vili said, squeezing her shoulder. “You’ve got the speed and strength, accuracy will come with time.”

A glowing feeling spread through her and Bilba grinned at him.

“We’ll keep working at it,” Vili said. “Pretty soon you’ll probably be better than Kili.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kili muttered, with mock anger. He hopped the fence and began to head off to retrieve the arrows. “Don’t bet on it!”

“Alright,” Vili said. “While he’s doing that let’s work on your stance. You’re used to firing from close range. There’s a few differences when you’re trying to keep accuracy with greater distance. I’ll show you.”

Bilba nodded and obediently started copying the positions he was showing her, listening as he explained why it was the way it was.

Syrath appeared over the hill behind them, Primrose prancing by his side. At almost the same time she felt a vague question from Fili, sent in the same way Syrath had, feeling more than words. She showed him where she was and went back to listening to Vili.

Affection rushed through her, for all of them. Primula and Bofur and Primrose, Syrath and Fili, Kili, Vili, Dis and Cassie and more beyond that. There was Elrond and even his idiot sons, Aragorn and Arwen, Thorin, Nori and Ori, even Frerin for the short time she’d known him.

And there was Xalanth, and Dwalin. She might not be able to have the relationship with him she wanted but he’d accepted her in spite of the way she’d treated him and, if she had anything to say about it, she’d be doing her best to show him how she felt, even if she couldn’t tell him.

So many people and dragons that she cared about, creating a world that had gotten so large without her notice.

Arms slid around her and she leaned back against Fili for an instance before he moved away from her to torment his brother who was just returning.

Cassie arrived as well, standing next to her to watch the two bicker.

No, Bilba thought, her life might not be perfect but it was fuller than she’d ever thought it could be and it was her life…

And she wouldn’t trade it for anything.

***

“How’s the fit?”

Bilba held her arms out to study her new vambraces. Perfect.

The rest of the armor fit beautifully as well and felt comfortable, her movements easy and unrestricted. It was gorgeous armor, well-crafted and practical. She stepped back to try out the feel and bumped into the couch. They were standing in the living room of Bag End. Primula and Dis were sitting in the kitchen chatting over a cup of tea before they had to leave.
Fili grinned in relief and grabbed her sword to wind the belt around her waist, cinching it tight. He then hooked his fingers in it and pulled her forward to kiss her.

After he pulled away he said, “So, last thing, courting braids. I didn’t tell you about it before because I didn’t want to overwhelm you with information. Now, however--”

Bilba nodded. Thanks to what Fili had shown her, she had a better understanding of the courting process, as well as other social things that had always escaped her. It wasn’t complete, there was no way for her to remember it all or for him to give her every last thing but she had a better grasp of the basics at least.

Fili fished in one pocket and came out with a pair of two pure mithril beads, both engraved with the crest of Durin and set with a flawless, blue sapphire. “Oh, look, I just so happen to have some courting beads on me.”

*Of course you do,* Bilba said dryly.

She stood quietly as he worked part of her pony tail free and put in the braid. It started under her right ear and was comprised of two braids combined in some strange intricate way she could never hope to reproduce on her own. When she pointed it out to Fili he shrugged and said, “We meet up in the mornings anyway. I can do it then.”

He capped the bead off, laying the braid over her shoulder so it hung down the front of her chest. “Tradition dictates leaving it free like this. You don’t have to leave it over the shoulder but most do.”

He did his own without looking at it, long years of practice at braiding coming in handy, and put the bead on.

Once he was done, Bilba said, *So, I've been planning to bring up the orcs…*

“No,” Fili said. “We’re not fighting orcs on the way back to Erebor.”

Bilba scowled. *Has anyone ever told you that you're a killjoy?*

“I am not,” Fili said. “You just have a twisted view of what constitutes fun.”

*Or maybe you just have no idea what fun is,* Bilba shot back airily.

Fili shook his head. “You’re worse than--” He stopped suddenly. *Well that suddenly explains a lot. I was going to say you’re worse than Dwalin. Now that I think about it I’m surprised I never put it together before. You two are almost the same person.*

Bilba pushed up on her toes and kissed him. *Thank you, but you’re not going to distract me with flattery. Now, about those orcs.*

***

In the end Fili didn’t let her hunt orcs. She tried asking Vili but he just laughed, for five minutes

Clearly *all* the Durins were a bunch of killjoys.

When Bilba made it back to the Garrison she veered toward where Syrath had finally given into at
least relaxing. Xalanth was by him and Bilba walked up and stood in front of him.

*Syrath, tell Xalanth to tell the Durins to let us hunt orcs.*

Xalanth was far more reasonable, she thought. *He’d* already let them hunt orcs while the others had been in the Blue Mountains.

Syrath raised his head toward the larger dragon. Xalanth rumbled, nuzzled his son and then, surprisingly, reached down and nuzzled her as well. Bilba put her hands on the underside of his jaw, as far as she could get, and hugged him.

**He says we already got to hunt orcs and we can hunt more when we get home.**

Bilba glowered. He had a point. She hated it when others had a point.

*Tell him I want to try out my new sword and armor.*

That got her another nuzzle and Bilba had a sudden suspicion Xalanth had decided she was an amusing child and was treating her as such.

**He said you can try them out when we get home.**

Her eyes narrowed. He was definitely humoring her.

Xalanth, however, could crush her with his eyeball if he wanted so her only response was to hug him again and head over to say good-bye to Primula, Bofur, Primrose and Frodo.

Primrose bit Syrath on the nose again, telling him if he stayed away for years this time she’d hunt him down and bite him harder next time.

Primula hugged Bilba for a long time and then went to stand next to Bofur. He put an arm around her and she leaned toward him, resting her head on his shoulder.

Bilba raised an eyebrow and Primula blushed, looking down.

Bofur simply looked proud.

Syrath came over and Bilba got in place in front of him.

Cassie was riding with Kili on Lyth while Xalanth was carrying Dis and Vili this time round.

They lifted off and Bilba looked down to see Frodo hanging onto Bofur’s leg, watching wide eyed as they soared away. Bofur had moved his arm to Primula’s waist and both were waving while Primrose had risen up on her hind legs to watch them go.

Bilba waved back, leaning over until Fili grabbed her around the waist, muttering about her suicidal tendencies.

Syrath banked, turning with the rest of the dragons and then they were winging their way back toward Erebor.

Bilba was going home.

***
They hit a second, smaller storm on the way back but pushed through it as, by that time, they were soaring over the mountains and Vili felt it was unsafe to stop.

Thorin sent out a contingent to meet them once they reached Mirkwood and, together, they returned to the mountain.

It was a hive of activity as they landed, supplies being unloaded from the dragons, soldiers greeting their wives and children. Bilba caught sight of Thorin striding forward toward Dis. He’d probably missed them more than he let on, Bilba thought. Yes, he still had Nori and Dwalin and Balin and the others but Dis and the boys were his immediate family, and the only immediate family he had.

She slid down off Syrath. Fili had already vanished somewhere in the crowd, moving to help the soldiers get things put away. Kili would be doing so as well once he returned, he’d gone off with a small escort to take Cassie home.

Bilba caught a brief glimpse of Fili’s personal guard as well as a few of the guards she knew were assigned to the other members of the royal family. She was so used to the guards she rarely noticed them anymore but they hadn’t gone to the Shire which meant she’d probably have to get used to their presence all over again.

She headed toward Xalanth, wanting to check on something she’d noticed in the air.

_Syrath, could you ask Xalanth to roll on his side for me?_

The big dragon obeyed her, carefully so as not to crush anyone running about, and Bilba ducked under him, reaching up to try and trace the strap running under his wing and around the base of his neck. She could barely reach it and was about to ask Syrath to have him move when a voice behind her said, “What are you doing?”

Bilba’s heart jolted inside her and she took a brief second to compose herself before turning around.

Dwalin stood behind her, his arms crossed over his chest and one eyebrow raised in question.

_I noticed while we were flying that one of his straps looked worn_, she said, proud of how even she managed to keep her tone. _I was worried it might start chafing his wing muscle so I thought I’d check it before I forgot._

Dragons, after all, weren’t as invulnerable as they might like their enemies to believe. Their scales could be pierced, by other dragons or by certain weapons specially designed to hurt them. Even if they weren’t pierced a scale could be crushed or driven into the soft flesh beneath them. Added to that, not every part of them was covered in scales. The thick muscle attaching their wings to their body, for instance, was not protected and was at risk of injury from attack or even from a damaged strap or incorrect placement.

Dwalin stepped up behind her and lifted a hand over her head, easily reaching the strap and running his hand along it. Bilba held still, trying to ignore the part of her that wanted to reach out and hug him. As a child she’d often imagined him reaching down to pick her up and toss her in the air like her mother had done a few times before Bilba had grown too big and her mother too weak.

She reached out for Fili, winding around his bond, in a sense, and felt him respond in kind.

Her spirit settled.
“Yeah,” Dwalin grunted, “it’ll need to be replaced.” He frowned. “This isn’t the one he normally wears in this position.”

Bilba flinched. *I’m sorry. He asked to have them off in the Shire. I didn’t realize they went back on in a specific order.*

Syrath’s were all interchangeable, she’d assumed all dragon straps were like that.

“It’s fine,” Dwalin said. “He’s the one who insists they’re different, likes them put on a certain way. He didn’t complain then I’m not.” He gave her an appraising look. “I’m surprised he asked you or that he let you take them off and put them back on. Usually he’s pretty picky about only letting me or Balin do it.”

Bilba ducked her head. *You won’t just fix the one that’s worn?* she asked.

Dwalin shook his head. “Don’t like the risk of a repaired strap. I’d rather he just had an entirely new one.”

He stepped back and clapped Xalanth on the stomach. The dragon rolled over to sit up again, managing to somehow not kill them in the process.

He reached out and nuzzled Dwalin and then Bilba, earning her another surprised look from Dwalin in the process.

“Something happen in the Shire?”

*Not particularly,* Bilba said. *Xalanth and Syrath and I stayed in the Shire while the others went to the Blue Mountains. We hunted orcs a few times. Xalanth seemed to have fun.*

Dwalin snorted, patting the dragon on the snout. “He would.”

That was pretty much the extent of her interaction with her father which, really, given her previous interactions with him represented a substantial leap forward.

Bilba left him to deal with the strap. Syrath was being swarmed over by the dragon level volunteers, unchosen young riders who took care of the dragons in return for getting to be near the babies and hope for the chance of being chosen by a drake, and headed to her room.

Once there she carefully removed her armor and took a bath. She then redressed, strapped her sword back on and replaced her knives in their various spots. Even without knowing about her extra knives, Fili had still fitted the new vambraces he’d made her with sheaths. She put those on but left the greaves and the rest of the armor, electing instead to put on the jacket she’d gotten from Fili that Dis had made over to fit her.

After that she decided to head to the kitchens and see what food she could find. She could always call for it to be brought up but she preferred to take care of herself, being waited on hand and foot was a foreign concept to her and probably always would be.

She made it all of one level before the less than perfect elements of Erebor made themselves known.

“Don’t think you’ve won.”

Bilba sighed and turned to see Beryl along with several of the young women of the court. The other woman had been staring at her jacket but, once she turned, her eyes went to the bead and braid laying over her shoulder and Bilba saw her face go positively apoplectic.
“You honestly think you’re courting him now? You? You’re nothing but a piece of trash flushed from Moria who doesn’t have the common sense to know your place!”

Her fingers were curled into fists as she spoke, her face nearly purple with rage and she moved forward, stopping just in front of Bilba. Behind her the other girls stood nervously, looking as if they’d rather be anywhere else.

The last time Bilba had run into her, Beryl’s words had cut her, raising up every insecurity she’d ever held. Fili, Dwalin and Syrath had been forced to come to her rescue, the legendary Orcrist, needing two dwarves and a dragon to save her from one noble.

Now…she felt nothing.

She already knew Fili loved her, she could feel it. She already knew how he and Syrath saw her and had witnessed the others surrounding her with love and affection when they were under no obligation to do so.

That wasn’t how people treated trash and therefore that couldn’t be what she was.

Her eyes flickered to one of the girls in the crowd, a tall young woman with short dark hair. The girl was a potential rider. Bilba sent out a request and saw the girl start, her eyes widening, before accepting.

After a minute she made a strangled sound and looked at Beryl. “She says she’s the Prince’s One.”

Beryl turned to look at the girl and then, slowly, turned back to Bilba. She made an odd sound and raised a hand, aiming it for Bilba’s face.

Bilba caught her wrist, studying the other woman calmly. Beryl glared at her, hatred seething from her…and also fear…and pain beyond that.

Unexpected compassion flooded Bilba.

“She says she’s sorry,” the other girl from the group said. “And that – and that she understands what it’s like to be in love with someone and fear they won’t respond in kind.”

She’d been lucky. Fili had responded in kind.

For Beryl, however, there was no hope. Bilba remembered the pain she’d been in before Lake-town, realizing she was falling in love with him and believing he would never see her the same way, thinking one day she’d have to watch him find happiness with another woman while she was left alone.

She didn’t wish that pain on anyone, not even Beryl.

For an instant, so quick she wasn’t entirely sure she saw it, hurt flashed across Beryl’s face, briefly overtaking the anger. Then it was gone and only the anger was left.

Beryl wrenched her hand back and Bilba released it. “I neither need nor want pity,” she spat, “and certainly not from the likes of you.” She stepped back, moving to surround herself with her friends. “You haven’t won,” she repeated. An odd, unnatural calm seemed to settle over her. She lifted her chin, looking down on Bilba as if she were a Queen and Bilba little more than an insect under her shoe. “Fili is mine,” she said shortly. “He’s always been mine and always will be and soon you and everyone else will know it. So go ahead and wear his jacket, his bead, his braid and whatever else you want, it doesn’t mean anything.” Her eyes narrowed. “You came down on the wrong side,
slave. You would have been wise to curry my favor the second you realized how far you’d overstepped yourself.”

With that she, spun on one heel and stalked off, her friends following in her wake.

Are you alright?

I’m fine. Bilba sent back. Just had a little run in with Beryl.

Fili swore. I told her to back off.

I handled it, Bilba said. I don’t need you to fight my battles.

That was sort of our deal, Fili corrected dryly. In this case, though, I’m pretty sure Beryl qualifies as one of my battles that you’re having to fight for me.

Bilba started walking again, heading toward the kitchens. You get to fight orcs and I fight Beryl, doesn’t quite seem fair does it?

Not at all, Fili agreed. You certainly got the short end of that deal.

I don’t know, Bilba said. I can find some sympathy for her, at least. The orcs are just bastards.

Sympathy? Did you just say you had sympathy for her?

Bilba passed through one of the gates to a lower level, greeting the guards as she did. Do you love me?

His answer was immediate. You know I do.

How would it have felt, she asked, feeling as you do, if I’d rejected you?

He was silent for some time. Damn, she finally heard, now you’ve got me going and feeling sympathy for her.

I can handle her, Bilba said. You can focus on the orcs.

You handle those too.

True, Bilba said cheerfully. Speaking of which….

We just got back.

Perfect timing. We’ll have the element of surprise. They won’t be expecting us.

You’re going to go regardless aren’t you?

Probably. As soon as I get something to eat.

Do I have time to get cleaned up?

Yes.

Thank Mahal for small mercies.
Things fell into a routine after that.

Bilba reported Beryl’s strange words, which had been borderline threats, to Nori and he responded by having them watched even closer than they already were.

Even if they’d wanted to try something they couldn’t, so closely did Nori have people on them.

Bilba left him to it and spent her time with Vanguard or with Fili and Kili. Kili and Cassie had definitely hit it off in the Shire and the younger Durin soon had a routine established going back and forth from Erebor to Lake-town to visit her. Often he would go without an escort, the length of time he was gone short and Lyth keeping him up in the air and only coming down long enough to pick up or drop Cassie off.

Bilba went with them on occasion but other times visited Mirkwood or even went farther a few times to visit Arwen in Gondor.

Vili took Fili, Kili and Bilba out hunting on several occasions, and also invited her to join him and Kili in their archery lessons, which she gratefully accepted. Syrath would usually join them, staying high on hunting trips to avoid scaring off prey and laying behind them while they fired arrows.

Xalanth was often there as well. At some point he’d decided Bilba was his responsibility along with Syrath and he watched out for her, much to Dwalin’s amusement.

She spent a lot of time around him too. Fili and Syrath left her completely alone on that topic, allowing her to deal with it as she wished.

She’d already been around him with training and Vanguard but she started finding herself trailing after him, following him on his rounds and lingering in the background as he dealt with various problems around the Kingdom.

If Dwalin was perplexed by the sudden turnabout in her attitude toward him he made no comment.

He also didn’t order her away or react as if her presence was annoying.

Instead, a couple weeks after she’d started trailing him, she rounded a corner after him only to come up short as she found him standing right there, facing her.

“You know,” he said mildly, “it’s a lot easier to hear what I’m saying if you’re walking beside me and not skulking a dozen feet back.”

Bilba positively beamed.

Dwalin gave her a confused look, then shook his head and returned to his rounds, Bilba now by his side.

And so it went until it was as common a sight to see her with Dwalin as it was to see her with Fili or another of the royals.
It had been several months since their trip to the Shire and winter had a firm grip on Erebor and its surrounding lands.

Snow and ice blanketed the ground and clung to the mountain itself. Bitter cold and howling winds made flying torture at lower levels and dangerous at higher ones and a constant canopy of thick, gray clouds brought a depressing feel to the overall landscape.

None of this kept Vanguard from going out, as none of it kept the orcs from continuing to attack, but it did make it far more miserable.

Though, Bilba thought to herself, it also made returning to the mountain that much more enjoyable so there was that.

Currently, she was lounging in the heated pool in her bathroom, sighing as the hot water seeped into her frozen muscles.

She was definitely going soft…and she quite frankly did not care at the moment. Hot water was bliss, especially after having to ride by dragonback in stupidly cold temperatures to and from the orc attack, fight the blasted things in knee deep snow and then see the caravan back safely to Erebor.

The only thing that had kept her going was the thought of the bath waiting for her when she returned.

Syrath had felt the same way. There was a pool very similar to the ones in the rooms on the royal level all the way at the bottom of the dragon levels. It was massive, large enough for several of the dragons and was specifically for days such as this when they flew through blistering weather.

*Hey, are you busy?*

She cracked one eye open, studying the ceiling far over her head. *Why?*

*Kili’s going to take Cassie home and asked if we wanted to go with him.*

*I was just out in weather so cold that even the orcs wanted to call it a day.*

Amusement flowed over the bond.

*I’ll take that as a no.*

*Why would you want to go?* Bilba asked.

*I’m used to the weather, more or less, Fili answered, and I’ve been stuck in for far too long. We won’t be gone long, we’re just dropping her off and coming right back.*

*No thanks,* Bilba said. *Have fun and good luck convincing Syrath to take you.*

*If he doesn’t want to I can just go on Lyth with Cassie and Kili.*

*I’m sure they’ll be thrilled at that.*

He laughed and then he was gone and she settled back with a groan of happiness.

She stayed in the water until the heat started to make her dizzy and then got out. She dried off, got dressed and pulled her hair into its ponytail. Dis had taught her how to create the braid to wrap around the band and Fili had worked with her enough that she could make a passable courting braid. It took her a bit longer but she soon had both in place. She decided against putting her full armor on
again, having no plans to leave the mountain, but put on her vambraces, dagger and knives and strapped her sword on.

Casual attire for her, as Fili called it.

She grabbed her jacket as she headed out, shrugging it on and pulling it tight. All the rooms had fireplaces that roared continuously, especially during winter, and the tunnels had braziers set up throughout but it was still cold, the rock feeling like ice to the touch.

She visited the kitchens first. Fili, true to his word, had offered positions at Erebor to any of Bofur’s kin and, a few months later, his brother and cousin had shown up to take advantage of the offer.

Bombur was a large, rotund, kind dwarf with a passion for cooking whose only desire had been to simply work in the kitchens of Erebor. He’d quickly proven himself to have a natural talent and was already one of the top underchefs in the kitchens.

Bofur’s cousin was an older dwarf, Bifur, who’d come all the way from the Blue Mountains to take part in the battle at the gates of Moria. He’d been injured, taking an axe to the head that had left him unable to speak in anything but Khuzdul. He could, however, speak by sign and Bilba had soon developed an affinity with him; they both had problems with speaking, both had been wounded by Moria and both communicated in unusual ways. He’d been given a position in the guard and had proven himself to be a capable and loyal soldier. Dwalin had offered him a position on Vanguard, which Bifur had gratefully accepted and was waiting for an opening in the rotation to join in.

After visiting Bombur, Bilba headed to the battlements to watch for Fili and Syrath. Syrath had agreed to take Fili, after much grumbling and promises of steak and other rewards in return.

The cold hit her immediately as she went up the steps that ran alongside the gate on the inner side. The gates themselves stood open, allowing people access to the kingdom for whatever business they had.

Bilba settled against one of the merlons, where a crenel was created between it and the next one, and looked out over the land that lay between Erebor and Dale. It was currently covered in snow, tracks running through it from the traffic between the two. It was relatively empty at the moment, it being late enough in the day that everyone was where they wanted to be but still early enough that no one had started returning to their homes yet.

Something in her shifted and she lifted her eyes to see the distant silhouettes of Syrath and Lyth returning. Fili was happy, Bilba noted. He hadn’t been able to spend much time with his brother of late and getting to come back from Lake-town with it being just the two of them had lifted his spirits. Syrath was happy as always, if cold, and planned to go back in the pool in the dragon levels as soon as he got back.

Bilba straightened, putting her hands on the merlons and jumped up to stand on the small ledge in the gap between them.

Something caught her eye, an oddly placed flash of light where she wasn’t used to seeing light. She turned her head with a frown and caught it again, flickering from the top of the Spires that overlooked Erebor and Dale.

She frowned. There was nothing but trees up there, one of the far borders of Mirkwood, there shouldn’t be anything that would catch the light.

Syrath and Lyth were close, passing Dale and entering the barren area between it and the mountain.
They were flying lower than normal, the air too cold higher up to allow for comfortable, or even safe, passage. In another moment they would bank and wind around to the back where the opening to the dragon levels lay.

The light flashed again.

Bilba looked and felt her heart stop in her chest as something large, and black, flashed out from the Spires, spiraling through the air straight toward the dragons.

Bone deep horror ripped through her and she whipped around to face the dragons again. SYRATH!!!! she screamed. SYRATH, LOOK OUT!!!

She felt them react to her through their bonds, saw Syrath start to rise, blind to what her panic was about and responding by instinct, trying to rise higher than anything could reach him.

It wasn’t in time.

Scorching, red hot pain burned through the bond, raging through her body, igniting her nerves.

Red bloomed in the air around Syrath’s left wing, bursting out like a flower blooming midair and falling to the ground in a crimson shower.

Syrath shrieked, the sound echoing through the area, causing a few of the travelers in the area to cover their ears in pain.

Bilba screamed in tune, the sound so raw and harsh it ripped at her throat.

And then Syrath was dropping, spiraling out of the air and she was running, shoving past horrified guards and half falling down the stairs.

Waves of pain throbbed through her and she opened her bond with him wider, taking in as much of it as she could. She’d been through worse, he hadn’t.

People were gathered around the gates, frozen in horror.

Bilba shoved past them, pushing them aside in her haste to get through. Her lungs felt tight and her breathing was ragged.

She forced her way past the final ones in her way, tripping and falling only to shove back to her feet and continue running. She bolted through the gates…just as Syrath impacted.

He hit with a reverberating boom and the sickening crack of bone. Snow exploded around him, already stained red and all Bilba could feel was pain, so much pain, burning through her like a fire, raising a cold sweat on her skin, causing nausea to roil through her.

A second shriek rang out and Lyth was boiling past, a column of fire already erupting from her jaws, lighting the Spires and all the surrounding area into an instant, raging inferno.

Syrath lay like a carelessly discarded toy and Bilba charged toward him. She caught sight of Fili crouched by his side, a dazed look in his eyes, his movements sluggish.

He staggered to his feet as she arrived, struggling to focus on her.

Past him, Bilba caught sight of dark shapes running from the gates of Dale. They were closer to the city than they were Erebor and she felt a flash of relief that help would soon arrive.
She dropped in the snow by Syrath’s side, nearly gagging at the sight of a thick, metal arrow shaft driven nearly to the fletchings in the thick muscle of his wing. Blood seeped from it, running along the curves and grooves of his scales and wing to drop off onto the snow.

A black arrow. Someone had shot her dragon, a baby, with a black arrow.

On the top of the Spires, Lyth shrieked in rage again and Bilba spared a thought to hope Kili could calm her before she set all of Mirkwood on fire.

At the end of his wing his claws were mangled, one of the talons nearly ripped off and, further back, his tail was twisted at an unnatural angle.

*It hurts*, his mind whimpered in hers.

*I know*, Bilba said. She tried to open her link wider, gritting her teeth against the pain thundering through her. Fili, slowly regaining his senses, did the same, trying to take some of the pressure of the both of them. He was injured as well but not as badly. Over the bond she got the vague impression of him having pushed free before they’d landed, hitting the snow and being knocked around but not seriously hurt.

Bilba put her hands on the shaft, flinching as hot blood poured over her skin. It was already pooling beneath her, soaking through the cloth of her trousers.

*Where is everyone?* she demanded. *Why aren’t they here?*

*I’ve been less than a minute*, Fili said, his voice tight. *They’re on their way.*

Snow crunched and Bilba saw the figures she’d seen running from Dale had arrived. She dismissed them, focusing back on Syrath, putting her hands on his side and trying desperately to calm his rising panic.

*Call Xalanth*, she told him. *Tell him you need him.*

*I did. He’s coming.*

A hand grabbed her shoulder, spinning her around and Bilba opened her mouth to tell off whoever had touched her and dared tried to take her attention off Syrath even for a second.

It was further proof to how soft she’d gone that she almost didn’t register the fist coming at her face and only started to dodge a split second too late.

Had she been hit full on it likely would have shattered the bones in her face. As it was the fist caught her in a glancing blow, the force snapping her head back and sending her body with it. She spiraled and landed face first in the reddened snow, blackness crawling at her vision and her body defying her commands.

She heard shouting and a sharp cry of pain, felt Syrath trying to rise beside her.

*Kili*, she managed, reaching to the closest help available. *Kili, come back. Hurry.*

She pushed to her hands and knees and turned to look behind her.

The Men who’d come from Dale were on their way back into the city. Several of them had hold of Fili, his body limp in their arms. They shoved past the citizens gathered at the gate who, in their shock and terror, opened a path and let them through.
No, Bilba muttered, her head ringing. No.

Lyth landed next to her with a thud and, as if watching from underwater, she saw Kili slide off. He shouted something but she could barely hear him, his voice distorted, slow and far, far away. He drew his sword and then he was gone, running after the Men who’d taken Fili.

Bilba staggered to her feet. She took a single step after him and then stopped, her mind clearing.

Syrath.

She turned and found his eyes, glazed with pain and fear, focused on her.

*You have to go after him. Kili will be all alone. You have to help.*

You need me, Bilba said. Her bond with him hurt so much and the one with Fili was unnaturally silent and both needed her but there was only one of her and she felt like she was being torn in two and what should she do?

Go, Syrath said. *I'll be okay. Lyth is here and the others are coming.*

Others? Bilba looked to Erebor, and felt her eyes widen.

The sky was almost black with dragons pouring out from around the back of the mountain and the gates of Erebor were clogged with a vast force running toward them.

All the mountain was emptying, all coming to the aid of the kingdom’s Princes and a royal dragon.

Over her head Lyth rose up on her hind legs and bugled her rage and fear for her rider to the sky while, past that noise, Bilba heard the sharp crackle of flame raging atop the Spires.

Go now, Syrath ordered, sounding far older than she knew him to be. *I have everyone coming, they have no one. Go before it’s too late.*

Bilba nodded, her eyes so wide she thought she might never close them again, not even to blink. *I’ll be right back, with both of them. I promise.*

Then, before she became paralyzed entirely with indecision, she drew her sword and ran for Dale.

Where are the Princes?

Dwalin’s voice, cutting through the floods of pain radiating over Syrath’s bond.

I don’t know, Bilba said, her own panic continuing to mount. It was hard to breathe and there was so much pain and Fili still wasn’t answering her and neither was Kili and what if Syrath was hurt even worse than she thought or what if the people who took Fili decided to hurt him and why? Why was this happening? WHY? I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know. They shot Syrath, adad, and then they took Fili and then Kili went after them and I don’t know where either of them are and Syrath is hurt so badly and I can’t hear Fili and he isn’t talking to me and I don’t know—

Stop. Get yourself under control before you get yourself killed. His voice was commanding, brooking no disobedience and she obeyed. She bolted through the gates of Dale and saw a young man pointing frantically down a side street. Bilba paused for an instant, forcing her eyes closed and focusing on her breathing.

She had to calm down. She was no help to anyone like this.
It was a lure, she managed. The attack wasn’t against Syrath, it was Fili. Men came out of Dale and assaulted us. They took Fili. Kili went in pursuit and I’m going after them both. We need help.

It’s coming. Hold on until we arrive.

Bilba felt herself starting to calm. She reached deep inside, finding the spark of rage already beginning to build against those who’d hurt the ones she loved. It wasn’t the same type of anger she’d built her life on for so many years. She didn’t need it to keep moving, it wasn’t vital for her survival and it wasn’t founded on a lie.

It was founded on vengeance.

She controlled it, using it to burst through her panic and fear. When she opened her eyes again a moment later there was molten steel in them.

How dare they hurt her dragon.

How dare they take Fili from her.

They would pay, dearly.

She grabbed ahold of Syrath’s pain and wrapped it around her like a cloak, using it to fan the flames of anger already burning through her veins. For the first time since she’d escaped she consciously called up memories of Moria and, specifically, the Arena. Her body tensed and her chin lifted in defiance. Her hand tightened on the hilt of her sword. With her other hand she reached into her pocket and drew out her dagger.

She started down the side street and those in her way fled at the sight of her.

She was grace and beauty, feared by the darkness and cheered by the light.

A blade was her herald and the dead howled in her wake.

She was Orcrist and those she hunted would rue the day they had crossed her.

***

She rounded the corner and the street narrowed into an alley, blocked at one end by a brick wall.

Kili was pinned against it, facing down a large group of Men. He had lost his sword somehow and, while he had his bow, his quiver of arrows lay near Bilba’s feet. The alley itself was narrow meaning, if they attacked, they’d have to do it one at a time.

In other words, they were all fools and she couldn’t have asked for it to be more perfect.

One of the Men saw her and sneered.

Bilba smiled in response.

She stepped forward and spun in an almost lazy circle. As she came about her hand snapped out, the full force of her body behind it, and her dagger embedded itself in the Man’s shoulder, pinning him to the wall behind him, a few feet from Kili.
He screamed but she’d already dismissed him, focusing on the others coming toward her. A few stayed back with Kili and she saw him duck, a fist flying as he fought to protect himself from the blades several of them held. He wouldn’t last long, not in such tight quarters.

She’d have to make this quick then.

Bilba crouched and grabbed the quiver of arrows, then stood in time to drive her sword into the gut of another attacker. She twisted and he fell to the side and she let go of the hilt, letting him fall.

The movement had her already half turned and she followed through, driving an elbow into the next man’s face. That continued bringing her around and she threw the quiver, arching it over the heads of the other attackers.

She dropped and the Man lunging for her lost his balance trying to adjust. She planted her shoulder in his stomach, using his own momentum to send him over and behind her.

She pulled her boot knives out and surged to her feet, driving them into the throats of her next two attackers.

Unfortunately this left her open to the third man coming up behind her. He grabbed her arm, spun her around and slammed her against the wall, hard.

He barely had time to raise a hand, however, before arrows were suddenly peppering his body, from two different directions.

More flashed by her, coming from the entrance of the alley, faster than she would have thought possible and then she and Kili were the only ones left standing.

Bilba turned toward the entrance of the alley and saw Vili, his eyes hard. He slung his bow over his shoulder and strode toward her. “Are you alright?”

Bilba nodded and he continued on past her, going to check on Kili. She saw him put a hand around the back of Kili’s head and press his forehead to his son’s. Kili, in turn, shut his eyes and lowered his head, letting out a breath in relief.

Bilba stepped over the remains of one of the men, retrieved her sword from the corpse it was currently lodged in and went to the man she’d pinned to the wall. Kili came up beside her, an arrow already nocked and aimed at the man’s face.

Kili, Bilba, Orcrist, asked mildly. Would you be so kind as to ask where they’ve taken Fili?

He did as she asked. The man responded by swearing at him, his face twisted in pain.

“What should we do?” Kili asked.

Vili stepped up next to them. The fact he won’t talk with a dagger in his shoulder and an arrow in his face is quite telling don’t you think?

Kili frowned. “Is it?”

Oh yes, Bilba answered, catching on to what Vili was implying. He’s a sycophant. He probably doesn’t even know. It’s no matter. I know how to find him now.

“Is this a party anyone can join?” a voice, hard with anger and tension, asked. “Or is it by personal invite only?”
Dwalin was standing at the entrance of the alleyway, his sword in hand. Next to him was...Nori, yes, that was who she needed.

She went to him. *Every city has a criminal underground,* she signed. *What are the odds the one in Dale was unaware, or uninvolved, in a plot to attack a drake and kidnap the Crown Prince of Erebor?*

“Zero,” Nori said shortly, “especially given how it was staged from within Dale and was somehow kept from my own agents.”

Behind them Vili approached, one arm tight around Kili. “The element that runs Dale, do you know where their headquarters are located?”

“There are three main groups,” Nori said. “Which would you like to start with?”

“Whichever is closest,” Dwalin growled. He glanced at her. “You think you’re just going to waltz in and ask?”

*I wasn’t intending on asking anything,* Bilba replied. *I plan on ordering them.*

He raised an eyebrow. “And if they say no?”

*Then the first person to tell me what I want to know gets to live,* Bilba said sharply. If the criminals of Dale had wanted longer lifespans they should have stayed away from Syrath and Fili. They hadn’t, and would soon learn the folly of their error.

“This way then,” Nori said and promptly turned and walked away.

“What are we doing?” Kili asked.

*Getting Fili back,* Bilba said shortly.

She followed Noir and heard the others fall in behind them.

“I don’t suppose I can convince you to go back to Erebor, can I?” she heard Vili ask Kili.

“No,” he said shortly. “You can’t.”

Bilba stretched out along her bond and felt a response from Syrath. He was surrounded, Xalanth and Lyth both crouched over him and healers from the mountain swarming about him. They’d given him something that had numbed the pain, the worst of it already seeping away. It had left him equally dazed and half asleep and she left him to it, not wishing to bring him back to awareness when he was still in so much pain.

From Fili, she still felt nothing, just the background hum she felt when he was sleeping. That meant he was unconscious and unable to tell her where he was...but it also meant he was alive.

Nori pointed ahead of him toward a ramshackle building set back in the shadows of several larger buildings. It was on one of the smaller, back streets, far from the center of town and the goings on of decent people. Two burly, dangerous looking men loaded down with prominently displayed weapons they probably thought made them look deadly ran inside at their approach, slamming the door shut behind them.

They were undoubtedly warning the others inside and preparing for their arrival.

Let them.
Bilba strode straight up to the rickety, half rotted wooden door, lifted her foot and in one motion kicked it open.

Inside hard looking men and woman were in the process of scrambling off stools and from tables, pulling sharp, wicked looking weapons from within coats and clothing.

*Wait for me*, she sent to Fili, knowing full well he couldn’t hear her. *I’ll be there soon.*

Then, with a smile more feral than it was kind, she lifted her sword and walked inside.
“What do you mean he can’t be moved?”

Thorin’s nerves had been pushed as far as they could go, making his tone of voice in addressing the healer…less than kind to say the least.

The dwarf in question, probably chosen to speak to him by virtue of how new he was, looked about ready to pass out. Getting a job as a dragon healer practically guaranteed getting close to the nobility, possibly even the royal family, no matter the station one had been born to, but it was doubtful this was how the dwarf had envisioned such a meeting going.

The dwarf, so young he barely had his first beard, wrung his hands together anxiously. “It’s just that-” he stammered, “the arrow – you see – it--”

“Spit it out,” Thorin growled. His eyes to where Syrath was curled in a ball, now drugged into a deep sleep. Xalanth was crouched over him, his flanks moving rapidly and his eyes so wide they were near perfect circles. Controlling him had been out of the question, at least until Balin had reached him. He was sitting against Xalanth’s chest, forcing the dragon to stay still or risk harming his own rider.

The Dragon Healer took a deep breath. “We don’t know how deep the arrow went, or what it may have hit. If we try pulling it out and it’s acting as a plug in something important, he could die instantly or bleed out. If we move him and it’s close to something vital it could shift and cause a fatal injury and then he would die instantly or bleed out.”

“What then?” Thorin said. “We can’t just leave him on the Mahal forsaken plain!”

“We’ve got the best healers we have already here,” the dwarf said, “and we’ve sent to Mirkwood to ask for help from theirs.” He hesitated, clearly not wanting to be the one to deliver the next bit. “We’re going to have to remove the arrow out here. Best case is the muscle of his wing kept it from getting in too far and we can just pull it out and sew it up behind.”

“And the worst case?” Thorin asked. His eyes flickered to the Spires where the remnants of flames still licked at the trees. The elves had shown up immediately, using their power to dampen the fire while dragons retrieved water and snow to drop on the flames. He would probably owe Thranduil an apology later but it was the least of his worries at the moment. The Elven King might not be happy about the fire but Thorin doubted the elf would question the motivations.

The Healer swallowed, his answer unspoken but clear.

Thorin swore and wished Lyth hadn’t been so thorough so he could have killed some of the bastards himself. “Do what you can.”

He strode past the dwarf, making his way to where Dis stood staring in the direction of Dale. She’d wanted to go in herself but Thorin had ordered her to stay. It was bad enough Fili and Kili were in there, the last thing they needed were more royals in an unknown situation with an unknown number of assailants.

Dwalin, he sent out.

Nori and the girl think the Dale underground is involved so we’re working on getting one of them to tell us where Fili’s been taken.
How are you doing that?

The girl’s been putting Dale’s Guard out of work. Figure eventually someone will show up to ask us to stop. How’s Syrath?

Don’t know yet. There’s no reason to give Bilba more cause to worry but I imagine she’ll figure it out on her own eventually.

What makes you think she hasn’t already? The girl’s no fool.

Thorin stopped by Dis’ side. Her body was rigid, her face set. She had her arms crossed, her fingers digging into the fabric of her sleeves.

“He’s still not talking to me,” she said shortly.

“He’s alive,” Thorin responded. “They’ll get him back.”

Dis never looked at him. “If they don’t…”

“They will,” Thorin said.

“This ends,” Dis said, her voice tight. “Do you hear me, Thorin? I’m done with always being a step behind. I’m done. You’re the Mahal forsaken, bloody King. Do something, or Durin help me I will. I’m not losing anyone else, do you hear me? Not one.”

“Neither am I,” Thorin replied, his voice dark. As soon as the attack had happened he’d given orders for the guard on the Treasury, put in place after the last incident, to be doubled. He’d also sent some of Nori’s best agents to go question the dwarf in the dungeons again. The dwarf was a traitor, deserving a sentence of death, and Thorin was tired of the bastard sitting in his cell insisting he knew nothing.

He’d also given orders to have Beryl and Nar taken into custody, immediately. There was still no hard proof and it would probably damage him somewhat in the eyes of the nobility and his Council but Thorin no longer cared.

Dis was right.

He was the King under the Mountain. He had a Council with the power to give suggestions but ultimate authority lay with him and he was past the point where he planned to be constrained and forced to pander to his nobles.

Nori and Dwalin were both convinced Nar was involved and, even without their suspicions, there was more than enough circumstantial evidence to warrant their arrest and questioning.

He wasn’t going to stand back any longer and be forced to watch the dwarf who was most likely behind the assassination attempts walk the halls of his kingdom in complete freedom.

Dwalin’s voice sounded in his head. One of my soldiers just reported in. Beryl and Nar are gone.

Thorin’s lip curled and his hands tightened into fists. Find them.

We will.

A commotion broke out and Thorin turned to see a contingent of elven dragons coming toward them.

He went to meet them, passing Syrath who still slept deeply and perfectly still, kept that way to keep
him from pain and from accidentally moving and sending the arrow in deeper.

Behind him, Dis continued to wait and watch for her sons, husband and surrogate daughter to come back to her.

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Bilba shoved, pushing the now dead weight off the end of her sword to crash to the ground with a thud.

She swayed in place and shut her eyes as black spots swam across her vision. Her breath came in harsh pants and she was drenched with sweat. She was grateful she’d thought to put gloves on before leaving, otherwise her hands would be to slick to grip her sword. Fatigue hung on her like a weight, trying to convince her to sit down.

Her bond with Syrath was wide open but she had adjusted to the pain somewhat, become used to it as much as it was possible to. Now she deliberately tuned back into it, calling it to the forefront of her mind. It burned like liquid fire through her veins, ignited her nerves, forced back the fatigue and called up adrenaline in its place.

It was how she’d survived in the Arena and it was how she would survive now.

She opened her eyes, just in time to see Dwalin shove a survivor against the wall. Vili and Kili stood on either side of him while Nori hung back, watching the door.

She’d lost track of the number of rat holes they’d chased the vermin of Dale into. This one was in one of the nicer areas of Dale, a small home belonging to some idiot with money who fancied himself more important than he really was.

Currently, the man was threatening all sorts of retribution, from his cohorts or from the City Guard.

“Your friends are dead,” Dwalin said shortly, “so I doubt they’ll be much help, and the City Guard hasn’t exactly been leaping to your defense now have they?”

The City Guard hadn’t been doing much of anything in fact. Bilba imagined they were more than happy to see the underground substantially lessened, if not wiped out entirely.

“I can pay you,” the man insisted, “whatever you want.”

“What I want,” Dwalin said, his tone dangerous, “is the Crown Prince of Erebor. Now how about you tell me how to get in touch with your boss or I’ll just kill you here and go find someone who’s actually useful to me?”

“I think,” a voice said casually from behind them, “that you’ll find I’m the one you’re looking for.”

It was about time, Bilba thought. She turned to see an unassuming man, tall and thin with short dark hair and dressed in average clothing.

Kili strode past her. He’d run out of arrows and had gone to an extra sword his father had given him. He raised it and pressed the point into the hollow of the man’s throat.

“Where’s my brother?”
The man looked past him, his eyes finding Bilba. “I’ll talk to you,” he said shortly, “alone.”

Kili snarled and pushed the sword forward, until a slender line of red appeared on the man’s throat. “Or I could just kill you right here.”

The man shrugged, unconcerned. “If you like, but then you’ll have to find someone else who has the information you want. Can your brother afford that delay?”

“How do we even know you have the information we want?” Dwalin drawled, stepping up behind Bilba.

“What’s to lose?” the man responded. He held his arms out to his side. “Search me. The girl can keep her weapons, we’ll go in a room and you’ll be on the other side. She needs help, all she has to do is call.”

I’ll do it, Bilba said immediately. Vili started to object but she cut him off, He’s right. We’re wasting time.

With that she stalked past the sniveling homeowner through the open door he was cowering next to. The room beyond was an office, featuring a large desk, bookcases and rug and a massive window at the back overlooking a garden outside.

She turned to face the door and leaned against the desk, crossing her ankles and arms.

Outside the office Dwalin and Nori did a very good job of searching the man before allowing him to follow her inside. Dwalin leaned in and grabbed the doorknob. “He tries anything just kill him and be done with it. We’ll find Fili, with or without him.”

With that he closed the door, leaving her alone with the human.

“Well,” the man said, copying her position against the door, “you certainly landed on your feet didn’t you? From a nameless slave to Azog’s top fighter and then, when you escape, you manage to land yourself a dragon and a Crown Prince. I’m impressed.”

Bilba’s eyes narrowed. Most people knew about slaves in Moria but they didn’t know about the Arena and, even if they did, there was no way for him to know whose slave she’d been. The man was a potential rider so she reached out to form a link. She could break it down after. Do I know you?

In response the man pulled off the jacket and vest he wore and then reached to take his shirt off. Bilba raised an eyebrow but gave no other reaction.

The shirt came off, revealing a torso and arms marked with scars, some clearly caused by bladed weapons, others by a lash. He turned, showing his back to be similarly marked. Her eyes went to his shoulder and saw a brand there, different from the one she bore but cut in just as deeply.

He turned around again, dragging his shirt back on. “You aren’t the first to escape from the Arena, just the most well-known. My name is Tamrin, by the way.”

I don’t care, Bilba said shortly. I never faced you in the Arena, if I had one of us would be dead.

“No,” Tamrin agreed. “The orc who had me was barely able to afford a fighter and wasn’t foolish enough to try pitting me against the likes of you.” He grinned suddenly, “I fought a few times after you and watched your fights. You were impressive.”
I’m still impressive, Bilba snarled. And you’re about to get a demonstration of it if you don’t stop wasting my time.

“I don’t know as much as you think,” Tamrin started, and quickly held up a hand as she began to straighten in anger. “I was approached by a group of Men who wanted to stage an assassination, not against your Prince, against the brother.”

And that makes it better? Bilba asked.

Tamrin shrugged, “It was just business. They paid well and, as I said, it wasn’t against your Prince. I wouldn’t have touched him. Last thing I wanted was you on my tail.”

I would have come after you no matter what.

“I can see that now,” Tamrin said, “this whole thing has been one giant mess. They didn’t expect the Heir to get in the way, when he did they went after him instead of the brother.” He frowned. “I have no idea why they took him instead of killing him and, no, I don’t know who they worked for. It was a business transaction, they wanted men, a black arrow and the means to fire it. I provided, they paid.”

And you have no idea where they would have gone? Bilba said in disbelief. In a city where you run the underground?

“Part of the underground,” Tamrin corrected. He straightened and reached into a pocket of his jacket, pulling out a folded square of paper. “I had them tracked when they came through the city with the Prince. They took him into the sewers. I marked how to get there on this map. After that I have no idea where they went.”

Bilba strode forward, snatching the paper from him. If you’re misleading me, I will find you.

“And kill me I suppose?” Tamrin asked, mockingly, “Or make me wish I’d never been born? A little cliché don’t you think?”

Bilba locked eyes with him. You provided the tools used to shoot my dragon and kidnap my One. If either of them dies, or if this map turns out to be false I will find you and I will personally deliver you to the gates of Moria.

For the first time Tamrin’s expression faltered, barely.

Bilba grabbed the doorknob and paused, her back to him. How did you get out of Moria?

“The orc who had me liked to use me as a bodyguard on his journeys,” Tamrin said. “I didn’t do a very good job of it. What about you?”

Bilba studied the doorknob under her hand. I just walked out. No one stopped me.

“Interesting isn’t it?” Tamrin said mildly, “How fear held us far better than any actual chains.”

Bilba twisted to look at him. You were given a second chance and this is how you choose to spend it?

Tamrin shrugged. “The world screwed me. I’m just returning the favor. You’re the odd one, believing you can take on Moria on your own.” He cocked his head, considering. “Though, I will admit, I can’t argue with the results. Who knows, maybe you got it right after all.” He frowned. “Speaking of Moria, there’s something else I need to tell you. I didn’t know about it at first, if I had I
never would have taken the job."

Bilba’s eyes narrowed. He’d taken a job that included setting people up to shoot a baby dragon and kidnap the Heir to Erebor, what could he possibly have found out later that would have put him off the job?

Several minutes later she pulled the door open and walked out, fast. She shoved the map into Dwalin’s hands and went straight out the front door, letting them catch up.

She had to put distance between her and Tamrin before she killed him.

Her eyes were wide and her breathing harsh. Inside it felt like a storm was raging, her emotions roiling. She rounded a corner and paused, placing a hand against a brick wall and leaning over, her eyes fixed on the ground. Her stomach clenched with nausea and she gripped her sword, so tight she could feel every ridge of the hilt under her fingers.

Fili had made the sword…Fili…and now…now Fili was with him…he was with him and the last time someone she’d loved had been…

She shut her eyes and clenched her teeth, her chest heaving with the effort to draw in enough air. She dragged her fingers against the wall, pain spiking through her fingers as rough stone dragged against her skin. She was nearly hyperventilating and struggled to get it under control, gritting her teeth to bite back a scream…of rage…of fear…of pain…she didn’t know.

She reached out for Syrath but he was still unconscious, as was Fili. Both of them were gone, leaving her alone when they’d promised she wouldn’t be.

In the end, why did she always end up alone?

“What did he say to you?”

She lifted her head to see her father standing there, Vili, Kili and Nori behind him. Kili’s eyes were wide, determined, but she could see the fear in them as well.

Pushing off the wall, Bilba went to him and hugged him. He returned the embrace immediately.

“We’re going to get him back, she heard him say but couldn’t tell which of them he was trying to reassure.

It helped regardless. Something inside her, coiled near to breaking, eased and when she pulled away a moment the fear had lessened. Kili, too, looked more settled, fierceness overtaking his own fear.

Bilba swallowed and readjusted her grip on her sword. She turned and Vili, Dwalin and Nori were all there, older, wiser, and more experienced than her or Kili.

It wasn’t all on her…it wasn’t like last time…it wouldn’t be like last time…

Not again.

She tried to focus. He said the attack wasn’t targeted at Fili, it was against Kili and it was intended to be an assassination, not a kidnapping. And, she paused again to take a breath as her emotions wavered, he said there are orcs involved. He saw them after, when his people witnessed them drag Fili into the sewers.

But it wasn’t just any orc he’d seen.
Not just any orc at all.

From the midst of her spirit flame began to rise up once more, overtaking the fear that had nearly stymied her.

Not just any orc.

*That* orc.

Rage burst forth like a dam breaking, flooding through her body. The fear vanished, the same way it had the first time she’d seen *him* from the Arena floor, sitting in the stands, and she snarled in anger, slapping her open palm against the wall, feeling the sharp burst of pain as it hit.

*We’re wasting time*, she snapped.

With that she started moving again, her resolve solid once more. She’d already looked at the map and knew where to go, she didn’t need to see it again.

*Hang on Fili*, she sent, knowing full well he couldn’t hear her. *We’re coming.*

And if *that* orc was there when she arrived…if he was there…finally…after so long.

If he was there…

Well then…

Old words, from an equally old memory flashed through her mind. “*I’ll kill you! Do you hear me? I swear I’ll kill you!!*”

It was time to make good on that threat.

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His head hurt.

Fili muffled a groan and held still, trying to process what was happening.

He remembered flying, then Bilba had screamed a warning and then…

Keeping as still as possible he inventoried his body, noting the nasty headache, the bruises and soreness. Nothing felt particularly serious and he relaxed fractionally, but kept his eyes shut and his body still as he cast out further, trying to take in as much information as possible without letting anyone know he was awake.

He was seated in a chair, his hands pulled behind the back and bound at the wrists with rough rope. He was dressed only in a tunic, trousers and boots and couldn’t feel any of his weapons.

Well, almost any of them. Whoever had taken him had been sloppy. They hadn’t bothered to actually lash him to the chair itself and had left on the thick leather wristband he typically wore around his left wrist. It was on his bare skin, under his tunic so it was possible they hadn’t seen it.

Shame on them for not checking.
He couldn’t hear a sound and, deciding to risk it, opened his eyes and raised his head to take in his surroundings.

He was in a small room barely large enough to qualify as a closet. Aside from him and his chair the only other furniture was a rickety looking table with a lantern on it. A door was set in the wall across from him, wooden and windowless, giving no hint as to what lay beyond it.

It was cold, but that told him nothing. It was winter, after all, and the bastards had taken most of his clothing.

His mind went to Syrath and his heart jumped with worry. He reached out but the dragon was deeply unconscious and didn’t respond. He could still feel pain from the wounds Syrath had suffered, the broken tail and talons and the sensation of the arrow still sunk in deep, a fact that surprised him. Why hadn’t they removed it yet?

Bilba? Can you hear me?

The answer was immediate. Fili! Are you okay?

For now, he said. I have no idea where I am.

You’re in the sewer, she said instantly. We don’t know exactly where yet, but we will.

He snorted, unsurprised she’d already tracked down where he’d been taken. How’s Syrath?

Hurt, she replied. It was a black arrow, they’re made of metal with a steel tip, meant to pierce dragon scale. They didn’t hit his scale though, they hit his muscle.

Fili frowned, his gut clenching at the implications. Muscle is dense, you know it as well as I do. You thrust a sword in and it wraps around it, almost forces it back out. What are the Healers saying?

Thorin reports he’ll be fine, Bilba said shortly. It’s possible he even believes it.

We need to get back to him, Fili said. Now.

Dwalin broke in before Bilba could respond, and then his mother and Kili after that. As he spoke to them, Fili managed to get his fingers under his wristband and reached the small knife he kept there. He slid it out and had just gotten it in position to start cutting at the ropes when he heard the sound of a key in the lock of the door.

It opened, and Beryl walked through. Beyond her, Fili caught a brief glimpse of a narrow, dark hallway with water running down the center of it, definitely the sewers then.

Beryl shut the door and faced him. Her eyes were huge and lit with an almost manic light. She was breathing harshly and her hands were gripping the front of her dress, so tight her knuckles were white.

“Fili,” she said, her voice strained, “so nice of you to join us.”

“Beryl,” Fili said, flatly. “So you and your father have been behind everything after all. We should have arrested you ages ago.”

“Probably,” Beryl agreed, “but you didn’t so now here you are. It’s okay though, “she continued, almost to herself, “we won’t be here long. We just have to wait a little while and then we’ll be on our way.” She grimaced. “Not a moment too soon. To think I’d be stuck in the sewers with vermin...”
Her voice trailed off as she spoke until she was muttering to herself under her breath.

Fili studied her, calculating. As he did, he carefully moved his hands and started working the knife behind him against the ropes, hiding a flinch every time the blade accidentally nicked his skin instead of the ropes. “What are we waiting for?”

Beryl walked over to him and leaned forward, putting her hands on his legs. Fili palmed the knife, closing his hand around it as she put her face mere inches from his.

“For your brother of course,” she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “He still has to die. He would have died already if you hadn’t gotten in the way.” She settled down into a crouch, crossed her arms on his legs and put her head on them. “It’ll be alright though,” she repeated in a soft, almost singsong voice, “it won’t hurt forever and I’ll be there to help you through it.”

“You kill my brother and you’re right,” Fili agreed. “It won’t hurt forever because I’ll kill you myself.” Over the bonds he passed the news to Dwalin and his father. He doubted Kili could be kept away, he knew if their positions were reversed he certainly wouldn’t be, but they needed to know he was still being targeted. “So you’re keeping me here to lure him in? Why? What’s he done?”

“He’s a Durin,” Beryl said simply. “You are too, but I like you so you get to live.”

“I get to live?” Fili repeated, “Since when? As I recall you tried to have me killed too, multiple times.”

Beryl sighed and pushed to her feet. “I begged daddy not to but he just wouldn’t listen. He’s very angry at you all, you know. Very angry.” She leaned forward again and took his face in her hands, digging her fingers into his skin when he tried to pull away. “But I fixed all that. Daddy has to do what I say and I told him he had to save you, so he did. And now everything will be perfect and we can be together, forever.”

She tried to kiss him but Fili wrenched his face to the side, grimacing as the action caused her nails to rake along his face.

Beryl glowered and straightened. “You shouldn’t be like that. You should thank me for sparing you.”

“You want me to thank you?” Fili asked in disbelief. As he spoke he moved the knife and began working again, slicing through the ropes binding his wrists. “When you’ve been trying to kill my family?”

“You killed mine first!” Beryl snapped, anger showing for the first time. Then, almost as soon as it was there, it was gone again, her face smoothing. “It has to be done,” she said, gently as if she were explaining to a child, “the Durins are a scourge, a curse upon the dwarves. You get to live because I want it but the rest of you have to go, so someone better can take over.”

Fili raised an eyebrow. “Someone better? Like your father I imagine?”

“My father,” Beryl agreed, “and me. Your family, and that little slut who doesn’t know her place, will die and, then, my father and I will take over and make Erebor better.”

“You’re insane,” Fili growled. “Even if you did manage to kill us all you’d never have Erebor. It’d go to Dain, or his son, or any number of others in line for it. Not you.”

Beryl gave him a twisted smile. “Don’t be so sure. I’ll still have you. With your family dead you’ll be the rightful King. You’ll just answer to me and my father.”
“Never,” Fili vowed.

“Never is a very long time,” Beryl said, calmly. “Just think, Fili. You’re barely sixty, and we live to five hundred. That’s a long, long, long time to say no. You’ll come around, eventually. We’ll make sure of it.”

She turned away as if to leave and Fili mentally kicked himself for letting his emotions get the best of him.

“Are you trying to get the key again?” he hazarded, trying to keep her talking. The more information they could get the better. “Is that why you’re going after my brother? As a distraction, like you did with my mother?”

Beryl turned slowly to face him and Fili raised his chin, putting on an expression of assurance. “That is your plan, isn’t it? You think you can somehow get the keys, which is impossible by the way since you don’t know where they all are or what they look like. Then you think you’ll find Morgoth’s cage, which has been lost for centuries and, then…” he lifted his eyebrows in question, “what? You have some insane idea that you’ll wake up Morgoth and use him to take over Erebor? You realize the myth about controlling him is just a myth, right? The ones who imprisoned him didn’t do it so someone could come along and use him for their own purpose.”

Beryl was looking at him, her face completely blank. Behind his back, Fili felt the last strands of rope part. He grabbed them before they could fall off and held them and the knife loosely in his hand. As he did he pressed on, locking eyes with the young noblewoman. “You do understand how insane that plan is, don’t you?” His eyes narrowed. “You’re terrified, Beryl, I can see it in your eyes. This is your father’s doing, not yours. Most people would settle for just trying to assassinate us but he actually thinks he’s going to take over, and he wants to go to such an extreme to do it? It’s insane, Beryl. You have to know that. He’s lost his mind.”

The woman’s face twisted. An instant later she was in his face again, her fingers digging into the muscles of his thighs. “You think you’re so smart, your Highness,” she spat, “but, then, that’s the problem with you Durins, isn’t it? You think you’re always right, that nothing you do is ever wrong, and the rest of us have to suffer for it!”

“I lost people at Moria too, Beryl,” Fili said, his voice tense. “You aren’t the only one who suffered!”

She kissed him, hard. It barely lasted a second, too fast for him to react, and then she was pulling back an inch or two. “See what I mean?” she said. “You don’t know everything, and you can’t stop everything, not even if you’re an almighty Durin.” She shifted and leaned around until her mouth was near his ear. “Maybe today was about the key. Maybe it was about your brother.” She pulled away and put her face so close their noses were nearly touching. When she spoke again her voice had gone back to that eerie calm, her tone singsong once more. “Or, maybe, it’s about something else entirely. You think you know what’s going on? You don’t know anything.”

Fili smiled coldly. “Perhaps not, but you know one thing I do know?”

He lunged and, an instant later, had her on his lap, one hand clamped over her mouth, the other twisting her arm behind her back. “I know,” he growled in her ear, “how to keep a prisoner from getting his damn ropes off.”

She struggled, kicking at his legs and trying to throw an elbow into his ribs. Fili ignored her, reaching over to find the knife he’d dropped on the ground. It meant releasing her arm, leading to her getting a few good jabs in, but he refused to give her the satisfaction of knowing how well she’d connected.
He retrieved the knife and managed to slice off a strip of fabric from the hem of his tunic. He then, rather cheerfully he would admit, gagged her.

After that he got up and forced her into the chair, using the remnants of the rope to lash her wrists and ankles to the chair.

“See?” he said straightening, “that’s how you tie someone up, Beryl.”

She glared at him, seething, and his mood darkened again.

“I felt some sympathy for you at one time,” he said, “but I can assure you that’s gone now. As far as I’m concerned you’re no better than your father, and will face the same treatment.”

With that he dismissed her, turning toward the door.

*I’m free. I’m going to head out.*

*Be careful, Dwalin’s voice came. There aren’t just mercenaries down there. We’ve got reports that orcs are involved.*

Fili sighed. “Of course there are.” He switched, not wanting Beryl to hear anything. *I’m surprised Nar would work with them. He may hate us for sending his sons to Moria but it was orcs that actually killed them.*

He’d been sending everything Beryl had said to him to the Guard Captain as she’d spoken, ensuring Erebor would know what was going on no matter what happened to him.

*We’re still missing something,* Dwalin responded. *The prisoner back at the Mountain, the one caught trying to get into the Treasury, is dead. He killed himself in his cell, probably just after the attack happened.*

Fili paused. *That’s bad. Who told him what happened?*

*Don’t know, will be finding out. He’s not the first or last to kill himself when we got close to the truth. You really think Nar’s plan to take over Erebor is inspiring this kind of loyalty? This level of fanaticism? Most work in return for gold or power, not so they can willingly off themselves when they get caught.*

*Do you want me to bring Beryl with me? We can try questioning her to find out.*

*No,* Dwalin said immediately. *It’ll be hard enough for you to get out. You’ve got her tied up and we’re almost there. We’ll get her.*

*Alright,* Fili said. *Keep an eye on Kili. They still want him.*

*We’ve got him. Worry about yourself.*

Fili nodded and went to the door. He leaned against it, pressing his ear to the wood. He heard nothing from the other side so, steeling himself, he opened it and stepped out, pulling it shut behind him.

The corridor outside was empty, the only sound the trickle of water running down the center.

Fili kept to the wall, trying to blend into the shadows and avoid making noise in the water at the same time, and made his way down the hall. If he were lucky he’d find he was moving away from the enemy and could simply leave without ever being seen.
Voices sounded from ahead of him, echoing off the wall, and he scowled.

He should have known better. He was never lucky.

_You could just turn around, go the other way._

_I could_, Fili agreed with his brother. _But who’s to say they aren’t that way as well?_

_True enough. We’re in the sewers. They run under all of Dale, it might take a while to find you._

Fili could hear the fear and anxiety in his brother’s voice. _You’re the one they want dead, Kili, not me._

_What if they change their mind?_

Fili didn’t answer. He reached out to Bilba and felt her bond respond but she didn’t speak. She’d been very quiet and he could feel the turmoil she was in. She was controlling it by cloaking herself in a mixture of rage and Syrath’s pain, not particularly healthy but he left her to it.

He had an equal amount of anger flowing through him, after all, and Syrath’s pain thrummed along his nerves, the injustice of it all making him even angrier.

The voices drew nearer. There were two of them, speaking Common rather than Black Speech. Water splashed and Fili drew back against the wall as two Men strode past him. There was no sign of anyone behind them.

Fili’s eyes zeroed in on the knife one of them was carrying in a small scabbard at the small of his back. He took a breath and stepped out behind them. Before they could register his presence he snatched the knife and re-sheathed it in the man’s kidney, followed by his lung.

The Man went down with barely a sound, his friend joining him an instant later.

Fili knelt and took a knife off the second man, sliding it into his boot, before retrieving the sword the man carried.

He stood, the sword in one hand and the knife from the first man in his other.

As he did more voices sounded from ahead of him. He turned to go the other way, only to draw up short as an orc walked into view. Before he could attack it roared, drawing a knife with one hand.

Fili sighed. _I’m about to make it easier for you to find me. Just follow the sound of battle._

The orc rushed forward at him.

Fili raised his sword and went to work.

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_Any time you want to find me that’d be great._

_We’re trying. It’s like a Mahal cursed maze down here. Uncle’s sent more soldiers in, they’ll be here soon._
Not soon enough. Fili ducked, barely missing a blow, and then lunged, driving his sword deep into the ribs of the orc standing over him. It went down, revealing three more behind it.

Fili waded forward, stepping over the orc he’d just downed. Past it, trailing behind him, were at least a dozen more, orcs and mercenaries alike.

He wasn’t going to make it; that much was certain. There were far more than he’d thought there would be, and they were coming from both directions. The corridor was narrow, making fighting difficult, and he had nowhere to go except through a seemingly endless stream of enemies.

They’d herded him into the water to slow him. It went to his knees and was ice cold, sucking the strength from him. In contrast, it only went to the shins of his attackers, giving them still another advantage in addition to their numbers.

Two came at him, an orc and a man, from both directions.

Fili threw his knife at the man, watching it sink into his throat, before he turned to drive his sword into the orc.

Another was right behind it, slamming into him before he could pull his sword out of the orc he’d just killed.

He was driven back, his hands losing hold of the sword, and hit the water. It closed over his head, the shock of the cold causing him to instinctively suck in a breath. Water gushed in and he struggled to get up.

He burst out of the water and gagged, vomiting water and struggling to breathe.

Hands grabbed him, wrenching his arms behind his back. They dragged him out of the water and shoved him onto his hands and knees on the stone walkway running alongside it. Fili knelt on his hands and knees and continued to expel water, his breath coming in short gasps.

He could hear his family and Bilba asking him if he was alright but, for the moment, didn’t have the strength to answer.

A foot caught him and pain exploded in his ribs. He fell onto his side and was rolled onto his back.

The same foot came down on his throat, pressing down on his jugular. Fili gagged and grabbed the foot with both hands, trying to get it off but it didn’t budge.

Standing over him, he saw a huge orc leering down at him. It had sheets of metal shoved into its body, stringy bits of hair clung stubbornly to its skull and one, milky, dead eye.

Bolg, Bilba’s voice sounded in his head, the word a snarl.

Bolg. Fili knew that orc, not from his own experience, but Bilba’s. The orc lifted its head, looking further down the corridor and Fili saw torchlight flicker for an instant off a gold earring in one ear.

In his mind, Bilba screamed, her rage and hatred for the orc so intense it was near irrational, so powerful it was a wonder things around her didn’t spontaneously burst into flame.

Footsteps sounded. Bolg increased pressure and Fili arched his body, his legs moving ineffectually as he struggled to free himself.

Nar knelt beside him. “I hope this illustrates how hopeless your situation is. You won’t be escaping,
Fili couldn’t speak with the pressure on his throat but did his best to convey his feelings nonetheless.

Nar made a tsking sound. “Durins, you never learn when to give up, do you? Perhaps, if you had, my sons would still be alive.” He paused, his mind clearly somewhere else. “No matter,” he said finally. “Soon enough the world will be free of your cursed bloodline.” He frowned at Fili. “I’d kill you too if it weren’t for Beryl’s…interference. She’s caused me a lot of trouble, more than she probably knows.” He sighed. “I suppose I can’t blame her, in the end. She is her father’s daughter after all. She fights for what she believes in.”

Mahal, he couldn’t breathe. Fili’s lungs felt like they were about to burst. Darkness ate at the corners of his vision. Inside his head he could hear them, all of them, screaming for him.

He shut them out, closing down his bonds.

The last thing he wanted was for any of them to feel him die.

Especially Bilba. Damn it all, hadn’t she lost enough already?

Nar was still watching him, the look on his face mildly interested. He might as well have been watching an insect struggle.

“Still,” he went on, “it is Beryl’s fault we’re in this situation. If it weren’t for her…unfortunate habit of speaking when she shouldn’t we would still be in Erebor. I, suppose, after the trouble she’s caused it wouldn’t do to reward her for it, would it?”

Fili beat weakly at Bolg’s foot. Over him, the orc simply sneered, clearly enjoying his suffering.

“I’d thought to make a statement before I left,” Nar continued. “Your brother is the youngest, I felt his loss would hurt the worst. The loss of both his precious heirs would hurt all the worse, though, wouldn’t it?” He watched Fili, considering. “I must admit, the thought of leaving even a single Durin alive sickens me. You all must be removed. It’s the only way to atone for what you’ve done, and to prevent it from happening again.” He stood. “Beryl will forgive me,” he said, almost to himself. “I am her father after all.”

Fili was spiraling, falling down a long, dark hole inside his mind. Nar’s voice seemed to come from a great distance, his final words following Fili down.

“Have no fear, your Highness. Your brother and lover will not suffer over your loss. They won’t live long enough to.”
Chapter 20

It was happening again.

No.

No it couldn’t.

Not again.

She was running down a tunnel...carved from stone, the screams of thousands embedded deep within the rock...no...it was a sewer...damp...water splashed...rock crunched...beneath her boots.

She didn’t know where the others were...there had been no others, it had always just been her and Amad...she couldn’t remember leaving them.

Her mind had gone blank. She’d been so angry...she’d been so afraid...and then he’d gone silent...Amad wasn’t singing. Why wasn’t she singing?...and now she was here.

Running.

Again.

She was always running.

And she was always late.

Silence where there should have been song...smoke rising over the treetops while Hobbits screamed...white hot agony tearing through a wing...

Not again.

She could barely breathe. Her chest felt tight and her heart raced erratically inside her.

The corridor curved and she bolted around it...

A group of orcs were gathered around a familiar, massive orc with its back to her. She caught sight of Nar, looking smug, and then her eyes went to what he was looking at and her rage boiled over.

The orcs at the back of the group were dead before their bodies hit the ground.

Bilba aimed toward Bolg, her sword flashing. Past him she caught sight of Nar, his eyes wide and stunned.
Damn it.

Bolg was already moving, his foot coming off Fili’s throat as he pivoted to face her.

Making a split second decision, Bilba dropped her sword. She’d taken her jacket off before entering the sewers and left it with a guard stationed outside, wanting quicker access to her knives. Now she slid one out from under her vambrace, gripping the hilt and holding it so the blade lay back along her wrist and forearm. Bolg had raised an arm as he pivoted, swinging it toward her. Bilba wrapped her arm around his forearm, pushed off and threw her left arm around his neck. She swung her legs around his waist, reversed the blade in her right hand and swung hoping to drive it into his throat.

Bolg’s other arm appeared between his neck and her knife. Unable to stop in time, Bilba could only watch as the blade embedded itself in the thick muscle of his arm. The knife had been small. He probably barely felt it.

He jerked his arm away, robbing her of the knife, and then he was lunging backward.

Bilba put her head forward as best she could, trying to protect it. Pain exploded through her back as Bolg hit the wall of the sewer and she grunted in pain. It wasn’t enough to kill her…he didn’t want her dead that easily…but more than enough to momentarily daze her.

Hands grabbed her and then she was being swung through the air, up and over his shoulder, then down and to the side until she impacted the wall yet again, pain vibrating through her side and leg. Bolg released her and she dropped a foot or so to slam into the ground.

She ended up on her stomach, her mind already screaming at her to get up. She struggled onto her hands and knees but dizziness rolled through her and her body sagged until she rested on one forearm, her other hand braced against the floor. Her arms shook as they tried to hold her weight. She was already exhausted, worn out from the fight through Dale.

Her eyes went to Fili. She’d landed next to him, her head near his hip.

Kili. She was vaguely aware he’d been the closest behind her. Hurry.

We’re almost there. We can hear the orcs.

Hurry. Bilba repeated. She shut her eyes. She had to keep attention off Fili, long enough for the others to arrive. She sensed movement and reacted, curling a hand into Fili’s thigh and using it as leverage to shove up and away. She landed on her backside just in time to avoid Bolg’s hand sweeping toward her. The gold band in his ear caught her eye and her anger reignited, threading through her adrenaline and strengthening it.

She drew her dagger and slashed at him, driving him back enough to let her get to her feet, one hand on the tunnel wall as support. She risked a quick look down at Fili and flinched in surprise at the sight of his eyes open and fixed sluggishly on her. They were glassy, and confused, but slowly regaining their focus.

Her knees tried to buckle and she grit her teeth as she fought to stay standing, refocusing her attention on the orcs.

They were ringed around her, Bolg at their center. They could take her in an instant if they wanted but she had no doubt Bolg had ordered them to stay back.

Bilba responded with a rude hand gesture and he sneered.

“Better. Perhaps this will be sporting after all.”

A pair of arrows zipped through the air, slamming into two of the orcs with meaty thunks. Kili ran into view, Vili right beside him and Dwalin and Nori a step behind.

Their arrival distracted Bolg.

Bilba moved, leaping over Fili and driving her dagger toward Bolg’s chest. He sensed it at the last second and moved. Instead of a heart shot as she’d intended, her dagger sank into his left breast, near his shoulder and arm.

He backhanded her, catching her on the temple and barely missing her eye. The blow spun her around and sent her stumbling out of control. Her foot caught against Fili’s body and she tripped, falling over him and landing sprawled with her legs over his waist.

As she lifted her head she caught sight of Nar, his eyes fixed on something, and followed his gaze.

Kili. He was staring at Kili. The fighting had immediately become too tight for archery so Kili had traded his bow and arrows for his sword and was facing off against several orcs at once.

His father was several feet away, orcs separating them; Dwalin and Nori even further.

Nar drew a knife and, in an almost trancelike state, began to move toward Kili.

Bilba cursed and opened a link to Vili. Vili! Nar’s going after Kili!

Vili responded with a comment about Nar that Bilba was fairly certain was not anatomically possible.

She had no chance to comment farther as Bolg chose that moment to come after her again.

Bilba rolled onto her side and kicked at him but she had no leverage laying the way she was and the kick was ineffective. Bolg merely laughed, caught her leg and dragged her forward, over Fili’s body.

Fili was fully conscious by then and trying to get up. He reached out and, for an instant, caught her wrist.

They locked eyes…and then Bolg’s arm came around her waist and wrenched her away from him.

Bolg threw her, almost nonchalantly, over the water running down the center of the corridor. She hit the ground on the other side and rolled, before catching up against the wall with a force that knocked the wind out of her. She landed on her side and curled in on herself, pain radiating through her body.

Arms grabbed her again and dragged her up, before wrapping around her body, pinning her arms to her sides.

They squeezed and an involuntary cry burst out as bruised and cracked ribs threatened to snap inside her chest.

“Kneel before your betters, slave.” Bolg spun her around and dropped her. She ended up on her knees in front of him, one arm wrapped around her stomach as she panted from pain and exhaustion.

Her dagger and knife clattered to the ground on either side of her. She lunged for the dagger only to have Bolg’s foot connect with her stomach, driving her air out again. Her body curled instinctively,
sweat pouring down her face as she clenched her teeth against the urge to vomit.

She looked past him, to the other side of the water, and saw Fili, up on one knee, his hand reaching to grab the sword she’d discarded.

Bolg grabbed her by her ponytail, wrapping it around his fist. He forced her to her feet and shoved her away from the battle.

Fili got up, staggering slightly, only to be immediately confronted by an orc.

Twin knives sprouted from its throat and then Nori was there, backing Fili up as he got his wits together.

Dwalin was standing in the middle of the running water, seemingly unaffected by the current. His axes flew and spun as he took down orc after orc. A large pile of dead lay around him but more were coming from other tunnels, drawn by the sound of battle.

She caught sight of Nar, his knife raised as he moved up on Kili who was still occupied with two orcs.

Another orc, coming along behind her and Bolg, turned to speak to the massive orc.

“Should we bring him?”

Bolg paused, turning to look at Nar. “The woman has what we want. Find her. He means nothing.”

The orc nodded and scuttled off.

One of the orcs near Kili moved, giving Nar a clean shot at the back of the young prince’s neck and he took it, the knife slashing down.

It impacted…with the metal of Vili’s breastplate, the thin weapon snapping off and falling to the water.

For a second he and Nar stood facing one another, Vili largely obscured from her sight by Nar’s body.

Then Nar sank to his knees and Bilba saw Vili step back, drawing a bloodied sword with him.

Bolg chuckled. “Good riddance. The worm was an irritant.”

He began dragging her again and the last sight Bilba had before they turned a corner was of Nar falling over into the water running alongside the walkway.

He sank into it without a sound.

And was gone.

***

Fili pushed an orc off and staggered as dizziness washed over him, forcing him to shut his eyes as his body sagged.

An arm slid around his waist and a hip pressed against his, bracing him.
He opened his eyes to see his father supporting him with one hand, his other still holding his sword.

The battle was dying down around them. Fili wasn’t sure if it was because there were actually fewer orcs or if it was they’d all gone with the main group once it left.

“We need to go after Bilba.”

Vili nodded. “We are. We had to clear a path first.”

He moved enough to get his other arm around Fili and hugged him. Fili returned the embrace and then held still as his father moved away and grabbed his chin to study him.

“Are you alright?” He turned Fili’s head side to side as he spoke, frowning at the scratches scoring the sides of his son’s face.

“I’m fine,” Fili said, lightly shaking himself free. His head was getting clearer every second and, while his throat hurt and his voice was hoarse, he was breathing without difficulty.

“You’re exhausted,” Vili said, frowning.

“We’re all exhausted,” Fili retorted, his voice shorter than he’d intended. He gave a tight smile in apology and nodded toward one of the side tunnels. “I know the route they’re taking. Bilba’s relaying it to me.”

He frowned as he spoke, trying to hide his own disquiet. Bilba was, so far, handling this entire thing better than she ever had, or would have, before. From what he knew of her past there had been a time when she would have cowered before the orcs. From what he knew of her since they’d met there had been a time, a very recent one, when her hatred and rage would have had her throwing herself at the orcs in a blind rage. She was steadier now than she’d ever been, able to handle both her fear and rage in a way she hadn’t before.

But that didn’t mean she was fine.

He could feel the turmoil in Bilba’s spirit, old memories swarming up from places she’d kept locked away from both him and Syrath. He stayed back, not wanting to see anything she wanted to keep private. At the same time, however, he wanted her to know he was there so he kept talking to her as she relayed information. He could feel the way her bond was twined just a bit tighter than normal around his, using him to keep herself grounded.

Dwalin stomped over, Kili with him, both breathing heavily. Nori was a few feet behind, watching for any new threat. Kili stepped forward to hug Fili and he returned the embrace just as fiercely. He’d seen Nar going after his brother and had fought to reach him but the fighting had been too thick, the corridor to narrow and tight to allow movement.

“Which way?” Dwalin ordered as they broke apart.

Vili nodded toward one of the tunnels. “That way.”

Dwalin nodded. “Alright. Let’s go.” He frowned at the three of them. “Should I even bother telling you lot to stay back and let me and Nori deal with it?”

Fili raised an eyebrow and Dwalin grunted. “Thought not.”

With that he headed into the tunnel and the rest fell in behind.
We’re coming, Bilba, Fili sent. Hold on.

***

It had started again as soon as they were in the tunnel, once she had less to distract her.

Bolg had bound her arms in front of her with frayed, scratchy rope, holding the short remnant like a tether.

When it started again, it was so faint at first she almost didn’t notice it, the faintest whisper almost lost in the rush of water through the tunnel.

Around her the blocks of the sewer seemed to shift in her mind, changing into stone carved out of the heart of a mountain. The air grew stagnant and the light dimmed.

And the whisper grew louder…stronger…until, finally, she knew it for what it was.

Singing. She couldn’t hear the words but the tone was haunting…tired…sad.

Near the end then, when her mother had recognized a truth Bilba had refused to see until it was years too late.

Footsteps came from a different tunnel as they passed it and the one they were in shifted back into a sewer, the song fading back into memory.

But that didn’t mean it stopped.

Whispers…snatches of memory continued to rise even as she tried to take her mind off it by relaying the route back to Fili.

“Your voice is so pretty, Amad.”

“So is yours, dear. Even the orcs stop sometimes to listen.”

“They wouldn’t know. The orcs only like ugly things.”

“Shhh, not so loud.”

“Sorry, Amad.”

Sorry.
I’m so sorry.

Bilba’s eyes burned and she clenched her teeth. She tuned into her body, the chill on her skin, the soreness and shake in her muscles, the dull pain in her hip and ribs. She went past that, drawing on the pain from Syrath, even from Fili though he partly blocked her on it, unwilling to add to her suffering.

Slowly, the burn subsided.

Beryl appeared from the other tunnel, an orc behind her urging her along. She looked angry, half turning to slap at the orc as it pushed her.

“Stop that! Do you have any idea who I am? My father will hear of this treatment!”

She drew up short as she caught sight of them, smirking when she saw Bilba.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Fili’s little slut.” She frowned, looking around. “Speaking of which, where is Fili? You better not have let him get away. And where is my father?”

Bolg ignored her and kept walking. The other orcs followed suit, two of them taking up position behind Beryl to make sure she stayed with them.

She kept up a litany of complaints, and demands, behind them and Bilba felt herself tensing as it continued.

Orcs were not known for their patience.

“Why are we moving so fast?” Beryl demanded. “I’m wearing a dress in case you hadn’t noticed. Which is now ruined, mind you. I’ll expect it replaced. And you still haven’t answered my questions. Where is my father? And Fili? If you don’t answer me then good luck with your precious Master getting what he wants! Hey! I’m talking to you!”

With the last she marched forward and grabbed Bolg’s arm.

Bilba came to a stop a split second before Bolg did. He turned to face Beryl and she opened her mouth to start up again on her tirade.

The crack of the back of Bolg’s hand hitting her across the cheek and mouth echoed in the tunnel. Bilba winced in sympathy, the side of her own head still throbbing from where the bastard had struck her. The force of the blow drove Beryl back several steps, blood already beginning to pour from a gash in her lip and her face swelling. She stared at Bolg, stunned, one hand going to her face.

“You will talk,” Bolg said, in broken, guttural Common. “Or you will suffer.”

He nodded to two of the orcs who stepped forward to drag Beryl’s arms behind her back and tie them. They shoved her forward and they all began walking once again.

“What are you doing?” Beryl’s voice was shrill, and garbled from the blow she’d taken. “This isn’t the plan! You heard what my father said! We have to kill Kili!”

“Your father said this plan was sanctioned,” Bolg said. “But, if that is so, why do my father’s Lieutenants report my father had no knowledge of it?”
Beryl stammered. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s just not important enough? You’re just orcs anyway. You’re supposed to shut up and do—”

Bolg stopped and turned to face her.

Beryl went white and cringed, trying to move away from the massive orc but there was nowhere to go.

It took all of five seconds for her to crack entirely.

“My father—” Beryl started, her eyes wide with fear. “He wanted…he wanted to hit the Durins…before we left.” She was nearly hyperventilating in her panic. “He wanted…to…demoralize them…to let them suffer…like he did…before he came back…and destroyed them all.” She looked up at Bolg, terrified. “Where is my father?”

“You have interfered and more than once,” Bolg growled. “You should pray to whatever pathetic Valar you believe in for mercy.”

“No,” Beryl said, desperation clear in her voice. “No, it’s okay! We left someone behind, in Erebor! While everyone was here he—”

“Silence!” Bolg roared. He grabbed Bilba’s hair again, wrenching her head back. “Do you think this one will not immediately report all that you say to the others?”

Beryl shut her mouth with an audible snap.

Bolg growled and turned away again. As he did he locked eyes with Bilba who held the contact with an ease she’d never had before. He was bleeding from the various wounds she’d inflicted on him and the sight made her heart swell with pride.

She hated him but, for once, she was controlling it instead of letting it control her.

Past that, however, even better than that…

She wasn’t afraid of him anymore.

Fili had been right. Bolg was not the immortal, invincible being he’d made himself out to be in Moria…that she had been convinced he, and his father, were. Taking his eye all those years ago hadn’t been a fluke.

She wasn’t a slave who, in a moment of insanity, had become a warrior.

She was a warrior who’d once been a slave.

She had made Bolg bleed, again, as much as any other orc.

And if Bolg could bleed like any other orc then his father could bleed like any other orc and that meant they could both die…like any, other, orc.

I told you so. Fili informed her.

Shut up and come rescue me already.
I’m working on it. If the orcs would just oblige and die faster I’d be there already.

So what you’re saying is you’re ineffective at killing orcs?

Ouch, you wound me.

Given how slow you’re going I’m surprised the orcs haven’t wounded you.

Yeah, yeah, and what about your current orc killing goals?

The barest hint of a smile graced her lips. I’m working on it.

Bolg chuckled. “So confident now that you have tasted freedom are you? You are nothing. You should have known your place, and died in the dirt and been forgotten.”

He released her and turned away. As he did her eyes went again to the band in his ear.

“Amad, what are you doing? You shouldn’t have that out.”

“I just wanted to see it. I miss him.”

“I know, but someone will see. They’ll take it.”

“I just wanted to see it. Just for a moment.”

Guilt ate at her. She should have insisted, demanded, taken it away herself and put it back in its hiding place.

If only she had…if only she could go back and do it over again.

If only.

Bolg grabbed her tether and began moving, dragging her after him.

Behind them she could hear the sound of Beryl being pushed after them. She’d started crying and the sound of her muffled sobs echoed in the narrow tunnel. Bilba tried to catch her eye but the other woman refused to look at her, keeping her gaze fixed on the ground.

Crying…muffled sobs…from fear…from a broken heart…

“Amad! What happened?”

“It’s my fault. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have had it out.”

“Your finger, Amad! What happened? Who did this?”

“I just wanted to see it. I’m sorry. It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.”

“Amad, please, please don’t cry. It’ll be okay. I’ll get it back, okay? Please don’t cry. I promise.”
“I’ll get it back.”

The tunnel curved and a rectangle of light burst in her eyes. Bilba flinched, blinking as her eyesight adjusted as they were led out of the tunnels.

_Are you out of the sewers?_ Fili sounded wistful.

_You would be too if you stopped wasting time._

_I’m trying! Tell the damn orcs to stop coming! Durin’s beard, how did they all get in here?_

That was the question of the day, Bilba thought. It was a massive operation, everything that went into the attack on Syrath, the number of orcs that had somehow been moved into Dale’s sewer system…it defied belief that it could have all taken place without anyone in Dale, Erebor or Mirkwood noticing.

_I rescued you in half the time it’s taking you to get to me and I had to go through half of Dale._

_My kill count is higher._

_Are we counting just today or all time?_

_Just today, Orcrist. I’m not an idiot._

_No, just slow._ Bilba shot back, fighting to keep an entirely inappropriate smile off her face.

_I’ll be there soon._

_Promises, promises._

_That is a promise. Count on it._

_I will._

See you soon.

Alright.

They had come out well outside the city itself, near the river. Looking behind her, Bilba could see Dale, and Erebor rising beyond it. To her right lay the Spires, the last bits of smoke still billowing up from where Lyth had set it, and those who’d ambushed Syrath, on fire.

Good for her.

Bolg said something. She followed his gaze, and froze in disbelief.
Orc dragons filled the sky, a good four dozen at least, coming from the opposite direction of the Misty Mountains.

This wasn’t possible. It just wasn’t. That somehow the orcs could get in, that a complicated assassination plot could be put in place was one thing…improbable…beyond belief…but maybe.

But, this? This many orc dragons and no one had seen them?

No, not possible.

Not by any natural means at least.

Thorin! She called. There are orc dragons coming!

There are what??

Bilba opened her other links, warning Fili, Vili, Kili and her father. Dwalin was the Captain of the Guard, both ground and air, and Vili was his second, leaving them the best ones to organize a counter assault.

The orc dragons shot by overhead and Bolg and the others stopped to watch. Bilba lifted her head as they passed, the rush of their wings a roar as they flew toward Erebor.

From the mountain she saw a second wave rise, the drakes and several elven dragons, swarming upward to meet them.

Thorin, she sent. Syrath...

They were in the process of trying to remove the arrow. She could feel it even then, each layer being painstakingly, slowly peeled back as they tried to assess the level of damage. There was no way he could possibly be moved.

He’ll be safe. Are you alright?

Bolg grabbed her hands and cut through the ropes, before stepping back and crossing his arms. The rest of the orcs spread out in a large circle around them, two of them holding onto Beryl who still looked stunned.

I’m fine. Bilba replied. Just catching up on things with an old acquaintance.

“My Lord,” one of the orcs said, approaching Bolg. “Your father has given orders. He wants the slave alive.”

Bolg drew a knife from a sheath at his waist, looking at the orc calculatingly, and it cowered immediately, backing away and babbling apologies.

Bolg turned back to face her.

Bilba felt an assault launch itself at her shields, the feeling similar to all those years ago in Moria, and she couldn’t keep back a smirk as his expression changed to one of anger when he couldn’t break through.

When he gave up she reached out and easily offered a link, confident in his inability to force anything on her and in her own ability to break it as she willed. Decided to give me a try at the other eye did you? she taunted.
Her sword was gone, as was her dagger and one of her knives. She still had her boot knives, one vambrace knife and the two she kept at the small of her back.

She settled into a stance, ignoring the way her body protested.

Instead she focused on the band glittering in his ear.

She’d made a promise to her mother.

And she was damn well keeping it.

***

Time lost meaning.

The sky became dark as the orc dragons were driven back, the battle soon taking place directly overhead.

She knew when Fili and the others arrived, the soldiers Thorin sent having finally met up with them. They were met head on by the orcs, still far stronger than they should ever have been.

She knew when an orc dragon landed and Beryl was forced on, but was in no position to do anything to stop them as they fled the battlefield.

Somewhere, the healers were getting closer to the arrow tip, each passing moment bringing hope as they found the arrow dragged more and more away from Syrath’s body by the dense muscle of his wing.

Bolg had taken a flanged mace from another orc and evading its blows had driven her further and further from the battle. There was no way she could survive a blow from the weapon, even had she been wearing armor, and she’d been forced to jump over and under it multiple times to avoid it.

On one of her last jumps, her feet had landed on ice and she slipped, hitting hard and barely rolling in time as the weapon smashed next to her head, ice chips flying up and falling over her.

She staggered to feet and stumbled back, grimacing as her feet threatened to slide again on the ice.

Bolg had managed to drive her all the way to the river, parts of which were frozen.

The portion she was on was a large, vaguely circular sheet of ice that spread out into the water, forcing the rest of the river to flow around it. She had no idea how thick the ice was but would hazard a guess the answer was probably not very.

Bolg stepped out after her and caught himself as his foot slid.

Bilba was already taking advantage. She’d drawn her last vambrace knife and held the blade between her teeth while her boot knives were clasped in both hands.

Bolg recovered enough to swing the mace but she ducked under it. She drove one of her boot knives as deep as she could into his calf before standing to sink the second into his shoulder.

She kept hold of that one and used the first one as a step, hoisting herself up. As she did she drove her foot down, snapping the blade off inside his leg. She swarmed up, bracing her feet on his back and kicked off, using the momentum to go into a handstand. She snapped off the blade of the second knife in his shoulder and transferred that hand to his other shoulder.
She bent her elbows just enough to let her push up, then wrapped an arm around his neck and swung, down and around in front of him, grabbing the knife from between her teeth with her free hand as she did.

Her legs slid around his waist and she drove the knife into his shoulder, not the one she’d stabbed with her dagger, snapping the blade off in the muscle.

The entire thing took mere seconds and then she was dropping off him, hitting the ground and throwing herself back onto the bank, away from the ice.

*I’d like to see you top that, Lord Has-A-Higher-Kill-Count.*


*And you’re in love with me so what does that say about you?*

*Valid point.*

She jumped back to her feet, her breath coming in loud, ragged pants. Reaching back she drew the two knives she kept in a double, criss-crossed sheath at the small of her back.

Her last two knives.

Bolg was staring at her, blood streaming from the numerous wounds he’d taken. He couldn’t move easily anymore. Even if he could have pushed past the pain there was no way to push past metal blades embedded in his flesh and, without the handles, he couldn’t just pull them out.

Black spots passed across Bilba’s vision and she staggered, going down on one knee.

Damn.

Just because he couldn’t move easily didn’t mean he couldn’t move at all.

A hand closed around her throat and Bolg lifted her straight up, off her feet and into the air.

Bilba stabbed him through both forearms and, with a roar of rage, he turned and threw her, out onto the ice.

She hit hard and slid, barely managing to catch herself before she went over into the river.

*Bilba!*

Her chest was heaving, her lungs and throat burning as she struggled to drag in enough air. She was drenched in sweat and every time she paused the cold made itself known, chilling her straight through.

She clenched her teeth against a groan and rolled onto her side, pushing up on one elbow.

She felt the Healers reaching the tip of the arrow embedded in Syrath’s wing. The moment of truth would be in the next few minutes, when they carefully started to remove it and found if it’d penetrated his body or not.

Overhead a scream of rage rang out and she looked up to see Xalanth blitzing through the orc dragons.

Being forced to leave his injured son to fight orcs appeared to have annoyed him.
She could feel Fili, fighting alongside Kili. They had been surrounded, many orcs wanting the
distinction of having killed the Heirs of Erebor. Vili and Nori had gone to their aid.

She had lost track of where her father had gone.

Bolg stepped onto the ice, mace clutched in one hand.

Bilba shut her eyes, trying to slow her breathing and her out of control heart.

She reached out, coiling around Fili and Syrath. She felt Syrath stir deep in his unconsciousness,
reacting to her, and she gently pushed him back down.

*Go back to sleep, Syrath. Don’t wake up. Not yet.*

She rolled, onto her hands and knees, and pushed to her feet. Her knees tried to buckle and she put
her hands on her thighs, trying to force them to obey. Exhaustion hung on her like a lead weight,
making it a fight to straighten her back but straighten it she did.

She was Orcrist, rider of Syrath, Beloved of the Crown Prince of Erebor.

And she was Bilba, daughter of Dwalin, son of Fundin.

And she would die on her feet.

***

The sword blow drove him to one knee. Fili grunted at the impact and set his other foot, trying to
keep his balance. He gripped the hilt tighter and braced the flat of his sword blade on his other palm,
pushing back with a curse and forcing the orc off. He surged up after him, delivering it a mortal
wound to its chest.

He whirled, sending the blade into another orc and another after that. Kili ducked a blow and drew
close, pressing against him so they stood back to back.

*You know,* Fili sent to his brother. *This would have been a great time for arrows.*

*I ran out,* Kili shot back. *It’s not like I expected this to happen!*

*The fact you brought arrows at all when you were just taking Cassie home shows you were being
cautious!* Fili retorted. *Next time forget caution and be paranoid!*

*Duck,* Kili barked. Fili obeyed and his brother drove his sword into an orc coming up behind him. *I
don’t see you with a lot of weapons. Isn’t that Bilba’s sword?*

Fili stood, just in time to drive an elbow into the jaw of an orc. Kili followed it up with a sword and
they turned as one to face the next enemy. *I was kidnapped in case you forgot. They took my
weapons.*

*And did a terrible job of it. Maybe you should have been paranoid and hidden more weapons on
you.*

Fili rolled his eyes. An orc lunged and Kili bent forward, allowing it to fly over him. As he did, Fili
jumped, twisting in midair. He rolled across Kili’s back and came up on his other side, dragging the sword in an upwards, slashing motion and opening mortal wounds on two orcs. *Tell you what. Let’s agree that, from now on, we’ll both skip caution and go straight to paranoid?*

*Fine. From now on we take Bilba.*

Fili snorted. *Agreed.*

Pain, not his own, flashed through him like a knife wound and his smiled vanished. He tensed, forcing himself to not physically react and give the orcs an opening.

*Bilba!*  

She didn’t answer.

Instead he felt a change in her bond.

Pain.

Exhaustion.


Despair.

The orcs pressed in, driving him even closer to his brother.

He heard yelling and his father and Nori arrived, weapons flashing as they cut through the orcs surrounding him and Kili.

Fili ducked under a swing by his father and spun around his back, bolting into the fray.

*Fili! Damn it, you’re not wearing armor!*  

Fili shook his head, not slowing his charge. *Neither is she.*

An orc rose in his way and he bent, barely, driving a shoulder into the creature’s chest. He spun as he came back up, the blade of the sword carving through the neck of another orc.

It was a good blade, a strong blade, made to protect its wielder.

A gap cleared and he caught sight of Bilba struggling to her feet at the edge of a sheet of ice jutting into river.

Two more orcs and he cut the first one down without thinking, planting a foot on its back as it fell and pushing off, leaping several feet into the air. He came down with the blade already in motion and beheaded two more orcs, their corpses thudding to the ground before his boots impacted.

Bilba.

He’d made the sword to protect Bilba.

A blade, but not a shield because *he* was her shield.

*Promise me you’ll kill him.* Her voice whispered in his mind.
**Promise me you won’t let him kill you first.**

An elbow to the throat of an orc, a boot in the chest of another and he was running full out, sword clutched in his hand.

He was her shield.

And she was his heart.

And he was not losing her.

***

Bolg’s hand wrapped back around her throat and he hefted her off her feet, holding her high over the ice.

“**Pathetic,**” he mocked. “I would take your corpse back to Moria and have it mounted as a trophy if you were not so weak. You shall be a warning instead.”

*I thought Azog wanted me alive?* Bilba asked, struggling to breathe. *Won’t he be upset that you killed his best fighter?*

“You will not be missed,” Bolg taunted. “*You have been replaced, and by a fighter far better than you.*” He tilted his head, studying her. “My father wished to watch you die in a match.”

He seemed to consider it, weighing his desire to kill her immediately against his desire to watch her die in the Arena.

In the end, he took too long to decide.

The ground rumbled. Bolg swayed and water sloshed over the edges of the ice. From behind Bilba, an earth shattering roar rang out, echoing in the air around them. The sound vibrated through her bones, rattled her teeth, and was so loud it turned into one, endless tone that drummed through her ears.

Bolg snarled in anger and dropped her. Her feet slid in the water pooled on the already slick ice and she went down on one knee with a hard crack that reverberated up and down the nerves in her leg. Her knee slid, the foot going off the ice, and she gasped, her heart jumping. She put one hand down, trying to brace herself but there was nothing to grab onto so she simply tried to hold still, hoping she wouldn’t slide the last foot or two into the water.

She risked a look behind her and saw Xalanth had landed on the far bank, his eyes fixed on Bolg. He couldn’t attack with Bilba in the way but that also meant Bolg couldn’t kill her without removing the only thing currently keeping him alive.

Bilba looked past the giant orc and her eyes widened as they caught on something behind him, just off the ice. Something inside her uncoiled and relief flooded her.
She looked up at Bolg, and smiled.

He snarled. He’d dropped the mace after she’d broken her blades off in his body, unable to hold it. He drew a knife from a sheath on his leg and reached for her with his other hand.

His body shuddered.

The expression on his face changed to one of shock, and disbelief.

He dropped both arms to his sides, the knife he held clattering to the ice.

He turned his back on her and took one halting step…and then another…and one more after that.

He lifted his foot…set it down without taking a step…and his knee buckled. He fell heavily, first to one, and then both, knees.

Bracing both hands against the ice, Bilba slowly and carefully moved herself forward, until she could get to her feet.

She grimaced as she rose, her body screaming at her in pain and exhaustion.

She wasn’t going down, not now, not after so long.

She walked forward, staggering a few times, until she reached his side.

Bolg was breathing shallowly, the air barely a wheeze as it went in and out. His eyes were fixed on nothing and he swayed in place.

*Last time,* Bilba told him. *I was only able to take your eye. I was weak.*

She wrapped both hands around the handle of the axe embedded in his spine. She pulled and it slid out, grating against bone, black blood and ichor squelching out around the edges of the blade and running down his back to the ice.

Bolg’s body shuddered again and he sagged so he was leaning on one hand on the ice but, somehow, through sheer power of will, he stayed up. His eyes were fixed on her as she made her way to stand in front of him, hatred seething in them. If he could have mustered the strength, he would have used the last of it, his dying breath, to take her with him.

Bilba stopped in front of him. A light breeze, chilled from the air and temperature, blew over the ice. She could hear the faint sound of battle behind her and could see Xalanth on the far bank, the sound of his breathing loud enough to be heard over the river.

Bilba reached out and grabbed the band in Bolg’s ear, yanking it out in one motion. She held it up, studying the slender ring. It was tarnished and bent, the band itself snapped to make it into an earring…but it was still her mother’s ring.

Her eyes cut to Bolg, noting the life rapidly draining from his, and she pocketed the ring.

She adjusted her grip on the axe and hefted the weapon, biting back a cry of pain as the muscles in
her arms, and her ribs, violently protested the action.

*I was weak last time,* she repeated. *But this time? This time the only weak one, is you.*

She swung, and Bolg’s head sailed clean of his shoulders. It hit the ice and rolled until it went off the edge and vanished into the water.

His corpse fell over soundlessly, black ichor leaking from the stump of his neck.

Bilba released the axe from nearly numb fingers and it clattered to the ice. On the far bank Xalanth watched her, puffs of white smoke coming from his nostrils as his breath crystallized in the cold air.

Bilba nodded at him and turned to head off the ice. Her father was waiting at the edge and she gave him a tired nod as he passed her to retrieve his axe.

*Thank you.*

Overhead the sky was beginning to clear, the last of the orc dragons driven back by the drakes. The same was true on the ground as humans from Dale and elves had joined the fray, cutting down the orcs until nothing remained of them but their corpses.

With every step she took away from the ice Bilba felt as if a massive weight were falling off her shoulders, piece by piece.

Fili pushed through the crowd, bloodied and battered and looking as exhausted as she felt. A smile broke out on Bilba’s face and she quickened her step to meet him.

He dropped his sword and threw both arms around her, dragging her in close. Bilba hugged him back just as hard, sagging against him and burying her face in his shoulder.

He pulled away and drew her into a kiss and she responded in kind, fingers of one hand digging into the muscles of his bicep.

When they broke apart she sighed and lowered her head to rest against his collarbone, her eyes shut.

“The arrow is nearly out of Syrath’s wing,” Fili said. “So far it doesn’t look like it hit anything vital.”

Bilba nodded. She’d lost track of the progress there at the end though she would have known if anything had started to go wrong. There would still be a long road ahead of Syrath and it would take time before they would know if any permanent damage had been done. As long as the end result was him alive, she would gladly take the rest, no matter what it was or how long it took.

“So,” Fili said. “You and Dwalin killed Bolg and my father killed Nar. I’d call that a victory.”

*For now.* Bilba said with a frown. *We have no idea how they all got in and if we don’t know then we can’t stop it from happening again.*

Fili shook his head, his eyes dark. He surveyed the remnants of what had become an impromptu battlefield. Not all the dead littering it were orcs. The wounded were being helped off, back into Dale to receive treatment. There would be memorials to come in the days ahead, and questions, many, many questions. “Right now, today, was a victory. Tomorrow --- well, we’ll deal with that when it comes.”

Bilba slid her hands back into his hair and pulled him down to kiss him again.

He was right.
Syrath would live.

Fili was safe.

Bolg was dead.

They had won.

They could deal with the rest later.

***

Dwalin grabbed his axe and lifted it up, grimacing at the blood covering the blade. He started to kneel to clean it but thought better of it when the ice creaked and groaned alarmingly beneath his feet.

**You should get off the ice.**

*I caught that.* He rose and moved, carefully, onto solid ground before returning to his original task of cleaning his weapon.

**I hate orcs. I wish to go kill more of them.**

Dwalin frowned across the river. Xalanth always got quieter, and stiller, the angrier he was. At the moment he was practically not moving and his sentences were short and pointed.

*You do that and it'll just delay you getting back to Syrath even longer.*

Xalanth growled, a low, rattling sound that always reminded Dwalin of a certain type of snake he sometimes ran into in the more arid, desert areas of the world. A few soldiers nearby gave the dragon sidelong looks and he sighed in exasperation.

**Knock it off. You’re scaring the troops.**

Xalanth hunched low, bunching almost as if preparing to leap, but Dwalin ignored him.

He wasn’t getting ready to do anything.

He was pouting.

*You’re as bad as Syrath.*

**He had to get it somewhere and it certainly wasn’t Quenth.**

No, Dwalin agreed. *She was more mature than you. I still have no idea what she saw in you.*

*I made her laugh.* He sounded quieter, some of the heat gone. Dwalin looked at him again and saw his body language had changed, from pouting to pain.

He sighed. *Sorry. Didn’t mean to bring that up.*
It’s not your fault, it’s the orcs.

And there was the anger again. Dwalin shook his head, wondering absently if Syrath was as prone to rapid mood changes as Xalanth was. He hadn’t particularly noticed it but, then again, the dragon was young. Perhaps it would develop later.

He finished cleaning the axe blade and stood, returning it to his back next to its mate.

You can go, he sent, studying the remnants of the battle. The only thing left here is clean up.

Alright. Don’t forget to get your ring back.

Dwalin frowned, turning to face the massive dragon. My what?

Your ring, Xalanth repeated. Bilba got it back but I guess she forgot to give it to you. He tilted his head the way he always did when pondering something that confused him. How did an orc get it anyway?

Dwalin gave the large dragon a confused look of his own and raised both hands, palms outward, revealing his family ring and the ring given to him when he took the mantle of Guard Captain still firmly in place.

Not those ones, Xalanth said. The other one.

Dwalin gave him a blank look. What are you talking about? What other—

Understanding hit and his eyes widened. In a near panic he shoved his hand under the collar of his shirt and breastplate, grabbing the chain that lay there against his undershirt. He yanked it out and pulled the chain off, holding it in his hand so that it dangled in front of him.

There, at the end of the chain, hung a large, heavy, ring. It was gold and engraved with delicate clusters of bell shaped flowers. Dwalin sagged, releasing a breath of relief even as he shot his dragon an annoyed look.

Xalanth’s confusion increased, strong enough to catch Balin’s attention back near the mountain. Xalanth’s head turned in that direction, speaking to his other rider for a moment before coming back to Dwalin.

I don’t understand. I saw it.

Bilba had taken something off the orc, an action which had struck him as odd. She’d never shown interest in anything from an orc before and, given how single minded she was in battle, it was strange she’d take the time to remove some random bit of whatever. He’d seen her hold it up for the briefest instant but, not possessing a dragon’s eyesight, he hadn’t been able to make out what it was. She’d pocketed it and he’d dismissed it.

It must have been something else you saw. I have my ring. You can see it yourself.

Xalanth leaned forward, able to bring his head nearly all the way across the river as if it were little more than a stream. He studied the ring at the end of the chain in silence and then drew away again.

You’re right. It was different.

Dwalin nodded. Of course it was. I made this ring. There’s no way another, identical one just happens to exist.
He put the chain back on and worked it back under his clothes.

*It was close.* Xalanth said. *Someone must think like you do. The flowers were the same but they weren’t cut into the metal like on yours. They were formed out of the band so it was like a ring on the bottom and then the top part changed into the flowers.*

Dwalin stopped moving, still in the process of arranging the chain.

Xalanth didn’t notice. *And there were stones on it too. A couple were missing and it was really dirty so I don’t know what color they were but they were in the middle of the flowers and—*


**Dwalin? What’s wrong?**

*Are you alright? What it is?*

Dwalin ignored his dragon and his brother and started walking toward where Bilba was still standing with Fili.

It was a different ring, his mind told him logically. There was no possible way it could be *that* ring. It’d been gone for over fifty years, not found with her and nowhere in Bag End. Her father had denied having it and while Dwalin had no reason to believe it he had believed her siblings who’d echoed it. The ring had been with her when she left…and gone when she was found.

The odds of it resurfacing now…and so close…he shook his head.

It was just not possible.

He shook his head.

It couldn’t be the same ring.

The odds against it were insane.

But he kept walking just the same.

***

It was a testament to how much she’d come to trust the Prince that she never sensed his approach.

“What did you take off that orc?”

She went completely still, her body tensing. Fili gave him a startled look, his eyes widening slightly, and Dwalin felt the first stirrings of true disquiet.

Leave it alone.

He couldn’t say where the thought came from, or why, but it bubbled up from somewhere deep within his subconscious. A warning, he couldn’t put a finger on what was triggering it.

After all, it *wasn’t* that ring…he knew that. He was just…clearing it up. Bilba would show it to him and it would be something else entirely and they would go on from there.
Bilba turned to face him, her face blank, and the warning in his mind grew stronger.

*What are you talking about?*

Dwalin’s eyes narrowed. “I told you before, I know what you look like when you lie. Don’t start trying it now.”

She didn’t respond.

“What are you talking about?” Fili asked.

“She took something off that orc,” Dwalin said shortly. “I want to know what it was.”

Fili frowned. “Why? What does it matter?”

“It doesn’t,” Dwalin said sharply, “which is why she shouldn’t have a problem with showing me.” He turned his focus back on her as he finished speaking. She met his eyes and then looked away, frowning across the water toward Xalanth.

Footsteps heralded the arrival of Vili, Kili a step behind him. The look Fili gave his father suggested he’d called him over.

Why would he do that?

“What’s going on?” Vili asked, stopping next to his son. Kili stopped on Fili’s other side, the three of them inadvertently flanking Bilba who stood a step or two in front, facing Dwalin.

“Nothing,” Dwalin said. “I just want to see what Bilba took off that orc she was fighting.”


Bilba flinched. It was barely perceptible, but Dwalin caught it.

“It means something to you,” he said, surprised.

Let it go. Please.

A slow, sickening feeling spread through him. “It’s exactly what I think it is,” he said slowly, “and you know it.”

A muscle in her jaw tightened and her eyes cut to the side, going distant as if she were picturing herself somewhere, anywhere, else. One hand went into her pocket, closing around something inside.

Dwalin put his hand out. “Give it to me. Now.”

Vili’s eyes narrowed. “Dwalin—”

“This doesn’t concern you,” Dwalin snapped, cutting him off. He kept his hand out toward Bilba,
and waited.

He had her backed into a corner and she knew it.

“Give it back,” he said, his voice barely a whisper and her eyes finally moved, coming back to meet his and the look in them, by all rights, should have been enough, should have told him enough to shut up, drop it and never bring it up again.

But it wasn’t.

Bilba frowned, her head turning toward Vili. When she looked back, she had clearly come to a decision. She was pale, her eyes red rimmed and her breathing was shallow.

She pulled her hand out of her pocket.

She kept it at her side at first, still clenched in a fist. Her arm was stiff, her fingers clenched in so tight a fist that each knuckle was perfectly outlined under her skin.

And then she raised her arm, palm facing upward, and uncurled her fingers.

Dwalin let out a breath as if someone had punched him in the gut. At the same time he reached out a hand that shook slightly, and picked the ring up.

He held it up, much as Bilba had.

It was nearly black with grime and age, the band broken and many of the stones missing. Several of the flower clusters were bent or damaged in some way and the ring itself was so warped it would be impossible to wear it.

But, even so, there was no mistaking it.

“Where did you get this?” he breathed, his voice hoarse. When she didn’t answer immediately, he looked at her and asked again, his voice harder. “Where did you get this?”

Behind her, Fili, Vili and Kili were all silent, waiting much as he was.

Bilba looked away again. He saw her swallow, hard, and then a tear escaped her eye, one that she quickly wiped away.

>You saw where I got it.
“Don’t give me that,” Dwalin said, anger coloring his voice. “You knew who I was when you met me, you hated me.”

*I got over that.*

“It doesn’t change that it existed. And, now this,” he held up the ring. Bilba didn’t look at it but kept her eyes away as if by pretending she were somewhere else she could actually *be* somewhere else. “This is no coincidence. Where. Did. You. Get. This?”

She clenched her jaw. Fili had returned her sword and, though it was sheathed, she had one hand wrapped around the hilt as if facing some threat.

*My mother had it.*

He’d thought at one point that a relative who’d known Bella might have been the one to instill a hatred of him in Bilba. The problem with that theory, however, had always been the fact that he’d never heard of any of her relatives being taken to Moria. And, if one had…how had she gotten the ring?

“I won’t take it off until we meet again. I promise.”

“Who was your mother?”

Bilba didn’t answer.

“Don’t.” Dwalin said, guessing her mind. “Don’t you lie to me.”

The world seemed to shrink, the others fading into the background until it was just the two of them. Just him.

And Bilba.

And an old, broken ring tying them together.

Bilba shut her eyes, tears escaping from under the lids. Her hand on her sword tightened further, desperate to fight but there was no fight to be had, no enemy before her.

There was only Dwalin.
You know who she was.

Dwalin frowned in confusion. “What?”

Bilba said nothing.

A moment passed.

A heartbeat.

A brief instant in time.

The step from one life to the next.

The change from breath drawn in, to it being let out.

The last puzzle piece slid into place.

Bilba’s age.
Her history.

Her hatred of him when they’d first met and the fact she’d known him at all.

The sight of her at Fili’s Coming of Age.

Adad.

“No.” His voice broke on the word and he inhaled sharply, fighting to keep himself under control. “NO. That is--” He shook his head. “My wife--” he said through gritted teeth, lifting a finger to point at Bilba in emphasis, “is dead. She’s been dead for over fifty years and is buried in Erebor. I don’t know what your mother told you but--”

She’s been dead for ten years, Bilba corrected, her voice hollow. Her eyes were open again but were still looking off into the distance, away from him. She was pale and her voice in his head was flat… sad. Resigned. Maybe fifteen. I’m not sure. There’s no way to track time properly in Moria.

“No.” Dwalin repeated, trying to contain his temper. It wasn’t the girl’s fault, he told himself. She was just a kid. She’d been lied too, clearly, she couldn’t be blamed. “I don’t know who your mother was or how she had my wife’s ring but she was,” insane, deluded, a liar, “confused. I am not your father.”

He couldn’t be her father. He couldn’t be because if he was then it meant – it meant—it meant…

Vili looked stunned. “You’re not her what?”

Dwalin ignored him.

Bilba was watching him, her expression now one of compassion, and Dwalin turned his back to head to Xalanth. It was ridiculous, he told himself, even as his chest tightened to the point where he could barely breathe. Utterly ridiculous. The girl’s mother had lost her mind in the mines, that was all there was to it. Lost her mind and given the girl some tale. Who knows how she’d gotten the ring? Brought in by one of the orcs perhaps or perhaps Bella had left it behind after all and if none of those ideas fit and he could think of nothing else then who cares because that was the way it was, had to
She used to sing.

The words stopped him in his tracks.

She had a beautiful voice.

No.

She sang all the time.

Stop. Stop talking.

Her favorite song, here Bilba’s voice wavered. Her favorite song was one she wrote.

NO.

She called it her travel song. It started with, the road goes ever on and on—

“STOP.” Dwalin turned back to face her. He grabbed at the collar of his breastplate, pulling on it. He couldn’t breathe, it was too damn tight. “Anyone could have known that,” he said. He was nearly hyperventilating, black spots dancing in front of his eyes. “Anyone.”

After you married and before you retired you took her on a flight with Xalanth. You went so high she couldn’t see the ground, it was just you and her, Xalanth and the stars.

Dwalin shook his head. His eyes were burning and his head was beginning to pound, his muscles wound so tight he felt they might snap.

She wrote you a letter before she left, Bilba continued. Saying she had a surprise. She took her ring. You gave it to her before you left to go fight the orcs. You said it was to remind her of your promise; that you would return to her.

His legs buckled and Dwalin went to his knees. Vili took a step forward but stopped when Bilba came forward instead and knelt in front of him. Behind him, Dwalin heard Xalanth make a distressed sound but he couldn’t find the strength to speak to the dragon.

“She’s in Erebor,” he whispered, his voice pleading. “She’s in Erebor.”

Bilba shook her head, her own eyes red. She put her combs and bead in her bags. She was afraid of bandits or of losing them on the road. She befriended a young girl and her mother while traveling. They had been wealthy but lost their fortune and were going to Ered Luin to meet relatives. Amad showed the girl her combs and bead one night, and the next day the girl was wearing them. Amad demanded them back but the girl’s mother lied and said they belonged to her daughter. No one had seen Amad with them so she couldn’t prove they were hers. She’d hoped to force the issue when they got to Ered Luin, but never got the chance. She locked eyes with him, her gaze intense. The girl and Amad were the same height and body type and the girl was wearing Amad’s bead and combs and she was burned…so badly burned. Even Amad’s family thought it was her. It wasn’t your fault. Amad never blamed you, not once. That was all me. I didn’t understand, but I do now. It was never
Around them the world continued as if nothing at all had changed. As if his own world had not just ended. People moved, aiding the wounded, handling the dead, talking quietly about the battle they’d experienced. Fat, gray clouds drifted by lazily overhead and a cold breeze, heavy with the promise of rain darted about the landscape.

Dwalin slowly rose to his feet.

Bilba stood as well, her gaze uncertain.

He took a step, and another, until he stood alongside her, his gaze looking past her. She kept her head to the side, looking out toward the river and Xalanth.

Dwalin opened his mouth, and closed it again.

What, after all, was there for him to say?

I’m sorry?

Sorry for the misunderstanding?

Sorry for a literal *lifetime* of pain and suffering?

Sorry for the years you spent alone?

The fear you must have suffered?

The despair?

Sorry?
Never would two more inadequate words ever be spoken.

And, so, in the end…he simply walked away.

*Where are you going?* Xalanth sounded panicked but Dwalin didn’t answer him.

He couldn’t answer him.

Any of them.

Instead he shut them all out, snapping the links closed on the voices clamoring in his head until every last one had fallen silent.

And then he kept walking.

He paused when he reached the entrance back to the sewers and turned to look back.

Vili was speaking to Bilba, cupping her face in his hands, his eyes focused on her. Fili stood next to her, close enough his body was brushing hers, arms crossed over his chest. Kili was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Xalanth though he could still feel the dragon panicking over their bond.

He turned and entered the sewers.

He made it all of twenty feet before the first bout of nausea hit him.

His knees hit the stone of the sewer, streaked with blood from the orcs they’d slain, and he became violently ill.

Time after time his gut wrenched inside him, expelling first food, then stomach acid, and then nothing at all. He bent over, one hand braced on the ground, the other around his gut, and heaved until he nearly passed out, until his body cried out in agony and his head pounded so hard he thought his skull would split in two.
When it was finally over he sagged, his breathing coming in hard, ragged gasps. His body shook from the violent bout and his stomach ached.

He dragged in a breath, and when he let it out it became a sob and once that first one was out others followed until the narrow corridor echoed with the sound.

The floodgates of his mind opened.

“You look lost. First time in Hobbiton?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Name’s Dwalin, Captain of the Guard of Erebor.”

“Belladonna. At your service.”

Dwalin let out a sound through gritted teeth like that of a wounded animal. He forced himself onto legs that barely held him and began walking again.

“Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

“The honor would be mine.”

He staggered and put a hand on the stone, trailing it along as he moved.

“What if you don’t come back?”

“I will. I gave you the ring didn’t I?”

“It’s just a ring.”

“It’s not just a ring. It’s a promise.”

And then had come the letter and the race to Bag End and the still body in a cold room.

Except…

Except it hadn’t been her. It hadn’t been her and she had been in Mahal damned Moria and he could have saved her, he should have saved her.

He would have saved her.

I have a surprise for you.

A surprise.

Bilba.

The surprise had been Bilba.

His legs buckled and he crashed to his knees again but he dragged himself back up, and continued. He’d begun to leave behind the areas they’d gone through originally, the bricks clear of blood and the corpses they’d left. The tunnels were narrower and the water flow lower.

Bilba.
His memory called forth an image, not of how he’d last seen her but of how he normally saw her. Wearing the armor Fili had made her, tall and strong, her sword clutched firmly in hand as she charged forth to battle the dark.

Mahal, but she was beautiful.

She was fire and ice, strength and stubbornness, grace and finesse. She was unwaveringly loyal, kind and compassionate to a fault and braver than anyone he’d ever known.

If someone had asked him to describe the perfect child the resulting image he would have come up with wouldn’t have held a candle to the person Bilba actually was.

There was no comparison.

She was as beautiful as Bella had been, inside and out.

And he’d left her in Moria.

Both of them.

His legs gave out again. He’d been trudging down the center of the tunnel, the water level down to a mere few inches. When his knees hit the water he made no attempt to get up again but simply put his hands on his knees and stayed still.

He couldn’t comprehend it.

His mind literally couldn’t wrap around it.

Every time he tried to think he returned to the same thing and it put him right back at the beginning again.

His wife…and the daughter he hadn’t known he had.

In Moria.

For decades.
He went over his life, every time he’d been happy, relaxed, at ease and horror filled him at the thought of what might have been happening to Bella and Bilba in those moments.

When he was eating his fill and they were starving.

When he was resting in his room and they were freezing in the dark.

When he was alive…and they were in Moria.

He stopped thinking entirely eventually, the horror to great to process.

Instead he simply stayed there, on his knees, in a sewer.

Footsteps splashed through the water behind him and then Vili, Thorin and Balin stood in front of him.

All three looked like how he felt.

“The kids told us,” Vili said. “Dwalin, I’m--” He shut up because he knew, as well as Dwalin, that there was nothing he could say, that anyone could say…nothing at all.

“Come on.” Thorin knelt on one side of him and grabbed an arm while Balin did the same on the other. “Xalanth is threatening to start tearing up the streets if we don’t bring you out.”

They pulled on him and he allowed them to drag him to his feet. As they did he finally found his voice, at least enough to ask, “Bilba?”

“She’s alright,” Vili said. “She’s worried about you.”

Dwalin made a strangled sound, somewhere between a sob and a laugh. “She was right to hate me.”

“No,” Vili said shortly. “She wasn’t, and she understands that. She was a hurting, confused, kid. You can’t hold that against her.”

“I hold nothing against her,” Dwalin said. “I hold it against myself.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Thorin broke in.

“She was my wife,” Dwalin replied. “I should have known.”

He fell back into silence after that, allowing the three to guide him out of the sewers.
He didn’t care about where they were going.

In the end, it really didn’t matter.

Because there was nowhere in Middle Earth where he could go to escape the truth.

And nowhere he could hide to escape himself.
Chapter 21

Bilba studied the ceiling.

It was strange, she thought idly, how people rarely, if ever, looked up.

Probably because it was profoundly boring.

She scowled and gingerly rolled onto her side before awkwardly getting up into a seated position. A dull pain, deep enough to make her nauseous, rolled through her and she grimaced, squeezing her eyes shut as her body helpfully reminded her of the injuries she’d taken in Dale and the fields beyond. She pressed her hands into the cold stone of the floor, clenched her teeth in anticipation, and scooted back until her body was supported by the wall behind her. Her ribs did not appreciate the movement, or any movement for that matter, and she held still until the pain passed. By the time it did she was sweating, trembling and breathing through her nose to avoid throwing up.

Are you alright?

Fine, she returned sharply, pain making her short tempered. It's my own fault. I let everything lock up and get stiff.

You should be in bed, Fili answered. Not sitting in random hallways.

Bilba rolled her eyes. I'm not in a random hallway. I'm in the same one I've been in.

Are you at least taking the powder Oin gave you for the pain? Fili asked.

Bilba ignored him. She could feel irritation matching her own coming from him. He’d been hurt far worse than he let on. He’d fallen from Syrath after all, jumped off actually, and while the snow might have cushioned his fall he’d still hit hard. After that had come the attack, nearly being murdered by Bolg and then the battle after where he’d racked up his fair share of cuts, injuries and at least two cracked ribs. She knew he took the powder Oin had given them to help sleep at night but avoided it during the day, claiming it left him unable to focus. He was in a council meeting at the moment, one of a number since the attack, and it, and the pain he was in, were making him as annoyed as she was. If they continued talking they’d undoubtedly end up fighting, not from any real anger at each other so much as from exhaustion, pain and general misery.

It was best to just not talk at all, at least until their tempers improved…and Syrath healed enough that they could both stop taking on his pain as well. He was on drugs as well but they were often inadequate or wore off sooner than expected, leaving him hurting until more could be administered. She would feel his pain flare through her at unexpected moments, a liquid line of fire burning through her veins.

In short, their lives all generally sucked at the moment, and she only had herself to blame.

At least in part.

She glanced down to the greave strapped to her leg. She was wearing her armor and had her recovered dagger strapped to her thigh once again. Her sword was braced against the wall next to her. Fili had claimed he couldn’t find any of her other knives, broken or otherwise, and had gleefully loaned her some of his own while he made her a brand new set that matched her sword and dagger. She’d taken the borrowed ones, and a few extra he’d happily tossed in, and had all of them on her.
She’d allowed herself to go soft, been caught off guard at the worst possible moment and, as a result, had nearly lost both of them.

It wouldn’t happen again.

She sighed and dropped her head against the wall with a light thunk.

Every time she thought she was getting to a point where she was finally strong enough to protect those she loved…it had worked out this time, yes, but not without a lot of help and no thanks to her own ineptitude at letting a bunch of orcs catch her off guard.

And not even any orc, but that orc.

Bolg.

The same damn orc and out of him, his sire and that Valar forsaken dam of his, he was the one she would have considered the weakest.

Noise came from around the corner and she turned her head, her bangs brushing lightly against her face as she did. She’d almost, almost, taken the ponytail and bangs and put them back into braids and a coil but had changed her mind at the last second and left them as they were.

And if her hands had been shaking somewhat when she’d done her hair that morning, arranging it in a way that Orcrist would have scoffed at but Bilba liked, what of it?

She had damaged ribs, of course her bloody hands shook when she lifted them.

She was done letting the orcs dictate her life.

Now if she could just managed to stop letting them get close to the ones she loved.

A figure appeared around the corner. Bilba noted the white hair and thick beard and relaxed, her hand moving from where it had instinctively crept toward one of her knives.

Balin stopped next to her and smiled down at her. “Still aren’t going in?”

Bilba shook her head and the older dwarf chuckled. “Of course not. Durin blood and Dwalin’s daughter on top of that. I think you might actually be more stubborn than he is.”

A Durin. That was something she hadn’t considered before meeting Balin. She’d met him the same day of the battle, he’d come to see her in the Healing Wards that evening. She’d known, in an abstract sense, that her father was related to the king but it hadn’t really sunk in that it meant she was related to him as well.

Meaning she was a noble by birthright.

“And not just any noble,” Fili had informed her. “But one of the highest rank. You’re effectively a royal.”

A royal, and also apparently Fili and Kili’s third cousin. Dis, upon finding out, had announced it was fantastic news much to Bilba’s confusion. Up to that point, she had been unaware that some of the nobility had been upset over her relationship with Fili. Had the pairing been with Kili, reportedly, her status as Orcrist and dragon rider would probably have carried her. Since it was with Fili, however, some of the nobility, mainly those with eligible daughters, argued her common blood and lack of lineage made her woefully unsuited to being paired with the Crown Prince and future king of Erebor.
All that had changed now. According to Dis, had everything gone right and Bilba been born and raised in Erebor, it was likely a betrothal would have been discussed between her and one of the princes at some point. Marriages of distant cousins, especially amongst royalty, were quite common in the dwarven culture where blood and family lines mattered and females were in short supply.

Which meant that, no matter which way her life had played out, there would have been a possibility of her ending up with Fili.

It was a….surprisingly comforting thought.

In any event the news, currently spreading like wildfire through Erebor, had mostly silenced the nobility. There were still a few who were clinging to the fact that Dwalin had yet to acknowledge her and, until he did, her claim of parentage was little more than that.

A claim.

She was claiming to be Dwalin’s daughter, and there were those questioning that claim. Remembering the crush of young women clustered at the base of the stairs at Fili’s Coming of Age Celebration, and the attention he constantly drew from girls of all stations and walks of life, she really shouldn’t have been surprised.

She shouldn’t have been surprised, yet she was, and not just by resistance to her being with Fili.

It was that her claim was being questioned at all, regardless of the agenda.

She’d known who she was her entire life and the thought that others might not believe her…might accuse her, and her mother by association, of lying…she’d worried over how her father and others might react to the news but she’d never, ever, considered the fact anyone might outright reject what she said.

Balin was still there, patiently waiting to finish what had already become a routine.

She complied. How is he doing?

“Why don’t you come in with me and see for yourself?” Balin asked.

Bilba shook her head and the dwarf gave her a look of mild exasperation. “You can take on all of Moria by yourself but can’t face your own father?”

Her own father.

Balin had never hesitated to accept her after she’d told him her story. Given that he was older than her father and therefore the patriarch of their small clan his acceptance of her should have been enough to silence her critics.

It hadn’t, at least not yet, a fact which had made Dis simply roll her eyes and proclaim that one should never underestimate the fervor of an ambitious noble with a daughter of marriageable age.

I can’t, she said, not meeting her uncle’s eyes. I just...

She shook her head and looked toward the other side of the hall where a non-descript door sat, closed. Most dwarves decorated their doors, carving them with family crests or setting jewels or other things in them.

It didn’t surprise her that her father had done none of those things.
It was a door. Its use was practical, not decorative.

Balin sighed, his eyes compassionate. “You two,” he shook his head as he headed to the door and pushed it open. Bilba caught a brief glimpse inside. It looked like a storm had struck the room, furniture and other items broken and cast about. She’d heard it happen that first day but, before she could do anything, Thorin, Vili and Balin had run past her and into the room.

Silence had followed…then, and every day after.

All five of them, and counting.

The door closed and the corridor, currently being avoided by all of Erebor, went silent again.

***

I am disgruntled.

It was an hour or so later. Bilba was counting seams of granite and other minerals running through the floor. When the voice sounded in her head she felt a rush of affection strong enough to lift a good portion of her poor temper.

Why are you disgruntled?

Xalanth won’t let me go outside.

He better not. You’re nowhere near recovered enough.

Neither are you!

She snorted. First off, I’m not outside. Second, I’m not the one who can barely walk, let alone fly. She paused. Do you want me to come sit with you?

She’d been splitting her time, spending her days where she currently was and her nights with Syrath. Fili joined her as he could but all the royal family were in high demand with the investigation into where the orcs had come from and how they’d managed all that they had with no one in Mirkwood, Erebor or Dale having the slightest inkling.

So far the investigation had turned up absolutely nothing. No one had approached the Treasury during the attack and there was zero evidence that anyone had been up to anything as Beryl had suggested, leading to a few speculating she’d simply been blustering as a final way to stir up trouble before fleeing. The criminals in Dale, those few Bilba had left alive, had either vanished or were so low ranked they didn’t know anything. Tamrin, who had known little to begin with, had been locked up for all of one day before escaping and disappearing entirely.

One might be tempted to dismiss it all as being over, something that somehow, someway Nar had put together and had taken with him to his grave.

One might be tempted, had it not been for something they had noticed shortly after the attack.

The orc attacks against the caravans had stopped.
All of them.

No one had seen an orc, in fact, since the battle.

Anywhere.

Gondor, Rohan, Rivendell, the Rangers patrolling the Wild.

All the orcs had gone to ground…and every time she thought about it the potential implications terrified her.

_It'll be okay_, Fili’s voice sounded in her head, picking up on her fear. _We’re going to figure this out._

_You know I hate empty platitudes_, Bilba returned.

_I do_, Fili answered. _Sorry._

He sounded exhausted.

He was lying about how much sleep he was getting, even with Oin’s supposedly magical, pain reducing powder he kept trying to push on her.

They were all exhausted.

All of them were battered, beaten down, and lost in the dark scrabbling to find out what was going on.

And in the midst of all that her father had found out the truth, all because she couldn’t manage to control her emotions under stress.

Erebor needed her Guard Captain and, thanks to her, the mountain went without.

_Xalanth is threatening to sit on me!_

_He has my permission._

_You are mean._

_And you’re a terrible patient._

There was silence a moment and then Fili’s voice sounded again in her head.

_Why is Syrath insisting Xalanth is trying to kill him?_

_He’s bored and in pain_, Bilba answered. _And he’s hoping you’ll be easier to manipulate than I am_
and will let him go outside.

Not likely. We don’t know how those orcs got in and if we don’t know that –

Then we can’t know if we got them all, Bilba cut in. I know. Are we any closer to finding something?

Anything.

Nothing, aside from the fact that what happened is impossible. Mirkwood, Erebor and Dale all have their own spy networks and intelligence. For that many orcs, and their dragons, to have come in undetected…it just isn’t possible.

Not possible, and yet it had happened.

Uncle’s been trying to get ahold of Gandalf, Fili continued, in the hopes he might have some insight, but he’s still missing. We tried to contact Saruman but he’s left Isengard to look for Gandalf and his current whereabouts are unknown. That leaves Radagast but no one ever knows where he is so the odds of us finding him are slim.

I thought there were five wizards? Bilba said. I read it in one of the books in the library.

There were originally, Fili agreed, but two of them went missing ages ago. No one knows what happened to them.

He went silent, his attention drawn by something else, and Bilba tried to convince her nerves to settle down.

Her eyes went back to the closed door.

They needed her father.

Erebor needed him.

She sighed and put her head against the wall again, gritting her teeth as a headache started to form behind her eyes. It was the final straw and she felt tears forming at the corners of her eyes, squeezing out and running in hot tracks down her cheeks.

Mahal but everything hurt and it just kept hurting. It hurt and she was tired and her mind wouldn’t stop playing everything over and over and over again. She knew logically that it would pass with time but, just at that moment, it certainly didn’t feel like it ever would.

It was an indeterminate time later that she felt someone sit down next to her. Her hand was picked up and wrapped around a warm cup and she opened her eyes as the strong smell of tea wafted up to her nose. She let her head fall to the side and then allowed her body to follow until she was resting against Fili. She wrapped her free arm around his bicep, pulled herself closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Drink the damn tea,” he ordered, his tone mild. He held a cup of his own and took a sip from it before setting it on the floor next to him.

How much of his magic powder did you put in?

He snorted. “It’s not magic, and enough to give you a break.” He rested the side of his head on top of hers. “Drink. Please.”

Bilba struggled upright again and obeyed him, grimacing at the slight bitter taste to the tea. The hot
steam wafted over her face and she closed her eyes, enjoying it. She sipped carefully, draining the cup to near the halfway mark. As she set the mug down with a clink she could feel the pain in her body receding to a dull throb, the tension in her muscles easing as she relaxed. Biting back tears, of relief this time, she curled against Fili again.

Thank you.

“Any time,” he answered.

Bilba rested her head on his shoulder again. Dimly she could hear Syrath grumbling but she knew he would tire quickly and settle down soon. She’d asked Balin to pass onto Xalanth the fact that Syrath often grew cold when he was ill and that he liked physical contact. The larger dragon had responded by curling around his smaller son, an action which had had gone a long way to alleviating his misery.

It also prevented Syrath from trying to sneak outside while Xalanth was sleeping which she imagined was a bonus for the larger dragon.

Both her soulmates were as safe as they could be so she allowed herself to lean a little harder on Fili’s shoulder and closed her eyes.

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Three more days passed.

Syrath continued to be an awful patient who, as soon as he felt the tiniest bit better, wanted to gallop outside and probably reopen all his wounds but his antics no longer made her as anxious as they once had. In the past she’d never had the ability to force him to rest when injured. Granted, it wasn’t as if she rested when she was hurt but the rules she lived by did not, and had never, applied to Syrath. She wanted him to rest until he was back to full health and his refusal to do so, and her inability to make him, had always left her unnerved.

Now, however, she had Xalanth on her side and he could physically keep his son from doing anything foolish.

She’d been making it a point to hug the massive creature every time she went in and saw him curled around his son.

The larger dragon wasn’t doing great himself, barely eating from worry over Dwalin, but he hadn’t let that affect his care for his young son, a fact which had brought Bilba intense relief.

Really, having an entire team behind her, many of whom cared for Syrath personally, and all who wanted the best for him and knew how best to help him… she couldn’t put into words the gratitude she felt.

She shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position against the wall. Fili and Syrath had both threatened to stop managing their own pain if she refused to deal with hers so she’d begrudgingly started to use the small packet Oin had given her.

It dealt with the worst of the physical damage she’d taken but did nothing for the new crop of nightmares she’d picked up, ones she couldn’t wake up from when taking the powder. This meant she could either go to bed relatively pain free, and be locked in nightmares all night, or go to bed in
pain and be unable to sleep because of it.

That night she’d chosen sleep, after going without the previous two nights, and had paid for it. After finally waking up, soaked in sweat, shaking and panting for breath, she’d given up and got up, carefully picking her way past a sleeping Syrath, and had gone back to the corridor outside her father’s room.

It was cold, the fires in the braziers lining the halls banked to bare embers. In the lower light the shadows were longer, and the darkness deeper. The silence was heavy, oppressive and Bilba could feel something deep inside her soul responding to it. Her mind, already primed for bad memories thanks to her nightmares, tried to convince her that things moved in the shadows, that the walls were cracked and ill cared for, the floor pitted, covered with filth and stained dark in uneven patches.

She shook her head, pulled her knees up carefully, wrapped her arms around her legs and put her head down, trying to remind herself she was in Erebor, not Moria.

Nothing was coming for her, not right then anyway.

Dimly she felt Fili starting to react to her, a vague feeling of concern coming across their bond. She closed it down, not entirely, but enough to stop him from regaining consciousness and, instead, to let him drift back down into sleep.

At least one of them should be able to get some rest.

Her mind refused to settle.

Coming here had been a mistake. She should have gone to the library to read or down to wander the empty stalls of the market, anywhere she could have distracted herself from thinking too much.

She relived the attack, every decision she’d made, every decision she should have made, all the many, many ways it could have gone wrong.

Part of her still couldn’t believe she’d come through with Syrath and Fili both still at her side and was convinced the eventual payment for her good fortune would be immense.

She saw again the look on Beryl’s face as the other woman was dragged away and felt her heart twist in compassion because she knew what it was like to lose a parent and because no one, no one deserved Moria.

And then there was her father and her anxiety over what would happen when he eventually came out, stress so intense at times that, as much as she feared it, she also wished it’d just happen already so it could be in the past and done with.

And then, after all that…or maybe looming over it all….there was Azog.

He was going to kill her.
She’d killed his son and, if given the chance, she’d do it again, a thousand times over, but none of it changed the reality, or the consequences, of her choice.

She’d killed Bolg and while Azog might have been angry at her before, might even have hated her or placed a price on her head….now?

Now he would kill her, and not quickly.

She wasn’t afraid of it so much as she was afraid of the people she loved getting caught in his quest for vengeance against her.

It added to the swirling chaos in her mind and she pulled her knees in closer, digging her fingers into her calves.

It was testament to just how much she was struggling that it took a full ten seconds for her to cue into the sensation of someone standing over her.

She tensed. She had one arm laying over the other, around her legs, and she slid the fingers of the lower hand into the underside of the vambrace on her upper arm, curling around the hilt of the knife sheathed there.

As she did she mentally tried to run through the list of those who would be capable of getting so far inside her defenses without her noticing.

She was in no condition to get up and defend herself, and it was far too late for that anyway judging by what she was fairly sure was the toe of a boot pressed against her left foot.

Direct route it was then or, as Kili liked to call it the bluff your way to success, and hopefully not death, route.

She tightened her grip around the hilt and, in a move she sincerely hoped looked smooth and fully in command, raised her head and looked up.

Oh.

That was why she hadn’t noticed.

Her father stood over her. He was dressed in full armor, axes on his back and sword strapped to his side.

His face was utterly blank, his eyes empty.
Before she could process what was going on he turned and walked away, down the hall, his stride purposeful.

Bilba stared after him in confusion.

And then she was struggling to her feet, her teeth clenched and one arm wrapped protectively around her rib cage.

She hadn’t sat outside his room to just watch him walk away when he finally came out.

She trailed after him, her eyes fixed on his back, trailing in his shadow, cast back by the dim light from the braziers.

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She had no idea where he was going.

He’d gone into the lower levels, in a direction she’d never been before. Eventually they’d passed under an arch and ended up on a narrow, steep set of stairs leading deep into the heart of the mountain.

Bilba walked slowly, one hand tracing along the cold rock, the other with an almost death grip on the hilt of her sword.

It wasn’t Moria, she chanted to herself. It wasn’t Moria. Going to the lower levels in Moria was bad. It was very, very bad. There were things down there, awful things that made the orcs look tame in comparison. Sometimes, when a slave did something deemed particularly bad by the orcs they would punish the slave by sending them to the lower levels.

They never came back.

Ahead of her the stairway ended at the foot of a dimly lit opening. From her angle it was impossible to see through it to what lay beyond. She’d long since lost sight of her father, his footsteps far more sure and quick than hers.

She raised her sword, annoyed when her arms and ribs betrayed her and refused to let her hold it steady, and went through the opening.

Everything was so still.

A multitude of doors stretched away in front of her, set in rock. As she walked she could see paths branching off from the main one she was on, leading to still more doors and more paths branching beyond that. Dimly she could hear the faint sound of her father’s boots and she hurried after, eyes catching on the doors as she passed each by. There was no sound from behind any of them and she could see most had layers of dust, suggesting they hadn’t been opened in a very long time.

Light caught her attention and she turned to see a blue glow coming from around a nearby corner. She rounded the curve just in time to see her father vanish into a room.
Bilba hesitated but fear and trepidation had never saved her from anything so she took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then stepped to the doorway.

The burst of color and vibrancy was a sharp contrast to the drab corridor outside and her eyes widened in surprise.

She looked up, taking in the deep blue sapphire overhead, the emerald on the walls and the far off hill.

The Shire, she realized with a start. It looked like the Shire.

Her eyes took in the large, carved marble box on a pedestal. Her father stood alongside it, his hands braced on the top and his head down. She looked past it, to the wall behind, and sucked in a sharp breath.

She sheathed her sword and stepped forward, past the pedestal and her father, until she stood before the massive portrait hanging on the wall behind it.

Grief flooded her and her vision blurred. She raised a hand, her fingers trembling, and touched the portrait gently, feeling the ridges and planes of the paint strokes on her skin.

She studied the picture like a starving man might food, eyes tracing over every inch.

She hadn’t seen her mother in anything but her dreams and memories for years and she’d never seen her like this at all.

Her mother’s hair hung well past her shoulders, curlier than Bilba’s, and thicker but the exact same shade. Her eyes seemed a deeper green, more vibrant and alive than Bilba remembered and she had a healthy plumpness and glow to her skin.

Her father stepped up, just behind her shoulder, his face still unreadable as he too studied the portrait.

*I never knew*, Bilba sent without thinking. *My hair is the same color as hers.*

It was the wrong thing to say.

A muscle twitched in Dwalin’s jaw. His hands clenched into fists at his side and, for the briefest of instants, his mask slipped, revealing an awful grief that sent a burst of cold straight through her.

She knew that grief. It was the same grief she’d felt just after her mother’s death, when all she’d known was despair and the mere thought of taking another breath had been too much to bear. When, in a moment of insanity, she’d thrown herself at the orcs in the mines, and at Bolg when she’d found them.

She’d wanted vengeance.

She’d wanted redemption.

She’d wanted the pain to end, but not if it meant she left those responsible for it alive in her wake.

She’d already shattered, and she’d wanted to take as many of them with her as possible before the broken pieces started to fall.

Her father spun on one heel with the precision of a soldier marching off to battle, and strode out of the room.
Bilba’s felt pure panic. *Where are you going?*

A rhetorical question.

She already knew.

It was exactly where she would have gone had she been in his place, where she’d already been when her mother had died.

He didn’t answer and she scrambled after him, ignoring the pain it caused. She rushed out of the room and managed to catch up to him in the corridor.

She grabbed his arm and felt him tense but he didn’t pull away and his steps slowed to match her pace.

As they got to the exit Bilba summoned a burst of strength, released his arm and ran ahead of him. She stopped at the base of the stairs leading to the upper levels and turned to face him, her arms braced on either side of the opening. It was laughable, she was a fraction of his size and injured. He could probably move her with one hand if he wanted, and with minimal effort.

He came up to within a foot of her…and stopped.

“Move.”

Bilba shook her head and his eyes narrowed. “I said, move.”

_No_, she insisted. The others were all right. She and her father were exactly alike, and it terrified her because she had no idea how to stop him.

No idea, because she knew damn well no one had stopped her.

They’d just thrown her in the Arena and started making bets.

Somehow, she doubted her father would accept such a fate.

A memory played back in her mind, one from not so long ago. *“You don’t have to take on the weight of the world, Bilba. Sometimes, it’s alright to be the kid you are and ask an adult for help.”*

She swallowed, nervous. It was the middle of the night. Would he even be awake? Would he come? He’d _said_ he would…but…

Dwalin was staring at her, probably trying to figure out how best to move her without hurting her, and she knew full well it was only a matter of time before he’d be moving past her and she’d be left behind watching the last parent she had walk away from her.

She opened a link, and asked for help.

The answer was immediate.

He was coming.
She sagged fractionally in relief and refocused on her father. Now if she could just stall him long enough.

*Why are you doing this?* she asked.

He gave her a look of disbelief. “You’re the last one who should be asking me that. You know exactly why. You’ve been doing it yourself for years.”

Damn it.

*Bolg is dead,* Bilba said. *You helped kill him.*

His eyes studied her. “Did he kill her?”

Bilba flinched. *Yes.*

It wasn’t entirely the truth, but it wasn’t exactly a lie either.

He didn’t buy it, at all. “Your lying hasn’t improved.”

She was going to lose him.

He was right there and she was going to lose him the same way she’d lost her mother. She’d looked her mother in the eyes, held her mother’s body…she’d had her…right there…right there in her arms…and she’d still lost her. Her mother had slipped away and now it was happening again and she was going to lose him even though he was right in front of her but she couldn’t hold him anymore than she’d been able to hold her mother and she would lose them both.

Both of them, and both because she hadn’t been, and wasn’t, strong enough to hold on.

All because she was weak.

Weak…and useless.

Her vision blurred and she bit down on the inside of her cheek until the metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

Her mother had always called her beautiful. Told her she was smart and kind and Bilba would have traded all of it, every last part if only she could have been strong.

Her eyes filled and the tears spilled over of their own accord, tracing hot tracks down her cheeks.

She’d failed her mother.

She couldn’t fail her father.
She drew her sword.

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

Bilba didn’t answer. She reached up and scrubbed a hand over her eyes, wiping the tears away in one, angry motion.

Then she straightened her shoulders and raised her head, steeling herself.

She flipped the blade around and held it out, offering it to him.

He gave her a confused look but reached out and wrapped his fingers around the hilt. Before he could pull the weapon back, Bilba grabbed the point of the blade and settled it in the notch of her collarbone, the sharp tip pressing against the hollow of her throat.

Dwalin swore and started to pull the weapon back, only to freeze as he realized the slightest wrong movement would slice her hand wide open at best, and her throat at worst.

“Let go,” he demanded, holding perfectly still. “Now.”

Bilba gave him a calm look, her breathing steady.

She could do this.

*You want revenge? Then take it.* The words stumbled inside her head and she wrenched them out. *She’s dead because of me. It’s my fault.*

His eyes darkened. “It’s not your fault.”

*It is.* Bilba repeated. It had been always been her fault. She’d tried to deny it, tried to ignore it, pretend it hadn’t happened. She’d blamed the orcs, Bolg, her father, anyone and everyone but under it all…she’d always known the truth.

No matter how hard she’d tried to run from it.

It was her fault.

*You weren’t there,* she told her father. *I was. It was my fault. She’s dead…because I wasn’t strong enough to save her.*

Her throat clogged and she struggled to swallow without cutting her own neck. More tears leaked out but she couldn’t move to wipe them away. *It was my fault.* She insisted. *I was supposed to protect her. I was supposed to keep her safe and I failed. Bolg and the orcs, none of them would have gotten near her if I’d been stronger, if I hadn’t been weak…and useless. I’m the reason she’s gone, Adad. I’m the reason she’s dead.*
She raised her chin higher, feeling a sharp bite of pain as the sword bit through the first layer of skin. Dwalin’s eyes widened in horror, his knuckles white where they gripped the sword.

They were at an impasse. He couldn’t move without hurting her and she couldn’t move without losing him.

An arm wrapped gently around her waist from behind and a body pressed full length along her back. A hand slid over hers where it held the blade, carefully peeled each finger off the sword, then intertwined their fingers with hers and pulled her hand down to where her other hand had grabbed the arm around her waist.

“Not on my watch,” Fili’s voice said in her ear. “I don’t know what you’re trying to accomplish but this isn’t the way to do it.”

He pulled her backward in one, easy motion and the sword vanished from her throat, clattering to the stone several feet behind her father. The hand holding hers let go and joined the other wrapped around her waist, pulling her back against Fili’s chest and lightly holding her there.

Bilba was startled, by both his sudden appearance and by how easily she’d allowed him to disarm her.

Vili stepped past her and stopped in front of Dwalin. He was wearing only a loose tunic and trousers but held himself with so confident an air he might as well have been as heavily armored as Dwalin.

“What are you doing?”

Dwalin scowled. “What does it look like?”

“It looked like you were traumatizing your daughter,” Vili shot back. “Don’t you think she’s had enough for one lifetime?”

Dwalin’s face darkened and Bilba pressed back closer to Fili who wrapped his arms even more securely around her in response. From the feel of his body behind her, he was dressed in a manner similar to his father’s. Vili must have jumped right out of bed when she’d called and Fili had done the same when his father had called him in turn.

“I don’t have the right to call her my daughter,” Dwalin said, his voice hoarse. “I don’t deserve to be a father.”

Vili scoffed. “No one deserves to be a parent. Children are gifts, not rewards. They come to us as a blessing and we do our best every day to be worthy of it. Sometimes we make mistakes, but we don’t just give up because of it!”

“I left them in Moria,” Dwalin snarled. “I think that qualifies as more than a simple mistake.”

He started forward and Bilba felt pure terror. She shoved her arms out to her sides, breaking Fili’s hold. Before he could grab her again, she lunged forward, threw herself to her knees, and wrapped her arms around his legs as much as she could. It hurt, her body loudly protesting the violent movement.

She heard him sigh from overhead. “Damn it, Bilba. You shouldn’t want anything to do with me.
You were right to hate me."

“You had no idea they were there,” a new voice said, and Bilba heard Thorin come into the room. Dwalin made a sound like that of a wounded animal and she tightened her grip on his legs.

“How could you be expected to save them?” Thorin continued, his baritone echoing through the tunnel. “If you believed Bella was buried in Erebor?”

“I should have known,” Dwalin said. “I shouldn’t have given up so easily.”

“You had her body,” Vili said, “which had been identified by her family, all of whom were in agreement. It had her bead and combs and the right physical description. What possible reason could you have had to question it?”

“What about Quenth?” Thorin cut in. “And Frerin? I did know they were there but I never got them out.”

“You had no choice,” Dwalin insisted. “Your grandfather--”

“There’s always a choice,” Thorin said. “Always. Mine was to obey my grandfather and my father, and that choice was wrong. I have to live with that. You have to live with the fact that you believed Bella was dead, and you were wrong.”

“Look at your daughter,” Vili said suddenly. “Does it look like she blames you? She was the one you left, her and Bella.” His tone changed suddenly, as if something had occurred to him. “Bilba, did your mother ever blame Dwalin? Even once?”

Bilba shook her head, keeping her hold tight on her father’s legs.

“If they were the ones you supposedly wronged,” Vili said. “And neither of them blame you, then what are you doing blaming yourself?”

“They should blame me,” Dwalin said shortly. “Both of them. You need to let me go.”

“And do what?” Thorin asked sharply. “March into Moria and get yourself killed?”

“She deserves justice!” Dwalin snapped. “They both do!”

“She deserves you!” Vili shot back. “Your daughter deserves to have her father. Bella doesn’t care anymore, Dwalin. She’s dead, and she isn’t going to give a damn about if you march into Moria or not.”

“Do you think she’d thank you?” Thorin asked suddenly. “If you go to Moria and die and meet Bella in the afterlife…if you find her waiting for you with open arms? After spending her life protecting your daughter, do you think she’d thank you for leaving her?”

“You’re a better father to her than I’ve ever been,” Dwalin said, addressing Vili, and the other dwarf sighed in exasperation.

“You haven’t even tried yet. She’s not even an adult, Dwalin. She still needs you, especially with that reckless streak she likes to carry about. Bella willingly spent her life to protect her daughter. If you truly want to honor her, then you’ll do no less. You know as well as I do it’s what she would want, what she’d expect if she were standing here.”

He wasn’t going to listen, Bilba thought. She certainly wouldn’t have. She got to her feet and
grabbed the front of her father’s shirt, looking up at him. *It was my fault,* she insisted. She’d been too afraid to tell him before, to face him…and Fili…and Vili…and everyone she’d come to love with the truth.

She’d been too afraid to face herself with the truth.

She was still afraid but she could do this. If she lost her father, Fili, Syrath, everyone…she could do this. She could save him where she’d failed to save her mother.

She could be strong.

Just once.

Just once when it really, *really* mattered.

Please, just once.

*PLEASE.* She begged. *Don’t go. If you want revenge, then take it out on me. It was my fault. She died because of me.*

He looked at her and, for the first time, the blank expression on his face cracked and she saw emotion on his face.

She expected to see anger, disgust, blame.

Instead all she saw was compassion.

He put a hand on the side of her face, his thumb running lightly along her cheekbone.

And then he hugged her.

Bilba was so startled she just stood there, unsure of how to react.

How.

How could he do that?

How could he hug her after she’d told him?

How --
Her father’s voice spoke inside her mind.

It wasn’t your fault.

She shook her head, her hands still clutching his shirt. It was mine. I wasn’t strong enough. I couldn’t --


In her mind she felt again the touch of her mother’s hand, tracing along her face, leaving streaks of blood behind. She heard the sickening rattle as her mother struggled to breathe, felt her own lungs seize inside her as she begged her mother to stay with her…as she apologized for failing, over and over again.

“Love you.”

The final movements of her mother’s lips, no air left with which to give the words voice.

Love you.

And then she’d been gone, and all Bilba had left was the sickening knowledge that it hadn’t had to happen.

Not then at least, not that day, not that moment.

And that the only reason it had, had been because she’d been too weak to stop it.

She shook her head at her father. Didn’t he understand? She was being strong now, finally, at long last. When it wasn’t already far too late. She was saving him. He didn’t have to go to Moria. He could stay.

You don’t know what happened.

I don’t have to know. Dwalin said, his eyes locked on hers. If you couldn’t save her, then she couldn’t be saved.

Her world ground to a screeching halt and, for an instant, she stopped breathing entirely.

You can’t mean that.

I mean it, he said, his eyes never leaving hers. I’ve seen the person she raised and I have no doubt you did everything you could to save her. If you couldn’t, then there was nothing left that could be
done. You did all you could. It was enough.

Bilba shook her head again. But she still died.

People die, her father answered, even when you do everything you can possibly do, sometimes they still die. But that doesn’t mean it was your fault. You did enough, Bilba. I don’t have to know what happened to know that. It was enough.

It was enough.

Bilba burst into tears.

Dwalin wrapped his arms around her and she buried her face in his chest.

If it wasn’t my fault then it wasn’t yours either, she said. Please. Please don’t go to Moria. Please stay. I want you to stay.

“I’ll stay,” he promised. He sounded beaten, and exhausted, but at least it was more than the anger, or, worse, the nothingness he’d had before.

She pulled away and nodded shakily, trying to get herself back under control.

Fili stepped up behind her again, putting her between him and her father. Dwalin studied Fili as if for the first time. “You and I will be having a talk at some point.”

Fili raised an eyebrow. “The usual? I hurt her and Erebor gets to find out how Kili does as King?”

“Something like that,” Dwalin said, his voice tired. He sounded…worn, like he’d been in a deep sleep and was still in the process of waking up. Bilba remembered the weeks just after her mother had died, the way it had felt like she was walking through water, the pain of her loss taking an actual, physical toll on her.

Fili met Dwalin’s eyes calmly, and evenly. “You’re the one who made her cry. Should Erebor find out how it does with my father as Guard Captain?”

Vili made a strangled sound next to them while Thorin snorted.

The faintest ghost of what, in better times, might have been a smile flashed across Dwalin’s face. “You’re willing to protect her, even against me. Good.”
He hugged her again and then pulled away, only to give her a fatigued but encouraging look as she gave him an uncertain one of her own. “I said I’d stay and I will. I just…need to think for a while, alright? And sleep. I haven’t been doing much of that lately.”

Bilba’s eyes flickered to Vili who smiled. “We’ll take care of him, Sweetheart. Why don’t you let Fili take you back?”

She nodded, shakily and allowed Fili to put an arm around her shoulders.

They went back up the stairs together, Thorin and Vili with Dwalin and her and Fili coming up behind. Balin was waiting for them at the top and the groups split, the adults heading back to Dwalin’s room while Fili walked with her in the opposite direction.

They went back to the dragon levels where Syrath lay, still sleeping deeply. Xalanth was curled around him, his eyes open and glowing in the dark.

Bilba put a hand on his nose before, carefully, lowering herself to the ground and working her way under his wing, to where Syrath was. She curled up against his side and gave a small smile of relief as Fili joined her. Without a word he settled down next to her, supporting himself against Syrath’s leg on the other side. He yawned, crossed his arms across his chest and leaned over, his head resting on Syrath.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “They’ll stay with him. He’s going to be alright, you both are.”

Bilba curled against his side without answering him, feeling the steady movement of Syrath breathing behind her.

Eventually she began to settle, her mind and body exhausted by the night’s events.

Her sleep that night, mercifully, was dreamless.
Chapter 22

Bilba didn’t see her father again for several days. Vili assured her that he was fine and simply trying to come to terms with things without upsetting her any further.

She spent most of her time with Syrath and Fili. By this point the number of Council Meetings had died down. Not because progress had been made, but because there was no more to be had.

They knew nothing.

There were still no signs of any orcs. Bilba had even gotten one of the other dragons to take her out, near the pass and even Moria, hoping to lure them out.

Nothing.

She had flown back, passing over wide paths and valleys of silence and stillness, like all the land was holding its breath in anticipation of...something.

It was unsettling, and people were picking up on it. There was a tension that hadn’t been there before, an unnatural quiet in the marketplace, mothers hushing their children as if they spoke out of turn in a library.

Vili had stepped up the guards, continued to send Vanguard out even when there was nothing for them to do and, together, apart...they waited.

Bilba just wished she knew for what.

In the end, it was a relief when her father appeared in the entrance to the dragon levels, not just to see him but to escape the anxiety she had been living under.

He stopped long enough to greet Xalanth and Syrath and then stood in front of her, an oddly nervous look in his eyes. “I want to show you something.”

He headed out of the room and Bilba obediently fell in alongside him.

It was still very early but the corridors were already crowded with nobility trying to push their agendas before their peers could do the same. Many sent her chilly looks only to snap to attention as Dwalin growled at them.

“What’s got them all knotted up?” he asked as they passed yet another noble stupid enough to glare at her in his presence.

If I’m your daughter, it makes it less likely they can challenge my being with Fili. Bilba responded.

He frowned. “What do they care about that?”

They have daughters, Bilba said, dryly.

He grunted.

Does he still get a lot of attention? Bilba asked, trying to keep her voice casual. Now that he’s courting me?

The word sounded strange, courting. It was not a word she would have ever associated with herself
and, in some ways, the thought was still surreal.

Even more, Dwalin answered, his voice annoyed. *Fool headed girls think they need to convince him that he’s supposed to be with them before he makes the mistake of marrying the wrong person.*

*Which would be me,* Bilba said, disgruntled.

*In about twenty years,* Dwalin growled, *at least. You’re still five years out from your Coming of Age. You’ve got plenty of time.*

Bilba raised an eyebrow but didn’t point out the disparity between her Coming of Age being five years away and him not wanting her to get married for twenty or more.

They lapsed into silence as he led her onto the royal levels. They traveled past room after room, one of them being Frerin’s. Bilba had gone in once, wanting to get a better understanding of the dwarf she’d met so briefly but who had changed her life so completely. The dark and silent rooms were kept exactly the way he’d left them on that last day, down to a pair of discarded boots in one corner and an old tunic tossed on the bed. She’d only stayed a moment and then left. The room was a shadow, a mere echo of its former occupant. She would no more find him in there than she would find her mother in Moria.

They passed Fili and Kili’s rooms and Dis and Vili’s, then hers, and then even further, past her father’s room and Balin’s, and beyond, the corridor curving around to an area she’d never seen before.

Her father stopped in front of a large set of double doors, locked and liberally coated with dust. It reminded her of the doors down below, crypts Fili had called them, where the dwarves stored their dead. The stone was carved and, as Bilba studied it, she picked out her father’s coat of arms, along with leaves, flowers and other nature related imagery.

Dwalin put his hands flat on the stone and pushed. A low rumble sounded and the heavy stone swung inward.

He walked inside and she followed, stumbling to a stop as her feet hit the threshold.

The sun was still in the process of rising, casting rays of orange, red and gold across a truly massive balcony cut from the side of the mountain. A rock ledge jutted out over the top of it, answering the question of how she’d never noticed it during her flights. She walked forward, barely noticing the rest of the room for the moment.

There was no wall separating the balcony from the room. Instead, glass panels had been set into hammered, silver frames, creating one giant window overlooking the balcony. Every panel was set with a glass door so that all could be opened to allow air to circulate in from outside.

Bilba went to the nearest set. They opened with barely a whisper and she stepped through. Half of the balcony floor was inlaid with green and blue tiles giving the impression of a field with a lazy river running through it. The other half had been dug out and filled with dirt, for planting a garden Bilba realized. She walked to the railing, white rock rising to her waist, carved with dragons. The top was flat and wide enough for her to climb up on and lay down if she were so inclined.

She put her hands on it instead and looked out.

All the valley upon which Erebor rested stretched out before her, the Withered Heath in the far distance.
It was a truly stunning view. It almost, almost, gave her the sensation of flying, and certainly made her forget she now lived most of her life inside a mountain.

She stepped back into the room. Her father stood in the center, watching her. Under his feet was a large rug, chairs and a table situated on top of it. Bookcases lining the walls were filled with dust covered tomes and the tattered remnants of what might have once been plants inside dust covered pots.

A fireplace dominated the far wall, two overstuffed armchairs stationed in front of it. Next to one chair was a basket filled to overflowing with balls of yarn.

“She liked to knit,” Dwalin said, his voice tight, as Bilba knelt to examine the basket. “It was meant to be a surprise, all this. I’d barely finished when I was called to battle.” He paused and swallowed, his eyes losing focus for an instant. “She never got the chance to see it. She never even got to know I’d done it.”

Bilba’s eyes flickered toward him and then away. She pushed to her feet, running her fingers along the armrest and then left it behind.

There were several doors leading off the main room, a bathroom similar to the one in her own quarters, smaller bedrooms and then one larger one. It shared the same outer wall as in the main room and also boasted the glass panels, complete with doors opening onto a smaller, private balcony. Thick curtains hung, tied back, at both sides. There was a separate fireplace in the room and a large, four poster bed with another thick rug under it.

“She used to say the stone was cold,” her father’s voice came from behind her, in the doorway. He started to say something else, and then just stopped, his voice falling off.

Bilba spotted a wardrobe almost identical to one she remembered from Bag End and went to open it.

It was filled with dresses, of every type of fabric and every style she could think of. A glance in a nearby vanity revealed it to be filled with ribbons and combs, a box nearby held necklaces, bracelets and earrings.

Bilba gently picked up a small brush laying on the surface, shaking it lightly to knock the dust off, and studied the light colored wood. She ran her hand over the bristles, feeling them prickle against her skin, and sucked in a breath as a new wave of grief came over her.

All of it, waiting patiently for her mother who would never see it.

She would have loved it.

Bilba set the brush back on the vanity. It stood out, the only item clear of dust, in a sea of unused and forgotten items.

She wondered, idly, if such things could feel happiness for having been used or sadness for having not.

She turned to see her father standing in the doorway behind her.

“She should have been here,” he said, “safe, with walls of stone and a legion of dwarves and dragons surrounding her, surrounding the both of you.”

Life is rarely fair, Bilba told him. We both know that.
Dwalin fidgeted and then blurted. “I want to see her.”

Bilba tensed, startled. What? Why?

“She’s my wife,” Dwalin said. “You loved her too. Wouldn’t you want to see her, if our positions were reversed?”

Bilba shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest, her anxiety rising. You’ll just want to leave again.

“I swore I wouldn’t,” he responded, moving to stand near her, “and Thorin was right. Bella wouldn’t thank me.”

Bilba shook her head again but didn’t answer. She didn’t know what to say.

Dwalin sighed, his gaze examining the room as if it would somehow give him answers. “I can have Vili come, if that’d help. I try to leave after and he can just punch me. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Bilba wished suddenly, vehemently, that a pack of orcs would suddenly attack.

She knew how to deal with orcs.

“She told you about me,” Dwalin said. “You said she did.”

Bilba nodded.

“What would she say now?” Dwalin asked. “Would she think I would keep my word? Would she think I was strong enough?”

Why would you want such memories? Bilba asked. Why not leave her as she is? Leave her as you last knew her.

“She was my wife,” Dwalin repeated. “And you’ve carried the memories your entire life. Who am I to shy from them when my daughter can’t?” He took her hands in his. “Please. Let me see her.”

Bilba clenched her jaw, studying his hands where they gripped hers. They were huge, making hers look outright child sized in comparison, and she could feel the banked strength in them. If he wanted to he could crush her hands, snap the bones into fragments and probably with little effort. She could feel his knuckles under her thumbs, the skin rough and pitted with old scars and injury.

The hands of a warrior.

She swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat and pushed back the burning in the back of her eyes. She gave a tight nod and felt him squeeze her hands, gently, in response.

Bilba took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and dropped her shields.

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Her earliest memory was of being carried by her mother.

She couldn’t say how old she’d been. Old enough to remember the feel of her mother’s thin dress under her hands and the gnawing hunger in her belly. The bite of constant cold.

It would be years before she would learn there was such a thing as warmth or that there existed those who didn’t constantly crave food.
Her mother had still had most of her hair then. Bilba remembered it a little, playing with the strands, stiff with grime and stringy, a little thinner every time she touched it.

Looking back at it now, through the eyes of one older and more experienced, she recognized things she hadn’t then. Her mother had shielded her from much and the rest...the rest had simply been the ignorance of youth. The belief all would somehow be alright because her mother was there.

Now she could see how her mother was always tense, felt in an entirely different way the grip she had on Bilba, constant and always just a little too tight as if Belladonna feared Bilba being snatched from her grasp if she loosened her hold for even an instant. The way her mother’s eyes constantly roved about, her head always tiled to listen, how she would shove Bilba against the wall and hide her when orcs passed.

The orcs knew about her, of course, but Belladonna had done everything she could not to remind them.

She saw now how other slaves, the same slaves, always seemed to be close by, taking turns helping her mother hide her, keeping her out of the way and safe, or as safe as one could be in Moria. The orcs allowed it, knowing their attention to her kept them from trying to escape. It also gave them leverage, a way to force obedience.

The orcs had taken bets on her, how long she would survive, what her manner of death would be.

Bilba was fairly sure her survival surprised them more than anyone.

But she hadn’t understand any of that...not then. She’d been a little girl with her mother and the life they lived, as far as Bilba knew, was all there ever was.

And she’d been okay with that.

She’d had, after all, no other experience by which to judge it by.

And it hadn’t been all bad.

The orcs were generally too busy with their own business, or just too lazy, to bother with the slaves. As long as they did their work and showed no outright defiance, they were usually left alone. Death came quick for most, but it was less often at the hands of an orc and more often from starvation, or the cold, or even illness or infection. Injuries could cause death as well, from lack of treatment or from the orcs finding out and feeding the afflicted to the Watcher.

An injured slave was a useless slave, and was discarded as such.

As much as Bilba had been surrounded by death on a daily basis, she’d understood it only as an abstract concept for a long time. It hadn’t been until she reached her mother’s waist in height and was capable of helping in small ways, that she’d had her first real experience with it.

Her first experience where she’d understood.

There had been a slave, a human woman named Anna, quiet and sad. She had helped take care of
Bilba, often splitting the day with Belladonna to keep an eye on her. Bilba could remember running through the corridors in play, Anna chasing after her.

Sometimes she’d called Bilba by her own name, sometimes another.

One morning when Bilba had gone to wake Anna, she’d been startled by how cold and stiff the woman had been. She still remembered kneeling beside Anna, shaking her to try and wake her up.

Finally, her mother had come and pulled her away.

“I don’t understand, Amad. Why isn’t she waking up?”

“Because she died, Sweetheart. She can’t wake up anymore.”

“Will she wake up tomorrow?”

“No.”

“When?”

“Never, Sweetie. She’s never going to wake up.”

And so she hadn’t. Later the orcs had come to drag Anna away and Bilba had tried to stop them only to have Belladonna grab her and drag her back.

“No, Bilba!”

“But, Amad! They’re going to take her to the Watcher!”

“It’s okay, the Watcher can’t hurt her. No one can.”

“But, Amad….“

“Remember the rule, Bilba. What is it?”

“….don’t draw attention.”

“Good girl. Now come on. We need to get back to work.”

And so she had learned what death truly meant.

What loss felt like.

For a time, the pain had kept her from getting close to any of the other slaves. It had been Bella who had nudged her forward again, promising her it was worth the risk, and the pain, of loss.

It was a lesson she would eventually forget until she was reminded by a dwarven prince who, somehow, had managed to see past the person she was to the person she’d been.

Bilba had made other friends, many whose names had long since faded, but she’d never lost their faces. Most didn’t talk about their lives before the Mines, the subject causing far too much pain. Bilba ended up developing the belief that they had all come from other sections of the mines she hadn’t been to, or other mines altogether. It was from one of the newer slaves, who hadn’t yet accepted their new life, that she had finally learned the truth. She had heard about something called outside where amazing things like grass and sky existed in abundance and where orcs didn’t command their lives, and deaths. When she asked her mother about it Belladonna paused and
looked at her with a look of such sadness that Bilba had regretted ever posing the question.

Then Belladonna had hugged her and said, “Let me tell you a story, Bilba.”

And so she had, and not just one.

There had been many, many stories, of a place called the Shire and a home named Bag End. Of flowers and fields and tall trees, of a bright sun and puffy clouds and rushing, crystal clear rivers.

For the first time Bilba had learned just how much she was missing.

And she had felt despair.

Her mother had looked at her, put a hand on her head, knelt until she was at Bilba’s eye level…and had told her about her father.

How he was a warrior and strong and brave and smart.

How he was a hero.

And how, one day, he would come and save them and then she would get to see the Shire and everything else that existed outside.

Bilba had believed her mother as any small child would and on that belief she hung her hopes, her dreams, and her future.

Hers and her mother’s.

And, so, hope had been restored.

And life had continued, moment by moment, linking together to form days, weeks, months, and years.

Decades.

It was easy, lost in the dark of Moria, where every day was identical to the one that had come before, where the sun never rose or set, where nothing changed…to forget the passage of time.
To forget time existed at all.

“What’s wrong with your hand, Amad?”

“Nothing, Sweetheart. It just gets stiff sometimes.”

“Why? Did you hurt it?”

“No, dear. It happens when you get older. Things don’t always work the same way.”

“I’m older, everything still works on me.”

“I’m quite a bit older than you, my dear.”

“But you can’t even be a hundred yet. You said we’d live hundreds of years.”

“…No, Sweetheart…I never said we.”

I never said we.

With those words, terror had taken root at the very foundation of Bilba’s soul. It had increased with every new line on her mother’s face, every white strand amidst the few still left on her head, every time her mother struggled to stand up straight or to open her hands all the way.

She tried her best to deny it. Her father was coming and he would save them and then…and then he would march to the door of these Valar her mother spoke of and would demand they repay her for the life she’d been denied and then her mother would have years given back to her, and more beyond that and it would be fine, all of it.

It would be fine.

Except it wasn’t.
Belladonna was the oldest slave in the mines, and not just by the length of time she’d been there. There were no old slaves. They were slow, they were clumsy, and they died quickly.

Her mother began to slow, her footsteps no longer as quick or as sure. Her hands, the fingers now permanently curled from age and old damage, no longer opened as they once had. Her inability to work, as she once had, drew the attention of the orcs who found her mother’s defiance and refusal to break amusing.

It had been as natural as breathing for Bilba to step in. To place herself between the whips of the orcs, their fists and feet, and take the beatings intended for her mother. The orcs didn’t care; they wanted to send a message, it didn’t matter who bore it.

Her mother begged her not to do it, sat beside her as Bilba curled in around broken ribs and sobbed from pain, and pleaded with her not to do it again.

Bilba never listened. Her mother had spent her life protecting Bilba, the very least she could do was return the favor.

Even as the beatings grew worse, as her legs shook with greater effort as she fought to stand each morning, as her mother grew steadily older…she didn’t stop fighting.

And neither did her mother. She had wanted to, not because she’d given up but for Bilba’s sake. Bilba had refused to let her. She could be just as stubborn as Belladonna when she wanted and she did not suffer through days and weeks of beatings just to watch her mother give up and die.

And so Belladonna fought…every minute…every day…right up until the moment she’d lost Adad’s ring.

Her mother had known, Bilba saw now, or had at least accepted that the end was near. She’d begun telling Bilba things. Her last words, Bilba realized in hindsight, the final things she wanted to make sure Bilba knew before she was gone.

Before Bilba had to go on alone.

“I love you.”

“Tell your father I love him, and I’ll be waiting, always.”

And so on, so many words, so much she’d wanted to say.

And only a single lifetime in which to say them.

A lifetime which was fast nearing its end.

Her mother had retrieved Adad’s ring from where it had been hidden for decades because she’d known it would be the last time she would see it. It was the only tangible thing of his she had that he’d touched and she’d simply wanted to feel close to him one last time before the end.
Somewhere Bilba had understood this, even if she’d consciously denied it, and so she hadn’t insisted her mother return it to its hiding place.

She should have, spent hours wishing with every fiber of her being she had, prayed to the Valar to let her go back and change that moment.

Just that one.

Just one moment, to change all the horror that had followed after.

When it had happened she’d been separated from her mother. She no longer recalled why. In those days the orcs delighted in ordering her from one end of the mines to the other, knowing she was too badly injured to move quickly, enjoying watching her struggle to leave and get back as fast as possible.

That day, she wasn’t fast enough.

Bolg had come through while she was gone. He and Azog did so on occasion. It was rare and the slaves always made themselves scarce when they were around. Her mother’s hearing had been failing of late, however, and she simply hadn’t heard, or seen, his approach.

She’d had the ring out and Bolg had seen it and he was an orc, and a high ranked one at that, and had access to as many baubles and trinkets as he wanted. One, simple, small ring held by a slave would have made no difference…made no difference.

He’d taken it from her anyway.

And that was it. The light in her mother’s eyes, so stubborn and defiant for so long, faded and when Bilba made it back to her mother’s side it was not the same woman she’d left.

Her mother had tried to keep going, she truly had, but the light was gone and it could never be brought back again.

The daily struggle to get an aged body up off the cold, rocky ground of the mines became nearly too much. The fight to put one foot in front of the other nearly impossible.

Bilba had seen it as age…and sorrow.

The orcs had seen it as defiance.
They had begun to take special note, believing order was kept by brutally punishing the slightest offense, ruling through pain and terror.

As always, Bilba had placed herself in the way but, in the end, she was just one person. She started to falter herself, which only increased the beatings, now taken for herself and her mother both.

She took it, all of it, without complaint, without hesitation.

And, in doing so, she’d drawn still greater attention.

The orcs started to take bets on how long she’d last, as they’d done when she was a child. It limited the beatings somewhat as they watched one another closer. They didn’t want anyone beating her to death on a certain day in order to win by cheating.

Not unless it was them of course.

On the other hand, it meant they were locked in on her. Their attention would not divert until she was dead.

Sometimes they would leave her alone a little while, their attention momentarily diverted by a new slave too stupid to obey or some other distraction but they always, always returned to her in the end. Always.

And then on one day, a day like any other, her mother had tripped as she walked down a corridor and had accidentally bumped into an orc, knocking him off balance.

He had reacted as any orc would have reacted, by backhanding her onto the ground and kicking her in the stomach, all before Bilba, who’d only been feet behind could reach her.

Why hadn’t she been walking in front?

She’d grown complacent, that was why. At that time it had been nearly two months since the last beating. She didn’t know what had distracted the orcs and didn’t care so long as it continued. She’d been able to heal, start living without the constant haze of pain…and she’d convinced herself things were going back to normal.

And then her mother had gone down before her eyes and she’d seen the orc draw a whip, sending it snapping through the air at her. Bilba had thrown herself in front, down on one knee. She’d caught the whip around her forearm and, angry, scared and utterly not thinking, she’d yanked, pulling it right out of the orc’s hand and sending it clattering to the stone.
Absolute quiet had fallen over the corridor, every orc and every slave stopping dead in their tracks to stare at her.

The scene froze.

Bilba blinked in surprise.

She wasn’t living this, she reminded herself, not again. It was in her head. It was in the past. She’d already lived it, years ago.

Lived all of it, and what came after.

A shudder ran through her, or the mental version of her, and she realized she was shaking, her breathing harsh and short. Her arm ached and she ran a hand over it, feeling the ridges of a scar that ran in a spiral around her forearm, the beginnings hidden under the manacle scars on her wrist and the end just at the soft inside of her elbow. She could feel it, a thin ribbon of fire snaking along her arm, her nerves vibrating just under the skin.

She became aware of a presence beside her and looked up in surprise to see her father beside her.

She’d forgotten he was there; forgotten the entire reason she was reliving all this.

Her father’s eyes were fixed on her and her mother, his face devoid of color. His eyes were huge and his hands were clenched into fists at his side so tight the veins stood out in sharp relief. He was shaking also but it was with rage, and grief…and horror.

“It only gets worse from here,” Bilba whispered, her own voice foreign to her ears. Once she and her mother had spent hours, every day, singing, lifting their spirits as well as those around them. Her mother had stopped singing after losing the ring and Bilba had followed suit, and of course now she couldn’t sing again, even if she’d wanted to.

She studied the scene and felt her eyes burning, her vision blurring.

“We can stop,” Dwalin said, his voice thick with emotion. “If you can’t – if you don’t want to go through it--”

“It’s always there,” Bilba said, her words almost a whisper. “I lived it, and I live it, every second. It never leaves.”

Dwalin nodded. He reached for her hand, slowly, and took it in his, carefully intertwining each of their fingers one at a time and then closing his in a firm grip.

“In that case.” He straightened his back, his chin up. “Let me live it with you.” He looked at her and his eyes were red rimmed and there was a darkness there she hadn’t seen before, not in him anyway. She saw it in her own eyes when she looked in the mirror, had seen it in her mother’s and in the eyes of the other slaves.

The darkness of Moria. Understood by those who had lived it, as he now had through her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her heart heavy.

“I can bear it,” he said shortly. “I’m not so weak that I would bow that easily.” He looked at her again, his gaze intense. “It didn’t break you. It won’t break me.”
Bilba returned the look steadily. “You’re wrong,” she said simply. She looked away from him, back toward the frozen scene. “It did break me.”

***

She didn’t resist.

Her mother tried to scramble up behind her but several of the other slaves grabbed her and dragged her back before the orcs could remember she was there.

The wrenched Bilba’s arms behind her back until they were near breaking and she wanted to scream from pain.

She clenched her teeth and held it back, barely.

They dragged her through the corridors, a silent crowd building behind her.

They took her to one of the upper levels and forced her into a large cavern with a rickety, wooden platform in the center.

The sight of it almost, almost, drew a whimper from her but, still, Bilba stayed quiet. She knew they wanted her to beg, to plead for mercy.

She refused.

Her feet hit the bottom of the wooden steps and she stumbled. The orcs released her, allowing her to fall forward. Her knee barked against another step while her palms scraped along the wood, splinters tearing into her flesh.

Her arms were grabbed again and she was forced to her feet, pulled up to the platform where two poles stood, spaced several feet apart, heavy manacles hanging from them.

Here was where she finally started resisting, digging her heels in and pushing back against her captors.

She’d been here before. Never on the platform itself but in the crowds forced to bear witness. The slaves brought here had defied the orcs but were still young enough, or healthy enough, to use. It would be a waste to kill them outright or throw them to the Watcher. The Arena was another option but Bilba had shown no pattern of rebellion, no open acts of defiance suggesting she’d be a good candidate.

So she was brought here, as others had been brought before her.

She knew what was coming.

She let out a sound finally, more of rage than fear, and shoved back again, fighting. She panted with exertion and buckled her legs, going down and trying to slip out of their arms and away.

But there were far too many, and she was nowhere near strong enough.

Her legs were grabbed and lifted and she was carried the last few feet. They put her down and held her in place while her wrists were locked in the manacles and the chains were pulled tight until her
arms were stretched out to their limit on either side of her. The metal was old and rusted and the edges sliced into her wrists, drawing sharp bursts of pain with every movement.

One of the orcs grabbed the collar of her shirt, barely more than rags as it was, and pulled, tearing it away from her back.

In front of her, and all around, the crowd was completely still and silent.

Bilba took a breath and squeezed her eyes shut, unwilling to spot her mother in the crowd.

Behind her, the crack of a whip sounded and she tensed, clenching her jaw until it ached.

The first stripe opened a vein of pure fire from her right shoulder to her left hip. Sweat broke out on her forehead and her mouth opened on its own to let out a gasp, but she didn’t make a sound.

Not with that one, or the one after, or the five that followed that.

She made it all the way to twenty, in fact, before the first involuntary cry of pain burst out from between her gritted teeth, a strangled cry more than anything but, still, there.

It was ten more before the tears started and another ten before her legs gave out. The chains didn’t have enough give to allow her knees to touch the wood so she was forced to crouch in an awkward position, one made worse by the presence of her blood staining the planks. Her feet would slip, throwing her weight onto the manacles and driving them deeper into her flesh before she managed to get back up again, only to be driven back down by the bite of the next lash.

When the last one finally fell she was near unconscious. The manacles were unlocked and she crashed to her hands and knees, her lungs burning as she breathed.

An orc put a foot casually in her side and pushed, sending her off the edge of the platform and onto the ground below. She landed on her back and cried out as the stone made contact with her ruined back.

Slaves, those she had helped and those who hoped they might one day be helped, surrounded her and picked her up. They took her to a small pallet where, for the first time since it had started, she saw her mother.

Belladonna, her face bone white, struggling not to cry and failing miserably. She’d cleaned Bilba’s back as best she could and tried to cover it with strips of cloth donated by other slaves.

It was only through those efforts, and perhaps a miracle of the Valar, that infection didn’t set in. Still, it took days for Bilba to be able to move enough to get up. Her mother had been there, every moment, feeding her what few scraps she’d found, cleaning her back and giving her water.

Bilba had gotten back on her feet as soon as possible, well before she should have, and had joined her mother. She often had to pause when the orcs weren’t looking, catching her balance on the walls or crouching down a moment to catch her breath.

She’d still been so weak…

Too weak, in the end.

The orcs had discovered an untapped vein of mithril deep inside one of the mines and had sent dwarven slaves down to mine it. Other slaves, Bilba and her mother included, had been tasked with taking out the rubble and loose stone the dwarves carved from the rock.
The mines were incredibly deep, the only way to reach them by narrow ledges that led from the top to the bottom. At one point there had been machines, pulleys and buckets that would take rubble from the bottom to the top to be removed. Those had long since broken so the only way to remove the rock was to load it into heavy bags and take it, by foot, to the top of the mines.

Heavy bags, full of sharp edged, broken stone that had to be carried on the back.

It had been agony for Bilba, every step causing the bag to scrape across the wounds on her back, reopening some until blood soaked through the back of her shirt and she was trembling from fatigue and pain.

It was on the fourth trip that she had stumbled, and gone heavily to her knees, the bag crashing down beside her.

Her mother, ahead of her, had heard the noise and swung around quickly, worried Bilba might be hurt.

The bag on her shoulder shifted, pulling her off balance.

Adrenaline surged through Bilba and she lunged forward, grabbing her mother’s shirt. Belladonna fell back, her weight dragging Bilba, still on her knees, forward.

She’d managed to get ahold of her mother’s shirt with her other hand and then Belladonna was over the edge, all her weight hanging from Bilba’s arms.

White hot agony had erupted in Bilba’s back as her muscles stretched and pulled. She’d screamed in pain even as she slid forward on the rock.

She let out a sound, half scream, half cry of denial as she fought to pull her mother back.

Belladonna looked up at her, and there was peace in her eyes.

Acceptance.

“No!” The word was wrenched from her throat, tears spilling from her eyes. “Amad, no!”

“It’s okay,” her mother said. “Bilba, it’s okay.”

“No!” Bilba shut her eyes and pulled, screaming in pain as the remaining stripes on her back reopened and she felt blood spilling down her sides and soaking into her shirt.

She could do this. She was strong enough, she was her mother’s protector, it was why she was there, it was –

Her mother’s shirt ripped.

Bilba stared at her hands, full of torn fabric and nothing else…and screamed in anguish.

She scrambled to the edge and looked over to see her mother only a few levels below. She hadn’t fallen all the way to the bottom of the mine, she could still be alive.

A few other slaves were on the ledges on the various levels but none were close enough to help.
Bilba lunged to her feet and ran, faster than she’d ever gone before. She made it to the ledge where her mother was sprawled on the rock and dropped down next to her mother, barely feeling the pain as her knees hit the stone with a sharp crack.

“Amad! Amad!” She was shrieking, high pitched and hysterical.

Her mother was breathing but the sound was choked, rattling in her chest.

Bilba lifted her hands, trembling so hard she could barely move, and started checking for injuries. As she did she looked and saw her mother’s eyes fixed on her, lips moving soundlessly.

“Don’t try to speak,” Bilba said, sobbing so hard she could barely get the words out. “It’ll be alright. It’s going to be fine.”

She’d always been a terrible liar.

Her hands found break after break, blood staining the ground in an ever growing puddle.

“No,” Bilba whispered. “No.”

A hand weakly touched her face and she looked to see her mother struggling to smile at her.

Love you.

The words were not audible but Bilba heard them just the same.

Love you.

And then the hand at Bilba’s face was gone…and her mother with it.

“Amad?” Bilba whispered. “Amad?” She reached out and shook her, lightly and then more frantic. “AMAD? AMAD!” She gathered her mother in her arms…and screamed.

***

Do you see now? It was my fault.

It wasn’t.

I couldn’t save her.

That wasn’t your fault.

You keep saying that…

Then maybe you should start believing it.

Tears threatened even as a deep, deep exhaustion settled into Bilba’s very core.

She’d spent so many years living in this moment, right up until Fili and Syrath had pulled her out.

She loved her mother, more than life itself, but she didn’t want to stay in Moria anymore.
Not in this moment, and certainly not in the ones that had followed.

The years that had passed between her mother dying and the day she’d walked out of Moria with a baby dragon in her arms.

Years she’d spent alone.

She couldn’t seem to grip her father’s hand tight enough.

“You know the rest,” she whispered, hoping he wouldn’t insist on seeing any of it. “The orcs came to take her and I snapped and attacked them. Azog saw and threw me in the Arena.”

“How did you lose your tongue?” He could barely get the words out, his chest heaving, reflecting the turmoil in his psyche.

“I caught sight of Bolg in the stands one day,” Bilba said, the slightest hint of pride in her voice. “I went after him and took his eye. Azog took my tongue in return.”

He hadn’t wanted her too damaged, she was doing too well in the Arena.

That little episode had led to Bolg finding out that she hated him personally, and why, and to the start of him wearing the ring to taunt her.

The scene had faded away until they were standing in a corridor of Moria, a random one, dark and dank as they all were. Bilba studied it, echoes of voices and ghosts dancing about the halls, trying to draw her back in again.

Dwalin sucked in a breath, his hand flexing in hers. “That…” he exhaled and tried again. “That is not the only way you should see her. And it’s not the only life you should remember.”

He faced her and took her other hand in his. He was crying, tears tracking down both sides of his face and his hands in hers were shaking. “I can’t take what you went through away,” he said, hoarse, “but I can show you the other half. Would you like to see her as she was? Before Moria?”

Bilba’s heart jolted in her chest and she stared at him, her eyes wide. “Can I?”

And suddenly Moria was behind them and they were in the Shire. In the distance, Bilba caught sight of a woman sitting on a bench in front of Bag End, her head down as she read a book.

Dwalin tucked Bilba’s hand into the crook of his elbow and gave her a tight, only slightly forced, smile. “Come on. Let’s go meet your mother. The way I knew her.”

***

It was much later when Bilba opened her eyes back in the rooms her father had built for her mother.

She smiled up at Dwalin, gratitude shining from her eyes. Thank you.

He nodded. She could tell he was still badly shaken but he was handling it, which was all she could ask for. He reached into a pocket on his shirt and came out with something. “I wanted to give this back to you. She’d have wanted you to have it.”
Bilba frowned in surprise but obediently put her hand out and took what he was offering her.

It was her mother’s ring, she noted, and then felt her eyes widen.

It was her mother’s ring…as it should have been, as it had been. The break in the band had been closed, the parts that had been bent straightened and the whole thing was bright and shining.

_You repaired it_, she breathed in awe.

He nodded and held up a slender chain. “I thought you could wear it on this if you wanted.”

If she did she’d be doing the same thing he did, each of them wearing a ring. She smiled and took the chain, threading it through the ring and putting it around her neck before gently tucking it under her shirt.

_Thank you_, she repeated.

He nodded, suddenly nervous. “I had another thought. Fili mentioned something about it, months ago, how you don’t like being inside mountains, for obvious reasons.” He paused, as if waiting for her to say something. Bilba didn’t know what he wanted, though, so she stayed quiet. After a moment he took a deep breath and continued. He held his hand out, indicating the suite. “Your mother didn’t like it much either, preferred the Shire and open space. She’d agreed to come to Erebor at some point so I made her this. I hoped it might make her feel less closed in.” He took a deep breath. “She never got the chance to live in it but you could,” he blurted. “I mean – if you wanted.”

He nodded at the room they were standing in. “This could be your room and, then, if you wanted – I mean – there are other rooms – I thought – you are a child, still --- you’d normally be with a parent -- - I know – I know you don’t think you are and, in a lot of ways, you aren’t – but I just--” He scowled, clearly annoyed with himself. “I just thought maybe we could get to know one another,” he said. “I just – if you wanted to try and be a family –then maybe--”

He cut off sharply as Bilba stepped forward and hugged him

She closed her eyes and sank against him, wrapping her arms as far as she could and burrowing into him.

It had been so _long_ since she’d been able to hug a parent.

So incredibly long.

He hugged her back, hesitant, and then with more confidence. “So is that a yes?”

Bilba released him and nodded. He let out a relieved laugh. “Good.” He tightened his grip. “That’s…that’s good. There will be a ceremony at some point, so Balin and I can acknowledge you publicly

Over their new soul bond, Bilba felt a strong surge of pride coming from him and her eyes widened in surprise. He was looking forward to acknowledging her. He _wanted_ everyone to know she was his daughter.

Her eyes started burning again and she scowled in irritation. She was not prone to standing around crying all the time, and neither was her father.

She smiled at him. _There’s something I need to go do._

He nodded. “Fair enough. I should probably go speak to Thorin about the troubling lack of orcs of
late.”

He still looked troubled, grieved, but there was a peace too, a steadiness. Everything that had happened was already years in the past. Belladonna was at peace, far beyond anything that could harm her, and Bilba was safe inside Erebor.

Bilba had no doubt he would still deal with guilt just as she did, but he would deal with it.

And, in the end, that was all she could ask for.

***

Bilba heard the sound of a door creaking opened and pushed off the wall she’d been leaning against. She’d studying her wrists absently while she waited. She hadn’t had much time to think about what tattoos she wanted, much less sit down to talk to Ori about them. Seeing the Shire, and her mother, as she’d been, however, and through her father’s eyes no less…she was beginning to get an idea.

Fili stepped out of the Council Chambers and Bilba put her arms down. He pulled the doors shut behind him, nodding at the guards stationed on either side. His own personal guard were nowhere to be seen, probably still inside the chambers.

He came over and Bilba grinned up at him.

“What’s wrong? He asked. “You said it was important.”

It is, Bilba said happily. I soul bonded with my father.

He blinked. “I thought I felt something.” He smiled. “I’m happy for you.”

Bilba grabbed his sleeve. But that’s not why I called you.

Fili raised an eyebrow. “Alright. What?”

He showed me some of his courtship of my mother and it made me realize something. She grabbed his shirt on both sides of his waist and tugged and, with a look of surprise, he leaned in, resting his forearms on the wall on either side of her head.

Bilba took his face between her hands, pushed up on her toes, and, very slowly, kissed him. He responded, taking it deeper, one arm sliding down to wrap around her waist and pull her closer.

When they broke off, both were breathing hard and the guards at the door looked thoroughly amused, and utterly disinterested as soon as Fili glared at him.

I realized I hadn’t kissed you in a while, Bilba said. She pulled him close again, pressing her forehead. I love you. Never doubt it.

“I won’t,” he whispered, his eyes wide.

Bilba grabbed his hands. Want to be reckless and impulsive in an age appropriate and non-suicidal manner? She gave him a dry look. Or do you have to go read all your letters from your many admirers? Adad said you were getting more now that I’m around.
He snorted. “I guess that explains Nori trying to glare me to death of late. I don’t read them, he and your father have to and with Dwalin…you know, it’s been up to Nori I suppose lately.” His smile broadened. “Now, about that recklessness, what did you have in mind?”

*I have no idea,* Bilba said cheerfully. *I was hoping you’d have an idea.*

“Nope,” Fili said, “but I know someone who might. What do you say we go track down my brother?”

Bilba agreed and, with a wicked look toward the poor guards who would have to report the Crown Prince’s abduction by Orcrist, nodded down the corridor.

Fili laughed and then they were running down the corridor, hand in hand.

Together.

***

A sheet of paper was laid on his desk and Thorin frowned at it. “What is this?”

“My report,” Nori said, stepping back. “I do write them, on occasion.”

“Very rare occasion,” Thorin muttered. “Summarize it.”

“And that’s the reason I don’t bother writing them,” Nori said dryly. “Saruman has turned back up. He’s in Rivendell.”

“Why?” Thorin asked shortly. “If Gandalf were there we’d have heard about it.”

“Agreed,” Nori replied. “Saruman appears to have found out something. He’s calling for a Council.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “Why can’t he just write a letter?”

“Because he wants a council of all the leaders of Middle Earth,” Nori said, crossing his arms across his chest. “The kings of Rohan, Gondor, Erebor, Mirkwood…every last one of them.”

“Doesn’t answer my question,” Thorin said with annoyance. “I don’t particularly enjoy the thought of flying halfway across Middle Earth on the whim of a wizard.”

“He expects them all in Rivendell?” a new voice asked and the two turned to where Dwalin was lounging against a wall. He’d shown up a few minutes earlier and had taken up the position, without explanation or word. Vili, who’d been there until then, had quietly bowed to Thorin and left the room, leaving Dwalin. “Security isn’t good enough. Half their buildings don’t even have walls. Might as well just kill you myself.”

“I would prefer if you didn’t,” Thorin said dryly. He tapped his quill on the paper, eyes narrowed. “I’m sure every kingdom would bring their own entourage, not to mention a dragon contingent. It could well end up being the most secure place in all of Middle Earth, for a time anyway.” He focused on Nori. “He said nothing about what the meeting would be about?”

Nori shrugged. “Typical wizard speak. Full of riddles and vague, cryptic warnings.”
“Saruman has never been known for being dramatic,” Thorin said, “or overly paranoid. If he feels there is reason for such a council then I would imagine there is,” which was the only reason he was considering it. He was a king, for Mahal’s sake. He didn’t jump just because a wizard told him to.”

“We could consult with the other kings,” Nori said slowly. “Circumspectly of course, to see what they plan on doing.”

Thorin nodded, still tapping the quill as he considered his options. “Do so. We shall decide what to do then.”

Nori bowed and left, closing the office door behind him.

“You should send Fili,” Dwalin said. “You shouldn’t be running about outside, not with what’s just happened.”

Thorin snorted. “Don’t let Bilba hear you say you want to send Fili out so he’ll be in danger instead of me.”

“I’d go with him,” Dwalin said, shortly. “And half Erebor’s army. I don’t necessarily think he’d be targeted. I just think you might prove too tempting to resist.”

“Nice to know I’m so irresistible,” Thorin said in amusement. He shook his head. “I won’t make any final decisions, not just yet.” He frowned at his friend. “What could be so bad that it would require an immediate council of all the rulers of Middle Earth?”

Dwalin shrugged. “We knew this silence wasn’t going to last. The orcs didn’t just go away out of the kindness of their hearts.”

He said it with a new edge, Thorin noticed, a renewed anger toward the creatures.

“No,” he agreed. “I just wish we knew what it was we were facing.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll face it,” Dwalin said, “just as we always have.”

“True enough,” Thorin said. He scowled down at the paper as if he could wring answers out of it by sheer will alone. “True enough.”
“Another council meeting?” Fili asked in exasperation, “as if we haven’t had enough already?”

“This one is in Rivendell,” Thorin answered, “so at least it’ll be a change of scenery.”

Fili dropped his head back in resignation. He should have suspected something like this when his uncle had invited him to his chambers instead of his office. Currently, they were sitting at a table on the balcony, an impressive view of the plains stretched out before them. It was the same view Bilba had from her new balcony in the rooms she’d moved into with Dwalin. This particular balcony had no railings, so the view could be seen no matter where one sat. Normally, he’d be able to watch the younger dragons frolicking about but, since Dale, Thorin had forbidden it.

Of course, in doing so he was risking Erebor being wrecked by stir-crazy baby dragons. Most of the ones old enough to be allowed outside were too large to fit through Erebor’s corridors but, given enough boredom, they were more than capable of inciting their smaller companions. Fili could still remember the time a rock slide had temporarily blocked the entrance to the dragon levels. Suddenly there had been baby dragons rampaging through the corridors, their older counterparts looking on innocently.

It had taken weeks to repair the damage and had led to several more entrances being added to the dragon levels.

At present the younger dragons had been cooped up nearly a month and he suspected the only reason they weren’t rampaging yet was because Syrath slept near the door into Erebor which meant Xalanth slept there ready to snarl at any who disturbed his son.

Fili lifted his head and leaned forward to grab his drink from the very large lunch spread his uncle had ordered. He sat back again and said, “Last time I agree to lunch with you.”

His uncle looked amused. “It isn’t so bad as you think. I’m going. You’re going to be in charge while I’m gone.”

Fili nearly choked on his drink. “No, that’s much worse.”

“You will be king one day,” Thorin replied, simply. “Would you rather it be dropped in your lap with no practice?”

“Practice?” Fili repeated. “You want me to practice being king?”

“Best to do it while I’m still around to undo any missteps,” Thorin agreed. “Not to mention I’d like to rest easy in the halls of our ancestors, knowing I did not leave the kingdom in the hands of one who had no experience.”

“I hate it when you make good points,” Fili said in resignation, half raising his cup in salute.

“I’m the King,” Thorin replied smugly. “All my points are good.”

Fili laughed. “I’ll let you tell my mother that.”

Thorin merely smiled in response and raised his own glass.

“Who else is going?” Fili asked. As he spoke a breeze blew over the balcony, ruffling the stack of
papers his uncle had sitting next to him, anchored to the table by a book. Calling a meeting of all the kings of Middle Earth did not just happen overnight. For one thing, several of the kingdoms had sent demands to hold the meeting in their own kingdoms, most likely coming from nobles pressuring to gain notoriety.

“Dwalin and Nori both insist on going. Then Balin and a few others.” Thorin said. “Dis is going but Vili will be staying, as will Kili.”

Fili raised an eyebrow. “I suspect my father will be around for any potential missteps?”

“Such as they may be,” Thorin agreed. “Aside from that we’ll be taking a sizable contingent of soldiers and dragons. Xalanth wishes to stay with Syrath. Lyth will also remain.”

Fili nodded. Lyth and Xalanth tended to run the dragons as his uncle ran things for Erebor. With Xalanth preoccupied with Syrath the duties had mostly fallen to Lyth and, as things were still tense from Dale, it made sense for her to stay.

“We’ll also be taking the group from Rohan,” Thorin continued.

“I was wondering about that,” Fili said. “If they insisted on riding you’d be waiting months for them to get there.” He wrapped his hands around his cup, trying to hide the nerves his uncle was probably already well aware of. He tried to force a smile. “Well, I guess there’s no time like the present to get in some experience. I’ll make sure Erebor is still standing when you return.”

Thorin snorted. “That would be much appreciated.”

***

They set out a few days later.

Thorin stayed to the back and watched as a flurry of activity broke about him. He spotted Fili talking to several guardsmen while, a few feet away, Bilba helped her father load supplies onto the dragons.

“He’ll be fine,” Dis said, appearing at his side. “It’s not like he hasn’t been trained for this his entire life. Besides, I seem to remember Grandfather doing the exact same thing for Father, and even you a few times.”

Thorin nodded. “I’ve a new respect for him, given the anxiety I’m currently having over it.”

Dis snorted. “You’ll be two days away and the Council won’t last long. I doubt Fili can do anything in a week or so that would have any lasting impact. Stop worrying.”

“Perhaps you should stay,” Thorin said, “or Balin even.”

Dis laughed. “No. Fili would think we had no faith in him. He’ll be fine. We’re the ones to be worried about, according to Dwalin and Nori at least.”

Thorin resisted the urge to roll his eyes in a most undignified manner. “They’re paranoid. No one would be foolish enough to try anything at the Council, not with half the military might of Middle Earth there.”

“You keep sounding as if you expect the attack to come from the outside,” Dis said, her voice
growing serious. “But what if it came from inside? What could all the military might do then?”

Thorin frowned. “I do believe,” he said finally, “that is why I haven’t attempted to curb their paranoia.”

Dis nodded absently. She was, Thorin noted, dressed in a manner similar to Bilba’s normal attire, her hair pulled back and a sword he hadn’t seen in years strapped to her side.

Clearly Dwalin and Nori weren’t the only ones worried.

He pulled his mind away from such troubling thoughts and focused on Dwalin speaking in a low voice to Fili. “What’s he doing?”

“Threatening him I imagine,” Dis said calmly. “Fili and Bilba do seem to have gotten a little more… expressive of late. I’ll probably have to put a chaperone on them.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “You don’t trust them?”

“I trust they’re young,” Dis replied, “and that it’s quite easy to get carried away at that age.”

“I’m surprised Dwalin doesn’t just ask Bilba to come with us,” Thorin murmured, “but then I suppose she’d have to leave Syrath behind, and Fili.”

Dis nodded. “She’ll be safer here anyway. If Dwalin’s convinced there might be a threat at the Council, do you really think he’d want her anywhere near?”

“Understandable,” Thorin said. He noticed one of his nobles approaching and sighed. “Duty calls.”

“Better you than me,” Dis replied with a laugh, as she headed off toward where Kili was talking animatedly with Vili.

***

The flight to Rivendell was uneventful, with the biggest hurdle being having to listen to the Rohan contingent complain about how their horses were better than dragons.

Thorin had to intervene on at least two occasions to ensure the king and queen of Rohan that, no, the drake they were riding was not planning to eat them, she was just greeting them.

Fortunately, he had always been quite good at keeping a straight face when needed.

They made it in one piece, in the end, spiraling down to land on the massive plains that surrounded Rivendell. Said plains were already liberally covered with dragons from Gondor and Mirkwood, many conversing with friends from Rivendell they hadn’t seen in a while. For dragons, travel around Middle Earth was not a particularly large undertaking so many had friends from every kingdom.

Once down, Thorin made his way through crowds of nobility, and military from every corner of Middle Earth. Nori and Dwalin fell in on either side of him along with a number of guards ensuring no one got close enough to try and slip a knife into his neck as he passed.

It was easy enough to find Elrond. The elf was surrounded by royalty. Thranduil and his son were there along with the redhead Guard Captain who was always giving Dwalin a hard time about the
baby drakes setting fire to some of the outer trees of Mirkwood. Then there was Thengel, king of Rohan, and his wife, Morwen, who had somehow managed to get there ahead of him.

Arathorn, who rarely left Gondor, had come along with his wife, Gilraen; most likely leaving Aragorn and Arwen in charge in their wake, just as Thorin had done with Fili.

Thorin walked up and exchanged greetings with his fellow royals, as well as with their host, Elrond.

He looked rather harried leading Thorin to believe this entire thing had not entirely been his idea.

“I’m pleased to see you’ve all arrived safely,” he said, the slightest hint of stress in his normally serene voice. “If you’ll all follow me I’ll see you to your rooms. The Council will convene in a few hours, just after dinner.”

That was a surprise, not just to Thorin but to the others as well judging by their reactions. He’d expected to have the meeting the next morning, after they’d all had a chance to rest and recover from the journey. For Saruman to insist on the meeting at night, when they’d all be tired and more than a little irritable…

“What do you suppose it is,” Dis asked in his head, “that is so important that it cannot wait another day, but was able to wait long enough for us all to be able to come?”

“That would appear to be the question of the day,” Thorin responded. “I suppose we’ll find out in a couple hours.”

***

In Erebor, there was heavy snow on the ground and the river was almost entirely frozen. Near the base of the mountain, where the river ran underground, massive forges had been lit to melt the water and keep it flowing inside Erebor no matter how cold it got outside.

On this side of the Misty Mountains, in contrast, Thorin barely realized it was winter. They had convened the meeting on an outdoor pavilion, seated on stone chairs that, given their discomfort, had clearly not been made by dwarves.

Thorin imagined the landscape around the pavilion was probably beautiful, given the elven fascination for the aesthetic, but at the moment all he could see were dark shadows beyond the light thrown from torches hung on the pillars running the perimeter.

In the center of their group stood a tall pedestal upon which sat two objects, a silver necklace and a sword.

Movement came from the corner of his eye and Thorin saw Dwalin and Nori, standing at his shoulders and just behind him, straighten and come to attention.

Saruman strode onto the dais, his robes billowing about him. Thorin had met the wizard a few times before and the man always comported himself with the air of a nobleman, well-groomed and giving the appearance of being high born.

Now his robes were wrinkled and appeared slept in, his beard was unkempt and there were deep circles under his eyes as if he had not slept.
He stopped before the pedestal and, without preamble, said, “Some time ago rumors were brought to 
my attention, whispers that a power was searching for the keys to the cage of Sauron, within whose 
corpse is locked the spirit of Morgoth himself.”

“What of it?” Thranduil said, his voice bored. “There is always a so-called power searching for the 
keys. Nothing has ever come of it.”

“It is that very belief,” Saruman stated, “that may well have led to our undoing.”

Thorin frowned. “What?”

“I have attempted,” Saruman continued, changing tacks, “to locate the lost hobbit key in the past, but 
have, thus far, been unsuccessful.”

“I wasn’t aware there was a hobbit key,” Arathorn broke in. “I thought it legend.”

“It is real,” Saruman said flatly. “It’s bearer fled with it, and disappeared, centuries ago. With the 
advent of these new rumors it was brought back to mind and so, on a whim, I asked Gandalf the 
Grey to search for it.”

“We met him,” Thorin said. “Looking for it under the Misty Mountains. I heard he’d disappeared 
sometime after leaving Erebor.”

“Indeed.” Saruman moved and picked up the necklace from the pedestal. It was one Thorin had seen 
a few times being worn by Arwen when she’d still lived in Rivendell. Once she’d married Aragorn 
and moved to Gondor the necklace had, apparently, stayed behind for Thorin had never seen it 
again.

“The fact he vanished while searching for the key raised the status of the rumors.” As he spoke, 
Saruman ran the necklace over his hands, the chain tangling around his long, narrow fingers. “As I 
searched I received yet more word,” at this he turned to look directly at Thorin, who merely raised an 
eyebrow in response, “word that Erebor wished to know the status of the other keys. This piqued my 
own interest and when I arrived at Gondor, and then Rivendell, I requested to see them as well.” He 
raised the necklace higher while sweeping his hand out to indicate the sword. “These are both keys, 
and both are fake.”

Neither Arathorn nor Elrond looked surprised but Thorin felt a jolt run through him while, on the 
other side, Thengel looked pale.

Before any of them could respond, Saruman turned to face Thorin and said, “which leads me to my 
next question. How is it that Erebor thought to ask the question?”

Thorin lifted a hand and Nori stepped forward. Without having to be asked he launched into a 
recounting of what had transpired with Nar and his agents, managing to attribute the work to 
Erebor’s Spymaster while simultaneously making it sound like the dwarf was an entirely separate 
individual who had remained behind in Erebor.

“So,” Thengel said coolly as Nori finished. “It would appear blame for this can be laid at Erebor’s 
door.”

Thorin bristled, lifting a hand to stop Dis as she leaned forward in her own chair. “I would think the 
fault would lie more with those kingdoms who failed to secure their Treasuries properly. Erebor’s 
key remains untouched.”

“Are you sure about that?” Arathorn questioned, clearly annoyed. “We, ourselves, didn’t know
about the fraud until Saruman arrived.”

“I am sure,” Thorin said. There was a harsh edge to his voice as he spoke and he eyed his fellow royals, daring one of them to speak out again.

Surprisingly, given his normal temperament, it was Saruman who broke the tension. “We have more pressing matter at hand than who is to blame. Someone currently possesses two of the four keys. Given Gandalf’s disappearance in the search for the hobbit key I believe it possible they have that key as well. This may well leave Erebor’s as the only one left.”

“How did they know what the keys looked like?” Thranduil broke in, “or where they were located?”

“My guess is there were break-ins at all the treasuries the night of Fili’s Coming of Age,” Nori said, “but Mirkwood’s was the only one noticed. It is quite possible that all of Nar’s agents carried replicas of the keys. We have no idea how they knew what they looked like.”

“And we have no idea where the missing keys are now,” Thranduil said. “We seem to be at a rather large disadvantage.”

“During my heir’s kidnapping,” Thorin said, “Nar’s daughter claimed she had leverage, something her father and the orcs wanted.”

“If it was the keys then they are now in the hands of the orcs,” Thranduil cut in darkly, “which puts us at an even worse disadvantage than first thought.” He leaned back in his chair, eyes studying Saruman. “So you have called us here to tell us that two, possibly three, of the keys are in the hands of an unknown enemy.” His eyes narrowed and he lowered his voice, his tone sardonic. “Anything else, or is that it?”

The look on Saruman’s face made Thorin’s blood run cold and he saw Thranduil’s eyes widen fractionally, a strong response from him.

“The original keys to the cage were made by myself and my fellow wizards,” Saruman said, his voice resigned. “As was the cage.”

Thranduil’s face hardened, his voice going dark. “Let me guess,” he said. “The one who created the cage—”

“Gandalf,” Saruman said. “The one who created the cage, and knows its current location and how to access it, is Gandalf the Grey.”

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Bilba studied the flames flickering in the fireplace. They crackled and leapt, twisting in odd shapes and patterns that could appear happy or sinister depending on her mood.

At the moment they simply seemed…melancholy.

She missed her father. The rooms felt empty, which shouldn’t bother her since she’d only been in them a short time and had lived on her own for years…but bother her it did.

With a sigh she pushed out of the chair and stretched, her back and neck popping as they protested
having been cramped for so long. She walked to the balcony, pushing open the door and stepping out. A brisk, cold wind washed over her and she shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. She stepped to the edge and leaned forward to rest her crossed arms on the ledge of the balcony, overlooking the plain.

It was later than she’d thought, the quarter moon already well up into the sky. She should already be down with Syrath. He was feeling better, though he still had yet to fly. The healers didn’t want to risk damaging still healing muscles in his wings by letting him try too early. His tail would have a permanent kink at the tip, a fact he liked, claiming it gave him character. Bilba imagined someone had told him that and he’d latched onto it. She made a mental note to try and find out who it had been to thank them.

She sighed and put her head down on her arms.

She was bored.

Syrath couldn’t fly, there were no orcs, her father was in Rivendell and Fili had spent the last two days so focused on running Erebor correctly she doubted he remembered she existed. Not that she faulted him for it. He was nervous and desperate to not let his uncle down, a feeling she could well understand. She supported him in it, but it meant he wasn’t available to train or do anything else. Neither were Kili or Vili, who were busy helping him.

As Bilba knew absolutely nothing about ruling she could do nothing to help, so she was simply, completely, utterly, bored.

So very, very, very bored. She emphasized each one with lightly banging her head on her arms. Her injuries were healed, for the most part, or at least as healed as she generally allowed them to be before she got back to work. She was used to doing things. In Moria she’d worked or fought in the Arena. In the Shire she’d been with the Garrison and the Rangers. In Erebor it’d been Vanguard, flying with Syrath or training with Fili and her father.

Now she had none of it…nothing to do…and it was driving her out of her mind.

And it’d only been two days.

Thorin and the others were going to be gone for at least a week.

She propped her chin on her arms and stared out over the plain, her body sagging against the ledge.

Maybe she should go after the goblins. As far as she knew they were still around and they had tried to kill her…

A flicker of light caught her eye, somewhere on the plain and she frowned, pulling herself up to peer over the edge.

The plain was dark, strangely so now that she thought about it. There was a moon overhead, not a full one, but enough that it should cast some light on the plain. She could see no sign of it, however, the entire thing as dark as if there were a new moon overhead. One section in particular seemed almost unnaturally black. She tried to focus on it but her eyes refused to stay put, skipping over it almost against her will.

She frowned, pulling her eyes away as the beginnings of a headache began to throb behind her eyes. She must be more tired than she thought.
Another flicker caught her eye and, for just a second, her mind registered…something. She wasn’t sure what but her subconscious niggled at it, trying to fit it into something she understood.

Still another flicker and, this time, she caught the barest impression of something glittering, a familiar spark off…off scales maybe?

Damn. She pushed away from the ledge.

Baby dragons. They must have snuck out to play. She’d found a few of the very small ones, barely born a week earlier, cowering near a bookshelf in the library that morning. Some of the older babies had convinced them to venture into Erebor only for the poor creatures to accidentally set a tapestry on fire, get scared of being in trouble and run for cover. Most of Erebor had been in a panic trying to find them with Fili, in particular, convinced it never would have happened had Thorin been there.

In the end, Bilba had stumbled on them. They had promptly swarmed her, wrapping around her chest and clinging to her like living…baby armor. She’d gotten them back to their parents and life had returned to, relative, normal.

It’d been the most excitement she’d had in quite some time.

She strode into her room, pausing just long enough to strap on her armor and weapons, continuing out of the room as she finished.

Newborn dragons inside a library were a far cry from them being alone outside. Even on the best of days, in spring or summer, during daylight hours, they were at high risk, being so small and defenseless. It was why they weren’t allowed outside at all until they were older and, even then, were closely supervised by the adults.

She didn’t bother waking up Fili. He was so exhausted he’d practically had to be escorted to his room by his father and brother.

She’d get the babies back in herself and avoid creating a second panic in the same day.

***

“It would appear,” Thengel said, leaning forward in his seat, “that the safety of Middle Earth rests on the dwarven key remaining safe.” He fixed his eyes on Thorin. “How can you be so sure it is?”

“For one thing,” Thorin said shortly, “the Erebor Treasury is located on the royal level. To get to it someone would have to make it past the front gates of Erebor and up multiple levels, each one secured by doors and armed guards.”

***

Bilba strode down the corridor, lifting a hand to idly run it across Fili’s door as she walked past his room.

Her footsteps slowed as she passed Thorin’s room, and then stopped completely.
There were no guards posted, at the doors to the next level or at the doors of the Treasury.

An odd sound came from the Treasury, as if someone were running coins through their fingers, letting them fall with a clink to the treasure below. She frowned. Were the guards shirking their duty? Robbing the Treasury even while their king was gone?

She headed to the doors, keeping to the wall. Once she reached it she leaned forward, peering around the edge.

There was no sign of the guards but she could still hear the sound.

She frowned and then slipped around the corner and headed inside.

***

“And yet,” Arathorn broke in, his voice kinder than Thengel’s, “you said yourself there was an attempt to get into Erebor’s Treasury.”

“Facilitated by Nar,” Thorin agreed. “A traitor who is no longer present or able to get anyone anywhere inside the mountain. Also, after that attack, which was stopped I might add, guards were placed on the Treasury.”

“And there is no other way to get in?” Thranduil asked.

Thorin hesitated. The secret entrance into the Treasury was called secret for a reason after all.

“There is,” he allowed finally. “But it is a door locked from the outside. There is but one key which is kept in my bedchambers.” He quirked an eyebrow, amused. “Not to mention, in order to access the door one would have to travel across a wide open plain, under the very nose of Erebor’s dragons and a number of balconies overlooking the area.”

And there was the fact that Dwalin had put guards on the inside of the door, where they would be hidden from sight by anyone passing by outside.

“So, no,” he continued, his voice sure. “There is no other way to get into the mountain.”

***

The doors of the Treasury opened onto a small dais that led to stairs down into the room. At the base of the stairs, set to either side of the door, were two large columns that rose from the floor all the way to the ceiling.

Bilba stayed low as she entered, keeping to the floor and keeping to the side so she was blocked by one of the pillars. She went down the stairs quickly and crouched, one hand resting lightly on the column.

She could hear voices, more than could belong to the guards, speaking in a low, guttural tone that brought a chill to her blood.
There was no way it could be what it sounded like...just no way.

She leaned forward and pressed her hands into the cold stone of the floor, the grit of dirt and debris pressing into her palms, and looked around the edge into the Treasury itself.

And found herself looking straight at a group of orcs.

Orcs.

In the Treasury.

_Inside Erebor._

_Orcs._

***

“We should move the key,” Thranduil said, leaning back in his chair. “Somewhere safer.”

“And where would you suggest?” Dis broke in, before Thorin could. “Mirkwood? Which already had a thief enter and leave the Treasury unmolested?”

Thranduil’s eyes narrowed and Thorin lifted a hand to ward off Dis before she could escalate the situation. “As I have said, the key is safe enough. The odds of someone getting to it inside Erebor are incredible. I don’t see how it could be done. Nar had daily access to the level the Treasury resided on, money, power and agents at his beck and call and he failed. The key is safe.”

***

Bilba felt as if her heart had frozen inside her chest. Her lungs struggled to pull in air and she had to force herself back behind the pillar again. She turned and went back into a crouch, her back pressed against the rough stone of the pillar.

Orcs...orcs inside Erebor. The sound she’d heard was their feet marching over coins.

How many? How many could have possibly gotten in?

She forcibly took a deep breath and leaned forward again.

At least two dozen, her mind calculated, _at least_ and still more were coming after, from near the back of the Treasury, a long line of them stretching across the floor.

She opened the links in her mind, to Vili, Fili and Kili, and to Syrath and called, reaching out to warn them.

She felt nothing.
She shook her head in disbelief. She knew it was possible for orcs to create…walls almost that blocked out the ability to communicate via mind link when in large numbers. It was why rider potentials inside Moria were unable to call for help to the outside but could still talk to one another inside.

But for that to be possible…there was no way that many orcs could be in the vicinity.

There was just no way.

A loud voice broke out over the rest…and stomach wrenched.

Bilba closed her eyes, her hands clenched into fists where they rested on her thighs.

Azog.

Of course it was Azog.

He had a knack for knowing when her life had been good for too long.

She let her body roll to the side, leaning to look around.

Azog was in the middle of the room, as big and ugly and intimidating as he’d ever been and Bilba couldn’t help the almost primal rush of fear that ran through her at the sight of him. On her shoulder, the brand burned as if freshly carved.

Azog continued to speak, his voice loud enough for her to hear but not so clear that she could understand what he was saying. He spoke to several large orcs spaced out in front of him, lieutenants, several she recognized as regulars from her Arena days.

She started to back away, planning to sneak back up the steps to raise the alarm.

Azog’s hands moved, punctuating something he was saying, and she caught sight of a thick chain clutched in one hand. She frowned, following the metal links. They led away from Azog and up to a thick collar locked around the neck of a figure turned away from her, partially blocked from her sight on the other side of Azog’s body.

Azog’s new arena slave? Why in the world had Azog bothered to bring a slave with him?

***

“Even if,” Thorin continued, “hypothetically speaking, someone was to get inside Erebor, past the security, past all the guards and into the Treasury itself…”

***

Azog moved suddenly, wrenching on the chain and dragging his new slave with him. Bilba saw the
figure stumble and then obediently turn to follow.

***

“…they still could not get the key.”

“So over-confident,” Thranduil said, steeping his hands. “Typical of your race.”

“And it isn’t typical of the elves?” Thorin retorted dryly. “In this case, however, no, it is not over confidence, it is fact. The key is locked within a chest made of pure mithril. No weapon known can break it.”

***

The new slave was taller than her but shorter than an elf or human, a dwobbit or a dwarf then. He was clearly male, his body leaner than it should be but well-muscled. Azog must have finally learned the benefit of not having near-starved slaves fighting in the Arena. The slave was dressed in the standard tattered rags of all slaves, his body liberally marked with scars where the fabric was ripped away, including a particularly long one on his arm.

His hair was short, matted, dark and filthy and held back in a short ponytail at the nape of his neck. As he finished his turn Biba’s eyes went to his face, past the dirt and ragged beard up to the eyes…

***

“The lock on the box,” Thorin finished, “is a blood lock, put in place by Radagast the Brown ages ago when the key was first given into our care. It can be opened only by a member of the ruling bloodline.” He spread his arms out, indicating himself and Dis. “A member of the house of Durin. Clearly my sister and I are currently unable to accomplish such a task so unless you feel one of my nephews is a traitor to Middle Earth—”

Here, Dis made a sound suggesting what she’d do to anyone who even implied such a thing.

“Then the key is safe,” Thorin said, dropping his hands into his lap. He did not point out the obvious fact that the other keys would be equally as safe if the same safeguards had been put in place.

He felt quite proud of himself for that.
Eyes, a faded shadow of the brilliant blue they’d once been, looked aimlessly in her direction and everything just…stopped.

Bilba went down heavily on one knee, back behind the pillar again, a hand on the column to keep her balance. Dizziness washed over her and she shut her eyes, leaning her forehead against the stone.

“Ah, my little guard.”

She wrenched her eyes open, nausea roiling in her gut.

“They came for me.”

“You have to get her out of here.”

“No.

She dropped her head down, her eyes burning even as her fingers curled against the column, the rough stone scraping against her fingers. She clenched her jaw and resisted the urge to drive her fist into the stone until the bones in her hand broke into a million jagged pieces.

She looked a final time and watched as still more orcs flooded into the Treasury, Azog organizing them as they prepared to march into the mountain. At his side, his slave walked quietly, his hands, she noted now, manacled tightly in front of him.

Her breathing was harsh and rapid.

Anger. She felt angry.

At herself for having given up so easily, at Azog for daring to set foot in Erebor, at the fact she couldn’t leap out right that instant and end all their lives…and repay a debt that had been a long time coming.

She pulled her dagger and held it down, next to her thigh. She pressed her other hand into the floor and began to edge backward.

The entire time her eyes never left the dwarf standing next to Azog.

She had to go. All of Erebor slept unaware death was about to march through its corridors. Fili and Kili were barely a dozen yards away, asleep in their beds.

She saw no sign of the guards, they were most likely dead, ambushed and dragged inside the Treasury to be hidden.

Which meant she was now the only person who knew, and the only one to warn them.

She had to go.

She had to warn the others.
But then…then she was coming back.

Then she was repaying the one person she owed more than anyone else save her mother.

*I am coming back*; she swore as she moved so that the pillar blocked her sight.

*I swear it. I will come back and I will save you.*

*Rider.*

*My savior.*

*Frerin.*
Chapter 24

The orcs were heading toward the door.

Bilba calculated in her head as she backed away, keeping low and behind the pillar. She could hear their feet getting closer, the jingle of treasure tumbling as they carelessly knocked over stacks of coins and gems.

There wasn’t enough time.

There wasn’t enough time to warn Fili, Kili and Vili, for them to get up and arm themselves before the orcs were in the corridor.

Not enough time…unless…

Damn.

The idea sparked as she passed one of the large doors to the Treasury. The idea, and the possible consequences.

She weighed them in an instant, her mind clicking easily into the mode it had been in for years inside the Arena, where the luxury of time wasn’t available and the difference between life and death often teetered on an edge thinner than the blade of a knife.

The consequences were acceptable.

Bilba stood up.

The doors to the Treasury were made of massive blocks of marble, carved and inlaid with gold and gems. They must have weighed an incredible amount but were balanced so beautifully that she barely touched one and it instantly started to move.

From inside the Treasury she heard a roar of anger and then rapid movement, feet running toward her.

The first half of the door slammed into its frame and she moved to the other side, forcing herself to move carefully and deliberately. She was shaking and her mind was screaming at her to move faster but she ignored it. Panic led to mistakes and she couldn’t afford a mistake.

A familiar, hated voice roared out a slur.

Azog had seen her.

Without lifting her head, Bilba gave an obscene gesture with one hand and then slammed the second door shut. She drew her sword, sparing an instant of regret as she slid the blade through the handles on the door.

She really liked that sword.

Bodies slammed into the door and it moved out an inch, catching on the blade which snapped against the handles, holding the doors closed.

Bilba ran. She hit the doors leading to the lower levels, shoving them open and sprinting through.
Her father was no fool. He personally slept on the royal level and had guards stationed in shifts on the Treasury doors and doors leading to the level itself.

In addition to that, and the guards at the doors on every level, he’d also sprinkled people in rooms throughout each floor. People he trusted, warriors to the last, and a large number of them members of Vanguard. All whose jobs, when they weren’t active on Vanguard, were to be a secondary line of defense for the royal family, ready at a moment’s notice.

Meaning that, like her, they slept in their armor with their weapons by their side.

She burst into the nearest room and skidded to a stop just inside, her eyes adjusting to the flickering firelight.

In a chair before the fire, Hram was already awake and rising from his chair, one hand grabbing his sword where it had been resting against the mantle.

“What is it?”

Bilba’s hands flew, giving him the short form in gestures as fast as possible. Hram wasn’t a rider but he had grown up a miner and knew Iglishmek. The few times she’d interacted with him she’d used it and he’d always responded easily in kind.

He cursed and headed toward the door. “Go wake up Opal and have her start rousing the others. I’ll wake up the royal family, assuming the orcs aren’t out already.” He flashed her a grin, briefly easing the lines in his face and making him look years younger. “Though I’d imagine a full out battle in the hall would be just as effective at getting them up.”

Then he was gone and Bilba was out the door again. She got Opal as requested and then alerted the two guards at the opposite end of the long hall, the ones guarding the doors into the next level down. One of them left to aid in spreading the word while the other began to head toward the royal level. A number of nobles, awakened by the commotion, joined in also, dragging on armor as they went. Others peeked out before slamming their doors shut again.

Bilba alerted the guards on the next level down, sending even more running up and felt herself relax minutely as they vanished around the corner. Surely that would be more than enough. Fili and the others must be awake by now. She reached out, and felt cold rush through her veins as she still felt nothing at all in return.

How was it possible? Even in the depths of Moria, in the pit of darkness surrounded by orcs she’d been able to speak via link to Frerin. By all rights she should be able to do so now, especially when that link was bolstered by a soul bond, and a dragon after that.

She leaned against a wall for a moment and focused.

There. She could…almost feel them, a vague impression like they were in Dale and she was trying to call to them from the balcony in her bedroom, on the wrong side of the mountain.

She started to take a step back toward the royal levels, and hesitated.

Was it just her?

Normally it would be a simple matter of asking another rider but all the ones on the first several levels had gone to Rivendell. All the ones she knew at least. There were probably others but she wouldn’t know them on sight and had no time to search for them.
If the others could still talk to their dragons it would be a massive boon. The dragons could clear any remaining orcs off the side of the mountain and kill any trying to escape. And, if by chance, Azog tried to flee with Frerin, they could stop that too.

If the dragons didn’t know, however, because none of their riders could talk to them to tell them…

Bilba looked up toward the ceiling over her head.

She didn’t even have a sword or her bow and arrows, just her knives.

Damn it all.

She started to run again, down, toward the dragon levels, passing many running past her toward the Treasury as word continued to spread. She would ensure the dragons were alright, she decided, and return to help drive off what would hopefully, by then, be the last few orcs.

She reached the dragon levels and darted inside.

A roar of pure rage echoed down the corridor and Bilba’s eyes widened.

She came out of the tunnel into the main level itself and dropped into a crouch on instinct as, overhead, orc dragons shot by. There was a mass of them, a black swirling vortex in the center of the room, rising up from the lower levels.

Fire erupted from below, a column shooting straight up. The room was filled with the screams of the dying creatures together with the awful smell of burning flesh. Bilba clapped her hands over her ears as the screams reached a fever pitch before slowly dying out.

Xalanth crawled over the edge of the ledge, pulling himself up from down below. There was a near feral look of rage in his eyes. He growled and Bilba heard an answer. Lyth was in front of the nursery, blocking the entrance.

Bilba went toward her slowly, giving the larger dragon a chance to see and recognize her. The last thing she wanted to do was startle a drake and end up incinerated.

Lyth rumbled at her but didn’t react as Bilba ducked under her wing and went into the larger area behind her.

She saw Syrath in an attack position of his own. The younger dragons were curled up around or behind him with a few of the mothers who’d remained behind in front of the lot of them. Syrath lowered his head and Bilba wrapped her arms around him as best she could.

Xalanth let out another roar and she turned to see a second wave of orc dragons boiling in, this time from one of the higher entrances, over their heads. Unlike the last set these carried orcs on their backs and, as she watched, they leapt off, grabbing the rocks jutting from the walls of the level and scrambling along them like insects.

Syrath nudged her and she frowned at him. A weight settled on her boot and she looked down to see a tiny black dragon sitting on her foot. He was one from the library, the ringleader as she recalled and if he was there…she quickly found the other three curled near Syrath’s left leg. They were unnaturally silent, their eyes wide with fear.

Lyth roared a challenge, stretching up to shoot flame toward some of the orcs and their dragons. There were one or two other drakes with her but not all the ones that had stayed behind. Bilba imagined the orc dragons must have come in through a lower entrance and they had gone below to
battle them. Xalanth had merely been the first to return.

Bilba gently nudged the baby off her foot and ran out of the nursery and for the stands that held the various weapons the riders used. She threw a full quiver over one shoulder, grabbed a bow, and started picking off the orcs swarming along the walls.

Shrieking and then a third wave was coming, from a midpoint entrance almost directly in front of her. Bilba swore and threw her bow over her shoulder. She grabbed a sword from the stands and crouched.

The dragons raced over her head, so close she felt the brush of their wing tips against her scalp.

She stabbed upward with her sword, gutting one dragon and knocking several others off course as they slammed into it.

Before they could recover she was up. She drove a boot into the skull of the nearest orc, watching with satisfaction as it fell off and vanished down the gap in the center of the levels.

She grabbed the straps used to control the dragon it had been riding and pulled herself on. She whistled in Xalanth’s direction and waved at him when he looked over.

Here’s hoping he didn’t forget himself and torch her by accident.

She dug her heels into the orc dragon’s side and then it was lifting up, soaring back into the boiling mass of its fellows. Around her several drakes, newly arrived from farther below, joined them and Bilba felt her gut clench. Not all drakes were fighters. Much like dwarves, there were those whose temperaments were simply not suited to the art of war. Xalanth and Lyth were fighters, as were a few others who’d stayed, but the majority of those left had little to no fighting experience. A large number of the warrior drakes had gone to Moria years earlier, and never returned. The ones who’d stayed behind had been too young to go at the time, too inexperienced or simply didn’t have the right temperament. Since then her father had done his best to train new fighters, many of which had gone to Rivendell as protection for Thorin. Now the rest fought as best they could, in quarters that grew tighter with every swarm that arrived, their movements further restricted trying to protect the baby dragons.

Bilba used every arrow in her quiver and went back to her sword. Flame seared around her, close enough that she was soon drenched with sweat. Blood splattered over her body and armor as she slashed at orc after orc and their dragons with them. There was no time for finesse, they needed the levels cleared before someone got in a lucky strike. Dragons were not invincible, particularly when they were young. Their scales were softer, easier to penetrate, their talons and teeth not yet strong enough to penetrate the hide of an orc dragon, and many were too small to produce flame. The adults were at risk as well. Dragons could always hurt other dragons. The acid the foul creatures spat could burn a dragon as easily as anyone else and their talons could pierce scale. They were smaller, it would take more of them to harm a drake but it could be done, particularly when the drakes they fought were inexperienced and in a small space where their own size worked against them.

The dragon she was riding jerked and she saw an orc pulling a bloody sword away. She pushed off, landing easily on that dragon. She held the hilt of her sword with both hands and rammed it into the orc’s throat, hard enough to knock it back off the dragon. It slid off the sword and dropped out of sight and she spun, gaining momentum and slashed the weapon in an arc at another orc shooting past. The creatures were densely packed together and she began to leap from dragon to dragon, battling the orcs as if she were on solid ground and not high in the air.

But they were coming at her from all sides and it wasn’t long before she was bleeding from a dozen
or more cuts in areas not covered by her armor, the orcs pressing in ever closer as they did their best to overwhelm her. Somehow she’d ended up near the top of the levels, the ceiling only feet above her, the dragons she was leaping between trying their best to crush her against it.

A sword came at her and she bent her knees and fell back until she was pressed against the orc dragon’s back. The blade rushed by over her head, the orc extending himself to try and reach her. Bilba tightened her legs around the creature, then rolled on her side and thrust her sword under the orc’s extended arm and straight into his armpit.

He died with a startled look on his face. Another came from her opposite side and Bilba was forced to keep rolling, off the dragon’s back entirely. She grabbed the straps wrapped around its belly and held on, twisting as she fended off attacks. She pulled herself up by the straps, enough to put a boot in one orc’s face before swinging back, barely evading a sword wielded by another.

An orc directly under her vanished suddenly, snapped up in the massive jaws of Xalanth who appeared climbing up the wall, his talons digging into the rock and creating his own footholds. He cleared the rest out before they had time to fully understand what was going on and extended his head out toward her. The dragon she was hanging off panicked but Xalanth snapped its head in his jaws with a loud crunch and held its corpse still. Bilba scrambled up the straps and over the creature’s corpse. She grabbed the ridges of Xalanth’s nose with arms shaking from fatigue and managed to drag herself up until she was perched on his head, just before his eyes.

She flashed a smile at him in gratitude. He, in turn spit the dead orc dragon out and started back down. More orcs and dragons were coming and he shot a burst of flame that seared along the ceiling. A number of the creatures died while the rest dropped down, into the waiting jaws of the other drakes.

Bilba worked her way to his straps, wrapping them around her forearms to anchor herself. Her breathing was coming in great gasps, the force of it causing a burn in her lungs and throat. She put her head down on Xalanth’s scales to rest for a minute.

They got to the main floor and she spotted dwarves rushing about, weaving through the downed corpses of orc dragons and orcs. All looked exhausted, many sporting injuries of their own and Bilba felt a rock settle in her gut at the sight of several still forms that were decidedly dwarven. She’d known the odds were against them but had still held out a sliver of hope that they would come through this without casualties.

She got down from Xalanth and heard a shout and then Kili was striding up to her. He looked as weary as the rest, his bow gripped in one hand and a half empty quiver of arrows slung over his back. She doubted it was his first.

Bilba raised her hands. Fili?

“He’s fine,” Kili said. “He’s with our father. Since he’s technically King right now they’re trying to make him visible, let people know things are under control.” He said the words but didn’t look convinced. He ran an arm over his face, wiping sweat off his brow.

Did you see Frerin? Bilba asked.

Kili gave her a confused look. “Did I see who?”

Frerin, Bilba repeated, her hands moving slow and methodical. I saw him. He was with Azog.

Kili’s mouth opened and then closed again, several times. “I thought you said he was dead,” he
managed, finally. He sounded weary and she wondered how much he was really processing of what she was saying.

*I was wrong,* Bilba replied. *We need to save him.*

Kili’s face was a mix of emotions, more than Bilba could hope to name. An orc dragon screeched nearby and he frowned at it, shaking his head as if trying to clear it. She heard him curse viciously, under his breath, and then nod at the dragons. “One thing at a time. We need to get the infants and the younger ones out, before the next wave.” He gave her a determined look. “Then we come back, kick the Mahal damned orcs out of Erebor and rescue my uncle, how’s that?”

Bilba nodded. Every moment the younger ones stayed was one more they risked injury or death. The adults were endangered as well and then there was also the fact the orcs were quite effectively keeping the dragons locked inside the mountain. They’d been on the defensive since this had started, it was time to turn that around.

*Can you talk to Lyth?*

He nodded. “Not from my room but I started hearing her once I got to this level. You and Syrath?” She shook her head and he frowned. “Probably his age. He isn’t as strong yet. And he’s still hurt.”

*What’s causing it?* Bilba asked.

“I have no idea,” Kili said, his expression uncharacteristically grim. “It shouldn’t be possible. Not like this anyway.” One of the other dwarves ran up to him and he turned to speak to him before looking toward Xalanth. “We’re going to have Xalanth punch his way through and try to clear an opening. The others can follow in his wake.”

*How many orcs do you think there are?*

“Too many,” Kili nocked another arrow to his bow and crouched as they heard the sound of rushing wings from outside one of the entrances. “We’ve lost the Treasury floor, and the one just below it.”

Bilba stared at him in shock. *You what?*

The only response she got was that same grim expression and then another wave was rushing in and there was no more time to speak.

Bilba fought from the floor this time. Some of the other warriors dragged bows and quivers of arrows to them, keeping all of them supplied. Bilba restocked and stood back to back with Kili, picking the creatures out of the air. Their bodies dropped about them, forcing them to dodge a few times. Xalanth stayed close and defended them, incinerating corpses or simply blocking them with his own body when needed.

Lyth was in the greatest danger. She was still at the entrance to the nursery and couldn’t move without putting those inside at risk. The orc dragons and orcs quickly realized this and focused their attacks on her, forcing her to be constantly on the defensive. She roared in rage and sent out a short burst of flame but it wasn’t as effective. The dragons and their orcs stayed close to the drakes and the dwarven warriors, stopping most flame attacks for fear of hurting allies as well as foes.

Kili pushed back against her, hard. Bilba dropped to one knee and swung around his side, sending three arrows in rapid succession into the skull of the orc dragon that had been diving toward him.

“Thanks,” Kili gasped. His breath was coming in harsh pants and blood was streaming from a cut on his forehead. He’d need to get it dealt with before it got in his eyes and impaired his vision. They
were all bloody and tired but the waves of the enemy seemed unending. There was no time to wonder about where they’d come from, they were there and if the dragons didn’t get out they’d die in their own home.

Xalanth was clinging to the wall next to the Nursery and she ran to him. He lowered his head down to her and she lifted her hands to sign, reaching out with her mind as she did. She had no idea if he understood but she had to try.

_Please. I know it isn’t done but I need to be able to speak to you. I can’t get through to Syrath._

He accepted the link, that quickly, and Bilba felt a rush of relief. It almost felt as if a missing limb had suddenly been returned.

_Thank you. Can you carry Syrath? And me and some of the smaller ones? We only have to get as far as Mirkwood._

*I will.*

Bilba nodded. _Alright. Tell Syrath and Lyth. We have to go now._

The dwarves were dealing with the last of the current wave, another one would undoubtedly be arriving soon.

Syrath was already up and ready to go. He nuzzled her as she came in and she paused long enough to hug him back. She found the four small dragons she’d saved from the library, curled around their tiny ringleader. She picked him up and the others scrambled up her legs and torso.

Lyth moved and Xalanth came in, Kili alongside him.

_Do you know why I can’t talk to him? _Bilba asked Xalanth. _When I was in Moria, I had better range than this and Azog had no problem attacking me from levels away._

_I don’t know. It feels as if a great ocean separates us from the rest of the mountain, _Xalanth sounded…scared, Bilba realized and the thought of what might be able to scare him terrified her. _Whatever it is…whatever is capable of blocking mental links or, worse, soul bonds, even a little, is not something we want to meet._

Xalanth lay down flat and Syrath carefully crawled onto his back, curling his talons into Xalanth’s sides to hang on. It would be awkward, the larger dragon would have to move carefully to not accidentally dislodge him and that would limit his ability to fight.

A dull throb started in her temples and Bilba grimaced. The headache she’d started getting earlier was coming back with a vengeance.

Kili and several of the warriors brought over weapons and started strapping them on to Xalanth, Lyth and even Syrath. As they finished Bilba saw Kili raise a hand to his head with a frown. He saw her watching and forced a tired grin. “I’m fine, just a headache. Come on. Faster we get out of here the faster we can make a difference from outside.”

Bilba nodded. She clambered up on Xalanth’s back, carefully as she still had the four baby dragons clinging to her. Syrath put his wings and arms forward on either side of Xalanth’s neck and upper body, creating barriers of a sort. She put the babies down in a pile on Xalanth’s back, under Syrath’s head and up against his chest. They huddled together in a small ball, the ringleader doing his best to put on a brave front for the other three. Bilba made a mental note to keep an eye on that one. He was
going to be a handful when he grew up. If he got the chance.

He would, if she had anything to say about it.

“Bilba!” Kili waved at her from where he was sitting on Lyth’s back. “There’s no room for you to strap in. Come ride with us.”

Bilba shook her head. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d flown without straps, or the last. Xalanth would be busy keeping Syrath stable and safe and Syrath couldn’t use his fire without running the risk of accidentally hitting Xalanth’s wings. Xalanth needed her.

She crouched at the base of his neck, in the hollow between his shoulder blades.

*I’m ready,* she sent.

Xalanth ran forward and dropped off the edge into the large hole that ran down through all the levels. Bilba grabbed the straps where they ran around the front of his neck and wrapped them around her hands and wrists. Syrath was laying over the others so she couldn’t secure her legs or reach the strap that would normally sit around her waist. Air rushed past her and her body pulled back, the straps the only thing keeping her in place. They dug into her wrists and hands and she grunted with pain, gritting her teeth as she waited for their angle to change and give her some relief.

Xalanth banked, leveling out. He extended his wings, gaining momentum, and then drew them back as they shot through the short tunnel that led outside.

For a moment there was rock surrounding them and then they emerged…into chaos.

The sky was black with orcs and their dragons, hundreds of them. The last time Bilba had seen anything comparable was when she’d knelt at the gates of Moria and watched Erebor try to battle its way inside.

Xalanth swerved, dodging past small dragons that had turned to attack him. He let loose a burst of flame, driving them back and then banked upward, trying to gain altitude. Bilba got to her feet, grabbed a bow and arrows and began picking off their pursuers.

She caught sight of Lyth and other dragons coming out and aimed her arrows there, trying to clear their path.

Xalanth leveled out again, high enough now that the orc dragons couldn’t reach them. He circled, waiting for the others.

Bilba watched them come. Her headache had dissipated and her mind felt clearer, sharper somehow than it had in the mountain.

*Kili?* She tested. *Can you hear me?*

*Yes.* He responded. *We must finally be far enough from whatever it was that was blocking us.*

*Syrath?* Bilba asked, hopeful.

*I’m here,* he answered and she sagged in relief at being able to hear him again.

Lyth and the others arrived and Bilba tried to ignore the fact that there were fewer dragons now than there had been inside Erebor. She didn’t know when they’d been lost, or who had been lost, but she’d known, logically, it would happen. There were too many young dragons, too small and weak
to defend themselves, and far too few adults to protect them.

And there were always, always too many orcs.

She swallowed against the swell of grief as faces and personalities of drakes she and Syrath personally knew ran through her mind. She had no time to dwell on which ones might have been lost, no time for grief. Not yet anyway. Later, after they were safe, and after she’d made the orcs pay.

*Mirkwood is here,* Kili sent, pointing to where several glittering dragons fought against clumps of orc dragons and their riders. *I’m surprised someone gave the order to engage with Thranduil being in Rivendell.*

Bilba doubted there had been much choice. This many orcs and dragons so close to Mirkwood, it wouldn’t take much for them to set the entire forest ablaze if they so desired. Mirkwood had no choice but to fight.

Bilba’s eyes went down, watching the battle beneath them. Now that they were at a safe altitude, most of the adults had left them to join the battle, many fighting for the first time ever. Some had their riders, others did not and Bilba clenched her hands into tight fists, her muscles tight with worry over them. Xalanth and Lyth stayed where they were, protecting the younger dragons until they reached Mirkwood. Most of those younger dragons were flying between the two adults while the very small ones were either on Xalanth’s back or on Lyth’s. The little ringleader, as she’d begun to call him, was currently perched on Syrath’s arm, leaning forward as far as possible to watch the fighting.

Instead of cutting to the left and going straight to Mirkwood, Xalanth took them straight back from the mountain. When Bilba asked he explained he was trying to get them away from the orc dragons before coming down. The creatures were congregated at Erebor and he wanted to be far enough that they wouldn’t bother coming when the drakes began to descend.

As they went out farther and farther the orc dragons did, indeed, start to thin giving Bilba, for the first time, a clear view of the plains themselves.

Her breath stopped in her lungs and her heart wrenched inside her chest. A wave of dizziness washed over her and Bilba sagged to one knee, a hand gripping Syrath’s arm as she looked over it and down Xalanth’s side.

The ground was a mass of black. Figures, mere dots from this distance, marching in rows. They came from the direction of the Withered Heath, an isolated, empty space within sight of Erebor but far enough away that it was never visited.

A perfect place to hide an army if one could manage to sneak it in.

The pieces fell into place even as her heart sank within her chest, despair rising up from deep within her bones.

The massive force of orcs she’d heard rumors about, the ones that had enabled her to deal with the Watcher. The sudden return, but of a force far smaller than what she’d been hearing about.

The caravan attacks, drawing their attention while more orcs snuck in…from somewhere. The escalation, a rushed attempt to replace the orcs and dragons lost during the Dale attack.

She still didn’t know how the original force had gotten by unseen, or how no one had ever caught on to the buildup later, how they had managed to miss all of it but, in the end, did the whys and wherefores really matter anymore?
They had been blind, and now an army marched its way into Erebor.

The mountain was not being raided or attacked.

She was being invaded.

Bilba’s eyes tracked back to the mountain, and the dots scurrying up its side, toward the no-longer-secret entrance, and the entrances to the dragon levels. She caught sight of what looked like elves, dwarves and possibly men from Dale fighting while, overhead, drakes and elven dragons fought against what, from their distance, looked like a swarm of gnats.

_We need to go_, Kili sent. He was standing on Lyth’s snout, staring down in horror. _We have to get back. They need our help. Everyone inside, they have no idea what’s really going on._

Fili, Bilba thought, swallowing past a rock in her throat. He would be a target. If the orcs were invading they would want Erebor’s royals, and Fili in particular. He was the heir and the acting King. They would be targeting him specifically, and she had no way of letting him know.

Lyth turned away, soaring toward the relative safety of Mirkwood. Xalanth followed as did the younger dragons.

Kili, almost in a daze, made his way to Lyth’s back and continued watching the battle raging beneath them.

They had been taken completely and utterly off guard. The bulk of their fighting force was either in Rivendell or trapped inside the mountain, kept busy protecting the merchants and miners, the children and elderly, forced to fight against splinters while the main army marched nearly unchecked outside.

The orc dragons and the orcs riding them were more organized than anything she’d ever seen. They fought as close to other drakes and elven dragons as they could, effectively stopping all fire lest it inflict damage on an ally. They swarmed in coordinated groups, attacking from all sides, acid and claws causing minor damage that, over time, would accumulate into potentially life threatening injury.

And through it all more just kept coming, the Withered Heath suddenly a fortress that had thrown open its gates.

Bilba didn’t have to ask Kili what he was thinking.

It was the same thing running through her own mind.

Erebor was being overrun.

And she didn’t know if there was anything she, or anyone else, could do to stop it.
I can help! Syrath leaned forward, sticking his head right in Bilba’s face as if it would somehow more properly convey his sincerity. You can’t just leave me here!

Bilba looked away from him, unable to keep eye contact. They’d reached Mirkwood and had landed near the palace. It was surrounded by trees, expertly arranged so that, from the air, it looked simply like more forest. For those who knew, however, there was a route leading underneath the canopy and to areas spaced widely enough to allow a large number of dragons to safely land, hidden from sight overhead.

Most of the Mirkwood dragons were fighting, as were all the drakes who’d felt capable enough to join in. This left plenty of room for the babies, the younger dragons, the two new mothers and the few others whose temperaments were ill suited to fighting and who generally helped in the nursery.

It also left room for Xalanth, Lyth, and Syrath, all three of whom were fidgeting to get back to the mountain.

You can’t go, Bilba said gently, but firmly, to Syrath. You can’t fly.

You don’t know that, he groused, his eyes flashing. Nobody’s let me try yet.

Because they don’t want you damaging your wing by trying too soon, Bilba replied. And even if you could fly, you aren’t going to instantly be back to full strength. You won’t be able to stay up for long. You can’t fight, and you know it.

He wilted, his head lowering toward the ground. I don’t like you fighting alone.

I won’t be alone, Bilba assured him. Xalanth will be with me. And Lyth and Kili and a host of others but there was no reason to emphasize him being left out. She ducked under his head and wrapped her arms around his neck. He leaned on her just a bit and she set her feet to take on the weight.

I can’t hear Fili. I won’t be able to hear you either, once you leave.

I know. As soon as she left, the strange veil would fall back over them, leaving her unable to easily communicate with anyone other than Xalanth, and unable to communicate at all with Syrath. I’ll be fine. You’ll see. I’ll get Fili, we’ll rout the orcs and you’ll be back in Erebor before the sun’s up.

Syrath lifted his head away from her, looking up toward where the stars were already beginning to fade as dawn approached.

Before it’s fully up, Bilba corrected. Just you wait. Once the sun is up, and the elves and humans can see better, the tide will turn.

The absence of many of Erebor’s drakes and their riders, both of whom could see in the dark, combined with a night attack had given the orcs the clear advantage. Well, that and the giant army they’d managed to sneak in under everyone’s nose.

But once the sun was up, and the elves and their dragons could see in the air and the humans could see on the ground…she had hope.

Syrath was looking at her. Bilba tried to think of something more to say but, in the end, there was really nothing she could say. They both knew the stakes, they understood the risks that came with
every battle and they knew it was always possible this moment might be the last one they would ever have together.

She hugged him again and then forced herself to step back. Several of the younger dragons, the friends Syrath regularly played with, were gathered around him, crouched in small balls with their tails wrapped around their feet, eyes huge.

**Be safe,** Syrath said as she started to walk away, **and bring back Fili.** Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, **I think, when you do, we should consider a leash for him. He tends to get in trouble a lot.** His voice wobbled just a bit in her mind, his emotions coloring the words, even as he tried to part with her on a light note.

**And you and I don’t?** Bilba asked dryly.

He laughed and she turned away from him, letting a breath out and steeling herself. Her hands clenched into fists at her side and she lifted her head.

Galloping feet came from behind her and a tiny body collided with the back of her leg. Bilba looked down and caught sight of the little ringleader just before he swarmed up her leg, around her torso, and up to her shoulder. Once there he perched on his hind legs, wrapped his tail along her back and side and grabbed onto her head to steady himself.

**He better not be getting any ideas,** Syrath muttered from behind her. **You’ve already got a dragon.**

**I’m sure he knows that,** Bilba responded, fighting back a smile at the small creature’s antics.

Syrath growled, a low, rattling sound that was quite impressive coming from him. The dragon on her shoulder straightened, then turned and chattered at Syrath, before turning back and tightening his grip on Bilba’s head.

Syrath gave a mental shout of outrage and Bilba paused to look over her shoulder at him. **What? You don’t even know what he said. It could have been polite.**

**It wasn’t.** Syrath had his head flat on the ground and was staring at the little dragon in annoyance. **He’s old enough to speak. He just hasn’t started looking at possible riders yet so no one knows.**

**Huh,** Bilba had assumed the ringleader had been a sibling to the others he kept hanging out with. If he was old enough to talk, however, it meant he must have been the single birth the nursery had seen months ago. It also meant he was an exceptionally small dragon. Syrath had been twice his size at the same age. **I thought those others were his siblings.**

**No, he just plays with them. Before, his mother kept him in the nursery but she let him play with the others when they were born. I think it was a mistake. He’s crazy now.**

Bilba laughed. She’d started walking again as they talked and had reached Xalanth and Lyth. The elves had brought out supplies and Kili looked up from where he was restocking his quiver. **“What’s so funny?”**

Bilba repeated what Syrath had said, provoking a squawk of outrage from the little dragon, and a snort from Kili. **“Yeah. It’s too bad my mother already has a dragon. He needs someone like her.”**

Lyth growled and Kili gave her an exasperated look. **“That’s not what I meant.”**

He stood up wearily, strapping the quiver back on and picking up his bow. **“Lyth thinks we should**
send someone to try and contact Rivendell.”

Bilba raised an eyebrow. *It’ll take two days to get there, and another two to get back. What good would it do?*

“They don’t have to go the entire way,” Kili explained. “Just far enough to be in range of a soul bond. And it only took us two days because we went all the way to the Shire, and weren’t in a hurry. They can get back faster; the tradeoff will just be how tired they are when they arrive.”

*And if we’ve managed to hold the mountain that long.*

Kili shrugged. He was bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, his hand reflexively tightening and loosening where it clasped his bow. His eyes darted to the sky repeatedly and Bilba knew he wanted to get back as badly as the rest of them.

*If you’re wanting to get in touch with a soul bond it’ll have to be someone whose rider is in Rivendell, Bilba said, and it can’t be Lyth or Xalanth. We’re short enough on warriors as it is, we can’t spare them.*

“I know.” Kili’s eyes flickered to the side and Bilba saw a dragon winding through the trees, toward them. She was small for a drake, her scales the color of stone tipped with a faded rose. As she came into sight the little dragon on Bilba’s shoulder gave a confused peep. An instant later he’d scurried back down her body and ran over to stand on his hind legs in front of the other dragon, stretching up to touch his nose to hers.

*Inilth.* Bilba said blankly. *You want to send Inilth?*

Inilth’s rider, Yari, was indeed in Rivendell. She was a scribe who worked in the library. Inilth helped with the younger dragons. Thorin had asked for Yari to go to Rivendell, along with several other scribes, to record the council but Inilth had wished to stay behind. She’d given birth to her first, and only, child and hadn’t wished to leave him or risk him by taking him so far from the mountain at such a young age.

“She won’t be going alone,” Kili said. He had that intense look on his face, the one that made him look like his brother. Bilba felt her heart wrench at the thought of Fili, still trapped inside Erebor, and she mentally let Syrath know she was completely on board with the idea of leashing him once they got him back.

“We can’t spare another dragon,” Kili said, “and most of Erebor’s army is trapped inside the mountain so we can’t spare a dwarf.”

“You can, however,” a new voice broke in, “spare an elf.”

Fingalon strode into the clearing, fully armored and in the process of strapping his sword to his side. He was one of the Thranduil’s best fighters, left behind to watch over Mirkwood in the absence of the king and his son. “I’ve set Elador in charge,” he said, referencing his twin brother and another of Thranduil’s trusted lieutenants. “Inilth will be fine.”

“Thank you,” Kili said. He focused on Bilba again. “I thought Xalanth, Lyth and you and I could guard her until she gets high enough to be out of reach. Fingalon will help protect her as they cross the mountains, when she has to come down to rest or eat.”

Okay. She wasn’t thrilled with the idea but couldn’t deny it was a solid one.

Fingalon headed toward Inilth only to pause as her tiny son, curled in a ball against her chest, hissed
at him. Inilth lowered her head to nuzzle him and he gave a worried sound and huddled down again.

Fingalon knelt on one knee, one hand grasping the hilt of his sword. “I will look after her, little one. That I swear.”

Bilba ducked under Inilth’s head and carefully picked the ringleader up. He cried but didn’t resist as she backed out and stood up. Once she did, Inilth touched noses with him again and then Bilba carried the small dragon back to where Syrath was. His three little friends were there, along with their mother who’d arrived and was curled around the lot of them. Bilba clambered over her tail and settled the ringleader with his friends. He curled into a small ball of misery and his friends quickly snuggled around him.

*Watch him*, Bilba told Syrath. *I don’t want him doing something reckless.*

*I will* Syrath promised.

Bilba pressed her face to his and returned to the clearing.

Kili was already on Lyth when she returned while Fingalon was seated on Inilth. Bilba went to Xalanith, who had been quietly watching everything, running a hand along his scales before climbing up and settling on his back.

*Of the drakes who didn’t go to Rivendell, she asked as she strapped in, how many were at Moria? Besides you?*

*None.*

*Yeah,* she tightened the straps and patted him to let him know she was ready. *That’s what I thought.*

They took off after that, bursting out of the tree line and immediately drawing attention from orc dragons patrolling near the border of the forest. Bilba sent word back to Syrath to let the elves know they might be getting company at some point. The focus of the attack was Erebor but that didn’t mean Mirkwood shouldn’t be ready. Fingalon had kept back some of the elves and the dragons to watch the forest, he wasn’t an idiot after all, so they should be fine. They would be fine, Bilba thought. They would be fine.

Please. Please let them be fine.

Someone had strapped a number of bows and quivers full of arrows to Xalanith and she readied one, nocking an arrow to the string and drawing it back. She let it fly a moment later, killing an orc that had been heading toward Inilth.

Bastards. They always went for the weakest. They wouldn’t be so quick to target Inilth if her mate, Quinlan, were present. The dragon was one of Erebor’s top fighters. He’d fought at Moria and during the wars against the orcs years before that. It was often amusing to see him and Inilth together, a scarred, battle hardened warrior and his tiny, gentle-natured mate.

Bilba highly doubted the orcs would find him quite so amusing.

She sent several more arrows flying and then they were rising, quickly. Within minutes they were higher than the orc dragons could fly. Inilth flashed past Bilba, Fingalon on her back with his bow and arrow at ready.

The two of them soared toward the Misty Mountains and, in the slowly lifting gloom, Bilba saw a swarm of orc dragons keeping pace with them down below. She cursed, her body twitching with the
desire to go after them.

**Fingalon will take care of her. We’re needed here.**

*It doesn’t make it any easier.*

**No,** Xalanth agreed. **It doesn’t.**

On the far horizon she saw the dome of the sun just beginning to rise into view, the sky around it changing into brilliant hues of pink and orange. Sunrise and sunset were her favorite parts of the day; two experiences she’d never had until after she’d escaped Moria. They gave her a sense of hope and optimism, and an assurance leaving Moria hadn’t been some elaborate vision because there was no way she could have ever dreamed up such beauty on her own.

*Aright,* she said. **We’ll assume help is on the way. Let’s make sure there’s still a mountain to save when they get here.**

**Gladly,** Xalanth responded and, with that, they turned back to Erebor.

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Things fell into an all too familiar cadence after that.

Well, mostly familiar. Fighting with Xalanth was quite different than when she was with Syrath. The same was probably true for him. He was used to Dwalin, or Balin when the situation called for it. She and Xalanth, in constrast, didn’t quite…mesh and there was no time to learn.

So Bilba did the best thing and kept quiet. Xalanth moved in ways Syrath did not so she chose to fight seated with her straps on, loose enough to allow movement but tight enough to keep her on through Xalanth’s twists and turns.

Xalanth spiraled through the center of the aerial battle, scattering orcs and their dragons like leaves in a brisk breeze. Bilba focused her arrows on those above and below them, any who appeared to be trying to target Xalanth’s wings. He had no choice but to keep them extended, the fragile membrane at constant risk in the close quarters fight.

They shot straight up, bursting into open air above the fighting. In the rapidly rising sun, Bilba caught sight of the rows upon rows of orcs marching inexorably toward the mountain. They crawled up the sides like ants, vanishing in through the drake entrances and the no-longer-quite-so secret entrance that led straight into the Treasury and, from there, the heart of the mountain.

**This isn’t working,** Bilba said. **They’re keeping us occupied while they walk into the mountain. Once they get inside it’ll be like trying to rout cockroaches.**

**Agreed. What do you say we clear some insects?**

Bilba smiled.

Xalanth dropped again, staying above the fray. Lyth appeared next to them and Bilba saw Kili standing on her back, his own bow at the ready, an arrow nocked to the string.

Lyth split away from them, heading to the left most ranks.

Xalanth went right. He dove, straight down, fire belching from his mouth. It incinerated the arrows already flying at him from the ground, and then continued and burnt those who’d shot them to ash.
He soared upward again and Bilba leaned back and twisted to send arrows behind them, trying to provide enough cover to let Xalanth gain altitude. They did a second run and then a third after that. On that one Xalanth followed his own fire down, raising his legs and running straight through the ranks, taking them down like so many sticks.

Bilba went to grab another arrow and frowned as her hand found only emptiness. She was fast running out of arrows, they would have to go soon to restock. Xalanth soared upward again and she used the moment to unstrap and clamber into a crouch on his back. She’d used all the arrows near her, the rest were behind her, near his back.

*We’ll start heading back,* Xalanth said. *We can get more and return. I’ll tell Lyth. Kili is probably getting low as well.*

*Alright.* Below them, the ground burned with the remnants of Xalanth’s fire, large areas cleared of everything but scorched earth and dead orcs. Several other dragons had joined in, wreaking havoc in the once orderly lines of orcs as they scrambled for cover. Bilba estimated the dragons had singlehandedly managed to whittle the army down by half and felt a burst of optimism for the first time. Near the mountain the swirling mass of dragons had lessened and spread out, the glittering elven dragons and larger drakes slowly beginning to dominate the smaller orc dragons.

They might actually win this thing.

Xalanth leveled out and Bilba knelt lower on his back, reaching out to grab an arrow. Ahead of her the mountain was rapidly approaching, Xalanth’s voice in her mind telling her he wanted to clear out some of the orc dragons there before turning to Mirkwood.

Bilba retrieved the arrow and stood up, turning to head back to her position just behind Xalanth’s head.

A shriek echoed across the battlefield, reverberating through the air and ringing off the mountainside.

Bilba jerked her head up, just in time to see Lyth, still a fair distance from them, plummeting toward the earth. Bilba saw arrows peppering the drake’s left wing and then she hit the ground and orcs were swarming over her like maggots on a corpse.

Bilba’s heart jumped in her throat and her blood turned to ice. She stepped forward, and Xalanth was no longer under her.

She barely had an instant to process it before she was falling, the wind whistling past her. She slammed into an orc dragon and lunged, managing to just grab a strap. Before she could get a strong handhold a foot smashed into her hand and she grunted in pain. She managed to get her dagger with her free hand, her sword inaccessible from the position she was in, and slashed upward to where the orc sat on the dragon’s back.

It dodged and sent a foot straight toward her face. Bilba swore and let go before it connected. She fell again, for a few feet anyway until a mouth closed around her ankle. She shouted, more in surprise than pain, as the orc dragon that had caught her threw her up in the air. She bounced, hard, off another one, fell again, and then was grabbed by another dragon.

She should have known they wouldn’t let her die easy.

*Bilba!*

*Xalanth!* Bilba shouted. *Go help Lyth and Kili!*
Hold on, I’m coming!

Damn it, Xalanth! Lyth and Kili can’t wait!

Neither can you.

She swore. Xalanth wasn’t going to leave as long as she was in danger and every second he wasted was one Kili and Lyth didn’t have to spare.

Another orc dragon grabbed her and then she was spiraling through the air again. This time, however, she managed to slash the damn thing across the face just before it released her and felt a surge of satisfaction as it screeched in pain.

The sky opened beneath her and she was falling, unchecked, before another orc dragon slammed into her and knocked her sideways. She caught a brief glimpse of Xalanth, orc dragons swarming him as he struggled to get to her, and then she dropped again.

A low… pressure of sorts began to grow in her mind, similar to what she’d felt twice before while still inside the mountain. From the corner of her eye she caught sight of one of the drake entrances a few yards away, blackness shrouding the doorway. The pressure erupted into pain, a stabbing headache that quickly escalated until it felt like twin daggers being driven into her temples. The din of battle around her faded, as did Xalanth’s voice. The rush of air on her skin went flat and Bilba no longer felt the sensation of falling. The world around her blurred, and went silent.

Are you dying then?

Bilba flinched in surprise and her heart jolted as the unfamiliar voice echoed inside her head. Frantically she reached out with her mind, and found her shields still solidly intact. Entirely unbroken, and she knew she hadn’t accepted a link from anyone so how -- Who are you?

It wasn’t Azog. His voice in her head had always been jarring, tearing, a blade cutting jaggedly through her mind. He’d had to tear down what little shielding she had in order to speak to her. Whoever this was behaved as if her shields weren’t even there. The voice wasn’t the guttural sound of Azog either, it was oddly cultured and smooth, deep and for reasons beyond her understanding, utterly terrifying. It awakened something primeval in her, her instincts reacting to it the same way prey would to a predator, by screaming at her to run.

Pity. I had looked forward to meeting you.

Get out of my head. Bilba demanded.

The voice chuckled, amused. Ah, Help has arrived has it? Perhaps we shall meet after all. I look forward to it.

What? Her body jerked and suddenly the roar of battle was back, air rushing past her once again, the aches and pains of her body screaming at her for attention. She shook her head, the pain in her temples already rapidly receding. What had just happened? Something niggled at the back of her mind and she frowned, trying to grab it even as it faded away.

She became aware of a persistent feeling against her shields, the equivalent of someone politely but rapidly knocking on them. She accepted and immediately heard an unfamiliar voice ask, are you alright?

Fine, she answered automatically because they were in battle and fine was the only possible answer.
to ever give. *We need to get to Lyth and Kili.*

**Working on it.**

The dragon under her banked sharply and she spread out on his back, reaching for the straps to try and secure herself. Her hands encountered nothing but scale and the bony ridge of the dragon’s back.

No straps, meaning a dragon who had no riders. She looked down and saw silver scales, colored in veins of bronze, under her hands.

Sardin. Young enough to still be convinced of his own invincibility, old enough to know when to shut up and do what needed to be done. Lyth complained about him constantly, according to Kili. He was stubborn, she said, reckless, brash, a distraction to the younger, female drakes who were constantly crowded around him, not that Bilba had ever noticed him returning their interest.

One thing she *had* noticed from listening to Kili was how Lyth apparently spent an inordinate amount of time watching Sardin.

He twisted again, falling at the same time to avoid a line of orc dragons coming at them.

**She isn’t answering me. Where did she fall?**

Bilba showed him and he banked again, heading in the direction she’d indicated. Behind her she heard a roar and looked over her shoulder to see Xalanth burst out of a mass of orc dragons.

**Are you alright? What happened? You stopped responding to me.**

*I did?* Bilba asked. *I’m sorry. I must not have heard you. I was a little distracted being used as a toy by the damn orc dragons.*

Xalanth fell in alongside them as she spoke. He was much larger than Sardin who, though a fully grown adult, had not yet begun to fill out and put on the mass he would as he aged.

*I’m fine,* added, answering his initial question.

**Good, because I’m going to kill you later.**

Bilba didn’t answer because then they were diving, right toward a fat cluster of orcs on the ground. Bilba tensed and found her lips moving in a silent plea. A roar sounded and she saw Lyth appear for a moment, blood streaming from a dozen wounds as she ripped at the orcs swarming over her body. They were going for her eyes, Bilba realized, the muscles where her wings connected, the membranes that allowed her to fly. Everywhere she was weak.

She saw no sign of Kili.

Sardin roared in rage, lifting up and putting his feet forward. Arrows pinged off his scales but, through some miracle, missed his wings. He hit hard, his feet raking through the ground and scattering orcs before him.

Bilba felt him under her and then there was air as the force of his landing threw her off. Fortunately, it wasn’t the first time she’d been thrown off a dragon and she had long ago learned how to fall.

She still hit hard, pain blooming through her shoulder, but she pushed it back. She rolled and came up in a crouch, her dagger already in her hand, sword in the other.
I’m fine, she sent to Xalanth before he could ask.

She surged to her feet, already spinning to bury her sword in the gut of the orc coming up behind her. Xalanth hit the ground on the other side, flame bursting from his maw as he incinerated orcs. A shadow fell over Bilba and she looked up to see Sardin leaning over her, ripping orcs off Lyth’s back and flinging them through the air.

*Kili!* Bilba shouted. *Where are you?* They were far enough from the mountain she should be able to talk to him again.

*Here.* He sounded dazed. Bilba followed the feel of the link in her mind and caught sight of him just under Lyth’s chest, backed up against her. She’d thought Lyth was holding still because she was hurt, now she realized it was because she’d been protecting Kili.

Bilba scrambled forward, and dropped into a crouch at his side. *Are you okay?*

He nodded, shakily. *Yeah, just got my bell rung. Help me up.*

In a perfect situation, Bilba would have had him stay where he was until she could be sure he really was okay.

They were far, far from a perfect situation, however, so instead she simply grabbed his arm and helped him stagger to his feet.

*She can’t fly,* Kili mumbled, staggering slightly as he tried to hold his feet. *But she can’t stay here.*

Bilba agreed. Sardin and Xalanth were on either side of Lyth, fending off the orcs but they were in the middle of what felt like a never ending army. There was no way to hold them off forever.

*We need to get her into Mirkwood,* she said. *So far they’ve shown no interest in the forest. If we can get her inside it’s possible they’ll refocus on the mountain.*

Kili nodded. *It’s worth a shot.* He looked up, toward Lyth where she was crouched over him. His face was white and he was shaking. *She’s in so much pain. I’m not sure if she can move that far.*

*She doesn’t have a choice.* Kili had lost his bow in the fall so Bilba grabbed the hilt of the sword he always carried and pulled it from its sheath, pressing it into his hand. *Let’s go. We can clear any stragglers while the dragons get the bulk of them*

A pair of orcs appeared between Sardin’s feet, escaping the carnage only to find themselves facing the bite of Bilba’s blade. She dispatched both and grimaced as her arms shook, the blade lowering faster than she wished as exhaustion pushed her arms down. She was breathing fast, her throat on fire. She was drenched in sweat and her clothing and armor were crusted and black with ichor and blood from the orcs and orc dragons she’d slain. Her own blood was mixed in there as well from the many blows she’d taken but none of it felt serious so she dismissed it, using the pain to fuel her adrenaline.

Lyth wasn’t moving. Bilba spared her a look and saw the dragon hunched, her head down and her flanks heaving as she breathed. She had large rents in her skin, Bilba noted, from orc dragon acid, blood leaking from deep within.

*Kili,* she ordered. *She needs to get up.*

*I’m trying,* he said, his voice panicked. *She isn’t responding to me.*
Bilba addressed Sardin. *We have to get her to Mirkwood. Get her up, please.*

Sardin turned and snapped at Lyth, his teeth coming within inches of her throat. She growled, a low rumble deep in her chest. Sardin snarled in return and snapped again, lunging at her as he did. Lyth’s head came up and she snapped back, anger reigniting the fire in her eyes.

Sardin kept harrying her, forcing her to her feet and driving her forward. As he did Xalanth moved in front, clearing a path toward the forest. Kili and Bilba stayed under Lyth as much as possible and drove the orcs off from her sides and back. At some point Kili got another bow, possibly off Xalanth or even Lyth, and began sending arrows at the orcs, keeping them back and out of range. He found a second bow a few minutes later and threw it to her. Bilba retrieved the final arrows from Xalanth and joined Kili in keeping the orcs back.

It felt like an eternity but was probably only a few minutes later that they finally reached the treeline. Lyth stumbled in while Bilba help up the rear, protecting her retreat.

As she took a step backward her foot caught a root and she stumbled, falling and landing heavily on her back.

Before the orcs could take advantage Xalanth was suddenly there, standing over her. He opened his mouth and flame burst out, clearing a massive area of orcs and sending the rest running, shrieking back toward the main body of the army.

Bilba went limp, gasping for air as she stared upward at Xalanth’s underbelly.

Kili knelt next to her, bow clasped in one hand. He was still pale, his eyes so wide the whites were showing.

Having been in his position herself not so long ago, Bilba did not envy what he was going through.

*Sardin is going to take her to the healers,* he said shortly. *We need to get back to the fight.*

*Are you sure?* He held a hand out and she took it, allowing him to pull her to her feet. *You could go with her.*

He shook his head. *She wants me to keep fighting, and she’s right. I’m a Prince of Erebor. My duty is not to sit safely in Mirkwood while my people die.*

He sounded determined but also still stunned, in shock.

Bilba looked toward the mountain, following the line of orcs still streaming inside through the various entrances and the secret passage. *We need to get back inside,* she said. *They may still not understand the sheer size of the army outside. We need to find Fili and help him, and help the rest of the people evacuate if necessary. She frowned. And we need to stop any more orcs getting in.*

Kili studied her. *You have an idea?*

Bilba gave him a wane smile. *I do. You aren’t going to like it.*

He shrugged. *If it gets those vermin out of Erebor I’ll get over it.*

Bilba nodded. *Alright then. Let’s get it done.*

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They didn’t bother trying to resupply. The dragons didn’t need their weapons and there would be
plenty within the Treasury, assuming they made it in.

“You’re right,” Kili said, watching the mountain come closer. “This idea is insane.”

Bilba rolled her eyes. She hadn’t said the idea was insane. She’d said he wouldn’t like it.

Ahead the drakes of Erebor lined up and attacked the orcs with renewed vigor. Over their heads and below the elven drakes did the same, creating a corridor between them, one that led straight to the secret entrance into Erebor.

Just before they reached it Xalanth opened his jaws and spewed forth flame, clearing the row of orcs that had been currently climbing up and into the mountain. The ones already at the door ran, vanishing deep into the mountain passage while those who weren’t that lucky simply died in their tracks.

Xalanth hit the wall of the mountain beside the ledge hard, talons digging into the rock.

Bilba and Kili scrambled off his back, landing on the ledge and backing away from the edge before someone below could take a shot at them.

Straightening, Bilba heard a scream of rage and watched as a drake slammed into one of the dragon entrances. Rock crumbled under the dragon’s talons, blocking the entrance and crushing the orcs who’d been trying to use it to enter. Two more drakes headed toward the other entrances, orc dragons giving chase as they tried to stop the drakes before they reached their target.

_I don’t like this_, Xalanth said, his head near the edge of the ledge, one giant eye focused on them. _The only way out will be the front gates. If the army makes it around you’ll be trapped, orcs within and without._

_You’re all out here_, Bilba said, _and reinforcements will be coming from Rivendell. The front gates are closed. As long as we can hold the inside of the mountain, we should be able to last until they arrive._

Xalanth growled but didn’t argue any further.

Kili tapped her on the shoulder and she turned to see him holding his sword out to her. “Here, this one is better than the one you’ve been using.” He held up his bow. “I’ve always preferred this anyway.”

_You barely have any arrows left_, Bilba signed to him.

“There will be more in the Treasury,” Kili said. He shrugged. “Besides, I think it’s fitting you have this.” He held it out again and she took it. She’d never really had much chance to look closely at his sword before but, now that she did, she saw the craftsmanship was exquisite. The hilt was gold and bronze, worked with the crest of Durin and a coiling dragon. “It was Frerin’s,” Kili explained, his voice hoarse. “I asked if I could have it after… well, after. Anyway, I thought you might want to wield it awhile, at least until we can give it back to him.”

Bilba tightened her hand on the hilt, her eyes burning. She lifted her head and nodded at him in gratitude.

“Okay,” Kili said with a sigh, turning to face the passageway. “Let’s hope those orcs ran all the way to the Treasury and out and aren’t lying in wait for us.”

Bilba snorted. Kili son of Vili, always the optimist. She followed him to the passage and turned to
look behind her. Past the fighting, the stench of death and the roar of war, she caught sight of the sun still rising. A light breeze rustled the tops of the trees in Mirkwood and, far overhead, puffy clouds floated across the sky.

The passage yawned open before her, leading into a mountain of orcs, thick with pain and fear. It would be like setting foot back into Moria again, and already she could feel the old memories rearing up, the echoes of the past howling through the corridors of her mind. In addition to that she couldn’t shake the feeling she was forgetting, or possibly overlooking, something important. The conviction gave her a sense of dread and foreboding, not that it mattered. Fili was inside, along with Vili and a host of others she’d come to care about, and if that’s where they were then that was where she would be also.

She nodded at Kili and he stepped inside, vanishing into the darkness beyond.

Bilba followed, casting one final look at the world outside, before turning to look at Xalanth.

*Tell my father –* She gave a tired smile. *Never mind. I’ll tell him myself. Burn the orcs to ash for me, would you?*

*Of course.*

*Good.* She turned her back on the outside world and strode into the darkness of Erebor.

*Are you sure about this?*

*Yes. Bring it down.*

*As you wish.*

She grabbed the edge of the door, Kili joining her. As it rumbled into its frame the sound of rocks splintering and cracking came from outside. The walls shuddered and Bilba tasted dust and felt bits of rock patter down on her from overhead.

It settled, and then it was just the two of them.

“All right then,” Kili said, his voice still strained. This far from Mirkwood he could no longer communicate with Lyth, couldn’t ask how she was doing and Bilba knew it must weigh on him. “Let’s get this over with.”

Bilba nodded. She fell in alongside him and together the two of them heading back into Erebor.

And to whatever waited for them there.

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Thorin sat at the desk in his room working on a speech, not his favorite thing to do in the world but one that was necessary. It wouldn’t do for him to be so close to the Blue Mountains and the Garrison and not stop in for a visit. He would do so before returning to Erebor, give a speech, meet people, all the normal things one did when trying to remain a well-liked and respected king.

A knock sounded on his door and he lifted his head, grateful for the distraction. “Come in.”

The door opened and Dis strode in. One look at her face had Thorin standing up in concern. His sister always hid her emotions in their soul bond, not wanting to burden him with her worries, but she’d never been good at hiding what she felt when face to face. “What’s wrong?”
“I don’t know,” she said, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands in front of her. “Do you feel anything?”

“I haven’t felt completely normal since we arrived,” Thorin answered. The council, Saruman, the whole thing had left him with a general sense of unease and disquiet. “But, aside from that, I feel fine.”

“Then it’s not the boys,” Dis mumbled. She shook her head and ran her hands up her arms. “I don’t know. I feel…sick. I’m cold and my body won’t stop shaking and…” She shook her head again, focusing on some random corner of the room. “If you don’t feel anything then it must be Lyth. I know we’re too far to communicate or really feel them but it doesn’t mean the soul bond ceases to exist. I just feel this conviction that something is wrong, that she’s been hurt somehow.”

“Then we’ll return immediately,” Thorin said shortly, reaching for his jacket.

“But what about the Garrison and the Blue Mountains?” Dis asked. “They’ll feel slighted. I mean…it is just a feeling, maybe? What if I’m wrong?”

“What if you aren’t?” Thorin responded. “They’ll get over it. We’ll make it up to them later. For now, let’s go back. If something has happened to Lyth then you need to be there.”

Not to mention him. There was little that could hurt a drake and most of what could was very, very bad. Granted there was always the chance of a freak accident of some sort but, in his experience, it was rarely ever a freak accident.

He finished getting his jacket on and grabbed his sword belt. “Come on,” he said. “What do you say we get back to Erebor?”
Chapter 26

The stench of orc hung heavy in the stagnant air of the tunnel. In Moria, Bilba had barely noticed. Now, only a few years removed from that life, the smell made her want to vomit. Her muscles were taut, her grip on the hilt of Frerin's sword painful.

It didn't help that this particular tunnel was unlike the rest in Erebor. There were no braziers to light the way, the walls weren't as finished and there were more twists and turns, her line of sight limited to only a few feet at a time. She understood the design, fleeing royalty was less likely to get an arrow in the back if they were always around corners but it didn't make traveling through it any easier.

She traced a hand along one wall only to snatch her hand away as the stone under her fingers seemed to shift, became cracked, wet with slime, sharp edges threatening to pierce the skin. The floor under her feet went from clean stone to covered in layers of dust, and she could swear she saw shadows darting around the corners just ahead of them. The collapse of the door into the mountain behind them had kicked up dust into the air. It irritated her lungs and she struggled not to give them both away by coughing, using the struggle to focus on the present and not the memories trying to drag her back into Moria. She was all Kili had at the moment.

He needed her, and she had no intention of letting him down.

Several feet ahead of her, Kili knelt at the juncture where the tunnel curved yet again. He leaned forward on a knee, resting the fingers of one hand on the floor to brace himself, and peered around. Bilba carefully moved to the opposite wall and copied him, rolling her head to the side until the she could see around in just the very corner of her vision. The tunnel straightened out, for only a dozen feet or so, and then ended at the back entrance to the Treasury. She could make out the flagstones leading out into the room and the edges of a few of the columns that shored up the ceiling.

She heard no sound. Orcs weren't exactly known subtlety but she wasn't dumb enough to just blindly trust that no sound meant none of them were present. There had been orcs heading into the tunnel up until just moments before Xalanth had cleared them and collapsed the door. Even if the creatures had run it was likely they were still in the vicinity.

Kili gave her a questioning look and she nodded. He rose to his feet, back pressed against the wall, and carefully nocked an arrow to the string of his bow. Then, in one smooth motion, he raised it to a ready position and stepped around the corner. Bilba came in behind him, sword at the ready.

They exited the tunnel and immediately crouched, trying to make themselves smaller targets to anyone who might be below on the main floor.

They saw no on and, after a moment of silence, started making their way down the stairs. As they reached the main floor Kili lowered his bow long enough to grab a quiver of arrows he'd spotted, Bilba covering his back. Dimly, she could hear sound echoing in the large room. They weren't alone but the noise was distant enough that, combined with the sheer size of the Treasury, they should be able to get out undetected if they were careful, and quick.

They made for the other side, winding around piles of treasure haphazardly tossed about and picked through. The orcs hadn't bothered to be careful as they marched through, knocking stacks of coins over, tossing priceless jewels about as if they were simple rocks. As she and Kili neared the doors, now cracked and damaged, one half out of its frame and balanced precariously against the other, they started to see signs of the battle that had raged there. Blood and ichor stained the ground, broken bits of arrows and other weapons were strewn without care and, as always, there were the dead.
Orcs and dwarves alike, the only peace between them coming in death, their bodies in heaps, twisted in unnatural shapes, the fighting so savage there had been no time to show respect to the fallen before the dwarves had been driven back.

Hram was just inside the doorway. Bilba paused, looking down at the grizzled features now slack with the pallor of death. He'd fallen in such a way that he looked as if he'd just settled down for a nap, a look of peace on his face she was sure hadn't been there in his last moments going by the damage to his armor and body.

She clenched her jaw, breathing through her nose as pure rage rushed through her. Her vision watered, tears of grief and anger mixed together, and she let out a slow breath, getting herself back under control. There was no time to focus on her emotions, later yes but, right then, the best way she could honor Hram was by killing the scum that had invaded his home.

Kili was staring at Hram and the other fallen dwarves. His face was pale and his body tense but when he looked at her Bilba was startled to see not grief but anger that easily rivaled her own.

"I want those bastards out of my mountain," he hissed, his voice low.

Bilba nodded toward the door.

So let's go kill them then.

The hall outside the Treasury was empty, of the living at least. The signs of battle were clear but no one was actively fighting, not there at least. Distantly, Bilba could hear the screech of orcs and the clash of weapons as the dwarves fought back but, when she started to head that way, Kili grabbed her arm to stop her. She gave him a confused look but he simply shook his head and nodded in the opposite direction, away from the doors leading to the next level down. Bilba frowned, there were no exits from the royal level the way he wanted to go, but she followed him quietly when he tugged her in that direction.

They heard the guttural noise of orcs as they passed Thorin's quarters, the door to his rooms slightly ajar. The same was true for Frerin's long-shuttered rooms and Fili's after. The door to Kili's suite was closed but he paused just outside it, frowning at her.

"They're probably in there too, aren't they?" he whispered and Bilba nodded. It stood to reason.

Kili readied his bow and looked at her.

Bilba grabbed his door and knelt. As with the rest of the royals, Kili had an area in his rooms set aside for receiving guests, it what she would see when she opened his door. Other rooms branched off from it, all with their own doors that could have any number of orcs behind them.

Might as well get it over with. She laid her sword over her knees, adjusting her legs to put her in a position to lunge forward, and shoved the door open.

Arrows whizzed past her, faster than her eyes could follow, and she heard the thunk of them hitting flesh, followed by the thud of bodies hitting the floor. She sprang forward into the room, going into a roll and coming up in a crouch, under Kili's line of sight, her sword raised.

An orc was just coming from her left, out of one of the other rooms. He was dead before he knew what hit him, followed by three others Kili caught coming behind him.

Kili stepped forward and pulled the door leading to the corridor closed behind him. "Let's go," he said, his voice normal. "Before our luck runs out."
Bilba fell in behind him as he slung his bow back in place and headed into his bedroom. As he did, Bilba heard a shriek and turned just in time to see an orc heading out the door they’d just closed into the corridor beyond. Where he’d been hiding she had no idea but she instinctively took a step after him.

Kili grabbed her forearm to stop her. "No, this way. Hurry."

He pulled her through the receiving area and into his bedroom. He slammed the door shut and cursed at the sight of the broken lock. The room itself had been destroyed, furniture and belongings scattered everywhere but Kili barely noticed as he headed toward a large bookcase along the back wall.

"Help me," he ordered, leaning against the edge and shoving. Bilba got in front of him and leaned against it as well. A low rumble sounded and then the bookcase was swinging out, away from the wall to reveal gray stone behind it.

They heard the sound of the corridor door slamming open from outside the bedroom and then the sound of orcs shrieking. Kili placed his hands flat on the stone of the wall. Blue light shone, reminding Bilba of the doors in the crypts. A door down there would only open if the person attempting to access it was of the correct bloodline.

The Durin crest shone for a brief second and then the part of the wall Kili had his hands on swung inward, revealing blackness beyond.

Bodies and what sounded like axes slammed against the bedroom door and Kili caught her arm to get her attention. "Time to go."

Bilba strode inside and he came after her. On the back of the bookcase there were recessed portions, hidden from view from the front by the books and then an extra panel of wood at the back. She and Kili slid their hands into them and pulled the bookcase closed, then closed the rock door itself, just as they heard the sound of the bedroom door splintering.

Kili touched her arm to get her attention and then began moving. "These passages go throughout Erebor, we'll be able to get past the levels the orcs have taken without having to try and fight our way through them to get to our own people."

Bilba nodded. The tunnel was narrow but the smell of the orcs hadn't permeated and she felt more grounded, less like she was in Moria and more like she was simply in a somewhat uncomfortably tight space.

They traveled in silence. Kili couldn't speak to her without stopping to focus on her hands and there really wasn't much to be said anyway. They both knew what the stakes were.

As they traveled, Bilba found her thoughts turning to Syrath, and Lyth. She hoped Sardin had been able to get Lyth to the other dragons safely.

She felt a flash of guilt. Sardin was reckless, more than she and Syrath were which was saying something, but he'd never do anything stupid with Lyth injured and relying on him. He was trustworthy when it counted. Xalanth respected him and, with him, that had to be earned. Not only had Sardin earned it but, as proof of how highly Xalanth thought of him, the larger dragon took great joy in sending Sardin on random missions and then insisting he report to Lyth when he returned. Sardin always seemed happy while Lyth was always flustered.

Xalanth was simply amused.
The ground began to slope, taking them lower in the mountain. The passageway was soundproof; she could hear nothing as they traveled even though she had no doubt fierce fighting was happening on the other side of the rock. She wondered why the tunnels weren't used for evacuation or moving troops but quickly realized the tunnels were so narrow it would take a long time to send people through, more than enough for orcs to see them and follow. As for warriors, she couldn't see someone in full plate armor fitting in the tunnels. Her father certainly wouldn't fit. The tunnels must be designed more for the family or the children of the royals and nobility, the expectation being that the warriors would remain behind to fight and give them the time they needed to escape.

Kili paused before a blank section of wall that, to Bilba, looked like any other.

"Alright," he said, "I imagine things are about to get rather ugly. Are you ready?"

Bilba moved to stand on the other side of the tunnel, her back against the wall, and raised an eyebrow at him.

Kili shoved against the rock, the grating sound of it moving echoing in the narrow tunnel. As soon as it was wide enough to fit through, Bilba ducked low under his arms and darted out. Her eyes registered the orc already coming at her and she stood with her sword up to block its blow.

There was another, and she could hear others behind her. She focused on the one she could see, ducking the wild swing it was aiming at her, and dropping beneath its guard to drive her blade into its rib cage.

She heard the sound of arrows being fired behind her and the shriek of orcs as they fell. Kili pressed against her back. "That's all for now. You?"

Bilba reached back to squeeze his arm in reply. They'd come out in one of the housing hubs where the majority of Erebor's citizenry lived. Homes had been carved into the rock walls surrounding a giant chasm, bridges spanning the expanse to provide shortcuts from one side to the other. Once it had been an active mine but the veins had all been played out. Rather than waste the space, or the walkways already set into the sides, the crafters of the mountain had come in to repurpose it into a livable space. There were several such chasms in Erebor, the largest housed the lesser nobility and the throne of Erebor, suspended on a small platform over a gaping pit. It was an impressive, if not particularly practical, sight.

"They've come farther than I thought they would have," Kili murmured, almost to himself, his eyes focused upwards. Bilba looked past him as he spoke and noticed the door to the tunnel they'd come from had closed, the wall once again looking no different than any other section.

"Your Highness!" a voice shouted and they both turned to see a group of armed dwarves running toward them. Several of them wore the armor of the guard but Bilba didn't recognize them and instinctively moved to place herself between them and Kili. An attack on the mountain would be the perfect time to stage an assassination; it would most likely be blamed on the orcs.

The four males and two females came to a stop and, as one, dropped to a knee in front of them. "Your Highness. My Lady," the lead, a young male with ash brown hair and a commanding air about him, said, "you shouldn't be traveling without an escort. Please allow us to aid you."

Bilba looked to Kili and was startled to see the carefree young man she knew utterly replaced by the second heir to the throne of Erebor.

"What's your name?" he asked, his voice somehow deeper and more authoritative than Bilba had ever heard it.
"Kamrin," came the answer. Kili made a gesture and he rose, the others doing the same. Kamrin took a second to introduce the others and Kili nodded, looking away with a frown as the shriek of orcs echoed through the large chamber.

"I need to find my brother and the main guard," he said to Kamrin. "We have information he needs to know."

"I believe he's in the second chasm," Kamrin said, nodding upwards, "It won't be safe getting there."

"Nowhere is safe right now," Kili muttered. He pulled out a new arrow and nocked it to his bow before grinning at Bilba. "Ready to kill some more orc?"

Bilba rolled her eyes. Did she look dead? No? Then she was ready to kill some orc. Obviously.

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As a child, Bilba had occasionally had what she'd deemed insane dreams. They always featured her, no longer weak or a victim, but strong, capable, and brave. She'd have a sword in hand, which was odd considering she wouldn't touch one until much later, that she wielded as if it were part of her.

With it, she carved her way through Moria. Slaves would rally behind her cheering, her mother would be marching by her side with a look of pride in her eyes. At the end she would have Azog, Bolg and that female on their knees, defeat in their eyes.

The dreams had terrified her, her mind convincing her that somehow, someway the orcs would see into her head and punish her for her thoughts.

Then had come her mother's death and the Arena, where she'd learned the way she fought in her dreams was all wrong. Much later, she'd found out the person she'd always dreamed of being had been her father and now...now she was living her dream.

It wasn't exactly the same, she was in Erebor instead of Moria and her mother wasn't by her side but, in the end, the fundamentals were there.

She was making the bastards pay.

Another orc fell with a shriek from the walkway they fighting on. It reminded her of battling goblins on a similar bridge back when she'd first seen Fili and her father. The memory of the old man, Gandalf, came to mind and she wondered if anyone had ever found him.

The memory was fleeting as a new wave of orcs came flooding in. The walkway was wide but not wide enough for the lot of them to fight side by side. There were also archers firing on them from other bridges, forcing her and Kili to stay behind those how had shields and could ward off the arrows. Bilba had put up with it to an extent but was currently taking her turn at lead, refusing to sit safe and protected in the middle. She was Orcrist. She didn't do safe.

Her arm ached every time she hefted the sword and she swore it was getting heavier with each stroke. Her legs were shaking and she was drenched in sweat, her breathing coming in harsh gasps through a throat that felt like it was on fire. The fight had started at night and the sun had been well up by the time they'd entered Erebor. They had been doing this for hours and, while she had every intention of doing it for hours more, her body was not in agreement.

She thrust her sword into the rib cage of the last orc but rather than bother pulling the blade back out
she simply planted a boot in its chest and shoved it off the bridge.

There were still orcs on the other bridges but none close enough to pose an immediate threat so she set the sword down and signed to Kili. I thought they said Fili was here?

"It's a big place," Kili said absently, studying an arrow he'd pulled from an orc. He'd been retrieving the ones he could as they went, and scavenging others as he came across them. Apparently deciding the arrow was still usable, he nocked it onto the string before giving her his full attention. "He could be farther up or farther down."

A shout rang out and Kili looked up in surprise. "Or he could be right there."

Bilba grabbed her sword again and looked up to see Fili standing on the bridge crisscrossing over the one she and Kili stood on. Vili was next to him, as were about fifteen or so warriors from the guard. Both looked as grimy and exhausted as she and Kili felt but they were both moving easily and, aside from scrapes and cuts, there were no obvious signs of injury.

A rush of relief ran through Bilba and she flashed a grin up at him.

"Bilba, Kili." Fili said, relieved and concerned at the same time. "Are you alright?"

She nodded, lifting her hands. You?

"Well enough" he answered.

"Kili," Vili broke in, his eyes fixed on his youngest son. "What's wrong?"

"Lyth was hurt," Kili said shortly, "Sardin took her to Mirkwood."

He didn't elaborate further but the set of his shoulders and the way his hands were clenched into fists spoke volumes.

"You've been outside?" Fili asked. "We've been hearing rumors."

"It's an army," Kili said shortly. "Mirkwood and Dale are aiding, as are all our dragons that made it out."

"The ones that made it out?" Fili cut in sharply.

Kili barely faltered. "They aren't enough; the army is huge. They were coming in through the dragon entrances and the not-so-secret-anymore back door." He hesitated. "Xalanth destroyed them. They can still get in over the balconies but it'll take longer." He looked guilty. "Uncle won't be happy."

"He'd be less happy to find out we let the mountain be overrun in the name of aesthetic," Fili said. "You did the right thing." He hesitated as fighting on a bridge near them drew his attention. They were currently clustered near one of the edges of the cavern, out of the main part of the fight. Bilba had noticed that, all things considered, there weren't as many orcs as she would have expected in this cavern despite it being up farther into the thick of battle. From what she could tell the orcs seemed more interested in moving as far as they could as fast as they could than in holding what they took. It made no sense, not even for them.

"We need to keep moving," Vili said, "before our luck runs out."

"I wasn't aware we had any luck to begin with," Fili muttered. He frowned at his father. "Do you think the army will march around?"
"I imagine they'll try," Vili said, "but I can't see the drakes allowing it. Or at least I can't see them allowing it quickly."

"So we should continue the evacuations as long as possible." Fili said. He looked down to them. "We've been sending the children and anyone who can't fight to Dale."

Bilba nodded. The warriors could focus on clearing the mountain without having to dedicate resources to protecting anyone. It put them on the offensive instead of defensive.

"If the rumor of the army was true," Fili said suddenly, his gaze turning to his father, "what about the prisoners?"

Bilba tensed. What prisoners?

She heard Kili ask the question beside her and Fili explained. "Some of the ones escaping reported the orcs were taking prisoners but I can't imagine why they'd bother. What would they want with them?"

Bilba put her sword down and raised her hands. Slaves? To take back to Moria?

Fili frowned. "Maybe. They'd have to be pretty obvious about moving them back. They'd just be setting themselves up for attack."

He had a point, Bilba thought, but still, if it were true... Where?

His eyes narrowed. "Up near the royal levels, but it's just a rumor. They may not even be there."

Bilba frowned. What if they are?

He scowled. "Have I mentioned I'm done being King? Uncle can have it back any time he wants."

"I'm sure he'd agree," Vili muttered, watching for signs of orcs approaching. "I'd be happy to have him back as well, if only because it'd mean the force that went with him would be back as well."

"We'll go," Kili said. "You should help evacuate, down lower. It'd be bad for morale if you got caught."

"And it wouldn't be if you did?" Fili said dryly.

Kili shrugged, a hint of his old cocky smile on his face. "I'm not the king, and I have no intention of getting caught."

Fili rolled his eyes. "If you can't get through," he said, his voice troubled, "then don't. There's no reason to risk your lives for a rumor."

He locked eyes with Bilba for an instant and she could see how much it was tearing him up to send them into greater danger.

I'm not called Orcrist for nothing, she signed to him. I know how to fight orcs.

"I know you do," he said. He hesitated, their eyes locked. There was so much that could go wrong, for either of them, so much to say, and no time with which to say it.

In the end, they said nothing at all. Not because they were afraid or couldn't find the words but because they both simultaneously decided nothing was needed.
Neither of them had any intention of allowing this to be their last meeting.

"I'll see you in Dale," he said instead, to her and Kili both.

Bilba smiled at him.

"Last one there buys drinks," Kili said, a mock challenge in his voice.

"Be safe," Vili said, exasperated. "Both of you," he added, giving Bilba a warning look. "I don't want to be the one explaining to Dwalin how you did something reckless and got hurt."

Bilba didn't respond, repressing a flinch at the stab of pain when her father's name was mentioned. It was no time to waste energy on wishing he was in Erebor and not Rivendell, however. Instead she dropped to one knee and grabbed her sword. A moment later she was back up and running, past the others on the bridge and onto the ledge along the edges of the cavern. All those hours spent running had paid off, she knew exactly where she was and how to get to where she wanted.

A dark tunnel yawned wide ahead of her and her mind registered the orcs swarming in it. In her mind the tunnel narrowed, darkened, and she saw her mother, hands over her head in an effort to protect herself, the lash of an orc rising up above her.

She slammed into the first orc, the tip of her sword ramming straight into its belly and sinking up to the hilt. She released it and spun, her hand already drawing her dagger. It flew, embedding in the throat of another orc. Bilba dropped into a crouch, sending the knives from her vambraces into two more orcs. They'd barely fallen before she was up, pulling her sword from the cooling body of the first orc she'd dropped. She leapt onto the back of one of the others she'd stabbed, her eyes on her next target only to pause as it fell with an arrow in its eye.

Several more arrows soared around her and Bilba took the opportunity to retrieve her dagger and knives, sliding the last into her vambrace as Kili came up beside her, new arrow already nocked to his bow string. Behind him were Kamrin and the others, their weapons at the ready.

_Can we use the emergency tunnels?_ Bilba asked Kili.

He shook his head. "The idea was you'd be trying to leave, not get back up. You can only enter them one way. You can also only enter from the royal levels. It was always expected attacks would come from below and move upwards, not the other way around."

Probably should have thought of that before putting in an entrance in the Treasury, Bilba thought dryly.

The sound of orcs screeching came from the tunnel and she readied her sword, mind fixed back on battle.

_Time to do what she did best._

***

They made it to the cavern housing the throne and the homes of the lesser nobility in record time. As they ran several more warriors joined them until they had a force of twenty or more. In the tunnels where it was narrow and restricted they took turns at point, giving others a chance to rest. Kili was kept in the middle at all times, whether he liked it or not. He didn't.

Word was that the captives were not being held in the cavern itself but in one of the wings that branched off from it, an area dedicated to the libraries and offices of the scribes as well as one of the
many offices Nori liked to use. The plan was to come out into the cavern and stay on the edges cut into the sides, avoiding the bridges. This far up there were bound to be more archers, raising the odds of a lucky shot if they let themselves get exposed.

She spotted the opening to the royal cavern ahead and readied herself. The ledges were far wider outside of the tunnels and more of them would be able to fight.

They exited, closing ranks around Kili as they did to guard him from archers on the bridges. It wouldn't be easy for the orcs, the ledges in this cavern had tall, solid rock barriers that rose nearly to the waist and then columns and arches decorating them. The only possible shots would have to be through small, window like openings between columns.

It would be hard, but Bilba wasn't dumb enough to think it impossible.

They spread out, pushing Kili in closer toward the inner wall where the homes were. They tried to avoid an outright cluster, not wanting to betray there was anyone of importance in their group, let alone a member of the royal family.

Ahead, those in the lead ran into orcs and their progress slowed. Bilba held back, watching the dark windows and open doors of the homes for possible ambush.

The last of the orcs blocking their path died and they fell back into a full out run, hoping to reach the other side as fast as possible. The sooner they could get where they were going, the less they would have to fight.

Almost unconsciously her eyes flickered to her left, out over the vast cavern that served as Erebor's throne room. It was the biggest in the mountain but, unlike the others, did not have the series of bridges on various levels. Instead there were three wide walkways, all on one level, all leading to a series of steps at the center. The steps ran up into a large platform upon which sat the imposing throne of Erebor. Usually Thorin sat on it, Fili standing at his side trying desperately to not look bored.

Fili hadn't been in the throne room while Thorin had been gone, choosing instead to stay on the move dealing with issues as they arose. He didn't have Nori, or Dwalin or Balin, who all served as Thorin's eyes and ears on matters of importance in the mountain.

Her eyes traveled along the rock leading to the stairs and upwards, tracking to the throne which currently...wasn't...empty...

Bilba's feet stuttered to a stop almost on their own, her eyes wide as she turned her full attention to the imposing chair at the focal point of the chamber.

It wasn't empty.

There was a... darkness shrouding it. Memory surfaced, looking over her balcony the night before and seeing an odd area on the plains below, a region so black that what little light the stars and moon had given off seemed to be sucked into it and lost.

Flickers shown from deep within the shadow, orange and red and yellow as if flame licked along the edges.

Bilba stepped forward, one hand going to rest on the stone balcony keeping her from a very long drop.

There was something inside the shadow...no...not something...someone.
She could make out a tall form, human possibly or elven. The figure was lounging, arms draped over the armrests of the throne, one leg thrown out casually.

Bilba lifted her gaze to where the face should be, and found herself locked in place, two glittering points of flame rooting her to the spot.

**I had wondered when you would arrive. You are quite entertaining.**

The words reverberated through her mind and Bilba sucked in a sharp breath. Dimly she heard Kili and the others gathered around her, asking her what was wrong but she couldn't move to answer.

*Get out of my head.* She demanded. *Who are you?*

**Now you're just being dull.**

And suddenly another memory was flooding in, from when she'd been falling outside, only this time there was more to it, words floating through her mind, a deep, deep fear within her bones screaming at her to run.

She'd forgotten. How in Mahal's name had she forgotten?

**You forgot because I wished it,** the voice answered. **As for the smith, I wouldn't ask him for help if I were you. You might not like who he sends.**

The voice sounded amused as if laughing at some private joke. Bilba jerked, or tried to, but nothing happened. Kili wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled, dragging her back from the archway.

**Oh, please,** the voice said, **as if it would be as simple as that, it's insulting.**

*Get out,* Bilba demanded again, her voice wavering in her head. *We sent for help. When they find out you're here...*  

**Is that supposed to scare me?** There was movement inside her head and Bilba felt a flash of bone deep terror as she had the sudden feeling of the soul bond she had with her father being picked up. **This is one of the ones you expect me to be afraid of is it?**

**No,** Bilba said, her body tensing. **Don't.**

Something wrenched inside her mind, the bond with her father stretching and thinning to nearly a breaking point. White hot agony, worse than anything she'd ever felt, exploded inside her. Bilba shrieked, her hands going to her temples. Her legs buckled and she hit her knees, curling in on herself.

Every nerve, every fiber of her being was on fire, her entire world nothing but pain, all consuming, scorching everything it touched. She felt it spill over and ricochet down her soul bonds, with her father, Fili, Syrath but couldn't do a thing to stop it.

All she could do was scream.

***

On the lowest level of Erebor, Fili stood by the gates, ushering people out. Outside the sky was dark with drakes driving the orcs back as they marched around the sides of the mountain, providing a corridor for those unable to fight to flee to the relative safety of Dale.
Without warning, pain exploded in his head, daggers lancing straight through him. His sword clattered to the ground, his knees hitting a moment later.

The pain crested and spilled over, flowing down his soul bonds and he felt more than saw his father hit the ground next to him, hands clasping his head.

***

In Mirkwood, Syrath bugled in pain and curled into a ball, wings going over his head as if to try and shield himself. Nearby Lyth roared with anger and struggled to her feet, eyes fixed on the sky.

***

Xalanth crashed into the side of the mountain, rock shattering under his talons, his sides heaving. The rush of orc dragon wings came from behind and he shrieked in rage, turning to incinerate them, fire erupting from his jaws as punishment for their folly in thinking him vulnerable.

***

Dwalin staggered, dropping the sack of supplies he'd been in the process of loading on a dragon. Pain cascaded down his bond with Bilba, the fact he could feel it at all from such a distance testament to the power of it.

Other voices joined in, a loud babble of pain, fear, confusion, and rage. It came from all sides, all of his soul bonds, leaking over into others and rebounding back from them until it was a mass of shouting and confusion. He saw Dis go to her knees, Thorin stumble and drop heavily onto a bench, Balin stop dead, head down and eyes shut as he pressed his hands to his temple.

And through it all, in the midst of it all, he heard her.

Screaming.

The distant sound of Xalanth shrieking with rage...and then it all stopped.

All of it.

Stopped.

Dwalin saw Thorin pushing slowly to his feet, his face pale.

"Find Thranduil," he hoarsely ordered Nori, who'd appeared at his side. "And the other kings." He looked at Dwalin, his gaze hard. "We have to get back, now." He hesitated. "Is she alright?"

"I can still feel her," Dwalin said, his own voice equally hoarse. "She's not dead."

Thorin nodded and left, on his way to ask for aid from the other rulers of Middle Earth. Whatever was going on back at Erebor it was bad, and they were going to need all the help they could get.

Balin approached, his expression strained.

"Don't," Dwalin said shortly before his brother could speak. He didn't need empty platitudes right then or false assurances that everything would be alright. None of it would change the truth, that she was in danger and he wasn't there, again.

*Damn* it all, not again.
He'd failed her once. He couldn't fail her again.

Not again.

He could feel his bond with Bilba, quiet and still, faint once more from the distance. It gave no hint as to what had happened, what was currently happening.

*I'm coming,* he sent to her, knowing full well she couldn't hear him. *Wait for me. I swear, I'm coming.*

He just prayed that, for once, he would be in time.

***

Bilba breathed in short, shuddering gasps, one hand on her throat. It burned, scraped raw from screaming and her lungs ached as if she hadn't breathed in days.

She was on her hands and knees, fingers curling into the rough stone. Sweat and tears dripped down her face, splattering on the rock below her.

Next to her, she heard the scrape of a boot as Kili staggered to his feet. Kamrin and the others, who hadn't been affected and didn't understand what had happened, moved to help him.

One of them handed his bow to him and Kili nocked an arrow to it before shakily raising it and aiming it at the throne.

Bilba shook her head, reaching out to weakly grab at his leg.

He released the arrow. It soared, straight and true and blindingly fast, toward the throne. Three more followed it, so fast Bilba didn't see Kili even draw or nock them.

A tongue of fire flashed to life in front of the throne and the arrows splintered into ash and debris, drifting to the ground as sputtering embers.

A second later Kili was back on his knees, fingers digging into his temple, teeth grit together so tight Bilba could hear the grinding from where she was.

**Is that a Durin I smell?** The voice was back, languid and smooth, and Bilba fought the instinct to run. **It must be. Only one of his blood would be fool enough to try and attack me. Which is it?**

Bilba stayed silent.

**It's not Oakenshield,** the voice went on, uncaring that she hadn't answered. He hadn't really been asking. **Though I do look forward to meeting him. His brother has been endlessly amusing. I can only imagine the fun the older one must be.**

**You like hearing yourself talk don't you?** Bilba said without thinking and immediately heard the sound of laughter rolling through her mind.

**You continue to amuse me so I shall indulge you a little longer, until I have the final piece. I would hurry, if I were you.**

The voice was gone.

Bilba struggled to her feet, her eyes fixing on the throne, and blinked in surprise.
It was empty.

Kili grabbed her, spinning her around and hugged her, hard. Bilba hugged him back and frowned as he pulled away, locking eyes with her.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded. You?

She sent it without thinking and felt her spirits jolt as he nodded. "I'm fine. I--" His eyes widened. "I heard you."

Bilba reached out, and instantly heard a cacophony of worried voices from Fili and Syrath, as well as over her mental link from Vili.

After assurances they were all fine, Bilba related a synopsis of what had happened.

You need to get everyone out, she finished at the end. And I mean everyone. I have no idea who, or what, this thing is, but we can't fight it. We need the wizards, or the High Elves. Possibly both. She knew about some of them, elves who'd been around for thousands of years and who held immense power. One of the strongest was Glorfindel, who she'd heard stories of but had never met. If even a fraction of the tales she'd heard were true, however, then he might be the only one capable of facing...whatever this thing was.

One thing she was sure of, however, was they had no chance. There was no fighting it, just fleeing before it.

Do we know what it wants? Fili asked.

No, Bilba said. And there's no way to find out. Let's just get out. We can regroup in Dale, try to figure out our next steps.

Fili agreed and ended the communication to refocus on the evacuation.

Kili was still next to her and Bilba took a second to sag against him, winding one arm around his waist and relaxing with a sigh. After that thing had been inside her head it felt...grounding was the best way she could explain it, to remind herself she wasn't alone, that there were flesh and blood people standing alongside of her.

Kili hugged her back with a fierceness that suggested she wasn't the only one who felt that way, and then released her to step back and address Kamrin.

"We still need to rescue those prisoners, and fight our way to the front gates. Are you in?"

Bilba could understand if some of them chose not to go forward. They had joined the Guard to protect the mountain from orcs. This, however...this was something far beyond simple orcs.

"Command us, my Lord," Kamrin said simply, his gave unwavering. Around them the others wore identical expressions, their eyes fixed on Kili who, in turn, straightened, his eyes shining with pride.

"It would be my honor," he said. "This kingdom has never been the mountain, but rather the people who reside within her. Let's go save Erebor."

***

Thorin knew something was going on as soon as he neared the Council Chamber. Loud voices were
coming from it and, just outside the boundaries stood most of Mirkwood's contingent, all lined up with their bows drawn, arrows aimed into the chamber itself.

Thorin didn't bother asking them what was going on. He simply strode forward, the elves moving just enough to let him through. As he reached the stairs leading up into the chamber he wasn't surprised to find Dwalin and Nori flanking him, weapons held loosely, but at the ready, at their sides.

The scene that greeted them inside the chamber was bizarre. The chairs they had sat in so recently were knocked over, as was the pedestal that dominated the center. Instead, in the spot where it had once stood, knelt Legolas, the Crown Prince of Mirkwood. Saruman stood over him, the tip of his staff pressed against the elven prince's throat. The crystal there glowed with a bright light, intense enough it was difficult to look at.

Standing a few feet away was Thranduil, sword in hand and a look of rage in his eyes. Elrond stood next to him, unarmored but somehow managing to look just as dangerous.

"I assure you," Saruman said, his voice calm, "I can kill him long before you, or any arrows from your archers, can reach me."

"What are you doing, Saruman?" Thorin demanded.

"Ah, there you are," Saruman said, amused. "I take it by your arrival things have progressed at Erebor?"

"What exactly is going on at Erebor?" Thorin said. "What have you done?"

"Who says I've done anything at all?" Saruman asked. He shifted and turned his gaze upward. "It would appear my escort is here. You will allow him to pass."

A roar resounded over their heads, one Thorin didn't recognize. He looked up and saw a dark shape over their heads, spiraling downward. From outside the sound of challenges broke out from the other dragons. Elven dragons, Erebor's drakes and the human dragons all took to the air but, at commands from their kings, took up defensive positions, flying in a tight circle around the form as it continued to descend.

Dwalin and Nori stood in front of Thorin, guarding him as the creature landed with a thud on the stairs on the far side of the dais, and creature truly was the only appropriate word for it.

On the surface it vaguely appeared to be an orc dragon, though far larger and jet black. It hunched low on the stone, its head moving side to side in a rhythmic pattern and it growled almost constantly, the sound closer to what Thorin usually heard from one of his own dragons and not the creatures the orcs used.

"What in the name of Mahal is that?" Dwalin asked.

"I can assure you," Saruman said, "Mahal had nothing to do with it." He grabbed Legolas's shirt collar and dragged him to his feet. "Now," he said, his voice still deceptively calm, "what do you say we find out how much you love your son, Thranduil?"

"I'll go with you," Thranduil said without hesitation, "but only if you release him."

"Father, no!" Legolas said. He tried to move, only to be dragged back by Saruman, the crystal pressed so tight against his throat a thin line of blood began to trickle out.

Thranduil? Thorin thought in surprise. This was about Thranduil?
"Why do you want him?" he asked but Saruman only scoffed at him in reply.

"You may be a king, Oakenshield," he said, "but it doesn't mean I'll simply tell you what you want to know." He nodded toward the creature. "Drop your weapons, your Majesty, and get on."

"Don't," Legolas said. "Whatever he wants with you...just don't."

Thranduil's expression never changed, his emotions hidden. Without a word he crouched and placed his sword on the ground, followed by several other blades hidden within his robes. He stood up and made his way to the creature. It clearly held no intelligence, moving about anxiously as a barely chained wild dog or horse might, but Thranduil managed to mount it as gracefully as if he were merely stepping from one patch of ground to another.

"Your Highness," Saruman said, addressing Thorin as if he were merely a prince rather than a king. He indicated a pile of rope near his feet. "If you would be so kind as to bind him."

Thorin tensed. He ignored the slight and instead looked to Thranduil, and found his fellow ruler looking back steadily. With a snarl under his breath, Thorin stalked forward, past Dwalin and Nori, and grabbed the rope.

"Make sure you do it correctly," Saruman said coldly, "or the young prince here will suffer."

Thorin went to Thranduil who held his arms out, crossed at the wrist. Thorin wound the rope around them, only to pause as the elven King hissed in pain. The rope had a spell on it, he realized, something that didn't affect him but was harming Thranduil. He moved part of the rope and grimaced at the sight of reddened, blistered skin where it had been in contact.

"Continue," Thranduil said.

"Thranduil--" Thorin started.

"Continue," the elf repeated, his jaw clenched. "I will not lose my son to the likes of filth like him."

"Such harsh words from one in your position," Saruman said, amused. "We shall see if you still feel the same when you find out where you are going."

Thorin finished tying the ropes, tight but not so tight as to hurt. Thranduil was in enough pain as it was.

He stepped away to stand near Elrond. Saruman walked backward, keeping Legolas between him and the guards. When he got to the creature he shoved Legolas away from him, mounting behind Thranduil before anyone could react.

He wrapped an arm around Thranduil's waist, bringing the crystal from his staff up to rest just under Thranduil's jaw. "Make no mistake," he said, his voice dark, "there are others who can take his place. Attempt to stop us and I will kill him and simply find another."

"This treachery will not go unanswered, Saruman," Elrond said.

Saruman laughed. "And who will answer it? Not the wizards, certainly. You have no idea what is coming, or what has already come. No one can stand against it. Our only choice is to join, or fall."

There were no reins on the creature but he must have communicated with it somehow because it lifted up, leaping into the sky.
"Follow them," Legolas ordered, already running out of the chamber. "We cannot lose them."

"They're going to Erebor," Dwalin said. "There's no way the two aren't connected."

Thorin nodded. "Let's see if we can beat them there."

Dwalin's hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. "Gladly."

***

Bilba lifted a small boy, barely old enough to stand on his own, onto the ledge of the balcony. They'd successfully rescued the prisoners, at least sixty of them, but had soon given up on trying to reach the front gates. Instead they'd retreated to a balcony and, with communication restored, called to the dragons.

Several of them had fought their way through the orc dragons still littering the sky and had been ferrying the prisoners to safety. Some of the rescued dwarves hadn't made it, others had. Bilba tried not to think about it, focusing instead on loading people onto the dragons as they made round after round.

Claws dug into the rock of the balcony and she found herself face to face with Sardin.

*How's Lyth?* she asked as she carefully transferred the boy onto the dragon's back. There were already several people there, helped on by Kili. One grabbed the child and wrapped his arms around him, holding him securely.

*Angry,* Sardin replied. *She may still be able to fly. She wants to get back into the fight.*

*Have her ask Xalanth,* Bilba said. If he thought she was okay to fight, then so be it.

They finished getting the last of the prisoners on the dragons. They had been parceling out their fighters with each flight, ensuring there was someone capable of helping the dragon fight as they went for the safety of Mirkwood. Bilba had tried multiple times to get Kili to go but he'd refused. Now the two of them were all that was left, Kamrin having been the last of the warriors to go with the previous group, grudgingly and only after Kili had commanded him.

"After you," Kili said, stepping back to let her get on. He looked exhausted, his fingers bloody and locked in a curve from drawing the bow back so many times.

Bilba grabbed the edge of the balcony and pulled herself up. Kili jumped up beside her, giving her a tired grin.

*Time's up.*

Bilba grabbed Kili's arm and shoved him, hard, knocking him forward into Sardin. To keep him from falling the dragon opened his mouth, catching the young prince and holding him with a light grip.

*Go!* Bilba ordered. *Sardin, go now!*

She jumped off the ledge and ran to the doors. The balcony was inside a suite of rooms, the outer doors leading into the hall had been closed and blocked but they hadn't bothered to close the balcony ones.

Bilba grabbed them and began to shove them closed, reaching for her sword to try and block them
the same way she'd done to the Treasury.

Behind her, Sardin fell off the balcony, wings snapping out and carrying him away from the mountain. Bilba heard Kili screaming at her inside her mind but didn't answer. They needed time. She had no idea just how powerful the thing inside the mountain was but didn't want to risk it being strong enough to take down a dragon. The farther away Sardin got, the better.

**As if I cared about the life of a single dragon, or the rabble it carried.**

The doors exploded.

The force sent Bilba flying. She impacted the balcony wall hard enough her entire body jolted with the force and fell forward onto her stomach. The impact knocked the air out of her and she gasped before sliding a hand through the grit and debris on the ground and pushing to her knees. Her body sagged and tried to drag her down again, her forehead nearly touching the stone.

Footsteps approached, until a pair of black boots entered her field of vision and came to a stop. Bilba lifted her head, which felt far too heavy for her neck, and saw the feet of orcs, dozens of them, ringing her and effectively blocking her against the balcony wall.

Her lungs began to function again and she pushed up until she was on her knees. Beside her, the feet crouched and she felt a presence looming over her right shoulder.

She turned her head to look.

On the surface he might have been human, taller than most, fit, with black hair. He wore simple brown trousers, black boots and a flowing, black coat that pooled on the ground around him as if it were more cloak than coat. He didn't bother with a shirt underneath, or perhaps he didn't need one. She doubted he got cold.

She knew he wasn't human.

She could see veins on his skin, lines of molten flame as if lava ran just under the surface. It broke through in patches, flickers of fire dancing on his skin, the areas mottled and black, almost like scale more than flesh. His eyes were pits of darkness with red and orange flame flickering in their depths.

The same shroud of shadow was there too, flowing around him and reaching out to draw ice cold tendrils along her face, wrapping around her throat in a near caress that she didn't doubt could crush her just as easily.

Over his shoulders the shadow was thicker, almost smoke like, carrying the strong scent of sulfur and fire with it. It had the vague outline of enormous wings sprouting from his shoulders, a giant, almost dragon like tail coiled around his legs. His fingers, draped over his knees, were claws and his bare feet sported large, curved talons.

*What are you?* she asked and he smiled, the look feral and cruel. He reached one hand out and lightly drew it along her cheek and jawline, his smile broadening as she flinched and drew back.

"Little fool," he said, his voice rich and deep and nothing at all like what she would have expected, "did you really believe Morgoth had but one Lieutenant?"
Chapter 27

Morgoth's self-proclaimed lieutenant shot his hand out suddenly, causing Bilba to flinch back in surprise. Instead of striking her, however, he simply grabbed her hand and, in one quick move, twisted off the ring she'd been wearing since finding it under the Misty Mountains. He smirked as he rose to his feet, "You have my thanks."

He nodded toward the orcs and several came forward. Bilba snarled and lashed out at them but there were far too many of them, and nowhere for her to go. They pinned her down and quickly divested her of her weapons and armor, leaving her in nothing but her trousers, tunic and boots. She was then dragged back to her knees and held while her hands were bound with rough, frayed rope. The feel of the fibers digging into the scars on her wrists brought horrid memories of iron shackles and biting metal and she fought to control the automatic panic that spread through her. A look at the...whatever he was, showed she wasn't succeeding nearly as well as she'd hoped.

One of the orcs picked up a long stretch of rope leading off the length wrapped around her wrists and held it out to him. "Lord Gothmog."

The creature, Gothmog, took the rope and tugged, pulling her to her feet. "Shall we go, my dear?"

Bilba rolled her eyes. As if she had a choice. Gothmog pulled her toward the door and Bilba cast a look over her shoulder, taking in what could well be her final look at the sky, before she was pulled inside the mountain and the door slammed shut behind her. Gothmog had locked her inside her mind again so she sent a silent farewell to Fili, Syrath and her father regretting she hadn't told them when they could still hear her.

She'd expected them to simply kill her on the balcony and assumed they had brought her inside for some other awful purpose, such as giving her over to Azog. There was a thought she desperately tried to pretend wasn't a distinct possibility for how things might play out.

Gothmog walked casually, in a manner that made Bilba desperately want to stab him even more than she already did. He behaved as if he owned the halls he strode through instead of Thorin, who was going to be twelve kinds of pissed when he found out.

They went to the throne room where Gothmog practically bounced up the steps and threw himself into the throne, draping one leg over the armrest and lounging back in the very definition of casual.

He dropped the end of the rope he'd barely been holding but Bilba wasn't dumb enough to think she had any hope of escaping. Instead she stopped a few feet away and dropped to a seated position on the edge of the top stair, draping her bound hands over one knee and leaving the other leg outstretched.

She could still hear the distant sounds of fighting and the occasional screams of those ill-equipped to fight, sounds which had her body twitching with the desire to go aid them. The hoots and screeches of orcs echoing through the corridors recalled Moria, the creatures themselves boiling through the corridors surrounding the throne with irreverence to those who had spent so long building them.

Bilba caught sight of the area where she and Kili had been shortly before, when she'd first caught sight of Gothmog. She wondered, if she'd known then where she would end up if she kept on that road, would she have kept going? The question was barely asked before she knew the answer; of course she would have.

Movement caught her eye and she glanced toward the walkway leading toward the throne, and felt
her breath catch in her throat, her fingers curling into fists.

Azog was coming. Somehow, unbelievably, she'd forgotten just how big the orc was, even larger than Bolg had been. His eyes were already locked on her, a predatory gleam in them and Bilba tensed, trying to think of all the ways she might be able to, if not defend herself, at least die with some semblance of pride. She briefly considered simply throwing herself off the edge of the platform and depriving Azog of the pleasure of killing her, but dismissed the idea.

She dismissed it because of the other figure coming with Azog. Frailer, with matted hair and beard and so covered in grime as to be nearly unrecognizable but she knew him at once just the same. Frerin. The rider, as she'd called him then, the one who taken the full wrath of Azog on himself in order to give her and Syrath their freedom. The one without whom she would have nothing at all, would most likely be dead as her luck in the Arena couldn't have held out forever. She couldn't bring herself jump to her death in front of him, it seemed...disrespectful. She wanted to make him proud and if that meant dying with as much defiance as she could muster then so be it.

She studied him as he came closer, unsure if he even knew who she was. It had been years after all and she'd changed, possibly even more dramatically than he had. He walked, she noted, surprisingly straight for one who'd been the slave of Azog for any length of time, his head up and his eyes focused. He reminded her of Fili in his bearing, and she felt a rush of relief that he had made it out safely, or at least hadn't been caught if he wasn't out yet.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and Azog drew a gleaming dagger out of a sheath on his belt, his lips drawing back into a sneer. Bilba saw Frerin stiffen and start to move, but Azog wrenched on the chain attached to his shackles and backhanded Frerin, dropping him to his knees from the sheer force of the blow.

The giant orc came up the stairs and in one move planted a foot in her chest and shoved, knocking her onto her back. Bilba grunted as he increased pressure, her ribs creaking and groaning under the weight of the orc.

"I have been looking forward to this," the orc snarled in Black Speech.

Bilba sneered at him, forcing herself to remain calm even as her body started shaking in spite of itself. Azog raised the knife and she fought not to close her eyes but to keep them locked on him, not giving him the satisfaction of seeing her fear.

"Stop," a bored voice said, and Azog froze in the act of plunging the knife toward her chest, looking toward the throne.

"She killed my son, and has caused great annoyance for the orcs."

"Annoyance?" a voice spoke up from behind him. "Is that what you're calling it? I'd say it's more like she's been roundly kicking your asses for the last five years."

Azog snarled and stepped off her to turn and backhand Frerin a second time, this time hard enough for Bilba to flinch in empathy. The blow rocked him backward and snapped his head to the side but when he looked back he was grinning.

"Truth hurts, doesn't it, Azog?"

The orc stepped toward him but Gothmog made an annoyed sound that stopped him.

"Mortals," he said in that same, slow, bored tone. "You all think in such finite terms. Someone
wounds you and you feel the worst thing you can do to them is cause them physical pain or kill them." He slid his leg off the armrest and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and steepling his fingers. "I can think of at least five punishments that would be far, far worse than either."

"That's because you're an asshole," Frerin said, sounding far too cheerful for someone in his condition. He strode past Azog as if the orc wasn't even there and dropped down beside Bilba, shooting her a grin as he did. "My little guard, we meet again. Aside from our current predicament, how is my greatest achievement?"

Bilba felt her heart jolt in her chest and couldn't stop the slow smile that spread across her face. Azog had stepped back a foot or so and was giving Gothmog a begrudging look. "What punishments?"

Gothmog settled against the throne again and waved a hand imperiously. "I would think at least one of them would be obvious." Azog looked confused and the creature sighed in disappointment. "Get me what I want and perhaps I'll tell you."

"We are searching," Azog muttered, "but the treasury is large and the slave claims to not know where it is."

"He doesn't," Gothmog stated simply. "I was quite thorough in my questioning."

Beside her, Bilba saw Frerin grimace and felt a surge of sympathy. Gothmog had caused agony just by touching her soul bonds, she couldn't imagine what it would feel like to have him actually shifting around in her mind. "The brother must have moved it," Gothmog continued. He settled deeper into the chair. "I would imagine, however, he would not keep its whereabouts entirely secret. Perhaps one of those heirs of his?"

Bilba stiffened and saw Frerin do the same next to her. "Continue looking," Gothmog said. "We have time. The wizard won't be here with the final piece for a while yet. If we haven't found it by then we'll take one of his precious heirs."

Bilba shut her eyes in relief that she'd pushed Kili off the ledge when she had. Then her mind latched onto the rest of what he'd said and she frowned. Wizard? Were they talking about Gandalf? And what was the final piece? The final piece to what?

"The heirs have fled like cowards," Azog growled. "We cannot reach them."

Gothmog snorted. "Another interesting fact about mortals. They are so reliably sentimental." He stood and grabbed Bilba by the back of the shirt, jerking her upright in one motion. Frerin moved as if to intervene but Gothmog kicked him away easily. He twisted his hand in Bilba's hair and jerked her head back until she was forced to arch her back to try and take some of the pressure off. "How fast do you think the oldest would return if we were to dangle his lover over the battlements?" He reached out a foot to deliver a brutal blow to Frerin's thigh that had him grimacing and gritting his teeth against the pain. "Or either of them if we were to add in their beloved uncle?"

Azog gave a slow, wicked grin. "This is why you wish to keep her alive?"
"She amuses me," Gothmog said shortly. He released her, shoving her at the same time so she stumbled and would have lost her balance if Frerin hadn't caught her and helped her sit. "Get me the final key," Gothmog ordered Azog, "before I lose my patience."

"What little he has of it," Frerin muttered beside her. He was still grimacing and rubbing his leg but looked more annoyed than in pain. As the two of them watched Azog turned and stalked away, grumbling to himself. He didn't seem to notice or care that he'd left Frerin behind and they certainly weren't going to point it out. Behind them, Gothmog slouched back in the throne again, looking more like a petulant youth than a figure of darkness.

Frerin grinned at her again. "So, where were we? Ah, yes, how is my greatest achievement?"

Bilba felt her face heat and couldn't help returning the grin. She raised her hands, keeping them hidden from Gothmog as much as she could. She had no doubt he was aware they were speaking but hoped as long as they kept it low he would leave them alone.

Fine. Syrath is as well. He was quite put out that you thought him a girl.

Frerin chuckled. "In my defense it was dark and I had a broken leg and was in a considerable amount of pain. Tends to dull the senses you know. Like eyesight." He frowned, as if realizing that didn't entirely make sense but then just grinned at her, content to leave it.

He'd also had a dead dragon, Bilba thought. At the time she hadn't really understood but now, having a soul bond with Syrath, she couldn't fathom the depth of the pain he must have felt losing Quenth.

I'm sorry, she signed now. I thought you were dead. It's my fault they didn't come for you.

He shook his head. "They'd have died trying. Azog turned me into his personal slave almost immediately, after I was dumb enough to survive him nearly beating me to death over your and Syrath's escape." He leaned over and lightly bumped her shoulder. "Durin pride and all that. Anyway, news started to trickle in over the years, rumors carried by new slaves, about the escaped Arena fighter and her blue dragon. It made it worth it, knowing you were out there." He lowered his head closer to hers. "I hope you don't mind but I liked to think it was partly me out there, taking it to the orcs."

It was all you, Bilba responded immediately. Neither of us would have been there at all if it hadn't been for you.

He grimaced, his mood falling for the first time. "And you wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for me." He gave a slight incline of his head over his shoulder toward Gothmog. "He called a meeting of the orcs at Isengard. Azog took me and Gothmog recognized me." He scowled. "Five years I managed to keep that imbecile from knowing who I was and the giant, flaming lizard went and ruined it."

"I am not a lizard," Gothmog growled from behind them.

"You're sort of like a lizard," Frerin retorted easily, "a really ugly one, that's also on fire. And Azog is certainly an imbecile." Bilba tensed, expecting a harsh response but Gothmog merely grunted in response. Frerin grinned at Bilba. "Being amusing has its perks, longevity being one of them."

And apparently the ability to repeatedly mouth off to immortal beings of evil, Bilba thought dryly. She caught onto something Frerin had said and asked, Isengard? Saruman?

Frerin nodded. "He's been secretly trying to find the keys for years. He made a deal with Nar to help him in assassinating my family in return for help getting the Arkenstone. At some point you-know-
who found out and took over." His eyes narrowed. "You can probably figure out what happened next."

Bilba gave a small, dry smile. *He got impatient?*

Frerin nodded. "That and Nar was apparently incompetent. Anyway, I'd imagine Saruman is the wizard who's on his way. I don't know what his melodramatic final piece is. He's after the Arkenstone here."

*So they are after the keys?* Bilba asked. *To free Sauron?*

"Morgoth," Frerin corrected. "Who happens to be locked in Sauron's corpse. They've already got the elven and human keys."

"And the hobbit one as well," Gothmog broke in. He lifted the ring he'd taken from Bilba, running it absently along his fingers. "Your little protégé brought it right to me." He frowned at it. "I almost had it once before, but the sniveling wretch who carried it fled from me." His voice took on an annoyed tone. "I did not expect a creature such as a hobbit to have the audacity to run from me, much less stay lost for so long."

"You're an ancient being of darkness," Frerin said dryly, "and you didn't think anyone who saw you would run screaming?"

Gothmog turned his gaze on the blonde prince, frowning. "You do not."

"I vacillate between reckless, insane and sheer stupidity," Frerin replied. "Just ask my family."

"I intend to," Gothmog said shortly. His eyes took on a distant look and then, just like that, he wasn't there. Bilba tensed but settled down again when she spotted an entire legion of orcs gathered at the end of the walkway, between them and freedom. If she had her weapons and armor she might have been able to get past them, but not as she was currently.

"He just does that to show off," Frerin muttered. "Anyway, as I was saying, once he realized who I was he knew he had his key to the Arkenstone." At her confused look he said, "The Arkenstone is locked inside a box with a blood seal. Only a Durin can open it and they just so happen to have one."

*Is that how they got inside the mountain?* Bilba asked. *They forced you to bring them inside?*

Frerin shook his head. "I couldn't have made it inside, not through the back entrance without the key. Nar's daughter Beryl brought the key to Gothmog. I don't know how she got it."

Bilba did. She remembered Beryl's claim she'd had a spy in Erebor who'd been up to something during Fili's kidnapping. They'd assumed the spy had been targeting the Treasury, but now it would appear he'd gone after the key to the back door.

*How did she know where it was?* she asked.

"No clue," Frerin muttered. "And she's a bit too nutty to ask, I think. She hid the elven and human keys and refused to hand them over until Gothmog promised her Erebor and apparently one of my nephews." He shrugged. "She also wants you dead but I would imagine you aren't particularly surprised."

*There are a lot of people who want me dead,* Bilba replied dryly. *She's not even near the top of the list. I'm surprised Gothmog didn't just torture it out of her.*
"He was planning to attack Erebor anyway," Frerin said, "and as we've already established he enjoys things that amuse him. He seems to take a special interest in being defied. I think it comes from whatever hobbit deprived him of the ring for so long. I also have a strong feeling it won't end well for those of us who do defy him, which is partly why I do it." He grinned at her. "If it's going to end badly regardless, might as well have fun with it."

Bilba nodded absently.

Frerin tilted his head suddenly. "Did he refer to you as Fili's lover earlier?"

Bilba felt her face go red hot and she nodded.

Frerin grinned. "Boy has good taste, as do you by the way. I imagine Dis and Vili probably stepped in to chaperone things?"

And Dwalin, Bilba signed. He threatened to kill Fili if he ever upset me.

Frerin looked confused. "Dwalin? Why does it matter to him?"

He's my father, Bilba signed. My mother was Belladonna. She was captured in a raid when she was pregnant with me. He thought she was dead.

Frerin was staring at her slack jawed. "I remember that," he said slowly. "We thought he'd never recover from her loss." He studied her, his eyes narrowed. "That explains a lot," he said finally. "He must be very proud of you, as he should be."

Bilba felt herself flush again and looked away.

The air around them seemed to grow heavy and, suddenly, Gothmog was back. He held a large chest in his arms, made from what looked like mithril and inlaid with gold and precious gems.

Beside her, Bilba felt Frerin stiffen and swear quietly.

Gothmog dropped the chest on the ground with a thud and gave a dark smile toward Frerin. "Well now," he almost purred, "what do you say you make yourself useful for once and open the chest?"

Frerin scowled and Bilba cast a worried look at him. She had no doubt what was in the chest. Gothmog reportedly had, or had access to, three of the four keys and was mere moments from gaining the fourth.

Once he had them all that would be left to do was find the location of the cage and if Gothmog was truly as ancient as he claimed, it was very likely he already knew it.

Which meant that, barring a miracle, they, and the world, were well and truly screwed.
Chapter 28

Gothmog strode over and grabbed Frerin's arm, dragging him unceremoniously to his feet and over to the chest. The creature then proceeded to kick Frerin in the back of the knees, knocking his legs out from under him.

Frerin grimaced in pain and let out a soft grunt as his knees impacted the stone. He looked over his shoulder toward Bilba and, in a surprisingly conversational tone, said, "you know, in hindsight, the whole blood seal thing might not have been quite the failsafe my ancestors thought it was."

Gothmog grabbed Frerin's hand and proceeded to drive a talon straight through the center of his palm. Frerin tensed and clenched his jaw but made no sound as blood welled up from the puncture, slipping into the various lines and cracks of his skin until finally squeezing between his fingers to drip onto the stone.

Gothmog forced Frerin's bloodied hand down on the lid of the chest. White light shone out from under his palm, tracing an intricate crest into the wood. A second later there was the unmistakable, soft sound of the lid unlocking, the quiet noise sending a bolt of panic through Bilba.

Gothmog threw Frerin back with one arm and he landed heavily near Bilba. She helped him struggle to a seated position and, together, they watched as Gothmog knelt and threw back the lid. His back blocked her view but she saw bright light shining around him, a sharp contrast to the darkness and flame that covered him like a shroud.

The creature stood, clutching something in his hand. Beside her, Frerin scrambled to his feet and lunged forward, only to instantly fall to his knees clutching his head in agony. Bilba scrambled to his side and held his shoulders as Gothmog turned to face them, one hand outstretched toward Frerin and the other clutching...a ball of light?

Bilba had never seen anything like it before. Whether it was a gem or a stone of some kind or something else entirely she had no idea but it was certainly beautiful. Gothmog swept his cloak back to slide the gem into an inner pocket. As he did, Bilba caught sight of three oddly shaped crystals strapped to his belt just under his cloak. One looked strangely familiar as if she'd seen it before but she couldn't begin to imagine where.

With a swift kick, Gothmog sent the chest scraping off the edge of the platform where it plummeted into the abyss below. He then turned and threw himself into the throne again, sprawled across it with one leg over the armrest. He gave an idle wave of his hand and Frerin sagged to the ground with a gasp, his chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath. Bilba leaned over to rest her head on his back, her arms wrapped around him as best she could. It wasn't what her mother had used to do for her as a child when she'd been scared or in pain. It hadn't changed her circumstances but it had helped her just the same.

Footsteps signaled the arrival of an orc, the panicked look on its face suggesting it had been summoned by Gothmog.

"Go find that woman," Gothmog said, sounding bored, "and bring her to me."

The orc nodded and scrambled away, off the bridge and into the depths of Erebor. Bilba helped Frerin back into a seated position again. As she did it occurred to her she wasn't hearing the sound of fighting anymore. Either it had all moved too far down for her to hear, or there was no longer any going on.
Either scenario did not speak well to Erebor's efforts to hold onto the mountain.

Footsteps heralded the arrival of Azog, walking with the swagger he always got when confident of his own victory. Beside him walked a smaller figure. Bilba thought it was an orc at first but, upon looking closer, she felt her mouth gape open at the sight of Beryl hurrying alongside the giant orc.

The woman looked wildly different from the last time Bilba had seen her. Her dress was filthy and torn in places and she was covered in what seemed like layers of dirt. Without her Ladies in Waiting it was clear she had no idea how to dress her own hair leaving it in matted tangles with jewels stuck about haphazardly. Bilba wasn't entirely sure if they were being held in by some sort of mesh or simply by the overall mess of hair.

The woman had lost weight as well, her clothing hanging off her frame and she was paler than Bilba remembered with deep shadows under her eyes. Perhaps the biggest change of all, however, were her eyes. They were wide and cast about aimlessly. Her mouth moved almost constantly though no words came out and she continually touched the thumb and forefinger of her right hand together in a repetitive, nervous motion.

Bilba had seen that sort of behavior before, in the mines with the slaves who had lost their minds. Her mother had always warned her to stay far, far away from them for most were unpredictable, prone to do anything from rock quietly in a corner sobbing to flying into fits of rage where they, or anyone around them, could wind up hurt.

Beryl's eyes landed on her suddenly, her eyes widening and her lips ceasing their movement. Bilba tensed, standing as the woman suddenly broke into a charge right at her.

"It's your fault!" she screamed, her hands raised with her fingers crooked into talons. "I'll claw your eyes out, you bitch! It's your fault!"

Frerin stepped in front of Bilba before she could react. He grabbed Beryl by the wrist, flipped her around easily and shoved her, letting her own momentum knock her off balance. She tumbled to her knees where she screamed and proceeded to beat the ground with her hands. "It's not fair! I was here first!" she shrieked, the worlds ripped out of her with an awful, guttural sound. "I should be the one everyone loves! I should be the one he loves! She gets everything! Why?"

"Enough," Gothmog said, disinterested. "I've gotten you your precious mountain. Now give me what's mine."

Beryl went silent, switching from hysterics to deathly calm in a single instant. Very slowly she gathered her feet under her and pushed up, swaying slightly as she did.

"I don't see Fili," she said, her back turned to Gothmog. Her tone was odd, almost singsong in a way that made Bilba shiver. She'd been pitted against some of the slaves who'd lost their minds in the Arena.

If given a choice between facing another or the Cave Troll again, Bilba would choose the Troll.

Beryl swung around to face them, a strange smile on her face. "That was the deal," she said, her tone suggesting she was talking to a child. "I get Erebor and Fili and you get the items I picked up from Rivendell and Gondor."

Bilba tensed, giving Frerin a wide-eyed look. None of what Beryl said made any sense even given her current state of mind. She'd have expected Gothmog to have killed the other woman simply for the way Beryl was speaking to him. Aside from that, however, was the fact Gothmog had no need to
make deals to get what he wanted. If Beryl knew where the other keys were he could just rip them from her mind.

Leaning close to Frerin she raised her hands and signed, *What is he doing?*

Frerin gave a short shake of his and leaned over until his mouth was right by her ear. "She thinks she can defy him," he whispered. "Whatever he's doing, it's going to be ugly."

Gothmog was still leaning back in the throne, his hands steepled in front of him and a clear look of amusement on his face.

In a sudden burst of movement, he stood up and came down the stairs, nodding at Azog and several of the orcs with him. "Follow me, and bring the girl and the Durin." He paused, his head cocked to the side as if considering something and then said, "we have other prisoners do we not? Bring me ten."

With that he walked straight past all of them and across the bridge.

Azog snarled under his breath before stalking after him. Bilba and Frerin were both grabbed by orcs and dragged after.

The last sight of Beryl that Bilba had was of the other woman seating herself carefully on the throne, spreading out her skirt as if it were spun from pure gold; her back and head straight and her hands gripping the armrests as if she were dressed in splendor. She looked outward with a vague smile on her face as if surveying a vast court bowed down before her.

Then Bilba's view was cut off as they were dragged through into a tunnel, leaving Beryl behind overseeing her kingdom of ruin.

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They were taken to the battlements on the ground level of Erebor. The place Bilba often liked to walk in the early morning to watch the sun rise before the gates were opened to allow people in to set up their boots in the marketplace.

There was no marketplace anymore.

The stalls had been destroyed, stones shoved over, wood splintered and burned, goods left behind overnight scattered.

There were bodies here too. There had been in every level they had walked through, orcs and dwarves scattered about like so many broken toys. Neither Frerin nor Bilba had spoken, showing as much respect and reverence to the dead of Erebor as they could.

The sinking feeling in her gut had begun to grow with every level they had traveled, every new step they took that revealed nothing ahead of them but death and the scurrying footsteps of orcs.

There was no fighting, no screaming of the wounded or those fleeing.

Nothing.

The truth was there but she didn't acknowledge it until they reached the bottom, stepping out over what had once been a thriving marketplace and was now only a place of rubble and death.
Erebor...

The Lonely Mountain...

The Kingdom of the Dwarves and resting place of the great drakes of Middle Earth...

The seat and throne of the House of Durin and her descendants...

Was fallen.

Beside her, Frerin was pale, the look on his face set and grim.

For Bilba, there was only grief.

Erebor had been her home, as much as the Shire had before that and, like the Shire, it now lay in ruins about her.

Once she would have blamed herself for that, as she had not so very long ago with the Shire. She didn't now. She knew the fault lay with the orcs and Azog and Gothmog, even with Beryl.

But knowing it wasn't her fault didn't make it hurt any less.

"At least the people are safe," Frerin said from beside her, as if reading her mind, "and the dragons."

"Not all of them," Bilba signed back, shoulders weighted with despair.

"You can't save everyone," Frerin said. "They deserve to be mourned, and avenged, but that doesn't mean we should overlook those who were saved. We take comfort in that, as much as we can." He frowned, his eyes locked on hers with an intensity very similar to how Fili looked in battle. "Don't carry the weight of those past caring, Bilba," he said, his voice gentle. "It'll crush you and that's one less warrior to protect those who are left."

Bilba didn't answer but she did, in fact, feel the weight on her shoulders lessen fractionally.

They were taken down to the main floor and across the ruined floor of the marketplace. The gates leading out from Erebor were closed, she noted.

The orc behind her shoved her and she stumbled over the first step leading up to the battlements. Frerin grabbed her arm to steady her and Bilba spared a moment to glare over her shoulder at the offending orc, making a note to be sure and personally kill him later.

They reached the top but were held back from the parapet so they could not see over the side. At the far end Bilba caught sight of a huddled group of dwarves, commoners and civilians going by their dress and the open fear in their eyes and she felt her gut clench at the sight of them.

She felt eyes on her and looked to see Gothmog watching her, clearly amused. He turned and leapt up onto one of the crenels, leaving himself completely exposed to anyone below.

That there was someone below was evidenced by the volley of arrows that immediately rose into view, aiming right for him.

A sheet of fire rose up and, in one instant, the arrows were incinerated, falling out of sight in a
sprinkling of ash.

Gothmog laughed, a deep, booming, very unpleasant sound.

"Who's next?" he called out. "Perhaps you would like to send a dragon after me and see what
happens to them?" There was silence. "No? Pity." Gothmog half twisted to make a motion and the
ten prisoners were brought forward. Bilba found it suddenly difficult to breathe. She started to step
forward instinctively only to have Frerin grab her arms and pull her back.

"You can't," he said, "and you know it."

You want me to just stand here and let it happen? Bilba signed at him, her motions short and sharp.

"Yes," Frerin said, his voice flat. "I do."

Bilba opened her mouth to retort, only to snap it closed again as, for the briefest second, she caught
sight of the deep pain in his eyes and the barest tremor of emotion in his voice. This was Frerin's
home as well, she reminded herself; his people, and he had far greater claim than she had. He wasn't
stopping her from cruelty.

He was stopping her from necessity.

She subsided, her hands clenched into fists at her side and let out a strangled sound as the prisoners
were lifted into crenels, ten of them, five on either side of Gothmog. One was lifted into place just in
front of Bilba, a young woman with blonde hair and wide, frightened eyes. She made eye contact
with Bilba and then was turned away and forced to look out over the wall, and the long drop below.
Bilba could see her shivering, her shoulders lifting and falling rapidly as she breathed.

Gothmog made a motion with his hand and, as one, the orcs stepped forward and shoved the
prisoners off the wall.

Not one of the prisoners even had time to scream.

Bilba let out an involuntary cry through clenched teeth, her vision blurring. She staggered as if
someone had punched her in the gut and her breath froze in her lungs. Beside her, Frerin went still,
his eyes hard and his jaw clenched. The only sign of how much emotion he felt were his hands,
clenched into fists so tight at his side they were nearly bloodless.

From beyond the parapet she heard screams and shouts from what sounded like a very large crowd.

"That was to demonstrate how little I like to waste my time," Gothmog said, his voice languid and
utterly uncaring. He motioned again and then Bilba and Frerin were being dragged forward and
forced up into crenels, one on either side of Gothmog. Azog personally lifted Bilba up and she felt a
twisting sensation in her gut at the realization he had no intention of letting her down again, not onto
the wall inside Erebor anyway.

As she'd thought, there was a crowd outside the gates, at a safe distance from the gates. It was
difficult to tell individual faces from so far but it appeared to be comprised of all the dwarves who'd
escaped Erebor as well as the elves from Mirkwood and a large contingent of men from Dale. In the
skies overhead, far enough back to be safe from arrows and hopefully Gothmog, she saw drakes and
elven dragons swirling through the skies.

She wished more than anything that she were among them.

"In case you fail to recognize them," Gothmog said mildly, "allow me to introduce Bilba, daughter of
Fundin and Frerin, son of Thrain.” Here his voice dropped, a note of cruelty entering in. Bilba knew Frerin had been wildly popular in Erebor and finding out he was alive in such a manner would be awful, not to mention the same for him at having his people see him in such a state.

From the crowd she heard a startled murmuring as the words registered. Bilba looked into the crowd, and finally spotted Fili several rows back with Kili and Vili on either side of him. They were surrounded by guards, watching over their current king.

Bilba tore her eyes away from him and focused on a distant point straight ahead of her. She really would have preferred this happen in private, and preferably fighting, and certainly not at the hands of Azog, but, if not, she would do her best to make it as easy on those she loved as possible. She took a deep, steadying breath, and shut her eyes, stretching her fingers out at her side and focused on her breathing. A light breeze hit her face and she relaxed into it, grateful it at least would happen outside and not inside some Valar forsaken tunnel or mine. She'd had enough of them to last several lifetimes.

"The heir of Durin has five seconds to give himself up," Gothmog said sharply, "or he can watch his lover and his uncle fall to his death. After that I shall send the rest of the prisoners to join them. One."

Bilba tuned him out. Gothmog was a fool in the end, or just needlessly cruel. Fili would have given himself up for the ten, there had been no need to kill them and then turn on her and Frerin.

She hoped his father and brother stopped him.

She shut her eyes, not wanting to see either outcome, him coming, or him fighting to come and being prevented.

She was good at tuning things out. She'd gotten good at it in the mines, blocking out the horrors around her and focusing on whatever her current task was. Then she'd tried her best to imagine the outside world and pretend she was in it, running through fields with her mother, and father when she'd been younger, visiting the Shire her mother always talked about, simply enjoying a life free from pain and constant suffering.

It was easier, now that she'd actually been outside and seen all the things she'd once only heard about in stories.

"Two."

Her thoughts faltered. She was afraid for her father. He'd gone away and his wife had died as far as he knew. Now he went away again and lost his daughter?

She didn't know how he would ever overcome that.

**Would you like to ask him how he'll feel?**

The words reverberated through her mind even as Gothmog's lips formed the word three.

Then, just like that, her bond and link with her father was no longer blocked off.

*Only* her bond and link with her father.

Fili's voice sounded from below, shouting out his surrender and she couldn't talk to him, couldn't tell him to take it back.

She could do nothing for him that his father or Kili, both standing next to him, couldn't do better.
So instead she reached out, searching along the link...and found her father instead.

It was faint, so very faint. They were coming, she could feel that much, but they were just on the outside edges, just past where a true link could be established.

That was why Gothmog had allowed it, Bilba realized.

There had been no doubt in her mind that it wasn't done from mercy.

No, he wanted her to know.

He wanted her to know how very close help had come.

Her father was still too far away for her to speak to so, instead, she tried to send him how she felt.

She wanted him to feel how much she loved him, how she didn't blame him, how badly she wanted him to be happy even if it all fell apart.

Even if she wasn't there to share it with him.

She tried, even if she highly doubted Gothmog would allow any of it through.

"Four."

Fili was screaming, the sound reverberating through the dead silence that had fallen on the crowd below.

Bilba, daughter of Dwalin, son of Fundin, called Orcrist by some, rider of Syrath and One of the Heir to the Throne of Erebor, opened her eyes on what had proven to be her final dawn.

She faced it with her head held high and her eyes steady.

She faced it like a Took, and like a daughter of the house of Fundin.

But most of all, she faced it like a warrior.

I love you, Adad, she sent knowing full well he couldn't hear her. Good-bye.

"Five."

***

He felt her.

Dwalin frowned and straightened in his straps, straining to look past the head of the dragon he rode
as if, in doing so, he could somehow see straight to Erebor.

There was nothing, had been nothing since they’d left.

The dragon that had carried off Thranduil and Saruman possessed unnatural speed and they had soon lost track of it. The elves had vanished soon after, their smaller and lighter dragons able to obtain more speed than the larger drakes. Since then they had seen and heard...nothing.

One could almost believe everything was fine.

If one were an idiot that was.

They had reached the first range of the Misty Mountains and were in the process of flying over them. They had yet to be harried by a single orc dragon, not even a scout, and that in and of itself was worrying enough. Sometimes peace was a good thing. Other times it proved just how very bad things really were.

He'd been trying to reach her almost since they left, even though he knew Erebor was still out of range. All of them had been trying, every one of them possessing a link with someone in Erebor had been desperately trying to reach them.

Their efforts had redoubled when, over the course of four hours, eight soul bonds had snapped.

_Eight._

Five had been dwarf to dwarf bonds, but the other three?

Those had been with _dragons._

Three dragons who'd chosen to stay behind in Erebor for one reason or another while their riders had gone to Rivendell, and who were now dead.

They hadn't lost a dragon since Moria and now something had happened that had caused them to lose _three._

And the worst part of it all was there was no way to account for dragons whose riders had stayed in Erebor with them or those who hadn't had riders at all.

Which meant the number might well be higher than three...and if there were dead drakes at all then Dwalin had no doubt in his mind the number of dead dwarves was far, far higher than five.

He sensed her, for just an instant, as they were passing over a valley that ran so deep fog was still pooled within it in spite of the sun having risen hours earlier. For the barest instant she was there at the very edges of his conscience, and then she was gone again just as quickly. He had the briefest impression of her trying to tell him...something, but it was gone too fast for him to figure out what it had been.

He passed the information onto Thorin who frowned at him from the dragon he rode just over where Dwalin was on his left.

_`I've felt nothing yet, neither has anyone else aside from the bonds breaking. It's odd, I would have thought we'd at least be in close enough range to connect via soul bond but even that seems...almost blank somehow._

Dwalin didn't have a chance to answer as, off to his right, a loud roar sound suddenly. He looked in
surprise and saw Quinlan, a battle scarred warrior drake who often mentored Xalanth when the younger dragon grew overwhelmed, twist in midair and shoot straight downward, vanishing into the fog in the valley below. On his back, Yari, a tiny scribe who was partnered with Quinlan's equally tiny mate, simply held on for the ride.

Dwalin heard Thorin cursing in his mind. *Follow them! I've lost enough drakes and dwarves today.*

Dwalin nodded and readied his blade as Kedric, the rider of the dragon who'd offered to let Dwalin ride along, passed the message on. A second later a small group of them were darting into the fog below, weapons at the ready.

Tension coiled in Dwalin's gut as they dropped into whiteness. There was no telling what lay below and the very last thing he wanted to do was fly in blind.

The fog was dense, the world deadening to a dull, slate gray as they passed through but it was not so thick they couldn't see the ground beneath them, or the large shape curled up on it.

A drake, Dwalin realized, and not Quinlan because he was squatting next to it, in the process of curling up around it.

Realization hit and Dwalin sent back up to Thorin, *It's Inilth. She's hurt.*

*We're coming.*

*Be careful, Dwalin returned. The fog is thick down here. I'd recommend leaving a few up top, just in case something comes by while we're blind.*

*Already one step ahead of you.*

Dwalin nodded to himself. They landed and he leapt off, landing on the ground in a crouch. As he straightened he saw a shape detach from Inilth's side and come toward him.

An elf and not just any elf.

"Fingalon," he said shortly. "Shouldn't you be watching over Mirkwood?"

"I would be," Fingalon agreed, "if I wasn't needed elsewhere."

Dwalin nodded toward Inilth. She appeared to be unconscious, or deeply asleep. This close he could see the cuts and gashes to her hide, caused by acid burns followed by claws or sword. He'd seen such injuries before, back during Moria and earlier. Quinlan was curled in a near ball around her while Yari was frantically checking her over, trying to help when she had nothing on her with which to help.

"She'll be all right," Fingalon said. "It looks much worse than it is and I've been healing her since we've been here. She's suffering more from exhaustion than anything else. She flew herself into the ground."

Which would explain why Yari and Quinlan hadn't felt anything.

Speaking of which...

"Dis says she felt something happen with Lyth. Do you know anything?"

As he spoke shapes broke through the fog around them, Thorin and the others he'd brought with him landing around them. Dwalin saw Dis dismount as Fingalon started to answer.
"I'm afraid I don't," he said. "She was fine the last I saw her, as was your daughter and Prince Kili."

"Only Kili?" Dis asked, the worry in her voice clear as she made it up to them. "What about Fili? Or my husband?"

"I don't know," Fingalon said again. "Their whereabouts were unknown when I left."

"In that case," Thorin said, his voice tense, "why don't you tell us what you do know?"

Fingalon nodded. "Of course, your Majesty. I will speak quickly for it is imperative you get back to Erebor as soon as possible, before it's too late."

"It's not going to be too late," Dwalin growled even as a sense of dread settled into his gut. Something was happening at Erebor that was so bad it was cutting down drakes and dwarves alike and there wasn't a doubt in his mind his daughter would be in the thick of it. Fingalon stated she'd been fine the last he'd seen her but, then again, so had Lyth and that had clearly changed.

His gut churned and he reached out, only to feel the same silence he'd felt all along save for the burst in Rivendell and the vague sensation from a few minutes ago.

"It's not going to be too late," he repeated, unsure who exactly he was trying to convince.

"I hope you're right," Fingalon agreed. He took a deep breath and then launched into what he knew.

And the more he talked, the worse the feeling grew in Dwalin's gut because of every scenario he'd imagined he'd never, even once, pictured a full scale invasion.

He'd thought it was bad but he was wrong.

It was a thousand times worse.

And, just as he'd thought, Bilba was in the middle of it.

Without him.

Again.
Chapter 29

Azog’s bony hand struck her in the small of the back and Bilba stumbled forward. Her feet tripped over the edge of the crenel she stood on and she felt a gut clenching sense of weightlessness and fear as there was suddenly nothing under her but air.

She started to drop, only to feel her shirt twist around her neck and pull tight in a chokehold. Her body swung backward, slamming into the stone with a heavy thud. The shirt tightened further and she gagged, her hands going to the material frantically to try and pull it clear.

The world shifted and then she was being dropped unceremoniously in a heap at Gothmog’s feet. Bilba curled up, drawing her legs in toward her chest as she gasped for breath, one hand going to her throat as if she could magically make herself breathe easier. She heard a scuffle a few feet away and looked through the gap in Gothmog's legs to see Frerin being held back by several orcs.

"I will have my revenge," she heard Azog snarl from just behind her and she tensed in anticipation of a blow.

Gothmog gave an overly dramatic sigh of long suffering. "Mortals." He grabbed her arm and wrenched her to her feet. He twisted her arm behind her back and turned her to face Azog. "So you kill her," he said mildly, "and then what? What happens when you wake up tomorrow just as angry at her? Or the next day? Or the day after?"

Azog looked confused which, Bilba had to admit, was not an expression she'd ever seen on him before.

"Or what about leverage?" Gothmog went on, sounding bored. Bilba was beginning to suspect boredom was his default state of mind. "You kill her and then realize she could have been useful the next day but, oops, too bad, she's dead."

"You say that," Azog growled, "but she served no such purpose to you. The Durin was held back from coming."

Bilba let out a short sigh of relief. She had no doubt Vili and Kili must have been the ones to hold Fili back and made a note to thank them for it if she ever got the chance.

Gothmog looked nonplussed. "She may still have her uses, her and your new slave both."

He shoved her forward, into the waiting arms of several orcs. "Put her away somewhere," he ordered, "and bring me ten more prisoners." He angled his head and turned his attention to Frerin, dismissing Bilba as one might an insect. "Tell me, Durin, how many of your people will your nephew let die before he gives himself up? What value does he place on his life in comparison to theirs?"

Bilba never got to hear the answer, if Frerin even had one to give, as the orcs were already dragging her away and down the stairs. She caught a brief glimpse of Azog, his face twisted in anger, standing near Gothmog and then they were on the ground floor and she was being forced back through the marketplace.

Just as they reached the stairs leading back into Erebor itself she was pulled to a stop and dragged to one side to make way for a line of prisoners being marched down into the marketplace and toward the battlements. Several of them gave her frightened looks and Bilba couldn't help the instinctual step
toward them, the desire to help overwhelming.

One of the orcs dragged her back, clawed hands digging into her forearms.

"You think you can save them, slave?" it growled at her in Black Speech. "You think you can save any of them?"

Bilba couldn't have answered even if she wanted but she did her best to convey her thoughts via the look on her face. The orc laughed at her in response, a guttural sound that made Bilba want to gut it on the spot.

"Fool," it spat. "You should feel grateful for the mercy shown them. It is far more than the rest of your ilk will get." He tightened his grip on her arm as the last of the prisoners passed and pulled her into the narrow corridor. "Lord Gothmog has already sent orders for the army to march around the mountain. They will take your people by surprise as they watch their kin die, and slaughter them all where they stand."

Ice cold fear burned through her veins and Bilba shoved backward, twisting around to try and run back into the marketplace. Desperately she tried to call out in her mind but all she heard back was the same maddening silence as before.

The orc laughed again, joined in by his fellow, and grabbed her around the waist, physically lifting her up and carrying her down the hall.

All Bilba could do was watch as the entrance leading to the marketplace dwindled, until it finally vanished and was gone.

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The orcs couldn't be bothered to take her all the way to the dungeons, if the creatures even knew where they were. Instead they brought her to a small, empty room that might have once stored weapons or food. She was shoved in hard enough to lose her balance and stumble to a bruising landing on the ground.

The orcs slammed the door shut and barricaded it. The result was total darkness and an absolute silence so thick it felt like a physical weight pressing down on her.

Bilba carefully pushed off her hands and knees where she'd landed and moved carefully until she found the wall. She pressed her back against it, slid down slowly until she was seated and then... she waited.

She was still blocked from communicating with anyone, so she had no way of knowing what was going on outside. The idea that a fight was happening, orcs against the innocent, against her friends was maddening.

Far more maddening than anything else, not that she imagined that being the intent behind her imprisonment. She'd been a slave for decades; her time in the Arena, when measured against all her life, had been short. Silence, isolation, darkness, monotony, none of that bothered her. She'd been raised in the silence that came from trying to avoid the attention of the orcs, the isolation on days or even weeks when she'd been sent into the lower mines as punishment for one thing or another, the
never-ending dark of living perpetually underground, the monotony of doing the same thing over and over again with the only end to it all held just past the gates of death.

She settled and drew her legs up, resting her hands on her knees and dropping her head back against the stone. She shut her eyes and focused on relaxing, allowing her breathing to become even and slow, her muscles loose and at ease even as her mind stayed sharp and alert.

It had been a long time but that didn't mean she'd forgotten the way.

She built the world inside her mind carefully, taking her time. It was easier now, there were fewer gaps she had to fill in, not as many things she had to imagine. She was tired of mountains for the time being so she pictured the Shire instead, untouched by orcs with green rolling hills, a brilliant blue sky overhead and a bright sun shining down. She put Bag End in its place with Primula standing in the doorway, Frodo clutching at her skirts as they waved in greeting. She added Drogo because she could and, near them, Primrose with strong, unbroken wings.

Bilba placed Syrath at her back, a warm, strong presence, and Fili at her side as she strode forward to greet her friends.

A sense of peace and even happiness spread through her and she sighed, allowing the darkness and uncertainty outside to melt away, for a time.

Her fingers dug into her knees where she sat on the cold stone floor but she gave it little notice, instead choosing to focus on the world inside her head. Primula and Drogo hugged her and then ushered her inside where her mother and father waited.

A slight smile spread across Bilba's face, not that anyone would have been able to see it in the darkness.

Bilba settled in deeper to her own mind.

Azog and the orcs wanted to break her.

They wanted to break the ones she loved.

They had tried to break her before, and failed.

They would fail again, and they would fail equally at trying to hurt her friends.

She had faith in them. Her father, her One, her dragon, and the many, many others who'd stood strong against the orcs before and would do so again.

Erebor may have fallen but her people had not, would not.

The tide would turn.

The people of the Lonely Mountain would rise.

And then...
Thorin hadn't truly believed it.

When Fingalon had reported what was happening, that Erebor was under attack by a massive army of orcs and their dragons, Thorin had hoped somehow, someway it was all a mistake. He knew something was happening, only an idiot would try to deny that, but surely it wasn't as bad as Fingalon said. Surely an army hadn't managed to set itself up under Erebor's very nose. Surely Thorin hadn't taken the bulk of her defenses from her just when she needed them most.

Surely not.

They'd set out as soon as Fingalon had finished speaking. He'd stayed behind with Inilth, as had Yari and a few of the other dwarves who weren't fighters. There were enough innocents in danger already without dragging in more. Dwalin had offered to let Quinlan stay behind as well with his mate but the dragon had given him a look that, by all rights, should have fried him on the spot. Quinlan was a fighter and his friends and family were back at Erebor, not to mention the tiny son he and Inilth had just had mere months before. After years of watching other dragons produce offspring with no signs of it happening for them, the two had been overjoyed to have their single egg. They had guarded it zealously, and were even worse now that the little one had hatched and proven to be a born troublemaker with a bad habit of dragging other baby dragons into his shenanigans.

The thought of the little dragon, tiny by any definition but a fighter like his father through and through, tugged at Thorin's heart and he'd ordered them to pull out at once. Originally the plan had been to wait in the small valley until the rest of their aid arrived and then go on together. Rivendell had promised to ready itself and follow as soon as possible, while Gondor's contingent had vowed to return home and fly to Erebor with the full force of its army behind it.

It was aid Thorin feared they would desperately need, but had no time to wait for. Every second that passed was one more that Erebor faced an invading army with the bulk of her own fighters trapped inside and most of the dragons left behind non-fighters.

Nobody questioned the orders. Thorin left behind weapons because the simple fact that Yari and a few others might not be fighters didn't mean they couldn't defend themselves, and then loaded up once more and left without looking back. They would be fine, he assured himself. Inilth was well on the way to recovering and the Rivendell contingent would pass by right overhead and be able ferry them back to safety.

No one spoke for the rest of the trip.

It was as they crested the last ridge of the Misty Mountains and caught sight of the Lonely Mountain in the distance that the full weight and reality of what Fingalon had told them had truly sunk in.

Erebor was burning.

The entire back side of the mountain was aflame and he could see the flickering arcs of light as siege engines sent still more fuel after what had already been thrown. Orcs crawled like maggots on the mountainside and squirmed over the landscape below, in numbers so great it could almost make one question if any resistance had been offered at all.

Almost, and only if one utterly ignored the chunks of stone that had been torn out of the mountain, the ledge where the secret entrance had once stood gone entirely, and the dead liberally coating the
Thorin didn't have to give the order to fly higher as motion caught his eye and he looked up to see a veritable wall of orcs mounted on the disgusting things they dared call dragons flying right at them. As they rose he cast another look down and felt his hands clench into fists of helpless rage at the sight of dwarves cast about like broken toys.

He saw the dead drake just as they lifted through a cloud and lost sight of the ground. It was sprawled on the ground with its wings, clearly snapped in several places, spread out, orcs swarming over it like ants.

Heat built in Thorin's veins and it took all he had not to command the dragon he rode to take him back down to kill every last one of the foul creatures.

He didn't, because the dragon was already dead and beyond caring...and because he'd lost enough that day.

*Thorin,* Dwalin's voice broke through in his mind, *can you hear me yet?*

*Yet?* Thorin asked. *What do you mean yet?*

The other dwarf's exasperation flowed across the link. *You mean you haven't noticed yet? We're blocked out down below. No one can talk via link, or even soul bond.*

Thorin's mood, if possible, darkened further. He hadn't tried to contact anyone, too preoccupied with what had been done to his kingdom in his absence. The clouds parted beneath him and he caught sight of the orcs and orc dragons swirling below them, waiting for them to descend. Past them his eyes trailed along the ground until they caught on a clear bottleneck of the army on both sides of the mountain. Drakes and large portions of his army stood there, attempting to drive the orcs back. There weren't nearly enough, however, and he could see orcs making it past to swarm onto the plain beyond. Even more were going up and over the heads of his soldiers, sliding past and joining their brethren on the other side.

There was only one reason Thorin could think of for his people to be putting so great an effort into holding the orcs back off the plains.

*I'm going to Mirkwood,* he told Dwalin. *Fingalon said that's where the injured were being taken. They may be able to provide a more recent update. I want you to take the rest and go help hold the orcs off the plain. They're targeting Dale, and probably the survivors from Erebor.*

The jolt of emotion from Dwalin was so strong it was nearly palpable. *The survivors?*

*You're no more a fool than I am,* Thorin responded. *Look at her, Dwalin. Do you really think she still stands?*

Dwalin gave no response but he didn't have to. Thorin could feel it. *Go,* he ordered his friend. *Find your daughter.* And his nephews and Vili and all the rest he'd left behind believing them to be safe.

A moment later and the dragon Dwalin rode was driving straight down toward the orcs gathered beneath him. The other dragons of his contingent, sans the ones carrying Dis and Nori, gathered in behind him. With Dwalin as the head of the spear they sliced through the orcs as if they weren't even
there, leaving many of them to flutter to the ground in pieces as they angled straight toward their fellows fighting to hold the horde back from Dale.

Thorin headed to Mirkwood with Nori and Dis flanking him. He'd seen no sign of Thranduil or the group of his people that had followed in pursuit of their kidnapped king. He planned to find out as much as he could about current conditions at Erebor and then join the fight. Dis and Nori would undoubtedly fight him on it.

He planned to ignore them.

He was Erebor's king.

He would not sit idly by while she suffered.

***

Dwalin found who he was looking for almost immediately.

Or, rather, he should say the one he was looking for found him.

They had barely joined the battle when a familiar roar rang out. Dwalin lifted his head to see Xalanth emerging from the midst of the battle, rising up to meet them. Something in Dwalin's chest eased slightly at the sight of his dragon, relatively unscathed but for a few burn marks and scrapes where the bastards must have doubled him, one going in to burn him and a second coming in behind to attack the weakened area.

Xalanth came alongside and just below and, with a nod of thanks at Kedric and his dragon for having carried him so long, Dwalin stood and easily jumped off.

He landed on Xalanth's back and was already strapping in as his dragon shot straight into the air, fire blistering any orcs in their path. Dwalin grunted as the air dragged at him. He tightened his grip on the straps and managed to get them around his legs and waist as they reached a higher altitude.

Where is she? he asked, the second he felt they were above whatever interference was keeping them silent on the ground.

She was captured, Xalanth said, his head hanging low. I'm sorry. I tried to protect her.

It's not your fault, Dwalin said immediately. Syrath? And the rest of the royals? A thought occurred to him and he asked, Did you see Quinlan's son?

He's safe, Xalanth said. Bilba got him out personally. Most of the rest made it out from the nursery too. They're in Mirkwood.

Dwalin hid a flinch at the word most.

Xalanth brought him up to speed on the rest quickly, from the escape from the nursery to watching the creature that had taken over Erebor throw innocents from the battlements. The news that Frerin was still alive nearly stunned him speechless but he had no time to process it and simply filed it away.

Vili and Kili held Fili back, Xalanth said, finishing up, but the bloodshed became too much. The creature was willing to kill without remorse. He finally surrendered himself, and his father and brother let him. Orcs took him inside, just before the army came around the mountain. No one has seen him since.
All right, Dwalin said finally. He couldn't blame the young Prince. He'd been in an impossible situation. We need to get to Dale and start evacuating survivors. Particularly Kili who was technically Erebor's current king with Thorin and Fili both out of commission. He had no doubts the young dwarf was a high priority target. We can take them to Mirkwood. Assuming even Mirkwood would be safe. The orcs seemed to have no interest in it but that could change any second.

Xalanth's head twisted around to study him. **You don't think Dale will hold?**

In response Dwalin simply looked down to where, even then, their forces were slowly, inch by inch, being overwhelmed. They were already battered and exhausted, even the dragons sluggish in their movements.

**Help is coming, we just have to make sure there are still people left to save when they arrive.**

**You sound like her,** Xalanth said, sadness coloring his emotions.

*She's not dead,* Dwalin said, reaching down to thump his dragon lightly on the side, *so stop your bellyaching. She wouldn't want it.*

**No,** Xalanth agreed. *She'd want us to slaughter all the orcs and their disgusting creatures.*

*Exactly,* Dwalin agreed. *So what do you say we get to it?*

***

From a balcony high up on the side of the mountain, Gothmog watched the battle rage with all the interest a dragon might foster upon a gnat.

Footsteps sounded from behind him but he didn't bother to turn to look.

"**It's here,**" Azog growled finally. He'd been sulking ever since Gothmog had refused to allow him to kill the child.

Gothmog couldn't bring himself to care. Not now, not when he was so close to a goal centuries in the making.

He raised his hand and absently examined the simple gold band now wrapped around one finger, idly turning his hand to study it from every angle.

"It's about time." He lowered his hand and turned his back on the fight, striding past Azog and into the now quiet halls of Erebor. As he walked a smile spread slowly across his face and he found himself clenching and unclenching his fists in excitement. "Now the real fun begins."
Chapter 30

The mountain rumbled.

In the darkness, Bilba's eyes snapped open. She'd been resting fitfully, curled up in a corner of the small room she'd been locked in for who knew how long. Some might have spent the time pacing or attempting to escape but she already knew one was pointless and the other futile. Far better to rest, regain her energy, and be ready when an opportunity presented itself.

She unwound carefully, grimacing as sore muscles complained at being forced to release the positions they'd become locked into. She pushed forward until she was resting on one knee and then pressed a palm onto the stone, cold leeching into her palm.

The rock was vibrating, subtle but there for those who knew to look for it. Bilba felt her heart clench in her chest and her blood ran cold. There had been a mine collapse in Moria, once. She'd been a level or two away and could still remember the way the ground beneath her feet had moved, rock breaking away from the tunnel wall to tumble down while grit and dust filled her lungs and nostrils and sent her into a coughing fit.

Her mother, who'd been several levels higher, had felt nothing at all.

The closest mine was nowhere near where she was so for her to feel anything reminiscent of a mine collapse...

What had that monster done?

Noise came from outside the door and her eyes flickered toward it. She pushed to her feet and moved to one side of the room, pressing her back against the wall. The door was shoved open a few seconds later, scraping against rock and letting in a dim ray of light from the corridor.

Bilba pivoted on one foot and sent the other into the gut of the orc walking into the room. The creature grunted and bent over to grab its stomach. Bilba grabbed his face between her hands and drove her knee into his nose. She followed it up with the boot of her other foot, driving him back into the arms of the two orcs coming in behind him.

As they went down she leapt, pushing off the back of one and going into a flip that took her right over and onto her feet behind them.

She turned, hoping one of them had a weapon she could grab, only to let out a gasp of pain as a hand grabbed her hair and wrenched her head back.

"You really are endlessly amusing," Gothmog's voice said from behind her. "I knew coming to get you personally would be worth it. You are quite the persistent one, aren't you?"

He sounded downright happy and Bilba couldn't help but remember back to Frerin's comment of how screwed they all were. She didn't see him now, or Azog, just Gothmog...who was smiling.

Before she could give any response, he dragged her around by her hair and pushed her in front of him. He released her as he did but Bilba didn't bother to try and resist. She wasn't an idiot and there was no point in engaging in a fight she knew she had no chance of winning.

What have you done? she demanded instead, knowing full well he could hear her.
His smile, if anything, grew broader. "Why won, of course. What did you expect?"

He pushed her and she grudgingly fell in line as he led her through empty halls and corridors, past the broken remnants of battle and the darkened buildings people had once called home.

Where are all the orcs? Bilba asked with a frown. She knew there was an army inside and there were certainly enough dead orcs littering the ground to prove how many had once been there but, aside from the ones at her back, and the occasional handful running past them, the mountain appeared empty.

Gothmog's only response was to put a clawed hand on her shoulder and spur her forward as if he couldn't wait to get to wherever they were going. There was no scenario under which that could be a good sign.

He took her to the throne room. As they approached, Bilba caught sight of Azog lounging on the throne. Frerin stood stiffly next to him. Beryl was sitting on the steps before the throne and next to her...Bilba sucked in a gasp and tried to move forward only to be dragged back by Gothmog.

Next to Beryl, Fili surged to his feet and tried to come toward her only to be similarly pulled back by Beryl. He had shackles on his wrists and Beryl was holding the end of a long chain attached to them. A second, shorter chain, attached the shackles to a third chain around his waist preventing him from raising his arms more than a couple inches.

"Now, now," Beryl said in that same, strange singsong voice. "You know the rules, Fili. I'm the Queen. You have to do what I say."

"Bilba," Fili said, worried. "Are you all right?"

Bilba nodded but had no chance to try and sign anything to him as Gothmog dragged her past him and up to the throne. Azog scrambled to get out of the chair and the creature sprawled into it, throwing one leg over the armrest and leaning an elbow on the other.

"Well?" he said to Beryl, his voice amused. "I've upheld my end of the bargain. You have your kingdom and your prince, do you not?"

She nodded. "I do. Here." She moved and now Bilba saw a bag had been sitting on the ground behind her. Gothmog waved at an orc to retrieve it and Bilba exchanged a look of confusion with Frerin. If Gothmog had wanted the bag he could have taken it any time he wanted, why all the theatrics?

The bag was handed to Gothmog and he leaned forward and unceremoniously dumped its contents on the ground. A necklace and a sword. As Gothmog nudged them into a position he liked Bilba felt her eyes widen in recognition. The necklace was one she'd seen Arwen wearing from time to time while the sword belonged to Aragorn's family. Both were considered family heirlooms, handed down from generation to generation. Gothmog retrieved the arkenstone from an inside pocket and set it next to the necklace before adding the ring he'd taken from Bilba.

"Beautiful, is it not?" he asked.

Sound broke out from behind them and he casually swept the four objects into the bag before standing up and throwing it at Azog who caught it in one hand and held it.

"Ah," Gothmog said, raising his voice. "So good of you to join us, your Majesty."

Bilba tensed and twisted to look over her shoulder, eyes widening in shock at the sight of Thranduil,
king of Mirkwood, being marched toward them. At his side walked Saruman, a fact which didn't
surprise Bilba as nearly as much as it probably should have. He'd always struck her as a particularly
unpleasant person. The fact he was working with, or for, someone like Gothmog made perfect sense
as far as she was concerned.

"You," Thranduil said shortly. "I had hoped you had crawled under a rock somewhere and died like
the rot you are."

Gothmog laughed and turned his back on the elven king. "Do not think to speak to me as though you
are one of the Noldor, elf. You can do nothing to me."

Saruman stepped in front of Thranduil. "I have upheld my end."

Almost casually, Gothmog reached back inside his cloak and withdrew the three strange crystals
Bilba had seen strapped to his belt before. He tossed them to Saruman who caught them easily and
frowned.

"There are only three here. Where is the fourth?"

"Talking to birds somewhere I would imagine," Gothmog said shortly. "Find him yourself." He
made a motion and two orcs grabbed Thranduil's arms and dragged him forward.

"That was not the deal," Saruman started to say, only to stop short as fire licked up Gothmog’s legs
and he turned burning eyes on the older man.

"Do not think to dictate terms to me, Curumo. I dealt with you because a fight would have been an
irritation, not because I would have lost."

Saruman opened his mouth to respond and then snapped it shut again. As Gothmog turned away,
Bilba saw a shadow of something dark cross the older man's face, a look that reminded her far too
much of Gothmog and she resisted the urge to shudder.

Gothmog grabbed her arm again and pulled her toward the ledge leading away from the throne. As
he did, Azog growled. "The girl still belongs to me."

"And you can have her back," Gothmog said casually, "once she ceases to amuse me. Until then,
how do you think she would feel watching all she's ever fought for crumble at her feet?"

Azog considered the words and then a slow smile stretched across his face.

"As I said," Gothmog continued, "there are fates far worse than death." His eyes went to Frerin for a
moment and then away again. "I may tell you of others later, if it suits me."

He started to tug on her arm, pulling her away from the throne. With a low growl, Bilba twisted,
breaking free from his grip. At the same time, Fili surged to his feet again. They met halfway, Bilba
grabbing his shirt front and dragging him down to kiss him as hard as she could. She dimly heard
Beryl screeching but ignored it. She dug her hands into the front of Fili's shirt, her hands moving.

I love you. Come find me.

He nodded, eyes locked on hers.

Then both of them were being dragged away, him back to the throne and her toward the ramps
leading away.
"Wait!" Beryl yelled suddenly, face twisting in sudden realization. "You can’t all leave! I need orcs to help me hold the mountain!"

"And orcs you have," Gothmog said cheerfully. "An entire army in fact, just outside the gates."

"They don't even know who I am," the woman said. "You need to tell them to obey me, and send some of them inside. The dwarves could get back in!"

Gothmog laughed, halfway down the ramp now. Without bothering to slow or turn around he called out, "I promised you the mountain. I never said I would help you hold it."

Beryl made a strangled sound somewhere between rage and despair. "Azog!" she called out, desperation in her voice. "Tell your orcs to obey me! You want the mountain, don't you? I'll give you half!"

Azog, walking next to Gothmog with Frerin being dragged along next to him, never even paused. "The age of the light has passed," he said with a low growl. "The age of the orc has come." He tilted his head and caught Bilba's eye, sneering. "My reward for the aid I have offered will be great, far more than a pathetic mountain and a handful of dwarves."

Bilba swallowed hard and forced herself to meet his gaze head on. The last thing she would ever allow was Azog to see her scared, even if that was exactly how she felt.

Azog moved as they left the ramps and entered one of the corridors. Thranduil ended up just behind her with Frerin at her side. Gothmog and Azog led while orcs stayed at their back.

Behind them, Beryl continued to rant and rave. They rounded a corner and passed entered one of the corridors. Thranduil ended up just behind her with Frerin at her side. Gothmog and Azog led while orcs stayed at their back.

Beryl continued to rant and rave. They rounded a corner and passed out of sight of the throne room but the sound of her shrieking continued to reach them for many corridors after. It grew distant and distorted after a while until it was little more than a faint hum, the barest impression of sound as if the walls of the mountain itself were crying out over the pain and loss of life within her halls.

Finally, it fell silent and, in a way, that was worse.

Far worse.

***

They went down.

Past the marketplace and the front gates where the sounds of raging battle gave Bilba hope. If there was still fighting going on outside it meant people were still alive to fight, and enough of them to put up an effective resistance.

She tried a few times to talk to Thranduil, hoping to find out where and when he'd been taken captive. Every time she tried, however, she was roughly shoved by one of the orcs and forced to focus on walking again. Around the third or fourth time it happened she had a vivid daydream of killing the orc responsible with extreme prejudice.

The first sign of something being wrong came several layers below the marketplace and front gates. She hadn't forgotten the sensation of the mountain shaking under her feet, and her stomach had been in knots with worry about what might have happened. The feeling had only grown worse as they had gone lower with no signs of damage and she'd begun to fear Gothmog might have done something to damage the foundation of the mountain itself. If that had happened, a collapse creating a weakness in the stone upon which the whole of the mountain rested...it could make Erebor
irredeemable even if the dwarves managed to seize back control.

It was as they neared the foot of the mountain that she first started to smell the unmistakable scent of dust in the air. It only grew stronger as they went lower and soon the air itself began to grow hazy. Bilba coughed as the dirt and grit in the air ran into her lungs and nostrils. Beside her, Frerin was straight, eyes wide and fixed and body tense. This was his home, more than it had ever been hers, and, what's more, it was his family that held responsibility both for it and its people.

They reached the stairs leading down into the crypts and Bilba struggled to not double over and cough a lung up as clouds of dust floated lazily up the stairs. As they reached the bottom, Bilba couldn't hold back a gasp of shock.

The crypts had been destroyed.

Everywhere she looked she saw cracked stone and broken doors. Through the destroyed walls she caught glimpses of overturned stone and scattered bone and clothing. The route Gothmog took them on didn't go near where her mother's crypt lay, for which she was grateful. Even if the woman inside hadn't been her mother, the crypt itself had still been designed for her and Bilba had no desire to see if it had been damaged.

The further they went in, the worse the destruction until, finally, they rounded a pile of rubble and debris to find the source of the devastation.

A hole, big enough for Syrath to have comfortably fit in with room to spare, in the dead center of the room. It was perfectly, unnaturally, round and deep enough that all Bilba could see was darkness within. She stared at it in confusion. This was the base of the mountain, no mines extended this far down, no levels or chambers farther below, nothing that would explain a collapse.

"What did you do?" Frerin demanded.

Gothmog answered, but his eyes were fixed on Thranduil as he spoke. "Mortals," he said, casually. "So quickly they forget how much exists in the world, more than they could see ever see, or remember, in their pathetic lifespans."

"A were-worm," Thranduil said, his voice flat. "Creatures that gnaw upon the roots of the world. It must have taken you centuries to find one, much less control it."

"I had time." Gothmog stepped toward the hole and Azog followed. He'd come up with rope ladder from somewhere and he and several of the other orcs began attaching it to the larger pieces of rubble before lowering it into the hole.

The action left Bilba, Frerin and Thranduil relatively alone behind them and she took the effort to sign to Frerin. The mountain, how badly is it damaged?

Frerin lifted his head to examine the ceiling over their heads before frowning at the rubble around them. "It should hold," he said finally, slowly. "The hole isn't near the walls and the damage appears to be limited to this level." He frowned, eyes dark. "Once Thorin gets the mountain back they'll have to test the soundness of this section and possibly reinforce it."

He sounded so sure, not if Thorin regained the mountain, but when.

"Your brother was in close pursuit after I was taken," Thranduil said, his voice far calmer than the situation warranted. "As were my own people. They could not have been far behind."

And they would have been warned, Bilba signed. We sent Fingalon and Inilth to warn them. They
wouldn't have come in blind. Assuming they'd made it, of course. The thought of Inilth and her little baby raced through her mind and Bilba fought back a wave of worry and guilt. Inilth was the last dragon she'd have ever chosen to send but it had been necessary, and the choice had not been hers alone. The other dragons had agreed, as had Kili and, of course, Inilth herself. It helped some, not much, but some.

"I never saw them," Thranduil said, his eyes fixed on Gothmog, "but if Fingalon went then I have confidence they got through."

Bilba nodded, of course he did. Thranduil had left the elf in charge of Mirkwood while he'd been absent. It wasn't a task he would have handed to just anyone.

The ladder was in place and Azog moved to the edge while the rest of the orcs scrambled down. Once down torches were thrown down after them. Gothmog gestured for them to come forward and Bilba obeyed, not missing how both Thranduil and Frerin moved first and kept her between them.

As they neared the edge of the hole Bilba looked down and realized the opening went straight down for only a dozen feet or so before sloping into a straight tunnel that cut horizontally out of sight. Thranduil was sent down first with Frerin close behind. As Bilba moved to the edge of the hole she couldn't help but look at Azog and Gothmog where they stood.

You went to all the trouble of putting together an army, she challenged, and yet you're so willing to abandon them behind you? Her eyes flickered to Azog. And you really think the orcs will continue to follow you in light of such disloyalty? Or that you can take them on if they decide to rebel?

Gothmog studied her for a moment and then, to her surprise, he threw his head back and burst into laughter. Azog, who didn't know what had happened, looked confused but apparently didn't care enough to question it.

Gothmog lowered his head and then he was smiling and Bilba really wished he wouldn't as it was probably the most terrifying expression she'd ever seen.

"Little fool," he mocked, "do you really believe I put together an army simply to waste it on one, insignificant mountain?" He leaned forward, until hot breath washed over her face and she resisted the urge to back away. "I have had ages to plan my revenge and you honestly believe all I could manage was something so pathetic? So paltry?" He raised his head to gaze up at the ceiling and the battle raging far over their heads. "This is not my army," he hissed, before locking eyes with her. "This is an amusing diversion. An opening feint in a far larger game. One I have already won."

He knelt suddenly, bringing them face to face and the urge to back away became almost overwhelming. His voice dropped to a low, utterly calm, whisper, and his eyes never left hers.

"There is a battle coming that will make you look back on this one with fondness. The darkness it brings will stretch across every land and all of Middle Earth will tremble in its wake."

Bilba went cold and felt her eyes widen. Her hands clenched into fists and every muscle in her body was wound tight.

Gothmog smiled and turned to face Azog. "You see? There are things so much worse than death." He grabbed her arm and shoved her toward the hole while, on his other side, Azog smirked. "Come along now. There is so much more to come. You won't want to miss it."
Syrath lay sprawled haphazardly on the ground and watched Sardin try to fuss over Lyth in a way that didn't wind up with her killing him.

Syrath had always looked up to Sardin, firmly convinced the older dragon was the greatest dragon ever, next to Xalanth of course, but the longer he watched the more he was coming to one, tragic, inescapable conclusion.

Sardin was an idiot.

Xalanth had denied Lyth's request to rejoin the fight, as had Thorin and Dis when they'd arrived, and she was eight kinds of pissed off. Syrath could understand. If he could he'd already be out there, ripping into the mountain with his bare claws if necessary to try and get to his danger prone riders.

In response to her anger everyone had been giving Lyth a wide berth. No one wanted to come close and risk a dragon hissing, or outright snapping, at them. Even Dis was holding back a little, though she was so happy to see Lyth alive she couldn't bring herself to stay that far away no matter the dragon's current mood. Currently, she was halfway between Sardin and where Thorin was conferring with the elves and the injured dwarves who'd been evacuated to Mirkwood. Everyone else, from what Syrath gathered, had fled to Dale, right where the orc army was headed. The warrior dragons were all back, however, and had gone to join the fight and Thorin promised Rivendell and Gondor were coming as well. Not only that but, and hour or two before they'd arrived, the elven contingent had come home. They had seemed upset for some reason Syrath had not been privy to but Legolas had taken charge. He'd just been about to send the returned dragons out to fight when Thorin had arrived. Now every able-bodied dragon, human and elf was gone save Thorin and Legolas who'd stayed behind to confer on strategy and escape routes for the wounded should the attack spill into Mirkwood.

Technically, Sardin was able-bodied as well, albeit exhausted from fighting off orcs while simultaneously guarding Lyth until she reached safety, but Syrath wasn't sure how long that would last if he kept pestering Lyth, stubbornly staying close no matter how often she threatened him with increasingly creative methods of death and or maiming. Syrath was very impressed with the amount of thought she'd put into some of them.

**Maybe he has a death wish?**

Syrath rolled his eyes upward to where the small dragon Bilba referred to as Baby Ringleader lay sprawled out on his head, tiny legs hanging over the sides. The baby's head was resting in the dip between the ridges of Syrath's eyes so there was no way to see him, but Syrath made the effort anyway.

**Maybe he likes her.** Syrath answered absently as he watched Lyth make still another threat, somehow managing to never repeat one she'd already given. Given how little effort she was putting into carrying any of them out, Syrath questioned her sincerity.

Tiny claws dug into his scales and the sensitive areas around his eyes and then Baby Ringleader was sliding down to land on Syrath's snout in an awkward pile. He scrambled to untangle himself and then, as if nothing unusual had happened, carefully arranged himself to sprawl on Syrath's snout so they were eye to eye. **Girls are weird, and Lyth is scary.**

**You're only scared of her because you're always getting in trouble and she has to yell at you.**
Syrath said reasonably. Baby Ringleader heaved a long-suffering sigh, completely unearned given his age and lack of death wish carrying riders, and slumped on Syrath's snout.

You're boring.

I am not. Syrath retorted, offended.

Are too.

Am not!

Are!

Not!

ARE!

NOT!

ARE!

NOT!

Syrath?

Syrath's head snapped up so fast the baby had no time to react and fell off his snout with a startled squawk. Syrath's head had been flat on the ground already so the little dragon slid more than fell, landing on the dirt with a plop. He immediately leapt up again, more annoyed than hurt, and glared at Syrath. He then sat up straight with his chest out, head up and tail wrapped around his feet.

Syrath pushed to his feet, head lifted toward the sky as if it made any difference. Fili? Is that you? He'd been trying to contact his riders non-stop, openly broadcasting for a while and eventually settling for simply leaving his shields down, effectively letting everything in his head leak out along his soul bonds and mental links in the faint hope someone would answer. It had been hard, at times, not to give into despair at the stubborn silence. He knew Fili was a high priority target given his bloodline and Bilba...well, Bilba was Bilba. If there was danger to be found she was guaranteed to be in the middle of it. Normally he didn't mind it so much but that was because he was usually there with her, not stuck in a forest worrying about her. He hated not knowing and he hated waiting because it gave him too much time to imagine what horrors they both might be facing without him there to back them up.

Syrath! The voice repeated and it was Fili and Syrath was almost ready to leap for joy, if it weren't for the fact that his wing still wasn't fully healed and he'd probably end up hurting it again if he tried. He was largely healed and desperately wanted to fight but he recognized he was still weak, the wing still stiff and painful to move.

Are you okay? he asked frantically. Are you hurt? Where are you? Where's Bilba? What's going on?

One thing at a time. Fili sounded distracted and Syrath noticed that, on the other side of the clearing, Thorin had gone still, eyes unfocused. A moment later and it was as if a wall had come crashing down. A sudden cacophony of overlapping voices resounded in his head and Syrath rushed to put his shields up and block them out before they became overwhelming. Dimly, he was aware of others putting their shields up as well, slowly cutting the babble of voices down until they stopped entirely.
Clearly, he hadn't been the only one to have the idea of letting everything stay open in the hopes of someone hearing.

**What's going on?** Baby Ringleader asked. **What is it? What is it?** He got up on his hind legs and braced his front legs against Syrath's foreleg. **WHAT IS IT?**

**I'm guessing they're all getting caught up,** Syrath said. Almost everyone around them had gone completely still, eyes unfocused. Thorin looked to be in the deepest concentration of all as he undoubtedly worked to find out just what was going on in Dale and Erebor.

Movement near his feet drew his attention and Syrath looked down to see Baby Ringleader staring fixedly at the ground, wings drooping on his back.

**What's wrong?** Syrath asked, suddenly panicked at the thought that perhaps the little dragon had been hurt in the short fall after all.

**Do you think Adad is all right?** The small dragon's voice was quiet and hesitant in Syrath's mind as if he were afraid to ask the question, or hear the answer.

**Why don't you ask him?** Syrath asked and the baby huffed a sigh.

**He's fighting. I don't want to distract him.**

Syrath thought about the large dragon. Quinlan had been one of the first to land and his son had run into him so hard and fast he'd bounced off the larger dragon's nose in his excitement. After he'd gotten back up, he'd huddled up next to his father for what seemed like only a very short time before he'd been forced to back up as Quinlan had joined the other dragons in the fight.

**I'm sure he's fine,** Syrath assured him. **He knows what he's doing.** Quinlan was a hero from the orc fighting that had happened around the time Bilba's mother had been captured, and had plenty of experience since then. He was one of the oldest dragons at Erebor, as well as one of the most intimidating.

**He doesn't have a rider,** Baby Ringleader said, still studying his feet as if they were the most fascinating thing ever. **Amad had a rider and she still got hurt, Adad said so.**

**My Adad will keep him safe,** Syrath said without hesitation. **And so will Dwalin and all the other dragons and their riders. They won't let him get hurt, you'll see.**

Baby Ringleader didn't seem convinced. He let out another huff and then, in a voice so small Syrath could barely hear it inside his head, asked, **Do you think Amad is really okay? Adad said so but...**

**I think no one in Erebor would ever claim Quinlan doesn't love Inilth, and you.** Quinlan might be terrifying but he'd never shown anything but outright adoration toward his tiny family. **If she really was hurt worse there's no way he'd have left her. She's going to be all right. Yari is with her and Fingalon. They'll make sure she's okay and comes back when it's safe.**

The words seemed to placate the little dragon somewhat because he lifted his head enough to move over and curl up around Syrath's foot. **I hate not getting to fight.**

**Me too,** Syrath said fervently. He reached out again, trying to reach Bilba this time but she remained silent. He found the soul link to her and followed but it might as well have led nowhere. It was totally quiet on the other end, just as it had been since she'd left and he'd had to stay.
Fili? he tried, a cold fear starting to uncoil inside him. I can't find Bilba. Where is she?

I don't know, Fili's voice came back, uneasy. The monster behind all this took her away. He was the one who kept us from communicating. The fact we can talk now, I'm guessing, means he's gone.

So that means Bilba is gone too? Syrath asked. Where?

I don't know, came the response, but I'm going to find her.

Syrath didn't answer. He knew Azog had been around and all he could think of now was him possibly having Bilba again after she'd escaped. Many of her nightmares were centered around him and, though she'd come a long way, it didn't mean everything was perfect. The nightmares might not be as often now but they still happened, they were just as intense and they usually left her shaking for hours.

She wasn't alone, Fili said, reading him through their soul bond. My uncle, Frerin, was with her, as was Thranduil.

Thranduil? Syrath asked in surprise.

The creature wanted him. I don't know why.

Someone, or something, else caught Fili's attention after that and Syrath let him alone. Instead he turned as Thorin moved away from the group to greet an arriving dragon. Syrath couldn't remember his name but watched as he knelt to allow Kili and Vili to slide off. Both were bloodied, covered in grime and looked exhausted but they moved with relative ease.

Thorin reached them, Dis right on his heels, and Syrath turned away from the reunion, trying to pretend his heart wasn't twisting with pain. At his feet, Baby Ringleader was watching with a look of intense longing and Syrath wondered how many would end the day longing for someone who would never return.

The thought that he might end up being among them brought a spike of pure fear. He pushed to his feet, pausing just long enough to carefully pick up Baby Ringleader in his mouth and deposit the small dragon gently on his back between his wings. He then headed over to where Sardin was curled up near Lyth.

Lyth gave a mild rumble as he neared, more a general sound of irritation than a threat, and then ignored him.

You were there when Bilba got captured, Syrath said bluntly.

Sardin physically flinched back, and the growl Lyth sent held a clear warning tone. Syrath felt a flash of guilt. He hadn't mean to say that like an accusation, wasn't completely sure why he'd even said it at all. He knew it wasn't Sardin's fault, he did, but he supposed there was a small part of him that felt...resentful. If Sardin had just ignored Bilba and waited a few extra seconds or maybe used fire to try and keep the enemy back until she could make it or...or something that didn't involve instantly abandoning her just because she'd told him to. Bilba had self-sacrifice written on her bones, of course her first thought would be to sacrifice herself to let Sardin and Fili get away. He wouldn't have left her, Syrath thought, deliberately ignoring the small voice inside informing him that such an act could easily have ended up causing a worse outcome, not a better one.

I was, Sardin said, not meeting Syrath's eyes. She told me to go. I don't... he hesitated. I don't know if there was time. If I'd waited, and she'd run, or if I'd let go and she'd jumped off the ledge...
The guilt increased. Sardin hadn't set out to abandon Bilba to the orcs. He'd had to make a split-second decision under horrible circumstances and it wasn't fair to sit in the comfort and safety of Mirkwood and second guess what he'd done. **Bilba would have been happy you obeyed her,** Syrath said, his tone only slightly begrudging. *She wouldn't blame you, and... I don't either.* Mostly. He sat back on his hunches, earning a squawk from Baby Ringleader as he nearly lost his balance. **Fili says Bilba got taken away somewhere by that creature. I can't feel her or speak to her. Fili says he's going to find her, but I won't be able to go.**

Sardin was silent. Beside him, Lyth growled something and Sardin jerked as if he'd forgotten she was there. He turned to answer her and Syrath waited, only belatedly realizing he'd approached Sardin as if the other were a fellow child dragon the same as he was. He'd never have dreamed of talking to Lyth that way. Sardin was younger than Xalanth and Lyth but he'd reached his majority a good fifteen years ago at least. He was a smaller dragon, his body trending more to slender and lean rather than bulk and sheer power, but what he lacked in size he more than made up for in speed and agility. There were few who could match him in a race and he was reportedly a menace in mock training battles, able to execute turns faster than his bigger opponents and come up under them before they could react. Many of the older warrior dragons had high hopes for him once he'd matured and settled down. The female dragons around his age also seemed overly excited about him, though not for the same reasons.

*I'll go in your place,* Sardin said suddenly and Syrath snapped his head up to stare at him in surprise. On his back, Baby Ringleader uncurled and scrambled up to sit on Syrath's head, staring down at Sardin in what he probably hoped was appropriately intimidating.

**I wasn't asking you to do that,** Syrath said, uncertainty in his voice. What *had* he been looking for when he'd come over? He'd been upset at the thought of Bilba being gone and of him unable to go after her and, at the time, bringing those concerns to Sardin had seemed perfectly logical. Now that he was here, however, was that what he'd wanted? For someone to know, or for someone to be willing to take his place? It wasn't just Bilba after all. Fili would be going too and while Syrath knew logically that he would be well looked after it bothered him that Fili would have to ride another dragon. A dragon who might have a rider, or riders, of their own to look after or who might be unused to a rider and could forget him in the heat of battle. It bothered him that Fili wouldn't have a dragon dedicated to him and him alone, watching his back, making sure that he, and Bilba, both came home safely.

**I would have gone anyway,** Sardin responded, lowering his head to meet Syrath's eyes. *I'll carry the Prince in your place. We'll find Bilba, and kill that foul creature who took her.* He tilted his head for a moment, as if considering something, and then added. **I give you my word on that. I'll get it done, or die trying.**

**Don't promise that,** Syrath said without hesitation. *Promise you'll all come back.*

Bilba would not have been pleased with that. Don't make promises you can't keep. That's what she always said. She hated what she considered to be grandiose words or hollow promises. **Just say you'll do your best,** he said now, amending his words to what he knew she would want. *Do your best, and try to return no matter what.*

**I'll do my best,** Sardin said solemnly, *and I'll try to come back, with both of them.*

*Okay,* Syrath said.

He leaned forward to press his face against the side of the other dragon's face. Sardin returned the
gesture. He then settled back down next to Lyth who, for the first time, didn't snap or growl at him.

Syrath retreated to where he'd been initially. Baby Ringleader picked his way carefully down to curl between his front legs, head resting on Syrath's foot.

Together, they waited, silent sentinels until their loved ones returned.

Syrath wasn't sure how much time had passed when a shout caught their attention. They, along with the rest of the dragons, dwarves and elves in the clearing turned to see a dwarf cradling one arm close to his side while pointing with the other over their heads. Almost as one, all eyes turned upward, just in time to see the unmistakable shape of Barahir swooping by overhead, maw opened in a roar of challenge that echoed through the clearing down below. A second dragon came close behind, followed by a third and then a fourth. More soon came after, in clusters, headed directly toward Erebor.

"Gondor," someone whispered, and then louder. "It's Gondor! Gondor has come!"

The sky overhead became near black with dragons, hordes of them, the entire might and force of Gondor's army on display. Flashes of glittering light flickered amongst them, eventually resolving into the figures of smaller, elven dragons soaring after their counterparts. They slowly overtook the numbers in the sky until it was filled with flashing light as the dragons of Rivendell soared in.

Lyth pushed to her haunches and roared, followed soon by Sardin. The other dragons in the clearing, those unable to fight due to health, lack of training or age, began to join in as well. Syrath surged up and opened his own maw to add to the sound. At his feet, Baby Ringleader did his best to squawk, flapping his wings wildly as if it would somehow help.

A cheer broke out from one of the dwarves and, as with the dragons, it quickly spread until the entire clearing was a mass of roaring dragons and cheering dwarves, elves and humans. Syrath saw several of the dwarves, bloodied and with pain etched deep in their faces, on their feet and near leaping for joy as they punched the sky and shouted.

Perhaps, however, the grandest sight was also the subtlest. For there stood the King of Erebor with head upraised, tears streaming openly down his cheeks, wearing the grandest of all smiles.

Hope, had arrived.
You're certain?

Fili hid a flinch at the fragile hope coming through the bond with his uncle. There's no doubt. It was him.

His uncle went silent and Fili tried to politely ignore the sudden flood of emotion. He shifted, grimacing as a particularly sharp edge of stone cut into his hip. He'd been lounging across the stairs leading up to the throne, resting on one hip and his elbow as he watched Beryl shriek at two confused orcs near the bridge leading to the rest of the mountain.

Well, one confused orc anyway. The other looked like it was sizing her up for a meal. The two were orc grunts, usually those considered the most expendable by the rest. Orcs used them as cannon fodder, protecting the best and brightest, by their standards, farther back in the ranks. If Beryl wanted action, her best bet would be orc commanders but, judging by the lack of organization from those still in the mountain, Fili was fairly sure they'd all either gone with Gothmog or were outside with the bulk of the army.

Lucky for Beryl. If she were to come face to face with an orc commander, Fili had no doubt she'd have been three days dead before catching on. It was unreal to him how utterly deluded the young woman was, so deeply and thoroughly spoiled by her father that she genuinely seemed to believe rank and bloodline alone should open any door she wished.

And you're sure he's no longer there? his uncle's voice cut into his musings and Fili tuned back into it.

There's no way to know for certain but my best guess is Gothmog and Azog took him with them when they left. His uncle and Bilba. He'd tried to speak to them when the ability had come back, only to hear silence in return.

And the Arkenstone. His uncle sounded troubled and Fili couldn't blame him.

You really think they're going after the cage?

Where else? Thorin replied. They came here specifically for the Arkenstone and you say he had the other keys.

Maybe, Fili answered, trying his best to put some positive spin on things. Perhaps the ring Bilba wore wasn't one of them. And, besides, no one knows where the cage is, it's been lost for centuries.

He's been alive for centuries. His uncle never had been one for self-delusion, always the one to stand up and face the truth, no matter how dark. He didn't stage this attack on a hope or possibility. He knows where the cage is.

And we don't. If Gothmog got to the cage and, Valar forbid, opened it, then this battle would seem like a mere scuffle.

His uncle gave the mental equivalent of a sigh. One thing at a time. We can't do anything with an army on our doorstep. Can you get free?

Fili barely managed to not snort in derision. It had been one thing when Gothmog and Azog had been there, but now... well, the day he couldn't escape from one delusional courtier was the day he
Some of his feelings on the subject must have leaked across the bond because it was with amusement that his uncle said, *Get to one of the balconies. I'll have a dragon come get you.*

Fili considered it, tilting his head absentely to one side as Beryl's shrieking impossibly reached a whole new level. Her face was red and contorted with rage, her hair and dress a mess and her words so shrill she was nearly incomprehensible. Fili wasn't sure if she was demanding reinforcements or a new dress, either a possibility with her.

*You said the army is focused on Dale, right?* Casually, he pushed to his feet and stepped down the stairs to the platform.

*Yes,* Thorin answered. *The dragons are trying to hold them back while the people are evacuated to Mirkwood.*

Fili strode casually toward the orcs and Beryl. The creatures had their backs to him and Beryl was either too caught up in her tirade to notice or simply didn't care. *Do you think you could pull their attention away from the sides or back of the mountain?*

*Of course. Why?*

*Give me a second,* Fili responded.

One of the orcs was stupid enough to be carrying a knife on his back. Granted, Fili did the same thing but, then, he wasn't dumb enough to give his back to the enemy. Reaching out, he grabbed the orc's shoulder with one hand. At the same time, he slipped the dagger out of its unsecured sheath, mistake number two, and drove it straight through the orc's shoddy armor, mistake number three, and into its back.

The orc screamed, instinctively arching its back as it tried to pull away from the sharp object stabbing into it. Using the knife like a fulcrum, Fili spun the orc into its companion, knocking both off balance. Beryl, who'd snapped her mouth shut in surprise, showed surprisingly good sense in moving to the side as Fili balanced on one foot and sent the other boot straight into the gut of the second orc.

The two creatures stumbled forward, giving Fili just enough time to snatch the knife back before they both went over the edge of the platform. They ought to have known better than to stand so close.

Mistake number four.

Beryl still looked shocked, an oddity considering all the violence she'd been privy to. Fili took the opportunity to snatch the chain off her neck, containing the keys to his shackles. Within minutes he had them off. He grabbed Beryl's hands, and saw her eyes widen. She jerked, trying to pull away but she had nowhere near the mass he had, or the years of training and fighting experience.

He snapped the shackles around her wrists and then calmly threw the others, and the keys, over the edge to follow the orcs.

Beryl watched them go and then turned to stare at the shackles on her wrists. Her eyes followed the metal to the chain clutched in Fili's hands and then slowly upward to meet his eyes. She opened her mouth and, for a second, Fili thought she planned to fly into another rage.

Instead, her eyes proceeded to well up and she let out a wail that reverberated through the chamber to the point Fili was convinced she might well bring the mountain down on the strength of it alone.
The urge to slap her ran through him but he pushed it down. She was shackled, after all, and no longer a threat to anything but his hearing.

Instead he did his best to shut her out and turned his attention back to his uncle. Still there?

Of course.

Good, Fili responded, a slow smile stretching across his face. I've got an idea.

***

Fili stood on the balcony in Bilba and Dwalin's rooms and tried to ignore the hollow feeling at not having her there with him. She'd become so integral to him in such a short time that he could no longer remember what his life had been like before meeting her.

And he simply couldn't imagine what his life would be like going forward without her.

Which mean his only option was to get her, and his uncle, back.

A rush of wind washed over him and then Sardin was there, scrabbling for a precarious hold on the ledge and railing. He was much too big for it but he did his best, struggling to stay in position long enough for the people on his back to get off. Fili had expected him to make several trips but somehow the dragon had managed to cram everyone on his back, an action Fili was sure Thorin wouldn't have allowed had it not been urgent, and a relatively short distance.

Dis was the first off, running to grab Fili in a hug that nearly crushed his ribs. Before he could recover, Kili joined her. Fili extricated himself just in time to see his uncle dismounting, carefully stepping from Sardin to the ledge and then onto the balcony. He held Orcrist in one hand and wore borrowed armor that fit poorly but that he still managed to make look regal somehow.

Fili moved toward him, pulling lightly away from Kili and his mother. Once he made it, he immediately tried to kneel, only to have the movement arrested by his uncle grabbing his arms.

"Don't," he said simply. "If it was anyone's fault it was mine, for not realizing we had been deceived, and for taking the bulk of Erebor's protection when she needed it most."

"You couldn't have known," Fili started to say, only to cut off as he realized what he was saying applied to him as well.

Behind him, Dwalin carefully made his way down, followed by Vili after him. As his father stepped onto the balcony, Fili noticed Sardin stretch his head forward as if to try and help his father, an action he hadn't taken for anyone else. Kili, he remembered, had once commented Sardin seemed interested in their father, the small handful of times he'd made it to the dragon levels, but Fili hadn't thought much of it. Now he filed the information away, under things to deal with after the world stopped doing its very best to destroy itself.

His father stepped up to hug him and Fili returned it before reaching out to clasp arms with Dwalin.

"I'm sorry," he said, locking eyes with the other dwarf. "I should have been able to protect her." The guilt of not being able to help her, and being forced to just stand there as she and his uncle were led away, had been gnawing at him.

"Girl runs to meet trouble with open arms," Dwalin muttered. "Only way to protect her would be having a twenty-four-hour guard on her."
"Good idea," Fili said. "We'll work it out once we get her back."

"We'll add Frerin into it too," Thorin growled. "He's as bad as she is."

That was true, Fili thought, thinking back to some of the things his other uncle had gotten into in the past. "I wonder if Gothmog and Azog realize what they've done, putting those two together."

For the first time a flash of amusement crossed Dwalin's face at the thought.

They headed inside the rooms, where the other forty or so dwarves snuck onto the balcony over the course of the last hour were waiting. In a far back corner Beryl, currently tied to a chair, was still wailing loudly, tears streaming down her face as she threw the mother of all tantrums. So far the noise hadn't drawn any attention but Fili could see everyone was tense and restless.

Dis' face went flat. Fili saw her hands clench in fists at her sides before she stalked over to the wailing girl, lifted one hand with her palm flat and proceeded to slap Beryl across the face. The sound echoed in the room and all conversation immediately died.

Thankfully, so did Beryl's wailing.

"Shut your mouth, you wretched girl," Dis hissed, "or I'll gag you and lock you in a storage room until this is all over. You and your ilk have brought enough suffering to my family."

Beryl sniffled, eyes wide, but obediently settled down, trying her best to look small and meek. Fili didn't buy it for an instant. He'd known her for years and was well aware of her habit of playing innocent any time she felt she was backed into a corner for something she'd done. It had always worked on her father and brothers, not so much on anyone else.

Thorin went to where Kili was standing near the door. Vili had joined him, along with a dozen or so others, dwarves and elves. All of them were armed with bows and quivers full of arrows.

"For my own peace of mind," Thorin said, "I shall repeat. You are the vanguard, and it is imperative you remain unseen. If even one of the wretches manages to escape and raise the alarm..."

"We won't fail," Vili said, nocking an arrow onto his bow string. He shot a grin at Kili. "What do you say, kid? Want to see if your aim has improved?"

Kili gave a pointed look at his already nocked bow. "I was just waiting for you. Age finally slowing you down?"

Vili shook his head in amusement before nodding at Thorin. The doors to the rooms were slid open and the group moved out silently, vanishing quickly into the darkness. The rest headed out after, just as quiet, hoping to pick off any orcs the archers might have missed along the way. It was a large mountain, after all, with a lot of places to hide.

A shadow flashed by outside the window and Fili turned in time to catch sight of the silver of Sardin's scales as he dropped off another group. There were other dragons, on other levels, dropping off more archers and soldiers as well. They were being brought in staggered tiers and dropped off quickly. They had deliberately chosen balconies at the back of the mountain, after sending in a wave of low flying dragons to pick off stragglers who hadn't followed the bulk of the army around the front.

Outside, the forces of Erebor had joined with those already at the front to drive the orcs back from Dale as survivors were evacuated. Gondor and Rivendell, upon arriving, had hit the army from behind, catching them into a pincer movement. The only saving grace for the orcs had been the
continued, annoying presence of the orc dragons. The creatures had been coming up on dragons trying to fight the forces on the ground, or help with Dale, and attacking them while they were occupied.

It had stretched out the battle, and already whittled down their numbers as people and dragons gave into the exhaustion of a long fight. The reinforcements had helped a great deal but they were in desperate need of a tipping point, one thing on either side that would sway the battle from the game of attrition it had fallen into.

Hopefully, that tipping point was about to take place.

Everyone had moved out but for Thorin, Dwalin, Dis and Fili. Fili nodded at Beryl. "What about her?"

"Leave her," Dis said immediately. "We can't afford her trying to give us away, and there is nothing she could say that would convince me she wouldn't."

"We could miss an orc or two," Fili said, idly spinning the sword someone had handed him to get a feel for its balance and weight.

"Then she will face the consequences of her own actions," Thorin stated simply.

Fili nodded. He'd been trained to be king one day and that training had included the inherent dangers of misusing mercy. Too little of it and a king quickly became a tyrant, hated by his people and risking the threat of a coup. Too much of it and the king risked becoming a pawn of those seeking to take advantage, or endangering himself and those he loved by showing mercy to one unworthy of it. A wise king understood he could not save everyone and, at some point, the hand of mercy must be withdrawn. Striding over to where the young woman sat, he crouched down slightly to her eye level.

"I would suggest," he said, voice flat, "that you stay as quiet as possible until someone comes back for you." Her eyes came up to meet his and her mouth opened but he continued before she could speak. There was literally nothing he wanted to hear from her. "If I were you, I'd use this time to consider everything you've lost, and for what?"

"It's your family's fault my brothers are dead. My father would have done better," she whispered, voice sounding oddly far off. "And I needed to get you away from that woman." Her eyes shifted, an odd light coming into them. "I had it all worked out, Fili. You'd have seen. It was all that woman's fault." Her voice changed, a sneer entering. "That damn woman. If it wasn't for her..."

She snapped her mouth shut as Dis came up beside Fili. "If it weren't for her, you'd have what?" she asked coldly. "Succeeded in murdering my husband, son and brother? Succeeded in murdering me?"

Beryl glared at her, rage building in her eyes once again.

"Don't waste your breath," Fili said, putting a hand on his mother's shoulder. "She's past hearing us."

He turned his back and his mother followed him. Together, with Dwalin backing them, they left leaving Beryl behind them to stew in her own hate.

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Fili stood in the rubble of the marketplace, before the closed gates. Overhead, Kili, his father and the rest of the archers were getting into position, crouched low behind the parapet. Beyond it, Fili could hear the battle, the clash of steel, screams of the wounded and dying, and the ever-present roar of dragons.
The fight to the lower levels had been relatively quick. His initial belief that most of the orcs had
gone with Gothmog proved correct. Less than a hundred had been left, and they hadn't been the sort
of orcs who proved much of a threat.

His uncle had grown steadily quieter as they'd gone down each level, past scores of dead, and
rampant destruction. Erebor had suffered a heavy blow and its recovery would not be quick.

We're ready.

Fili looked up and nodded at his brother. His uncle stood next to him, and Dwalin on the far side.
Behind them ranged over two hundred dwarves, elves and men snuck in slowly from Mirkwood and
the evacuees of Dale. They'd used the exhaustion of the battle to cover their tracks, feigning the sight
of worn out dragons and their riders, and warriors on the ground, retreating from the front lines.

They'd returned soon after, unknown to the orcs, dropped off on balconies to the rear of the
mountain where they could sneak in and join the rest.

Now they were ready, dwarves posed on both sides of the entrance and ready to drag the gates open
at Thorin's word.

He glanced beside him and saw his uncle standing tall and proud, eyes fixed ahead and expression
stony. Anyone who didn't know him might think he was strangely unaffected by all that he'd seen.

To his family, it was clear.

Thorin Durin, called Oakenshield for his actions at Moria, was near blind with rage.

He raised an arm and the rustling and movement from behind them stilled. On the parapet, the
archers carefully nocked arrows to bows and balanced on the soles of their feet.

Thorin's arm fell.

The dwarves at the wheels of the gate began turning. Chains clanked and, with a low rumble, the
gates started to swing open. Outside, Fili caught a glimpse of a wall of orcs with their backs to them,
expecting their own reinforcements to come swarming out.

Mistake number five.

The archers rose to their feet in one, smooth motion, releasing a volley of arrows over the parapet
and into the back ranks below, right at the commanders of the orc army. At the same time, Thorin
gave a roar and charged forward, Fili and Dwalin at his sides.

One step at a time, Fili promised himself as he raised his sword and fixed his eyes on the closest orc.

First step, take back his mountain.

Second, take back his One and his uncle.

Third step?

Kick Gothmog's ass all the way to the Void, and Azog with him.
Chapter 33

The tunnel was massive, and bitterly cold. The walls were a mix of soil and stone but they, and the presence of the orcs, were more than enough to raise flashes of Moria in her mind.

A pale light flared ahead and she looked up to see the crystal at the top of the wizard's staff glowing. With a start, she suddenly realized why she'd thought one of the crystals Gothmog had thrown to Saruman had seemed familiar. She'd seen it before, adorning the head of the staff carried by the old man from the goblin caves, Gandalf.

A sick feeling settled in her gut. She'd liked that wizard far better than she'd ever liked Saruman, who'd always seemed perpetually sullen. She desperately wanted to hold out hope that Gandalf was somehow all right but could think of no good reason for Gothmog to have had the crystal.

Yet one more thing the bastard had to answer for.

A clawed hand in her back shoved her forward and she stumbled, catching herself on Frerin who was a few steps ahead. He shifted his balance, bracing her until she could get her feet under her. Bilba gave him a brief smile in thanks and fell in beside him. Thranduil was a few feet behind and all three of them were surrounded by orcs.

Gothmog walked at the front, with Azog near him. Saruman was there as well but he was several feet back and couldn't quite get up next to Gothmog no matter what he did. It didn't seem to be sitting well with him, judging by the glare on his face, and Bilba suspected this wasn't what he'd imagined when he'd set out to betray Middle Earth.

A second, massive tunnel opening came into view on the side wall and Bilba guessed that was where the worm creature had gone after creating the one they were in. She strained to see down it as they walked past but all she saw was darkness.

"Ugh," Frerin said suddenly from beside her, "what in Durin's name is that smell?"

Bilba frowned at him, wondering how he could smell anything over the stink the orcs gave off. Then the smell hit her as well, a thick, oppressive stench like that of rotting meat, and she jerked back as if she'd been physically struck.

"It's that monstrosity of his," Thranduil said coldly from behind them. "The smell isn't as bad outside but builds up quickly within the tunnels."

Monstrosity? Something large shifted in the tunnel ahead of them, still lost in the dark past the wizard's staff, and she tensed. A few moments later the light fell on a creature that was like some horrible bastardization of an orc dragon and... something she didn't want to think about.

"Mahal have mercy," Frerin breathed, horrified. "What did you do?"

"Oh, I assure you," Gothmog said with amusement, "there was very little mercy involved."

An almost red hot heat began to build inside Bilba's veins and it took all she had to hold herself back from physically lunging at him.

Frerin did not have the same control, as he gave a snarled, "You bastard," and proceeded to lunge at Gothmog.
A second later he was on the ground, screaming in pain as he clutched his head without Gothmog having laid a hand on him.

Bilba darted forward as the attack ended and dropped next to him, grabbing his shoulder and resting a hand on his chest. Azog started to step closer but Frerin gave a near snarl and struggled up to a sitting position and then, with Bilba supporting him, stood up.

Gothmog had already turned his back on them and was studying the hybrid. As the thing, which appeared to have no more intelligence than a simple beast, swayed and moved Bilba caught sight of orc dragons crouching behind it.

As if by unseen orders, an orc grabbed her arm roughly and dragged her to one of the foul creatures. Her hands, which had been unbound until then, were roughly tied in front of her and she was dragged onto the orc dragon, in front of the orc that had grabbed her.

Frerin and Azog mounted another while Gothmog got on the large hybrid with Thranduil. The elven king, Bilba noted for the first time, looked ill. His face was washed out and she'd noticed earlier he had odd, almost burn like blisters on his wrists where the ropes he was bound with met his skin.

She didn't have any more time to focus on it as the orc behind her forced the orc dragon around and her view was blocked. The small dragon, that barely deserved the distinction, surged forward at an awkward, shambling run. After a few moments, it started leaping, wings snapping out as it tried to get up in the air. Unlike the intelligent dragons, like drakes, who were taught by their parents to fly, orc dragons were trained by the keepers who raised them.

Clearly, whoever had trained this one had been an idiot.

The thing finally managed to get off the ground and into a low flight through the tunnel. Behind them the others had also gotten up, including the hybrid.

They soared through the tunnels, covering ground at several times the rate they would have on foot. It set her nerves off; wherever they were going, they would get there long before help could come after them. Assuming there was any help left to come.

Bilba clenched her teeth and firmly banished that thought. They -- *Fili* would be okay. Syrath would be safe in Mirkwood and Kili had his father looking over him in Dale.

Father.

A sudden sense of fatigue and resignation washed over her.

She wanted her father. It was the same feeling she'd had when she was very young, during times when she'd been at her weakest and every step, every breath was near torture.

Taking a deep breath, that almost led to her gagging at the smell even flight didn't diminish, she forced herself to focus on more positive things.

With great dedication and detail, she proceeded to imagine killing Gothmog, Azog and every last orc that had dared lay a dirty claw on Erebor. She knew full well Gothmog could see what she was picturing and soon felt a wave of amusement that verified it.

She didn't particularly care if he was amused or not.

He wouldn't be when it all came to pass.
She couldn't say how long they traveled through the tunnel. They stopped several times to allow the
dragons to rest but it was impossible to know if it was on any kind of cycle or simply at Gothmog's
whim. Bilba did know it felt as if her stomach were chewing on her spine, a feeling which grew
steadily worse, but she'd been hungry before they left. It wasn't a feeling she'd felt in a while but it
hadn't been so long that she'd lost the ability to deal with it. Saruman was clearly not used to it,
judging by the way he continually hinted at eating but, seeing as there didn't appear to be any food
present, it was a waste of time. The best they were given was brackish water that all of them drank
without comment, except Saruman, again, who complained as if it would somehow magically
change things.

To the surprise of none save Saruman, it didn't.

Eventually, they rounded a curve of the tunnel and she spotted a distant spot of light. The spot was
higher than they were, the tunnel sloping sharply upward to meet it. As they traveled, it grew rapidly
larger and brighter until, suddenly, they burst through and up into the sky.

Bilba leaned forward, studying the landscape below. She had no idea where they were, but it wasn't
a place she'd have ever willingly chosen to go. She'd always believed Moria to be a dreary and
desolate place, but that was only because she'd never seen or known about this place.

Everywhere she looked was brown and arid. A dry, hot wind blew over the landscape, piling up
sand into small hills and valleys. Every so often a withered looking tree came into view, struggling in
vain to survive.

With nothing to orient herself, Bilba had no way of knowing which direction Erebor lay in. She
twisted, searching, but found nothing. In the far-off distance, she could just make out the faint outline
of a mountain range but it wasn't familiar to her, certainly not the Withered Heath or Iron Hills. She
saw no hint of smoke, heard no sound other than the roar of the wind past her ears.

The orc dragon began to spiral, heading down toward a large, flat rocky area. The creature landed
with a thump a few minutes later and the orc pushed her off. She landed awkwardly on her side,
unable to catch herself with her hands. Heat burned through her clothes from the rock and she
scrambled up onto her hands and knees. Sand and grit dug into her palms and what felt like a
veritable wall of oppressive heat dropped on her, raising an almost instant sweat and making her long
for the rush of wind from being on a dragon.

She'd seen evidence of wind from overhead but there was none in this place, the high dunes
surrounding them blocking it. Not too far away she could see the ground appearing to ripple, a
common mirage in extreme heat.

She pushed up onto her feet. She'd only been there only a few minutes and was already miserable
and desperately ready to leave.

The others landed about her. The dragons, as they let people off, took up spots just off the rock in the
sand. It must have been near scalding, even with the protection of their scales, but they didn't seem to
notice or care.

The orcs, she noted, seemed as miserable as she was. Frerin was already sweating while Thranduil,
aside from how ill he already looked, seemed as unaffected as if he were standing under the trees of
Mirkwood.

Gothmog, in contrast, was in his element. Tongues of fire were running along the lines of his body,
flickering amongst his fingers and licking up his sides. The shroud of shadow that seemed to cover him was darker and thicker and he seemed to have grown taller, and stronger.

"What do you think, my dear?" he asked her, pointing toward the mountain range still in the distance.

_Am I supposed to think something?_ Bilba thought in annoyance. _I've seen mountains before._

"Not these you haven't," Gothmog said casually. He went to talk to Azog and Bilba took the opportunity to go to where Frerin was standing near the edge of the rock. In the sand the orc dragons, and even the hybrid, were panting heavily and she hoped it was from heat and not exhaustion. Already, she could feel beads of sweat trailing down her face and her shirt was sticking to her body. The less time they spent here the better.

Where are we? she asked Frerin, using her hands.


_And the mountains?_

Frerin grimaced. "Mordor. Morgoth once ruled from there. His presence poisoned the land and it never recovered."

Bilba frowned. _Would the cage be there?_

"You would hope they would have picked somewhere a little less obvious," Frerin said dryly. "Then again, I suppose it's so obvious no one would think of it, right?"

He shot a look back toward Thranduil who gave a casual shrug. "I was not present at the caging of Morgoth."

Frerin scowled. "Mordor is huge. Here's hoping the bastard doesn't have a specific location and plans to spend the next century digging."

It was a false hope, and they all knew it. Gothmog had put far too much effort and planning in to have left so great a detail out.

"Why does he want you?" Frerin suddenly asked Thranduil. "What purpose does it serve?"

"I wouldn't know," Thranduil said, but there was an odd note to his voice that suggested he wasn't being entirely truthful.

The three fell into silence after that, the heat so overbearing even the simple act of communicating was exhausting. Finally, Gothmog declared the dragons had rested enough and then they were heading out. To Bilba's surprise, he grabbed her arm and pulled her to the hybrid, changing up the order of who was carrying what.

For the first time, as he led her back, she noticed Saruman was being forced to ride an orc dragon. The thing was much too small for him and he clearly had no idea how to control it, creating an almost comical image. He tried several times to complain to Gothmog as they passed but was roundly ignored.

Gothmog swung her up onto the hybrid's back and easily mounted behind her. Thankfully, he banked the flames spiraling around his body to prevent her being burned, though she had a feeling it was more that he didn't want to deal with her screaming in pain.
A long hand with skinny fingers appeared in her range and she saw that he was showing her the ring he'd taken from her. He'd put it on at some point, which was odd as she wouldn't have thought it large enough for him.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he nearly purred. "Granted, I could have opened the cage without it but it wouldn't have been near as much fun."

The hand vanished and then they were lifting off, Bilba forced to scramble for a hold on the hybrid before she fell off. The rush of air in her face was a sharp relief and she relaxed in spite of the circumstances.

The mountain range of Mordor grew steadily closer. They stopped twice more to let the dragons rest and, with each stop, Gothmog grew more and more excited. Now that she knew where they were, Bilba looked several times in the direction of Erebor, futilely hoping for some sign of pursuit, but each time the sky was blank.

As they neared the mountains, Bilba realized what she'd thought was a low portion of the mountain range was actually an enormous gate set into the wall of rock. It was black and made of what looked like solid iron with a wide walkway on the top and a balustrade comprised of squat, spiked towers. It was patrolled by several rows of orcs who turned to watch as they neared but gave no other reaction.

Her stomach dropped as the hybrid began to beat its wings harder, lifting them up to clear the gate. Past it, Bilba caught sight of a lone mountain and what looked like the ruins of a tower. Of the landscape she saw little more than flat land covered in what looked like some sort of black sand.

They rushed over the gate, heading toward the mountain in the far-off distance. They were high, the hybrid having overshot the gate by a significant amount. The orc dragons were unable to follow and were struggling along below them. Past that, was the flat, dead landscape and...

Bilba blinked, shook her head a bit and looked again.

Was the earth moving?

Gothmog’s mouth was suddenly right next to her ear. "Are you beginning to realize, my dear?"

He shifted and then the hybrid was flying lower, angling toward the ground. It shot past the orcs and, as it fell lower, the ground began to come into clearer view.

Bilba felt her heart freeze in her chest. She knew her eyes had gone wide and her breathing was suddenly sort and rapid.

Sound began to reach her ears, the march of feet upon hard earth, and the clack and clatter of armor.

The landscape wasn't moving.

It was covered.

With orcs.

Thousands of them.

Tens of thousands.
More than she'd ever seen or known even existed in all of Middle Earth. They crawled over the land like a parasite, each and every one outfitted with armor and weapons.

"Now do you see?" Gothmog asked, right in her ear. "Your precious dwarves and elves and humans. They locked the cage, turned their backs and never looked again. I have had this entire land to myself, for hundreds of years."

Bilba was on the edge of hyperventilating. She curled her fingers into the fabric of her trousers, tensing until her body was shaking from tension.

She'd never seen such a gathering.

Not at Moria, or Erebor, ever.

Gothmog hadn't been lying or exaggerating when he'd claimed the force at Erebor was nothing, and she could see why he'd abandoned it with such ease.

It was barely a fraction of the army he had at his disposal.

It was far bigger than anyone could need and the fact Gothmog had bothered to make it so large could only mean one thing.

It wasn't meant for one battle, or even for a war.

It wasn't even meant for a single race.

It was meant for annihilation.

Total and complete, of every race, every kingdom, every elf, hobbit, dwarf, dragon...everything.

Gothmog did not intend to simply take over Middle Earth.

He planned to destroy it.
Chapter 34

Fili heaved for breath as he dragged his sword out of what felt like the thousandth orc he'd killed.

For all he knew, it was the thousandth.

He staggered, legs shaking under him. He planted the point of his sword in the dirt and went to a knee, one hand holding the hilt, the other draped across his knee. He kept his head down as he pulled air into burning lungs. He dragged an arm across his face trying to clear the sweat from his eyes but all he managed to do was smear it into the blood and grime coating his skin.

Around him, the battle raged. They'd successfully surprised the orcs from behind, driving like a spear straight through their back ranks and slaughtering scores before the creatures realized what was going on and countered. At the same time, the dragons overhead and those fighting on the ground had taken advantage of the confusion to launch dual attacks, boxing the orcs in from three directions.

It had been effective, but not enough.

Since then things had settled into a grind. Kill orc, kick the body out of his way, turn to face the next one, or three. It was a constant dance, an unending need to keep moving, watching, not let his guard down for even a second or risk paying dearly for it.

Sort of like right then.

A shadow loomed over him and Fili cursed, heart leaping in his chest. He struggled to pull his sword free but his arm screamed at him and the blade felt like it weighed a ton. He shoved upward, trying to regain his feet, but they buckled and staggered beneath him. He was never going to get up in time.

The orc coming at him sneered, axe already descending toward his head and Fili cursed that he was about to be killed by some nobody, nameless orc that would probably spend the rest of its pitiful, and hopefully short, life crowing about it.

A whistling sound and suddenly a fountain of black blood was spurting up from the orc’s neck, right where its head had just been. The corpse stood there a moment before slowly falling with a thud on the bloodied dirt.

A new shadow fell over him and Fili looked up to see Dwalin, and his brother, standing over him. Dwalin held one of his battleaxes in hand, the other presumably wherever it had gone after decapitating the orc.

"Sitting in the middle of a battlefield," Dwalin drawled. "Don't remember teaching you that one."

Kili, his back to them as he surveyed the field with an arrow nocked and ready, glared at his brother over his shoulder. "Wait until Amad hears about this."

Dwalin snorted. "Wait until my daughter hears."

Fili flinched. "Please don't. I enjoy living."

"Funny way of showing it." Dwalin grabbed his arm and dragged him to his feet. As he did, Kili let loose a barrage of arrows that laid out several orcs that had been heading their ways. Others, witnessing the assault, suddenly decided it was vitally important they attack other targets.
"I wasn't sitting," Fili muttered, taking the opportunity to pry his hand off the hilt of his sword. He'd held it for so long his fingers had locked into position and were unwilling to release. He shook his hand out, grimacing at the pain. "I was kneeling."

"Oh, well, that's so much better," Kili mocked. He turned and sent an arrow flashing past his brother, so close Fili felt the wind of its passing on his face. A thud sounded from behind him, followed by a thud. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

The look he gave Fili should, by all rights, have killed him where he stood. Dwalin shoved him on the shoulder, pushing him back toward Erebor, and Fili scowled, resisting. "I'm not going back. I can still fight." Kili barely looked winded, the bastard, and Dwalin was clearly tired but still strong.

"You can fight again after you've eaten and rested," Dwalin said shortly.

Overhead, a loud boom echoed across the sky and the eyes of every orc, human, and dwarf nearby immediately looked up to see if they needed to dodge out of the way of a falling drake or orc dragon. Instead, they were treated to the sight of Xalanth boiling through a group of orc dragons as easily as a fish would through water. The massive black and gold dragon turned back at an angle that would have snapped a rider's neck, and screamed in rage at a new approaching wave. Quinlan and Barahir swooped into view on either side of him and Fili smirked as the orc dragons, far too late, recognized the trap and scrambled to flee. The three dragons let loose pillars of fire that turned the orc dragons and their riders into a cloud of ash drifting lazily above the battlefield.

"I was slowing him down," Dwalin said, pride shining in his voice, before Fili could say anything. "Sort of like how you're slowing me down. Hurry it up, brat. Faster you're inside, faster I can get back to killing what needs killing."

A few more arrows whipped past them and then Kili was grabbing Fili's sleeve and physically turning him around and shoving him toward the mountain. "I'm going to shoot you if you keep standing around talking in the middle of a battle."

Fili frowned at his brother, who rolled in eyes in response. "In the foot. You'd survive, and I wouldn't have Bilba and Syrath on my tail for it. They'd probably thank me."

“I would thank him,” Syrath informed Fili calmly and, for not the first time, he wondered about the intelligence of leaving his links and bond constantly open with the dragon.

“Traitor,” he returned without heat. He wouldn't shut off the dragon and they both knew it. Fili needed Syrath as much as the dragon needed him right then. It had been days since Gothmog left with Bilba, Frerin and Thranduil. Days of endless fighting, breaking to rest and eat and then heading back out to fight again. Syrath was going stir crazy with worry in Mirkwood, as Fili would have done had he not the distraction of trying to stay alive. Now that he thought about it, Lyth was no doubt going crazy with worry over her rider as well, which probably explained his brother's mood.

“I think his mood is explained by you being stupid,” Syrath responded sagely.

Fili ignored him. They were at the gates of Erebor and he allowed his brother and the Captain of his uncle's guard to usher him inside, past the rows of soldiers guarding the entrance. Once they were sure he was in an area where collapsing wouldn't get him killed, they headed back out again, but not before threatening him with wildly creative forms of punishment if he tried to head out before he'd eaten and slept.

Inside, the area that once housed the markets of Erebor had been turned into a camp. Refugees from Dale, and others who hadn't been able to make it to Mirkwood, huddled in one corner, fear in their
eyes as they watched battered and bloodied soldiers fight for their survival.

Another area had been dedicated to the wounded, while a third stood vigil to the fallen, laid out in rows and covered with whatever blankets they'd been able to find. They would need to be buried, soon but there had been no time, space, or people to spare, to get it done yet.

Fili went to the small area near the base of the ramps leading to the upper levels. It was here that his uncle had ordered the storehouses of Erebor be opened and the food brought out to both those fighting and those they were fighting to protect. Many people, unable to fight for one reason or another but still in reasonable health, were on a brigade bringing in buckets of fresh water and whatever other supplies they could scrounge from farther in the mountain.

The sight of so much food caused Fili's stomach to twist in fear of what they would do once winter set in, but there was nothing to be done for it. The kingdom needed saving now, and that meant the stores had to be opened now.

Someone handed him a plate with meat, bread and cheese on it and he ate without really noticing, chasing it down with a mug of water before heading to a row of pallets laid out for people to rest on before returning to the battle. Someone recognized him and tried to offer the option of having a private space set up, befitting his rank or some such nonsense, but he waved them off, tossed his sword down, and collapsed on the nearest empty pallet.

He was pretty sure he was asleep before he'd fully laid down.

***

He was standing in the doorway of Bag End.

Fili frowned in surprise. A glance down showed he was barefoot and wearing a simple tunic and trousers, not a weapon in sight.

He turned and saw the Shire laid out behind him, light breeze dancing through the grass and flowers. Birdsong rang out from nearby trees and he could hear the distant laughter and chatter of people at the market. A shadow flashed by overhead and he looked up in time to catch sight of a Shire dragon soaring past. A male hobbit sat on the dragon's back but they were gone too fast for Fili to identify them, if they were even anyone he knew.

A rattle of pots and pans caught his attention from inside Bag End and he leaned forward, bracing a hand against the doorframe. "Primula? Are you home? Frodo?"

There was no reply but, now, as he leaned further in he could hear the faint sound of someone humming. Another noise, followed immediately by the clatter of pots hitting the floor.

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" a woman's voice exclaimed.

Fili hesitated, and then stepped a few feet into the home. "Primula? Are you all right?"

"Come on in," a voice he realized didn't sound at all like Primula's called. "You're just in time!"

Fili's eyebrows knitted in confusion. He obediently headed toward the kitchen. As he entered he caught sight of someone bent over, just behind the table, gathering things up off the ground. Without hesitating, Fili walked around and knelt to grab a pan just before she could and lifted it to hand to her.

"Oh, well don't you have manners?" a cheery voice exclaimed. Â She straightened to put the pan
back and, for the first time, Fili got a good look at her. The young woman smiling brightly down at
him was definitely not Primula. She was smaller, her frame slender and rather short even for a
hobbit. Amber locks of hair, held back by combs, tumbled about her shoulders and she wore a
simple, dark purple sundress that complemented the blue of her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Fili said, pushing to his feet and stepping back so he didn't tower over her. "I'm afraid
we haven't met."

"Haven't we though?" she replied, raising one eyebrow as if daring him to challenge her.

Fili hesitated. He'd met a lot of hobbits in the Shire and it stood to reason he might not remember
them all. Still, he couldn't begin to imagine why his mind would think to conjure up the Shire or
some random woman he didn't even consciously recall meeting. "This is a dream," he said slowly.
"A very odd one."

"Most dreams are, to one extent or another," she replied casually. She didn't offer her name and Fili
wondered if he'd simply never heard it, leaving it a blank spot in his mind. A teapot on the stove
behind the woman whistled and she clapped her hands and spun around to grab a few potholders
and carefully lift it off the stove. She turned to set it on a tray Fili hadn't noticed, next to a plate filled
with scones. There was an also a small pot of jam with a knife sitting next to it, and two empty plates
along with two cups turned upside down on saucers. Humming under her breath, the woman
grabbed sugar, cream and spoons to add to the tray before turning to him with a brilliant smile and
gestured to the tray. "Would you mind?"

"Of course not," Fili said, training firmly instilled in him by his mother kicking in. She moved out of
the way and he picked the tray up and held it carefully.

She nodded and gestured to a hall he remembered leading toward the back of Bag End. "Thank
you, Fili. This way."

She started off, nearly bouncing with carefree abandon, and he followed with the tray. As they
walked through the home he noticed that, oddly, every single door and window was wide open and
all the curtains had been removed. The woman didn't seem to notice, or care, and he'd already
accepted the dream he was having had gone well into the realm of strange so he put it out of mind
and carried on.

The back door, similarly open, came into view and they walked out onto the far side of the hill the
home was cut into. Here, there was a truly stunning view of the rolling hills and fields of Hobbiton,
and the river winding lazily through it. A circular, metal table with chairs set at an angle, to allow a
view into the field, was set up and, when directed, he sat the tray down on its surface.

The woman dropped into a chair and began serving the tea and scones, setting a plate and cup in
front of him and offering him the jam and knife to prepare his scone in whatever way he saw fit.

Fili hesitated. "Not to sound rude, but I'm a bit busy at the moment."

He was apologizing to a dream, his mind informed him bluntly. Perhaps he'd taken a blow to the
head during the battle and failed to notice. He called out for Syrath, hoping the dragon might be
able to wake him up, but heard nothing in return. Perhaps the dragon was asleep; a fact which, in
hindsight, might be a good thing. The last thing he wanted was it getting out that he was dreaming
about tea parties in the midst of battle, and keeping things to himself wasn't exactly one of Syrath's
strengths.

The woman gave him a strangely knowing look and calmly grabbed a scone and smeared it liberally
with jam. "Nonsense. There's always time for tea and scones."

Fili sighed in resignation, shook his head, and leaned forward to take a scone and accept the cup of tea she held out to him.

She picked her own cup up and held it in both hands, staring idly into the fields. Fili could see a few green lumps he took to be sleeping dragons, and spotted several children along the banks of the river flying kites or attempting to sail small, toy boats in the lazy current.

When it became apparent the woman had no intention of speaking, he politely cleared his throat and asked, "What are we doing?"

"Enjoying the peace and quiet," she responded softly. She turned her head to look at him and, for the briefest of seconds, the expression on her face was strangely familiar, eliciting a flash of recognition though it was gone too fast for him to place. "It never lasts long enough, does it?" she inquired, shifting back to look out again.

"No," Fili agreed. "It doesn't."

She smiled without turning her head again. "Then let us enjoy it while it lasts."

He hesitated but, as the dream clearly had no intention of letting him wake up any time soon, finally shrugged and reached for a second scone. "All right."

He settled back in his chair, surprised at how comfortable it was, and watched the world slowly pass by. It was peaceful, he had to admit. There were no orcs to fight, no creatures from Ages past threatening to wake up the source of all evil and enslave the world. He doubted very much that the Shire was even aware of what was happening on the other side of the world. They lived in their sheltered corner, protected by elves, dwarves and humans alike, at peace and content.

He sighed, something in him relaxing, and reached to refill his tea cup. On the riverbank, he spotted a young boy attempting to fly a kite and took to watching him, mentally cheering when the lad finally got it up and going. After that, he watched a few of the younger dragons wrestling in the field and then it was back to a group of children playing king of the hill with a small pile of dirt they'd built up.

Before he knew it, the sun was dropping down toward the horizon, painting the sky in vivid hues of purple, orange and gold. He took a bite of the final scone, and set his tea cup down next to the now empty pot. On the other side of the table, the woman sighed and gently placed her cup down on its saucer with a quiet clink of porcelain. "There now, you see?" she whispered. "Gone already." She stood and, for a few seconds, stayed where she was. The setting sun bathed her in vibrant hues that faded until she was little more than a shadow standing in the dark. Only once the sun was gone entirely did she turn toward the door. Fili got up and, once again, followed, leaving the tray and its contents behind him.

The lanterns were all lit inside the home, and a comfortable fire snapped and crackled in the fireplace. Rather than sit as he'd expected, the woman retrieved a shawl tossed over the armrest of a chair and carefully draped it over her arms. She added a large, wide brimmed straw hat with a flowing yellow ribbon for a band, before twirling in a circle and asking, "How do I look?"

"Lovely," Fili said and she beamed at him in response. She went to the large bookcase in the corner and stood, rocking up on the balls of her feet and clutching her hands behind her. She finally selected a volume and then headed for the front door.

Fili frowned, wondering how she planned to read in the dark, only to reach the foyer and find it
filled with light shining through the windows and the sound of songbirds drifting through the windows.

As the woman reached the front door, he made to go with her only to have her stop on the threshold and turn to face him. "I don't think so," she said, gently. "Not yet anyway." She studied him before the light faded a bit from her eyes and her gaze turned serious. Again, he felt the odd feeling of recognition, as if he did know her, but didn't at the same time. "Would you walk the same road if you knew the darkness it would lead you into?" she asked, gaze suddenly sharp and intense as if she saw straight into his soul and would know the truth no matter what he said.

"I would walk it no matter how dark the end," Fili answered immediately. "What I've gained along the way has made it more than worth it."

The worry in her eyes lifted, and she smiled. "Who said anything about the end?" She tilted her head, studying him for a moment though, for what, he had no idea, and then nodded once, sharply. "Yes," she said, clearly speaking more to herself than him, "you'll do nicely, I think." She spun, and stepped through the door, feet firmly planted on the same stone step Fili had been on when he'd first started this bizarre dream.

"Wait." Fili took a step forward with one hand raised. "Where are you going?"

She looked back over her shoulder at him and joy poured off her in such strong waves it was nearly palpable. "To an unexpected meeting of course." She then tucked the book more securely under her arm, put a hand on her hat to keep it in place, and turned her back to him. The door slammed shut on its own accord, and Fili flinched in surprise.

Around him, the lanterns slowly began to dim, and he hesitated before reaching for the door. His hand found the handle, and he pulled --

And his eyes snapped open. He was on his feet before registering what had awakened him, grimacing as sore muscles protested and what felt like layers of dried sweat, blood and grime cracked and pulled at his skin. A vile odor that he quickly realized was him reached his nostrils and he wondered if he could simply stand near the orcs and have them drop dead from the smell instead of any sort of physical attack.

Surprisingly, in spite of how awful he felt physically, inside he felt strangely at peace, calm even in a way he wouldn't have thought a simple rest and meal would have provided.

Syrath? he asked. Is everything all right?

I don't know, the answer came back. Everyone seems very excited all of a sudden but no one is saying why.

Fili nodded. The dream he'd had while asleep came back to him, and he frowned but had no time to dwell on it as he finally caught what it was that had pulled him out of his rest.

There was a buzz going on around him, people chattering excitedly and gesturing toward the front gate. Several people rushed past him to join a large crowd gathered at the gate, swarming over it and trying desperately to see out even as guards and soldiers tried to pull them back before they got themselves skewered by an arrow.

Fili knew he could just call on his brother or father for information but he had no idea what they were currently doing and feared distracting them at a critical moment.
Instead he stiffly retrieved his sword from where he'd tossed it next to the pallet and shoved it in its sheath as he lumbered his way toward the gates. As people recognized him and word spread, a path opened, allowing him passage. Normally, he wouldn't care for such things but this time he was simply glad he didn't have to try and shove his way through. For the first time, he found himself missing his personal guard, who'd been absorbed back into the main guard or Vanguard after Nar had been dealt with. If they'd still been there he wouldn't have had to worry about the crowd parting for him, or about kneeling in the middle of a battlefield to catch his breath.

A few people reached out to grab his arm or touch him and he made sure to smile at them in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. Morale was everything in battle, his uncle had drilled into him time and time again, and the people needed to see their leaders strong and unwavering. Many a battle had been lost in history due to the faltering of a leader, who'd taken his people's hope with him when his own had flagged.

Fili reached the steps leading up to the battlements, trying not to think of what had happened on them not so very long ago. As he did, his eyes narrowed at the sound he could hear drifting in from outside.

Was that...cheering?

It must have been for, suddenly, the guards lining the top of the battlement joined in, throwing their arms up and roaring in joy, so exuberant they forgot where they were and risked getting shot in their excitement.

"What's going on?" Fili demanded from the top step. "What's happened?"

One of the nearest guards looked down at him. "Reinforcements, your Highness!"

"Reinforcements?" Fili echoed in disbelief. "From where?" They had everyone he could think of. The forces of Erebor, Mirkwood, Dale and even Lake-town had been there nearly from the start while Gondor and Rivendell had joined in later. More had continued to come as word had spread and, only a day and a half earlier, Dain had arrived from the Iron Hills with a full contingent that had taken some of the pressure off. The only kingdoms still left would be --

"Rohan, it looks like," the dwarf cut in, "and Lothlorien with them."

"How is that possible?" Lothlorien had few dragons, none of whom fought or even carried riders as the elves of that wood felt it improper, while Rohan had no dragons at all. To muster their army, on horseback, and arrive in any time to render aid they would have had to ready themselves and marched out days ago, possibly before the attack had even started.

"I don't know," the guard said, waving a hand at him, "but you can see for yourself. It's them, my Lord."

Fili went up and knelt so he could peer out without risking an archer taking him out. The battlefield looked as bad as he remembered, littered with piles of corpses and exhausted men, elves, dwarves and even orcs doing their best to kill one another. Overhead, dragons still swarmed but their movements were slower as well. Even with rest breaks and rotating fighters in and out, there was only so much constant fighting one could take.

He raised his eyes toward the far end of the battlefield, in the direction of Dale, and felt his heart jump.

Just as the guard had said, there were not one but two armies charging headlong into the battle.
Astride both horses and massive elk, the elves of Lothlorien and the men of Rohan plunged into the remaining ranks of orc, shattering them under their hooves and swords as they charged forward. At their helm, Fili caught sight of what looked like the Lord and Lady of the Silver Wood, Celeborn and Galadriel, both famed warriors in their own right. With them he caught sight of the familiar gold of the king's armor, Thengel and beside him... Fili's eyes narrowed, and then widened with shock.

For riding beside Thengel, staff in hand, and blinding white robes replacing the traditional gray ones he was known for, was none other than Gandalf, the wizard everyone seemed to have been searching for the last few months.

The guards were still cheering, and the people down below were beginning to join in as well. Fili, however, could not quell the disquiet inside him as he watched the new armies begin to rout the remaining orcs. Already the creatures were breaking and running, retreating in the face of two new, perfectly fresh, forces.

Forces that had to have been put together before there was ever a threat to Erebor. Had they known about the attack ahead of time? If so, then why had no warning been sent? Both kingdoms were near enough to Gondor that one could have been relayed. And if they hadn't been put together because of the attack on Erebor...

He swallowed past a rock suddenly lodged in his throat and struggled to keep his face blank, projecting an aura of strength and grace under pressure even when it was the last thing he felt. His eyes ran over the field where soldiers were sagging to their knees in exhaustion, and to where dragons were near falling to the ground more than landing, sides heaving and heads hanging as they struggled to breathe.

Mahal help them all, he thought. They'd barely made it through this battle. If there were still another ahead of them, aside from Gothmog who was bad enough alone...

The peace he'd been feeling inside vanished.

"Peace and quiet. It never lasts long enough, does it?"

No, he thought, not nearly long enough, and now he wasn't sure when he'd feel it again.

If ever.

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Gothmog was whistling.

Bilba hadn't thought the creature could get more annoying but he was clearly out to prove her wrong. They'd gone straight to a small ledge jutting from the side of a solitary mountain, the base crawling with orcs like maggots on a corpse, and been carefully let off by the dragons.

Now Bilba stood next to Frerin and Thranduil while Gothmog led the way inside, Azog next to him. Behind them, Saruman was still being let off but they made no attempt to wait for him.

Incredible heat slapped her in the face as they entered, and she scowled as a heavy sheen of sweat immediately rose on her skin and plastered her hair to her neck and face.

"Pleasant," Frerin muttered next to her. "Always loved the thought of melting, didn't you?"

Bilba shook her head at him and frowned at Thranduil, who walked in silence next to them. He seemed pale, his back almost unnaturally straight and a grim, fixed expression on his face. He
reminded her of some of the victims of the Arena, those who knew full well where they were going and were doing their best to face it stoically. From the look on Frerin's face, he saw it too.

There was a large chasm in front of them with an outcropping jutting out over it. Just before the outcrop, stood a column of rock. It was here that Gothmog stopped and spun to face them. "I almost feel as if I should say something to mark the occasion, don't you?" he asked, clapping his hands. When none of them responded, he raised an eyebrow and said, "What? No threats of doom? No promises of retribution?" He tsked and then unceremoniously grabbed Thranduil's arm and dragged him out onto the outcrop, shoving him to the very end where it was barely a few feet wide before grabbing his arms and easily breaking the ropes binding his wrists.

Bilba leaned forward as far as she dared to look over the edge, and gasped at the sight of a river of a thick, roiling, red liquid far below. She'd never seen anything like it but, judging by the way the heat intensified when she leaned forward, she guessed she wouldn't like falling in.

Frerin grabbed her shoulder and tugged her away. "You're making me nervous."

As he spoke he nudged her farther away from the edge and behind him. Bilba saw him shooting a look at Azog, who was studying them both speculatively, and tensed.

"Are you sure this will work?" Saruman asked, coming up beside Gothmog. He looked drenched in sweat and was flagging, the heat clearly having a severe effect on him. Thranduil looked the least affected, somehow, the barest hint of a sheen on his face and his breathing no faster than it had been outside. He stared at Gothmog unflinching and Bilba felt her heart surge with admiration for him. She wished now that she'd spent more time trying to get to know him as well as his son and vowed to rectify the error, if given the chance.

"Watch and see," Gothmog murmured, barely acknowledging the wizard. He reached inside his cloak and withdrew the objects from before, the sword, necklace and Arkenstone. The ring, she noticed, he still wore on his hand, metal gleaming in the flickering light from the flames below.

As he hefted the Arkenstone, Bilba noticed, for the first time, two indentations in the top of the stone column, one at the top and one at the bottom. As she watched, Gothmog easily fit the Arkenstone into the top, round indent, and then placed the necklace in the bottom one, the indentation the perfect size and shape for it.

An odd shimmer seemed to cross the face of the pillar, and suddenly a thin slit appeared in the rock, dead center between the other two objects.

Without warning, Frerin gave a shout and lunged forward, yelling something intelligible. Gothmog never even reacted and Frerin barely made it a foot or two before he found himself flat on his face, with Azog's foot placed solidly in the center of his back.

Don't, Bilba sent toward Gothmog in a panic, knowing he was the only one who could hear her now. She tried to run forward, only to have Azog lift his foot of Frerin's back long enough to kick her full in the chest. She didn't have her armor and it had, by now, been years since she'd been kicked like that so she was ill prepared. Pain exploded in her chest and the air in her lungs fled. The force of the blow sent her flying back, right off her feet. She hit the ground hard and skidded across the rock, rolling to a stop on her side.

She choked, struggling to get air as she rolled partway onto her stomach and braced on one elbow. At her neck, she felt the chain with her mother's ring slip out from under her shirt and she wrapped a hand around it until she could feel the metal, heated by her skin and the air, pressing into her palm. The orcs had either not noticed it when they'd taken her gear, or hadn't cared, for which she was
She lifted her eyes in time to see Gothmog raise the sword and slot it into the small opening in the stone, driving it in until the blade was completely encased in stone. He sneered at Thranduil. "What? No final words? A message to pass onto your precious son?"

"There is nothing I need to say that he does not already know," Thranduil said flatly. "And, if there were something, I will tell him myself."

The sneer on Gothmog's face widened into a sick parody of a smile. On the surface of the pillar the rock seemed to suddenly waver and turn molten, slowly swallowing the Arkenstone, necklace and sword as they watched.

The cave went black.

Bilba gasped, eyes straining to see in the dark, but there was nothing. No light from outside, no glow from the flames below or flicker from the torches set into the wall.

Nothing at all.

It grew cold, a bare hint of it at first as if her mind played tricks on her, then rapidly increasing until her entire body shuddered and her teeth chattered.

And then it came.

It was slow, sneaking up on her like snakes to coil about her ankles. It rose as if she stood in water, past her knees, up to her waist and, then, in a sudden rush, up past her head, barely allowing her the time to gasp in surprise and terror before she was swallowed.

And then she was surrounded by evil. Raw, pure evil.

It could not be reasoned with.

It could not be bargained with.

Goodness and light withered and died in its wake.

Gothmog was but a mere shadow in its presence.

Dimly, Bilba was aware of falling to her hands and knees and leaning forward until her forehead touched the floor. She closed her eyes, and screamed.

She couldn't hear it, only feel the pain in her throat as her vocal chords were overtaxed and torn from the strength of her screams.

Then, just as suddenly as it started, it stopped.

Bilba sucked in a harsh breath, her body shaking so violently it was all she could do to keep on her knees. Around her she could hear similar sounds and looked up to see Frerin in no better shape than she was. Azog and Saruman were both still on their feet, though they looked a bit on the shaky side while Gothmog...
Gothmog looked positively gleeful.

Bilba followed his line of sight to the outcropping where Thranduil was standing, head down, and swaying lightly on his feet.

Gothmog leaned against the pillar, folding his arms and casually watching the scene as if waiting for a grand trick to be performed. Azog, too, seemed captivated, to the point he barely noticed as Frerin shoved his foot off and scrambled free. He made it to where Bilba was still kneeling and crouched next to her. No one was watching them but neither made any attempt to escape. They wouldn't make it five feet before the orcs outside would be all over them, and neither of them had weapons or armor.

On the outcrop, Thranduil swayed again, one leg buckling briefly before he regained his footing. The movement slowed, before finally stopping entirely. His back straightened and his hands idly opened and closed into fists at his side, though his head stayed down.

No one in the chamber moved and it seemed the air itself went still.

The scrape of a shoe on stone rang out and suddenly Saruman was pushing past Gothmog and Azog to stand before the outcrop.

"My Lord," he said solemnly, bowing slightly at the waist. "I am Curumo. I was sent by Mahal but soon saw the error of my ways, and his. It was at great personal peril that I provided aid and was promised great rewards in return." As he said this last, he sent a glare at Gothmog, who merely raised an amused eyebrow in return.

Thranduil, finally, raised his head, and Bilba felt her heart stop in her chest. Beside her, Frerin breathed out as if someone had punched him in the chest and driven the air out of him.

Morgoth, the Dark Lord and Master of Lies, simply smiled.
"We must march on Mordor, immediately."

To his credit, Thorin didn't burst out laughing but Fili imagined it was less from self-control and more a mix of exhaustion and grief that stayed him.

"We have spent days fighting for the mountain," his uncle said, voice flat with fatigue. "And more have fought longer. My people have nothing left."

Fili swallowed, his own rush of grief passing through him at the words. The combined forces of Rohan and Lothlorien had succeeded in turning the tide of battle, breaking through the remaining ranks of orcs and routing them to so great an extent that they'd fled the field in droves.

It was a great victory, but the price had been far too high for celebrating. After the initial relief, and joy, at seeing their salvation riding in, reality had quickly set in. Eyes had turned toward the field, and the obscene number of dead. Exhausted dragons littered the landscape, heaving sides the only signs of life, while a steady stream of equally worn out soldiers wandered in a dull trance toward Erebor's gates.

Thorin, Fili and Kili had met Thengel, Gandalf and the Lord and Lady of Lothlórien in the center of the field. There had been no time, or desire, to set up any sort of table or tent, and only the barest effort made to find a relatively untouched patch of earth over which to meet. Aragorn, Elrond, Lord Bard of Dale and Varr, Master of Lake-town, had made their way over, looking as tired and battered as the rest of them. Fili had no idea when Lake-town had arrived but spared a moment of worry for the small town, and his brother's friend, Cassie. The orcs hadn't come from that direction so they should have been safe, but then everyone who currently lay dead inside Erebor's upper halls should have been safe as well.

"If you do not go," Galadriel intoned solemnly, "it will have all been in vain."

Thorin looked as if she'd slapped him and Fili clenched his hands into fists at the seeming casual dismissal of their sacrifice. The elf, and her husband, were dressed for war but were as fresh as if they'd stepped out for a walk. It was easy enough for them to pass judgement and make demands, having not lived through the past few days themselves.

_We had rotations_, he sent to Thorin, unwilling to say it out loud and risk undermining his uncle in front of the others. _Some aren't as tired as others._

That was a stretch. The fighting had lasted days and all the rotations in the world couldn't overcome the limits of flesh and bone. Their only saving grace had been numbers, enough to allow for longer breaks and shorter stints in battle but, even then, it only went so far.

"My father is sending more," Aragorn cut in.

Arathorn had sent several groups but mustering the entire army of Gondor to leave the city, while ensuring the people who lived there were safe in its absence, was no small feat. Fili was impressed at the numbers Gondor had been able to gather and send on such short notice, it had made a great difference, not just in the fight but in morale.

"Would it even matter?" Bard asked, exhaustion lining his voice. "The creature has fled, and no doubt is already at the cage. We have no hope of stopping him before he opens it."
Way to be optimistic, a voice sounded in his head and Fili turned slightly as his brother trudged up. He held his bow loosely in one hand, empty quiver hanging from his belt. He looked dead on his feet, probably the result of hypocrisy, demanding Fili go in and sleep while he ran himself into the ground. Fili allowed the sentiment to carry across their bond and got a dirty look in response before Kili stopped next to him, close enough to use Fili’s shoulder to brace himself without being overt about it.

"Do we even know where they've gone?" Thorin asked wearily. "There'd be no use rushing off when we don't know where it is we're going."

"Mordor," Gandalf said, solemn. "That is where I placed the cage, Ages ago and it is where the creature has gone to release Morgoth."

"And my father?" Legolas broke in, arriving next to Thorin. "Is he still alive? Why did that thing want him?"

"I have my suspicions," Gandalf said, "but voicing them without knowing for sure would serve no purpose."

Fili's eyes narrowed but a sidelong glance from his uncle had him holding his peace. They were all fully aware that nothing in Middle Earth could force Gandalf to say more than he wished. It was clear Legolas knew it too, though the way his jaw tightened showed just how he felt about it.

"You placed the cage," Thorin said suddenly, voice hard, "which means, I imagine, you are also the one who revealed its location?"

Ouch, Kili sent. Fili silently agreed. Apparently, realizing they couldn't force Gandalf to speak did not prevent his uncle from putting the wizard in his place. Perhaps, at a different time and place, Thorin would have shown more restraint but too many had died, and Gandalf was demanding they leave before the fallen were even buried. Fili could not fault him for lashing out.

Gandalf's expression didn't change. "The cage was put in place centuries ago," he said, as if Uncle hadn't spoken. "And the keys created. Saruman created the dwarven key, Alatar the human, and Pallando the elven."

"Who are Pallando and Alatar?" Fili asked with a frown. He'd heard of Saruman of course, but simply too tired to remember if he'd heard of the other two.

"Friends," Gandalf said simply. "Long since gone now, early victims of Gothmog I would imagine."

"If you knew that then you had to know that thing was still around," Legolas said, anger lacing his voice. "So why didn't you do something then?"

"We missed it," Celeborn cut in simply, "and now we are paying for the oversight."

"All of Middle Earth is paying," Thorin said quietly, his voice hard.

"And all of Middle Earth must march," Celeborn countered, "or you may as well have handed Erebor to the orcs as soon as they arrived."

"What makes you think we'll have any chance of defeating Morgoth?" Fili broke in. "The Valar themselves couldn't defeat him. All they managed to do was the cage. What possible chance do we have?"

For the first time, the faintest hint of a smile crossed Gandalf's face. "We have a chance," he said,
"because there is yet another key. The key made by Radagast."

"The Hobbit key," Thorin said flatly. "The one you were searching for all those months ago?"

"The key that Gothmog currently has?" Kili asked. "At least I'm assuming he does. Bilba was wearing it when she was captured."

"Gothmog is not Morgoth," Galadriel said smoothly. She reached to her hip and drew a long, shining blade from a sheath. It glinted in the sun, sparking off the metal of her breastplate. "He can, and will, be defeated. And his own arrogance will then lead to us defeating Morgoth."

"Our job will be to create a path to get you to him," Elrond said, speaking for the first time. Until then he'd been standing quietly, listening.

"They want a distraction," Thorin said, a dark quality in his voice. "Much like that creature used the blood of my people to distract us from his true purpose." His eyes locked onto Gandalf. "You want me to take those we've bled to save and march them onto orc pikes to give you a chance to fix your mistake."

"I would not ask it if it were not of vital importance," Gandalf said. There was compassion in his voice and eyes, as if he could see straight through to Thorin's soul.

Fili could see in; could see the pain his uncle felt as if he took every fallen dwarf, and drake, as a personal affront, and as a personal loss.

Fili knew that he did. He also knew the last time he'd felt such pain from his uncle had been after his return from Moria, just before he'd shut them all out. It had been years before he'd opened up again, not until after Bilba had arrived, and Fili desperately hoped they weren't about to be locked out again.

_Uncle Frerin is there_, he sent, and knew from the flicker of overt pain in his uncle's eyes that it was the wrong thing to say.

His uncle's response, when it came, was bleak. Thorin's eyes drifted around the battlefield, taking in silent mounds and empty shells of those he'd once sworn to protect. A drake, far too young to have been in battle, cried in pain near the gates as people swarmed about, trying to help her. _How many times must we relive Moria before it's enough?_

_Just once more_, came the answer, and it wasn't Fili who sent it.

He and Kili turned simultaneously, as their father and Dwalin strode up to stand on either side of his uncle.

_It's not going to be like the last time_, Vili added. _We were alone then. We weren't this time, and won't be next time._

_I'm getting my daughter back_, Dwalin sent shortly, _and your idiot brother. And then I plan to take my foot and shove it where the sun don't shine on that bastard who took them._

Thorin sighed in resignation. He already knew what his answer must be, but had been unwilling to voice it. _I'll rally all I can._

Those who weren't too injured, Fili thought, or too exhausted. They'd have to leave some behind as well, to look after and care for those unable to defend themselves. He didn't know what numbers they could muster but hoped it would be enough. The ground forces would set the pace, which
would at least give the dragons a chance to rest a little. That would be important as they would be the first wave once they'd arrived.

Thorin grimaced and turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Elrond asked and received a bitter answer thrown carelessly over a shoulder.

"To tell my people we're going to go face off against a damned fallen Valar that Aule himself couldn't defeat."

Legolas left as well, with barely an acknowledgement. No one questioned whether or not he would be involved. Since his father's abduction he'd fought with a silent grimness, biding his time.

Fili watched them go, Dwalin falling in alongside Thorin while Vili stayed. With a frown, Fili turned back to Gandalf. "Why wasn't Morgoth destroyed the first time around?"

"He could not be destroyed," Gandalf said shortly, "only contained, and it is possible to do so again."

"It took all of the Valar last time," Kili argued. "And nearly wiped out Middle Earth."

"They didn't have the tools we have now," Gandalf countered.

"The key?" Fili asked. "You think the Hobbit key is so powerful it can do what it once took all of the Valar to do?"

"I do," Gandalf said without hesitation. "The ring was made by Radagast, at the behest of the Valar, and is imbued with the power of them all."

Fili's eyes widened. "The power of the Valar? And Bilba was wearing it?"

Gandalf looked amused. "The greatest power in the world is little more than a ring in the hands of one who does not know how to use it."

"And in the hands of someone who does know how to use it?" Fili asked. "Someone like Gothmog?"

"Light does not suffer darkness," Gandalf replied. "He will not be able to use the full power of the ring, no matter how he tries."

"That's something," Fili muttered. He sighed, much as his uncle had, and ran a hand through his hair. "All right then," he said finally, equally resigned. "I suppose, before we all go get ourselves killed over this thing the question should be asked, what in Durin's name does the ring even do?"

For the first time, an oddly out of place look of amusement crossed the wizard's face.

"The ring takes advantage of Morgoth's greatest weakness."

Kili raised an eyebrow. "Which is?"

"His vanity."

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"Aule, did you say?"
Bilba flinched at the words, said in Thranduil's voice but with a brittle edge she'd never heard from the elven king. His face was changed as well, hard like stone and so cold she was sure touching it would freeze her solid. She'd always thought Thranduil an imposing and standoffish king but realized now he'd been downright warm and friendly compared to the visage his body wore now.

Saruman seemed woefully oblivious.

"Yes, my Lord," he said, nodding vigorously. He scrambled inside his robes and then held up the crystals Gothmog had given him. "I have the crystals of the five wizards. I took them, to ease your return to power."

"More like I took them," Gothmog interjected. He was leaning casually against the podium, idly examining his fingernails, or claws, as if they were the most interesting thing in the room.

Saruman waved a hand dismissively. "It matters not. With them gone, there are none left who can oppose me, and certainly not you, my Lord," he added quickly.

"Are there not?" Morgoth asked. His words, Bilba noticed, had the strangest echo, as if two spoke at once. "Your robes have darkened, Curumo. Tell me, who holds the mantle of White Wizard now, if all but you are destroyed?"

Saruman gaped and, by the podium, even Gothmog looked up with a frown, the first sign of disquiet Bilba had seen from him. She looked closer at Saruman and realized that what she'd assumed to be a trick of the light was, in fact, an odd darkening of his robes, from the brilliant white he'd always worn to a dull and faded gray.

"Aiwendil lives," Gothmog said with mild annoyance. "But it can't be him. He lacks the strength to carry that kind of power." His voice was dismissive but he offered no explanation as to exactly why he'd left one of the wizards alive.

"It matters not," Saruman grumbled, pulling his robes tight around him. "I am still the strongest. I have the crystals of the others--"

"Most of the others," Gothmog corrected, bored.

Sauman half turned to sneer at him. He turned back, only to draw up short as he suddenly found Morgoth mere steps in front of him, having moved from the far end of the outcrop to where Saruman stood, so fast Bilba hadn't been aware of it even happening.

For the first time, Saruman seemed to falter. "I betrayed Aule," he repeated, almost stammering. "And destroyed the other wizards, at great personal risk."

Gothmog snorted but Saruman ignored him.

"I was promised a great reward," the wizard went on. "One befitting my service."

Morgoth cocked his head slightly, studying Saruman the way Bilba had seen Syrath study a warg, as if it were a mere curiosity rather than a threat.

"Were you now?" Morgoth practically purred and Bilba fought back an instinctive shudder. Beside her, Frerin wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him. Bilba wasn't entirely sure if he did it for her benefit or his own, and didn't mind either way.

"Yes," Saruman stated. He drew himself up and raised his chin, attempting to look intimidating no doubt, but all Bilba could see was an elderly man trying desperately to look strong before an enemy
of far greater size and strength. It reminded her, with a start, of an elderly dwarf she'd once see try to
do the same to an orc in the mines, and was startled by the burst of sympathy that rushed through her.

She knew how that story ended.

Morgoth smiled again, a slow one, splitting across his face like a gaping wound. It was not a natural
look, not one she'd ever seen Thranduil wear, and something she was quite sure would haunt her
nightmares, if she lived long enough to sleep again.

With a burst of movement so fast Bilba gasped in surprise, Morgoth grabbed Saruman by the robes,
wrenched him forward and, with an almost casual air, pushed him until the wizard was leaning off-
balance over the edge of the chasm.

Saruman blanched and seemed frozen with fear, hands scrambling to lock over Morgoth's forearms
as his mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Bilba saw his hands fist in the fabric of the silver robe
Morgoth wore, Thanduil's robe even if it was not currently Thranduil she was seeing.

"You know the thing I despise about traitors?" Morgoth said as if they were holding a pleasant
conversation on a sunny afternoon. "They're just so... 
untrustworthy."

He smiled, teeth a white gleam against the dark that radiated off him. Fire licked down his arms,
spreading out to follow the lines of the robe where it flared at his waist and fell to the bottom of his
boots.

Saruman fell.

He didn't scream.

Bilba wasn't sure he had the time.

Morgoth stood on the edge, looking down with a blank expression. Ash that had once been his robe
fell to the ground around him, leaving streaks on his pants and boots, and edging the muscles of his
naked chest and arms. Firelight flicked around him, casting him in dark, moving shadows and
unnatural highlights. The effect removed the refined, civilized king Bilba knew and replaced him
with something almost...elemental, born of ash and fire.

Several feet away Azog, who'd started to step forward as if to speak, clearly thought better of it, shut
his mouth and moved back into a deep shadow.

Bilba was deeply disappointed.

"Too bad," she heard Frerin whisper next to her. "I was really hoping Azog was dumber than that."

A slight growl revealed Azog had heard him but Frerin merely looked smug. The look dropped off
his face, however, as Morgoth turned to walk away from the ledge and into the chamber itself. Frerin
grabbed Bilba's arms and pulled her back slowly, as one might try to carefully avoid a venomous
snake.

Gothmog was still idly studying his claws as Morgoth strode past him, heading toward the exit from
the mountain.

"Stop."

Morgoth paused, and partly turned toward Gothmog. There was a charged silence, and then
Gothmog casually pushed up from the column and held up the hand he'd been so closely observing
the past several minutes. With a start, Bilba realized he'd never been looking at his claws at all, but the ring he'd slid onto one finger.

"The years you've spent locked up," Gothmug said, dropping his arm to one side, "have been most enlightening."

Morgoth's eyes glittered with a strange light as he mocked, "And yet you managed to do exactly nothing with the time you were given."

"Did I not?" Gothmog looked positively delighted. Bilba and Frerin, and even Azog, had all gone perfectly still, hoping desperately to not draw the notice of the two circling predators. "The Istari were prancing about, and Eru's precious favorites." He went back to examining the ring yet again, still casually leaning with his back against the podium, ankles crossed and one arm absently draped across his chest to provide a rest for the elbow of the other. "I was forced to work in the shadows, or risk exposing I wasn't quite as dead as many thought."

"Except for when you came out to kill the Istari of whom you were so afraid," Morgoth mocked. Gothmog looked amused. "I needed information, they had it." His eyes flickered toward the edge of the chasm. He pushed up and strode a few steps forward, toward Morgoth. "I took the two least likely to be missed, and so they weren't."

Morgoth waved a hand dismissively, turning away. "Unlike you, I have no fear of the pathetic Istari, or a few elves."

"You are so tragically predictable. You could never resist the satisfaction of corrupting one of the firstborn." Gothmog said mildly. "You took such great pleasure in using them to create your precious orcs. So inferior, and yet you were so jealous of them."

Morgoth's eyes narrowed. "Firstborn indeed," he spat. "When I was there before the music of the Ainur even began!" For a split second pure hatred twisted his features into something terrifying, and far from sane. It was gone almost as soon as it had come, however, leaving his features blank. Emotion changing in the blink of an eye, he stretched out an arm, turning it this way and that and making a show of studying the musculature and framework of it. "Still," he said, softly, "they do have their benefits, and this one in particular is a fine example."

"A fine example of flesh and blood," Gothmog agreed, "and woefully unable to house the full might and power of a Valar." He raised an eyebrow. "Or have you been so caught up in your whims you failed to notice?"

Morgoth scowled. "It matters not," he said finally. "I have more than enough to accomplish what I wish."

"Oh, I think it does matter," Gothmog countered. "You think your kin went to the trouble of setting a trap just to have it be entirely ineffective? You willingly placed yourself in an inadequate form, at a fraction of your power."

Morgoth laughed, an unnatural sound when considering who it came from. "You really think you could best me?"

"At your current strength?" Gothmog asked. "Yes, I do believe I can." He held up his hand again, showing off the ring. "And particularly when I have the final key to your shackles."

Morgoth's face darkened. He faced Gothmog head on, brows furrowed. Gothmog, in turn, raised an eyebrow in amusement as he said. "I think you'll find I'm a bit harder to destroy than the wizard."
"You're a fool," Morgoth nearly snarled. "You think you can contain me in this body? I will simply cast it off, and you will pay the price of turning on your betters."

His eyes shifted, losing their focus, and he slumped, swaying on his feet. A minute later he looked up again, and though the look in his eyes was one of anger, it was also strikingly familiar.

Bilba gasped as, beside her, Frerin sucked in a sharp breath and hissed, "Thranduil."

His eyes flickered briefly toward them and Bilba was impressed that, rather than fear or pain or despair, the elven king simply looked royally pissed off. Then he swayed on his feet once more and clenched his jaw, eyes closing. He gave a groan dragged out from somewhere deep inside and when he opened his eyes again, it was Morgoth looking out from them.

"I did say the key was a shackle did I not?" Gothmog asked, tone suggesting he was lecturing a particularly stupid child. "You have merely traded one cage for another. A smaller, and far less powerful one, leaving you under my authority."

"Am I now?" Morgoth asked, and Bilba felt an instinctive shudder at the low, deadly quality to his voice. "Was it you then who gave me permission to destroy the wizard?"

The barest flicker of uncertainty crossed Gothmog's eyes before vanishing back beneath the layers of insufferable arrogance he wore like a cloak. "It is certainly me preventing you from destroying me now," he taunted.

"Hmmm," Morgoth mused. "But it is not as complete as you thought it would be, is it? I may be shackled as you say, but I am far from bound."

"It matters not," Gothmog dismissed. "You are leashed, and with you, there are none who will be able to stand against me, wizard or elf."

"We shall see." Morgoth's anger seemed to have dissipated and, if anything, he seemed almost mildly amused, an emotion Bilba had already come to associate with bad things when seen in either creature. "So, after your grand betrayal, what is your next step? Dragging me to war with the ilk that crawls about Middle Earth?"

"On the contrary." Gothmog strode forward, motioning for Morgoth to follow him. As he did, Frerin grabbed Bilba's arm and pulled her up as well.

"I don't want to be caught in here alone with Azog," he said under his breath to her. "We might both end up tripping and following Saruman."

Bilba nodded and the two of them followed the two creatures out of the cave and onto the short ledge they'd initially been dropped off on. As they walked out the multitude of orcs below, as if summoned, turned as one and began to cheer their appearance. The sound was incredibly loud, echoing and reverberating about them until it was little more than a mindless roar.

"I was thinking," Gothmog announced to a visibly surprised Morgoth, "I would have Middle Earth come to me, and then utterly destroy them."

"Perhaps you did not waste your time as much as I had thought," Morgoth allowed. He raised an eyebrow. "Are you so sure they will come?"

For the first time since Morgoth had awakened, Gothmog turned and looked directly at Frerin and Bilba.
"Oh, yes," he breathed, "they will come."
"This is insane," Kili groused. "You know this is insane, right?"

Fili cracked an eye enough to glance at his brother. "Well, I didn't," he said dryly, "but now that you've said it a dozen or so times I'm beginning to consider the possibility."

Kili gave him a dark look and turned his back. He was standing in front of Lyth, who was sprawled out flat on the ground and looking away, pointedly ignoring him. She'd been informed she wasn't anywhere close to healthy enough to go with them, and wasn't taking it well.

Fili was several feet away, lounging back against Syrath and watching his brother alternately try to get his dragon to talk to him and complain about how insane their plan was. They'd been making final preparations for days, allowing the ground forces to get a head start so the dragons wouldn't leave them behind, all the while hoping desperately they weren't giving the enemy the upper hand while they tarried. Gandalf seemed confident Morgoth and Gothmog were both petty enough to wait for them to arrive, but if he was wrong...

*It is pretty insane.*

_Don't you start._ Fili muttered. He shifted, and frowned at the loud squawking that immediately came from the weight settled on his head. He had no idea when Quinlan's son had decided to attach himself to Syrath, or why Fili was apparently included as an annoyingly independent appendage, but he'd already been warned not to question it.

Apparently, the little dragon was quite the smartass.

His eyes drifted over to where his uncle was deep in conference with the other leaders of Middle Earth. He could be over there, if he wished, but had chosen to rest and spend time with Syrath while he could. Lyth wasn't the only one being left behind.

"You heard Gandalf," he said to his brother. "This won't be won by our ground forces."

"Doesn't change the fact it's completely insane," Kili shot back.

Fili shrugged. "What choice do we have?"

Kili muttered something under his breath, gave up on getting Lyth to acknowledge him, and spun on his brother. "Why are you so calm about this?"

"I'm going either way," Fili said simply. "Who cares how we get there?"

Behind Kili, Lyth relented and nudged him on the shoulder, hard enough to knock him forward a few feet. He turned back to her, but not before Fili heard him mutter, "It matters when the way is completely suicidal."

_I wish I was going with you_, Syrath's voice sounded in his head, forlorn.

_It'll be all right._ Fili returned. It would have to be. If they didn't succeed, nothing else would matter. Middle Earth would fall to darkness or, worse if the reports about the size of the army waiting for them was to be believed. No one needed an army that big just for subjugation.

No, the battle would most definitely not be won on land. Orcs bred like rabbits, and aged to
adulthood almost as fast, able to produce mass numbers in a relatively short time. The kingdoms of Middle Earth were in almost near constant conflict with them in one form or fashion, trying to keep them in check before they overran everything. In the past, the creatures had never been patient enough, or able to control the bloodlust taught to them from birth enough, to plan any real offensives, or collaborations. It somewhat limited their threat and made them marginally easier to control.

It had also, Fili could now admit, made the rest of them complacent. While they had assumed everything was as it had always been, Gothmog had been reining in the orcs, hiding them in the deep tunnels and places of the worlds, building an army the likes of which the world had never seen.

And now, thanks to their blindness, he held a force that no one on Middle Earth could hope to match.

In a straightforward fight, orcs against human, dwarf and elf, the orcs would win. It was not a question of battle tactics, courage or strength. It would simply be attrition, basic arithmetic.

There was no hope down that path, but that did not mean there was no hope.

Middle Earth had one advantage over the orcs, one possible redeeming quality that, if used wisely, could end up being their salvation.

The orcs might rule the land, but the other three races more than ruled the sky.

Orc dragons were small, stubborn and mindless, and incredibly hard to breed or train. The orcs had lost many dragons over the past few months, and a huge amount during the battle for Erebor. While the reports spoke of a monstrous force of orcs in Mordor, there was no such report of an equivalent sized dragon force. There had never been that many to begin with and, even if there had been, they could never hope to truly match the combined forces of dwarven, human and elven dragons. Orc dragons were a fraction of the size, could not fly nearly as high and were generally far easier to kill than any other species. Most dragons refused to even classify the creatures as dragons, considering it a grave insult, and insisting the things were little more than giant insects.

Fili had no idea why Gothmog hadn't spent the same time growing an orc dragon force as he'd spent on the orcs themselves. The task may have been too difficult; powerful as Gothmog might be, Fili doubted he had the ability to increase the birthrate or force stubborn orc dragons into submission. If he had to guess, Fili would imagine Gothmog had simply not considered it worth his time. He had an army four times the size of any currently existing on Middle Earth, and the power of a fallen Valar. Who needed a bunch of orc dragons that couldn't even pose a serious threat?

He could well be right.

But still...there was a chance.

Slim, insane, and suicidal...but a chance.

And Fili planned to take it.

He glanced toward his uncle, and noticed a new figure had joined the group. Tall, thin and dressed in heavy brown robes, the man looked like a slightly younger version of Gandalf, albeit with a brown and white streaked beard and robe. The staff he held was similar to Gandalf's as well, but the crystal on top was unique, as had been the one on Saruman's staff from what Fili recalled. Radagast, the
elusive wizard Gothmog hadn't been able to find, had shown up on his own shortly after the battle ended. He'd spoken quietly to Gandalf, the two of them shooting glances off in the direction of Mordor.

"Did you feel it?" Fili, who'd been nearby, had heard Radagast ask.

"I did," Gandalf had answered. There'd been sorrow in his voice, that had apparently surprised Radagast.

"You mourn? Truly?"

"I mourn for the man he once was," Gandalf's reply had been. Talk had turned after that to other topics, mainly something to do with Gandalf's wardrobe change and how no one told Radagast anything. Fili had moved off before they realized he was eavesdropping though, if he had to guess, he probably wasn't as surreptitious as he would like to believe.

"Time to go," Kili said suddenly, eyes also fixed in that direction, toward their uncle who was looking back their way.

Fili nodded. "Yeah."

Reaching up, he gently pulled the baby dragon off his head and set the small being on the ground. The baby promptly turned and bounded away to where his father was resting near Inilth. She and Fingalon and the others left behind in the mountains had made it back earlier that morning. The baby had spent time with both his parents before quietly returning to Syrath to allow his mother to rest. Her injuries were healing well, but she was still tired and it'd be some time before she was back to full health.

Kili reached a hand out and Fili grabbed it and let his brother pull him to his feet. Turning, Fili wrapped both arms around Syrath's neck. You take care while I'm gone. Make sure Lyth doesn't try to follow us.

I'll sit on her if I have to, Syrath said, voice forlorn. You'll come back, right? And Bilba too?

Fili sighed and pulled back to look the young dragon in the eyes. "I'll do my best."

He turned, waited for Kili to say goodbye to Lyth, and then followed him over to the main group. They'd barely arrived before their mother appeared, grabbing both to drag into a rough hug. She would not be going. They could not, in good conscience, simply abandon their people while they went off to fight Morgoth. Especially now. A lot of work would have to happen to restore Erebor, bury the dead, and comfort the suffering. His mother would rule in Thorin's stead and, in the event none of them returned, she would rule in truth as Queen. Legolas had already placed Fingalon in charge behind him, while Elrond had his sons in charge in his stead. Aragorn was the only one who didn't have to worry about succession as his father ruled in Gondor, and would continue to do so in the event of his son's loss.

Middle Earth would continue, even if they did not.

Assuming they succeeded.

If not, then at least their kingdoms would have solid leadership as they faced the end.

Dis released them. "I'd ask you to stay," she whispered, "but what would it look like if I kept my sons home while so many others went?"
She patted them both on the chest, not expecting an answer, and then strode away to say goodbye to her brother and husband before she lost her nerve, or broke down entirely.

Fili looked up and tried to pretend his eyes weren't burning. When he looked at Kili a moment later, he saw his brother's eyes were glassy with moisture, but he fixed his gaze forward, jaw set.

"All right," Fili said, setting himself as well. "What do you say we get this over with?"

"Yeah." Kili sent him a shaky smile. "Sooner we leave, the sooner we get back."

Fili nodded and reached to clasp his brother's shoulder. "Right."

The smile faded and Kili gave him a troubled look. "You realize a lot of this plan relies on things entirely out of our control, right?"

Kili's gaze had moved, fixing on where the baby dragon was touching noses with Quinlan. The massive, battle-scarred dragon pressing into the ground to try, unsuccessfully, to get on his tiny son's level might have been comical had it not been for the utter love and adoration radiating off him toward the tiny dragon.

Past them, Fili saw others, of every race and species saying what could be, and for some would be, their final farewells. Many were crying, some clinging to one another so hard it was a challenge to decipher where one ended and the other began.

In his mind, Fili heard again the words Gandalf had spoken, after laying out his plan and hearing a multitude of loud, and passionate, objections. "There is but one path to Morgoth, and the cost to travel it will be high."

"What choice do we have?" he repeated, voice a near whisper.

Kili's eyes darkened and Fili knew he was thinking along the same lines. His only response, however, was a simple nod of his head.

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Fili watched as the mountains of Mordor came steadily closer.

He rode on the back of Sardin, with Kili seated behind him. The slender dragon had approached him before they left and requested a link. Fili had been startled but had finally shrugged and accepted. They were facing the end of the world after all, who cared about tradition anymore?

Sardin had explained what he and Syrath had decided. Apparently the two were treating Fili like a piece of baggage to be bandied about, but anyone who spent much time with dragons had to learn to expect a small amount of imperiousness, particularly amongst the younger set.

They had set out quickly after that. The drakes had flown highest, with the human dragons the layer below and the elven dragons beneath that. Fili imagined they must make an impressive sight from the ground, a heavy shadow, blocking the sun.

He hoped it would be enough.

They traveled fast and light, with barely any supplies. The ground forces carried more, but even they were only geared for a short battle. Fili doubted they would be able to hold out long, even if everything went perfectly.
The mountains were coming up fast now, looming out of the desert landscape like a great wall of darkness. Below them, through the layers of dragons, Fili caught glimpses of the ground forces, horsemen of Rohan along with dwarves, and humans from Dale, Lake-town and even Gondor. A number of dragons had been sent with them to protect them from aerial attacks as they'd traveled but none had come.

Gothmog was very convinced of his own victory. Such arrogance would either be his undoing, or theirs.

A low rumbling echoed across the landscape and, in the distance, Fili caught sight of the massive gates of Mordor starting to move. They were black, made from solid iron and wide enough to easily fit the trolls on top working the wheels to open them. The screech of improperly maintained metal echoed across the landscape and the slowly moving slabs were so enormous it was more like a building parting down the middle than a set of gates.

If Gandalf were right, Fili thought grimly, a force stood behind those gates that would surpass any army on Middle Earth, or all of them combined.

Twin roars rang out and then a space was opening in the middle of the dragon formation, around Quinlan and Xalanth, who'd dropped into position. They were the largest dragons in existence, or at least the largest anyone knew about, and the ones most capable of the task ahead.

A swarm of orc dragons rose over the edges of the gate and, in unison, the front layers of dragons unleashed fountains of fire at them. Xalanth and Quinlan, both riderless as dwarven skin did not hold up to fire the way scales did, dove through the dead center of the flames and quickly vanished from sight.

An instant later the flames had receded, leaving clouds of ash in their wake. Maybe the dragons were right, Fili thought with dark amusement. Maybe orc dragons didn't deserve the name, not if they couldn't even resist a little fire from their betters.

Xalanth and Quinlan reappeared, suddenly dropping fast, legs up and talons extended. They slammed into the trolls on top of the gate with all the force of a mine collapse, hard enough that a boom resounded. Then the trolls were gone, knocked over the edge of the gates and out of sight.

The two dragons landed, claws scrabbling against the metal for a hold. They turned toward the giant wheels and gear systems that allowed the gates to open, and let loose an ocean of fire. The flames rippled along the metal, incinerating the wooden wheels and melting the gears into an unrecognizable mass of twisted metal.

As Sardin shot over top of the gate, Quinlan and Xalanth turned and sent out new rivers of flame, over the edges of the gate, incinerating those below and giving the armies a chance to get in position. The gate was now permanently locked in a position that would allow only a small, steady stream of orcs to pass. It would still be a numbers game, still a game they were destined to lose, but at least it would make it a little fairer in the long run. Having a land with only one entrance or exit was fantastic for a siege situation where the enemy surrounded you, not so much when you were trying to march your own forces out to meet them.

Behind him, he felt Kili twist around to let out a whoop of joy. First phase successful. Fili looked over his shoulder as well, in time to see Quinlan and Xalanth lean forward and take off from the gates, swooping low over the landscape before lifting to a better height. Xalanth rose through the ranks to be nearer to where Dwalin rode with Thorin, while Quinlan stayed below. At intervals, the dragons on the lowest level sent out new gouts of flame to thin the orc army, and keep down archers. There were also trebuchets, he noted grimly, but none appeared to be currently ready to use. Thorin
would have had the trebuchets ready days ago, long before any sign of the enemy. Thank Aule that the orc commanders did not share his uncle's foresight.

As the dragons cleared the gate, he got his first look at the army, and felt his blood run cold.

Gandalf hadn't been exaggerating. If anything, he'd **understated** the numbers. Orcs covered the ground like a living carpet, a writhing, seething mass of hatred ready to be unleashed upon Middle Earth. If they weren't dealt with, it wouldn't matter if they defeated Morgoth and Gothmog. The orcs alone would be more than enough to wipe out all life entirely on their own.

Fili lifted his eyes to see Mount Doom rapidly dominating his vision. Behind him, he could feel the solid weight of his brother. He didn't know where his father or uncle were. The leaders of Middle Earth, along with Gandalf and Radagast, had been split throughout the layers and spread out as much as possible in the hopes some would survive.

They were fighting to save Middle Earth, and the price for that would be higher than any yet paid.

Fili swallowed, a heavy weight settling in his gut. He was at peace with the possibility of paying that price himself, but he couldn't it being asked of anyone in his family.

The cost would be high, he thought, but, please Aule, not **that** high.

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Bilba and Frerin stood on the ledge outside the entrance to Mount Doom and watched the approaching army. They had been dragged outside when Morgoth, who'd been lounging and behaving like a spoiled royal until then, had suddenly gotten excited. They had emerged from the sweltering cave, where Bilba had spent the last several days convinced she was being slowly roasted, in time to see a wave of fire at the gates.

The dragons had crested over the flames a few seconds later and Bilba had watched them with wide eyes.

Were they really trying a full-frontal assault? Were they completely **insane**?

She looked beside her to where Frerin stood but his body was tense, and his face grim. His eyes were fixed on the dragons. Neither were bound, as there wasn't anywhere for them to go, and Frerin had wrapped his arms around his torso, fingers digging into his sides.

Bilba felt a presence at her back and glanced over her shoulder to see Azog looming over her. A shudder ran through her and she looked away sharply. Gothmog had finally given Azog a rundown of methods of revenge far worse than death and, ever since then, the orc had been almost unnaturally cheerful. Bilba had no idea what Gothmog had said, but she doubted it was anything good. She'd asked Frerin, but he'd refused to speculate. She wasn't sure if that was because he didn't know, or because he did and simply didn't want to tell her.

"I wonder," Morgoth's voice, lazy and unconcerned as ever, drew her attention, "what it is they think they are doing?"

"Attacking us, I would imagine," Gothmog replied, amused. "Isn't that what we've been waiting for?"

"Is it?" Morgoth mused. "I had expected a challenge."

"Perhaps they know that you're chained," Gothmog mocked, "and not...quite as strong as you once
A slow smile split Morgoth's face. Past him, the lines of dragons were nearly upon them and Bilba resisted the urge to scream at them to run. The elven dragons, and some of the human ones, were engaged with some of the orc dragons, as well as with archers on the ground. The rest of the orc army were splitting, a bulk heading toward the gates while the rest were bunching around the base of the mountain, apparently foreseeing the dragons landing on, or near, there. Some were trying frantically to ready the trebuchets but there was no fast way to load one of those and dragons were already taking them out as quickly as possible.

"Is that so?" Morgoth said slowly. "Do they believe I am limited to parlor tricks, like some sort of pathetic Maiar?" He rolled his head to the side as he spoke, giving a derisive look at Gothmog who clenched his jaw in annoyance.

Morgoth chuckled, a bastardized sound with no hint of merriment or light. He stepped forward to the very edge of the ledge. A cold wind, whipped up seemingly from nowhere, spiraled around Bilba, lifting loose tendrils of hair from the mess of braids wrapped about her head. She shivered and shot another look at Frerin, who only gave a brief shake of his head, eyes still fixed outward.

Morgoth lifted his arms a few inches away from his sides, palms facing outward and fingers relaxed and slightly curled. The wind increased, whipping his hair back from his shoulders. A glow lined his body, bringing into sharp relief his muscles and sending glittering sparks of light running along his hair like rivulets of water. It was hauntingly beautiful, and Bilba felt a strange mix of peace and tranquility wash over her.

The feeling was washed away in an instant, when Morgoth spoke.

"Mat."

A short word, deceptively simple, and Bilba's mind automatically translated it from Black Speech to its Common equivalent.

"Die."

A wave of pure, white light rippled out, expanding into an enormous wall stretching high into the sky. There was no escaping it, no outrunning or avoiding it. It passed over the orcs gathered around the foot of the mountain, overran the orc dragons swarming through the air and, finally, rushed through the ranks of dragons coming toward them.

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

And then, without sound or flourish, dragons began to fall from the sky.

There was no pattern to it. One dragon would continue to fly, while the one next to it fell. An entire group would fall, while another would remain untouched. Still another would find itself thinned like a gardener clumsily trying to pick weeds and snatching flowers instead. There was no reason to it. Drakes fell next to human dragons, interspaced amongst the now dull forms of elven dragons and the smaller, pale forms that were the orc dragons.

As they dropped, those riding them fell as well, some were caught by others.
Some were not.

Bilba's breath froze in her chest, and her heart stopped. Beside her, Frerin's eyes were wide and fixed, his body so locked Bilba doubted he could turn away even if he'd wanted.

As if standing in the midst of a nightmare, she watched as Morgoth raised his arms and turned to face them, laughing as a cascade of dragons fell behind him like rain from an unexpected storm.

Bilba couldn't stop the stream of tears tracking down her face, but she was proud of herself for one thing.

She didn't give the bastard the satisfaction of hearing her scream.

Not when the dragons began to fall.

Not when they hit.

Not when dwarves, elves and humans rained down, and she heard the screams of frustration, rage and grief from those too slow to catch them.

Not even when Barahir, eyes glazed and body limp, dropped past her to break upon the mountain below.

Not even then.

But she wanted to.
Fili soared over the battlefield feeling as if he were in a nightmare.

He wished it were one he could wake up from.

Below, the ground was littered with the broken corpses of dragons and those riding them. He caught sight of Quinlan, clearly dazed and favoring a leg. He'd been on the lowest level of the tiered formation, near Xalanth, and must have been hit by a dragon falling from overhead. Other dragons had already landed around him, protecting him as he got his bearings. He wouldn't be able to fight on land but should still be effective in the air, a harsh but necessary evil and one Fili was sure the dragon was happy to take in lieu of the alternative.

The image of Quinlan's tiny son flashed through his mind and Fili breathed a silent prayer of thanks that the small creature wouldn't have to deal with the agony of a broken bond, or the pain of losing his father.

He had no doubt others were feeling such pain, even then. They'd lost the mental links again as they'd approached Mordor and the mountain within so it was always possible those back home hadn't felt the breaks, but he doubted they were that lucky. His uncle had mentioned people feeling soul bonds snap on the way from Rivendell to Erebor and he had no doubt those left behind had felt these now. Gothmog relished pain. He'd make sure they could feel it.

Plus, it was the only thing he could hold onto in light of the fact that he couldn't see his family anywhere. Couldn't see them, but hadn't felt any bonds break and surely he would have had they...had anything happened.

Surely.

Some distance from Quinlan, and farther down the slope, lay the still body of another drake, one of the younger ones he didn't immediately recognize. A young dwarven woman knelt next to it, fingers digging into the fabric of her trousers and mouth open in a scream he could practically feel if not hear.

*I'm so glad it isn't me.*

The words passed unbidden through his mind, followed closely by a rush of shame over their selfishness. It could yet be him. Syrath and his mother had been left behind but the rest of his family was there, and the battle was far from over.

It could be him, but he thanked Aule it wasn't.

Yet.

Sardin shifted beneath him, not the sharp twists and turns he'd made when avoiding falling dragons and people, but enough that it got his attention. He looked down and saw orcs advancing on the young woman. She was still kneeling, silent, eyes fixed on her hands.

"No," Fili growled. They'd lost enough. He leaned forward and patted Sardin on the neck, hoping to convey that he'd seen the same thing the dragon had and wanted to go.

Sardin must have gotten the message because he adjusted and suddenly was diving straight down, through the gaps in the formation everyone was too stunned to close. Only moments before those
holes had been filled with friends and family.

Now...

Now they were simply gone.

Sardin landed behind the woman, roaring in rage and sending a burst of flame over her head to incinerate the first few ranks of orcs making their way up. The move gave Fili enough time to unstrap himself from the harnesses and slide off the dragon, drawing his sword as he did.

"Come on," he ordered, kneeling next to the young woman and grabbing her arm to pull her to her feet. This close, he could see she had dark blonde hair tied in braids around her head similar to how Bilba wore hers. Her eyes were a deep blue and she wore clothing that marked her as a member of the merchant's guild, which explained why he didn't recognize her. The guild was enormous, often boasting families with many children, dwarven and dwobbit alike. It also had a high number of dragon riders, due to the children of merchants being the ones to deliver food regularly to the dragon levels, by intent.

Regardless, the fact the guild was well represented didn't mean he was willing to sacrifice one of their own to the orcs. The young woman, who was probably his age if he had to guess, resisted, stubbornly staying in place, and he bit back a growl of frustration. Leaning in, he pointed past her face at the advancing orcs. "Are you really going to sit here and let the bastards that killed your drake kill you without putting up a fight? Your drake really meant that little to you?"

At that her head snapped up, eyes blazing fire at him. Fili grinned. "Much better." He grabbed the hilt of the sword strapped to her back and pulled it from its sheath to shove into her hands. "Get up."

She struggled shakily to her feet, and he grabbed her arm to help steady her. As she gained her footing she glanced at him to thank him, and then did a double take. "Your Highness?"

"Last I checked," Fili said with a grin, even as he internally grimaced. He was used to the lower classes, particularly the female members, making a fuss whenever he happened through, a scene they did not currently have time to play out. Sardin was still keeping the orcs back but there were far too many, spread far too wide for him to cover them all.

Her eyes narrowed. "So, are you actually going to be able to fight or am I going to have to protect both of us?"

Fili's jaw clenched, but he resisted the urge to snap back. She was in pain, it edged her words and practically bled from her expression. People in pain, he'd found, could often behave like wounded animals, lashing out at anyone who came near. He didn't know why. He'd done it himself in the past and couldn't have explained why if asked. Maybe it was a way to let some of the pain out. Maybe, by dropping it on someone else, it was a way to feel less alone in it.

He didn't know, but the last thing he was going to do was hold her responsible for words spoken minutes after her drake had been killed. Instead, hoping to distract her even if only a little, he stepped forward, ducking under Sardin's jaw. He came up on the other side, just in time to ram his sword through the chest of an oncoming orc. He twisted, using his body to pull the sword free, then continued the momentum into a full swing, easily beheading the next orc. He took out four more in quick succession before ducking back again to allow Sardin to send out another bout of fire.

Around them, other dragons were landing, ringing the base of the mountain and doing their best to drive the orcs back. Even with as many as they'd brought they had no chance to take on the entire horde which was why they weren't going to try. Instead they planned to block off the mountain,
giving the wizards, and Galadriel, a chance to defeat Gothmog and retrieve the ring. Pulling in as close as possible would also prevent the trebuchets from being put in use, as it would be rather ineffective to fling rocks at them when the orcs would be hitting their own people at the same time.

Actually, on second thought, he almost hoped the idiots would use the things.

The young woman stepped up beside him, almost trancelike, absently swinging her sword in one hand as Sardin finished sweeping the area in front of him, flames meeting with the fire of other dragons ranged in front and to the sides.

"So," Fili said, unable to help himself. "Still think it's all just for publicity?"

She shrugged numbly. "Orcs are idiots. My little brothers killed more than that protecting our caravans on trade runs." Her voice sounded exhausted, and dull, but there was the tiniest spark of amusement in there, buried deep. She was trying.

"All right then," he said. "I guess I'll just have to make you eat your words." He frowned, eyes narrowing slightly as a thought occurred to him. "You don't think the stories about Orcrist are put out by the throne too, do you?"

The young woman rolled her eyes. "Of course not. She's bloody Orcrist."

Fili nodded, pleased. "Damn right she is."

A boom thundered overhead, vibrating through the stone beneath his feet, and he looked up in time to see Xalanth slamming into the mountain just below where a ledge jutted out from the side. Galadriel and the wizards had transferred onto him midflight and, even then, were scrambling off and onto the stone outcropping. It would have been helpful, Fili thought, if Xalanth could have used fire when he landed. It wouldn't have killed Gothmog or Morgoth but would have forced them to respond, and use power to do so. They were both strong, but not infinitely so, and certainly not with Morgoth supposedly bound by the ring.

"You planning to fight?" the girl drawled next to him in a near perfect imitation of both Dwalin and Bilba, "or you going to stand there and try to look pretty until the orcs run you through?"

Fili lowered his head and glowered at her. "Keep that up and I won't introduce you to Orcrist."

Her eyes widened. "You're joking. She'd never want to meet me."

Fili snorted. "Bilba's the kindest person you'd ever meet. She'd be thrilled to meet you, so long as you aren't an orc." Or a goblin, he added to himself, considering all the random mental reminders she gave herself, and accidentally broadcast to him and Syrath, and probably Dwalin; to remember she still needed to kill them. "Of course," he added casually, "you'll have to survive this whole thing first." As would he, and Bilba.

"You're on," the girl growled, hand tightening on the hilt of her sword until her knuckles went white.

It occurred to Fili he had no idea what the girl's name was. He opened his mouth to ask but, before he could, she charged past him and into the fray.

"Fair enough." He gave a short nod and ran in with her, where others who'd landed along with the dragons were already locked in battle. Mentally, he spared one quick thought for Galadriel and the others, as well as Bilba and his uncle.

And then his only focus was the orcs.
Frerin swore. "Is that Barahir?"

Bilba nodded. She hadn't particularly known the dragon all that well but she knew Syrath and Aragon, and knew both would be devastated by the loss. She saw no sign of Aragorn now and hoped that, wherever he was in the formation, that he had someone there to help him through the shock and pain of a broken bond.

In the next instant, her attention had shifted as the mountain vibrated under her feet. She stumbled as dozens upon dozens of dragons slammed into the mountain's base, unloading their riders and sending out bursts of flame to drive back the advancing orcs. Heat rose from the flames, a wave of it blowing strands of hair back off her face and raising a light sheen of sweat on her skin.

Morgoth turned back from the edge with a smug look at Gothmog who, as usual, looked unimpressed.

"What?" he said, sounding bored, "Couldn't manage them all? I thought you were a Valar."

"One that you have confined," Morgoth replied. He raised an eyebrow. "Why do you complain?"

He nodded toward the ring on Gothmog's finger. "If you wish for me to destroy them, then give me the means."

"Somehow, I doubt they are the ones you'd destroy," Gothmog replied dryly.

A shadow fell over them and Bilba felt her heart jolt in her chest at the sight of Xalanth flying straight toward them. He slammed into the mountain just below the ledge, head arched over the rock and appearing to stare straight at her.

For a second Bilba thought her every dream had come true. She pictured her father bursting onto the scene, singlehandedly taking out Morgoth, Gothmog and Azog and taking her and Frerin safely back to Erebor.

Then, in almost the same moment, she realized he wasn't riding on Xalanth's back and her heart sank just as quick.

"Don't think for a minute he isn't here," Frerin said from beside her, eyes compassionate. "If he could have been on Xalanth he would have been." He nodded toward the ledge. "He's probably down there now, fighting his way up."

Bilba managed to give him a shaky smile and nodded. She briefly wondered how he'd known so clearly what she'd been thinking, only to remember he'd been a slave in Moria as well. Surely the dream of one's family or friends coming to the rescue couldn't have been unusual.

She tensed as she saw Gothmog and Morgoth turning toward the huge dragon, cold fear rushing through her at the thought they would hurt him.

Before they could do anything, the figures she'd seen on Xalanth's back were coming forward, leaping off to land on the ledge. She recognized the wizard, Gandalf, though not the man standing next to him, and then an impressive looking woman dressed in full battle armor.

Xalanth growled and she realized he had been looking at her. There was no way to know what he wanted but she smiled at him. He responded by letting out a grunt and then dropping out of sight. The act immediately released a vise that had been wrapped around her heart, as she'd still worried one of the monsters would do something to him the longer he stayed in their view.
As the three advanced, Morgoth simply smirked and walked to another side of the ledge, not so conspicuously leaving Gothmog to face the three alone. As Galadriel drew a sword, and the two flanking her raised staffs, Frerin grabbed Bilba's arm and pulled her back, toward the edge farthest away from the oncoming battle. Behind them, near the entrance into the mountain, Azog was busy watching the rest of the action and didn't appear to notice their movement.

Gothmog reached over his back and then he was drawing what looked like a long sword made of flame out from seemingly thin air.

"Where in Durin's name do you suppose he was hiding that?" Frerin asked and Bilba snorted, shaking her head as she raised her hands to sign.

*I don't want to know.*

"Probably for the best," Frerin agreed sagely. "There are some things we mortals are simply not meant to know."

The first clash of blade on blade sent a burst of light so intense it was imprinted on the back of Bilba's eyelids when she shut her eyes. The elven woman drove Gothmog back, a fact which caused Bilba's eyes to widen in shock even as her heart jumped in excitement at the first sign of anyone being able to set him on his heels.

The two wizards, meanwhile, split to move past the two and head toward where Morgoth was standing near the edge again, his back to them. As they neared, Morgoth almost casually looked over his shoulder.

A sheer wall of force, similar to the one he'd thrown out before but less intense, rippled out from where he stood. It slammed into the wizards and knocked them back onto the ground. They slid several feet, nearly ramming into the elven woman fighting Gothmog.

She stumbled, forced to looked down and dance out of the way of the two wizards. This left an opening for Gothmog who raised his sword in both hands and slashed it down in a blow that, while it lacked elegance or skill, held a terrifying amount of raw power.

The woman, still trying to avoid the wizards, looked up and twisted to try and avoid the blow. She stumbled, one foot hitting Gandalf, and fell over him, barely managing to get her sword up in time.

Gothmog's blow slammed into hers and she grunted, face tight with exertion as she struggled to hold the blade back. She had to be insanely strong, Bilba thought, to be able to hold that kind of power, especially at the angle she was at.

Past the woman, Bilba caught sight of Morgoth smirking over his shoulder. He turned to face out again, and raised his arms. Bilba made a strangled sound and grabbed Frerin's shirtsleeve, tugging to get his attention.

His eyes narrowed and he started to rise to his feet, only to hear a low growl from behind them. Apparently, Azog hadn't forgotten about them after all. To Bilba, the orc seemed slightly panicked, eyes darting back and forth between the combatants as if slowly realizing he might have taken on forces far out of his league.

Power started to crackle at the end of Morgoth's fingers and Frerin wrapped an arm around Bilba's shoulders, pulling her close against him. Bilba curled against his side, nearly shaking with the effort to not try and do something.

The female elf was still laying across Gandalf's chest and, as Bilba watched, the wizard managed to
get his staff in his hand and raised it up. The wizard dressed in brown robes, now crouching behind
them, had his as well and, simultaneously, they shoved their staffs forward. A wave of power of their
own surged out, driving Gothmog back, not far but enough to let the three regain their footing.

It wasn't fast enough to stop Morgoth.

Power shot from his fingertips, straight upwards. Overhead, thick, dark clouds began to gather,
swirling in a thick, ugly maelstrom. The temperature plummeted and a stiff wind kicked up, causing
Bilba to shiver as it sliced through her thin clothing. A few seconds later the first drops of rain began
to fall, intensifying quickly until it was coming down in sheets, a pounding deluge of heavy, fat
drops splashing down across the battlefield.

Frerin swore. "So much for dragonfire."

Bilba grimaced. The dragons could still produce fire but it would be less intense, would travel a
shorter distance, and, in general, would cause less damage. The water would turn the dirt into mud
and raise the risk of slipping and falling and, in the heat and chaos of battle, a mud splattered friend
could easily be mistaken for a foe.

The woman returned to her battle while the wizards headed back toward Morgoth who was now
turning to face them.

"I think," Frerin said slowly, "this is going to very quickly be the worst place for us to be."

Movement came from behind them, and then Azog was suddenly moving past them, vanishing over
the ledge and running down into the battle below.

"Huh," Frerin said. "Guess he thought so too." He stood up and almost leisurely stretched, before
grinning at her. "What do you say we go remind them who Orcrist and Frerin, son of Thrain, are?"

Bilba raised an eyebrow, taking his hand when he offered it and getting to her feet. We don't have
armor, she signed, or weapons.

He gave her an incredulous look. "You need armor now? And weapons?" He scoffed and widened
his eyes dramatically. "So much for the legend of Orcrist, greatest arena fighter of all time." His eyes
cut back toward her. "They had been saying I was second best," he mused. "Maybe--"

His voice trailed off, and Bilba glared at him. I could still kick your ass.

"Sure," Frerin said flippantly, "if you had armor."

Bilba considered punching him, but didn't. Mainly because he had a point. She'd never used armor in
the Arena, and had a minimal set that she rarely wore after that. It wasn't until she'd gotten to Erebor
that people had started getting picky about what she wore when she fought.

As for weapons, it was a battle after all. There were plenty of blades to be had and it'd be little
different than how she'd gotten them in the Arena.

She had gotten soft, she realized, and it pissed her off.

You want to make a wager, Lord Second Best? she signed. Who can find and get to Azog the fastest?


Bilba shrugged. The battle between the elven woman and Gothmog was getting worse and Morgoth
and the wizards seemed to be trying to use bursts of power on one another. It was definitely time to leave, before she or Frerin became an unintended victim.

Not to mention she was now thoroughly drenched thanks to the rain and was freezing. Fighting would take her mind off it, and warm her up at the same time.

*Fine, what's the loser get?*

Frerin gave her a brilliant grin that belied how he must have felt with his hair plastered to his face, water dripping off his chin and his body shivering from the cold. "Loser has to take responsibility when your father asks who in Durin's name decided it was a good idea to go into battle without armor or weapons."

*Better start working on what you're going to say then, Bilba signed. Fighting in the Arena had been terrifying but, once she'd left, she couldn't say she'd minded fighting. It was the main reason Primula had sent her to Bofur and the other dwarves and to the rangers after that. The rush of adrenaline, the freedom of soaring through the air on Syrath's back, it had lit a fire in her veins, different from the terror of the Arena, that she'd come to love.*

She hadn't felt it as much in Erebor. She didn't miss it enough to wish she'd never gone there. What she'd gained in Erebor more than made up for anything she might have lost, but that didn't mean she wasn't excited at the thought of getting to experience the thrill of it all again.

That familiar fire began to rush in her veins, and she saw the answering light flickering in Frerin's eyes.

There was nothing to be said after that. In silent, mutual agreement the two of them spun and ran toward battle.

As they both leapt off the edge, hit the slope and began to slide down, Bilba knew three things with absolute certainly.

One, her father was going to kill her, or Frerin.

Two, she was kicking Frerin's ass for questioning her abilities, even if he did have a point.

Three, the orcs were going to rue the day they'd chosen to cross her.
Chapter 38

Bilba wrenched her blade out from where she'd buried it in its ex-owner's chest with a scowl of disgust.

She'd forgotten just how much she hated orc weaponry. It was flimsy, poorly crafted, and never as sharp as she'd like it, assuming it was sharpened at all. She may have grown softer than she'd been in Moria, but one area she didn't mind having changed in was weaponry. She was happy to fight without armor, but damn it all did she miss her sword.

Ice cold water streamed into her eyes, adding to what was already drenching her from head to foot and she bit back a curse as she tried, unsuccessfully, to wipe it away. Her body was shaking violently from the cold despite the fighting, only serving to increase her agitation. Already, six orcs had taken one look at her and run.

The ones who'd stayed were clearly lacking in basic common sense. Granted, they were orcs, but even so...

She started to move forward, trying to make progress through the horde for the eighth or ninth time, only to snarl in frustration as yet another orc was suddenly in her face. She twisted away, moving to get her sword up, only to feel a jolt of panic as her foot slid in the slippery mud now coating the mountain’s slope. She fell back into it with a thud, cold muck soaking through her tunic. The mud was slippery and her body slid in it, her legs ending up between the orc’s feet and putting her in perfect striking distance. The force of the blow had also jarred her and knocked the sword from her hand, sending it tumbling down into the sea of orc filth just a few meters below.

The orc sneered at her as it raised its sword, hands wrapped around the hilt as it prepared to drive it into her chest.

Bilba spared a split second to roll her eyes.

As if she'd be killed that easily, and by a rank and file orc of all things.

Please.

It was insulting.

The orc was still gloating, which gave her plenty of time to brace her elbows in the mud and drive a foot straight up between the stupid thing's legs. The orc shrieked, melodramatically, and promptly lost its grip on the hilt of its sword. Bilba rolled to the side, missing the blade as it hit the earth with a wet thunk,

She lashed out with a leg, cutting one of the orc's legs out from under it and sent it tripping to the ground next to her. She rolled and sat up, grabbing the orc's sword from where the blade had sunk in the mud, and wrenched it free.

She then calmly drove the sword straight into the orc's throat. Black ichor spurted into her face and she gagged before dragging the sword free. She twisted back around, planning to get up, only to grunt as her shoulders hit the ground again when still another orc showed up to promptly tackle her back and straddle her.

Much like its predecessor it was far too dumb to think about disarming her or pinning her arms first.
Bilba barely managed to get the sword up, hand on the hilt and other hand bracing the flat of the blade as she blocked the creature's blow. It sneered at her and leaned forward, using the advantage of its bodyweight to try and force its weapon down, mere inches from her face.

"Get off her, asshole." A boot collided with the orc's head, knocking it to one side and jerking its sword wildly off course. Before it could even try to recover, the head of a bright green and yellow dragon came down, a cavern of teeth yawning wide, before it snapped up the orc in one bite, wrenching the creature off her.

"Come on." Frerin knelt beside her, grabbing her arm with one hand while gripping his own stolen sword with the other. "Time for a break."

Bilba scowled at him. *I hate these stupid swords*, she signed in annoyance as he dragged her upright.

"Consider it a challenge," he said happily, pushing her back as the dragon took up position where they'd been standing. Bilba tugged against Frerin's arm but his grip was like iron and she gave up, lifting her hands to sign in agitation at him.

*I thought we were going after Azog.*

He shot a look at the teeming mass of orcs Azog had vanished into and shrugged. "I don't know. I think after this is all over, you and I deserve a break. What do you think?"

Bilba raised an eyebrow in suspicion, and lifted her hands. *Moria?*

His grin, if possible, got wider. "I hear it's nice this time of year."

Bilba nodded. *I heard the Arena was recently remodeled.*

"You know, I heard that too" Frerin asked with mock surprise. "Put in a skylight. I always said it'd look better with some more natural lighting."

Bilba fought a smile, and didn't resist as he pulled her behind the front lines. The armies of Middle Earth had landed on the mountain in a tiered formation, with the first two rows fighting while those behind rested. After a set amount of time they would switch, those in front dropping back while fresher fighters moved forward to take their place.

It wasn't going to work forever but, so far, it was holding.

A clash drew her attention and she used her hand to shield her eyes from the rain as she looked toward the outcropping on which the most important battle raged. The elven woman, who Frerin had identified as Galadriel, and Gothmog seemed evenly matched, driving one another across the outcrop as each tried to gain the upper hand.

Behind them, Morgoth fended off the wizards, using only one hand to lazily hold them back each time they tried to close in on him.

Bilba frowned. *Should he be that nonchalant?*

Frerin shrugged. "I don't pretend to understand the intricacies of crazy." He studied the field around them and Bilba felt a small burst of pride at the fact he was breathing harder than she was. Had they been able to catch up to Azog, she would have won that bet. She was sure of it.

"What do you say we try to find someone we recognize?" Frerin asked.
Bilba nodded and turned to survey the field with him. They'd taken refuge several tiers up, almost halfway up the slope of the mountain, behind a dragon so covered in mud and grime it was impossible to tell what color she was supposed to be.

Xalanth was further down the slope, crouched near Quinlan who appeared to be injured and favoring a leg. Far from putting him out of the battle, however, it had simply angered him. Even then, there was a wide swathe of cleared land around him as orcs made the surprisingly wise choice to attack other foes.

No one had ridden Xalanth, which meant her father and Fili had come in on other dragons. As it was easier to spot a dragon, and she assumed her father and Fili would have stayed close to the for shielding, all she needed to do was figure out who they rode and find that dragon.

Sardin? she signed to Frerin after a moment. He was the only one she could think of, with Lyth and Syrath both injured and presumably left behind in Mirkwood.

Syrath better damn well have stayed behind. If she found out he'd come when he wasn't fully recovered, or that Fili had let him come, she'd kick both their asses.

"Sardin?" Frerin craned his neck, looking for the telltale flash of silver. "Always liked him. Figured he'd make a good match with Vili if the two ever stopped long enough to speak to one another."

Bilba nodded in agreement. The landscape, and those fighting on it, were all liberally coated in mud. Added to that the pouring rain and dark skies and the scene was one of darkness and dim, shadowy figures clashing together, broken only by the sputtering flames of dragons. Over it all rang the clash of steel upon steel, the thunk of sword against shields and the roar of battle, so loud it turned into almost a single tone regulated to the back of her mind. It was giving her a headache but, in light of the way her stomach was gnawing at her spine, and her body was shaking so violently she thought she might break apart, it was the least of her worries. The only bright spot in the misery was that the rain was so hard all she'd had to do was raise her head and open her mouth to quench her thirst, and wash off the orc filth at the same time.

A burst of light from the outcropping drew her attention again, and she watched as the battle between Gothmog and Galadriel seemed to grow more frenzied. Unlike everyone else, those two did not have the option of resting and one, or both, seemed to be tiring.

Morgoth seemed in no such distress, still almost causally blocking the blows from the two wizards. He was in no apparent rush and acted almost amused by their efforts. They, in turn, she noted with surprise, weren't really attacking. They left alone clear openings that Morgoth offered on a proverbial silver platter and didn't press the advantage of the odds being two against one.

They were keeping him occupied. Not fighting him so much as just keeping him busy while Galadriel fought Gothmog.

The fact Morgoth seemed perfectly content with it was unsettling.

She tore her eyes away, and spotted a familiar face a few meters away, crouched next to, and just under, the wing of a resting dragon. Nodding to Frerin, Bilba slogged through the mud until she reached the dragon and dropped next to the young woman's side.

Opal, she signed. I thought you'd be fighting with Vanguard.

"I was," the woman said darkly. Her eyes took on a faraway look and she gave Bilba a tired smile. "Now it's just me. Well, and you and the Captain, assuming he's still around." She let her head fall
against the dragon's side for a second with a sigh, and then laboriously got up, reaching for a sword lying next to her. "Looks like we'll need to do some recruiting after this is all over, if there's anyone left to recruit." She gave a short nod to Bilba and then, with a look of resignation, headed back down the mountain toward the battle.

"There," Frerin said suddenly, pointing past her. He'd been standing behind her during the short exchange and Opal hadn't seemed to notice him. Bilba followed his eyes down the slope almost directly under the outcropping, past rows of dragons, and people, of all races until her eyes caught on a slender dragon. He was just as covered in mud as everyone else but the constant deluge periodically revealed flashes of bright silver scales. He was in the fourth tier, moving downward slowly back toward the front lines. There were people near him but, from that distance, it was impossible to identify them.

Bilba moved, Frerin next to her, and started down the slope. The mud and water was slick and she slipped several times, landing hard before Frerin helped her up. At least twice he went down himself, once instinctively grabbing her and taking her down with him, to profuse apologies once he got himself righted again.

They were nearly there when Bilba finally caught sight of yet another familiar figure and felt a surge of relief and happiness. Pulling away from Frerin, she scrambled forward, shoved the hilt of her sword in the ground to retrieve later, and grabbed Fili's shoulder from behind. She'd already considered the fact he'd be understandably on edge and might not react well to being surprised. She easily ducked the sword blow he aimed at her as he swung around, came up inside his guard, and threw both arms around his neck.

From nearby a young woman she didn't recognize snorted and said, "See, I said your guard was too wide."

Fili blinked, startled, and then his eyes went wide, arms coming around Bilba almost automatically "Bilba?"

Bilba grinnned at him and then shoved up on her toes to kiss him, tightening her arms around his neck to drag herself closer. He responded in kind, arms wrapping more securely around her waist.

Bilba sighed and relaxed, sagging against him. In that instance, nothing else mattered. The rain, cold, mud, creatures doing their best to destroy the world because they were bastards, all of it simply faded away.

It was all perfect.

For a moment.

Fili pulled away first, and promptly frowned at her. "Please tell me you haven't been fighting without armor or weapons."

Bilba gave him a derisive look and nodded toward her sword. Fili's lip curled in disgust.

"That barely qualifies and, even then, I'm not sure I haven't just insulted weapons in general."

Bilba agreed but she wasn't about to tell him that. A low rumble sounded and Sardin lowered his head to nuzzle her, hard enough to knock her off balance. Fili steadied her while she hooked an arm around the dragon's jaw to return the affection.

"He's been feeling a lot of guilt," Fili explained, voice loud to try and reach over the din, "for you getting captured."
Bilba gave him a confused look and raised her hands. *Why? It wasn't his fault.*

"So he's been told," Fili said with a shrug.

Someone cleared their throat and Bilba turned to see Frerin stepping forward with a faint smile. "Nephew, it's been a while."

Fili froze, staring at the other dwarf. Then, dropping his hands to Bilba's upper arms, he squeezed and then released her to throw his arms around his uncle. Frerin laughed and returned the embrace. His face over Fili's shoulder took on a decidedly moist appearance and Bilba raised an eyebrow, earning a glare in return.

"Shut up, it's raining."

Someone snorted before Bilba could and she saw the young woman from before still standing there, slightly off to one side. Realizing Bilba was watching her, the woman flushed and then stammered, "Orcrist! Hi. I'm Kaia." Her eyes went wide and she suddenly blurted, "I think you're just amazing! Really, just--"

She waved her hands helplessly, mouth opening as if she wanted to say more but didn't know what.

Bilba gave a slow nod in confusion. The other girl reminded her a bit of how Ori acted around her. Fili said it was because he was a fan but she still wasn't entirely sure what that even meant.

Without warning, something like a thunderclap rang out over the battlefield. A second later a wave of wind and energy slammed into them. Bilba was thrown to the side, and into Sardin. She felt his muscles bunching as he set himself, bracing against the force buffeting them. A harsh wind stole her breath and Bilba turned in toward Sardin to try and catch it.

The wind, and the strange force stopped as quickly as it started and she carefully raised her head.

A strange lull had fallen, the noise of battle giving way to a low murmur and shifting. Overhead the deluge lessened and then slowly tapered off.

On the outcropping, she caught sight of Gothmog down on one knee, hand braced against the rock. He was swaying, and struggling to stay upright. Bilba had to search for Galadriel and finally found her only a few meters away, struggling to pick herself up. A deep gouge in the mud suggested she'd been thrown from the ledge and skidded more than halfway down the mountain slope.

A boom reverberated from the outcrop and Gandalf was suddenly flung to the very edge. The other wizard, who Frerin had called Radagast, ran forward to stand in front of him as Morgoth advanced on the pair. In contrast to how he'd appeared earlier, the creature wearing Thranduil's face was smirking, and held a look of intense concentration.

A rush of air on her face and then Kaia was bolting past Bilba, a look of dark anger on her face and her sword clutched in her hand. At almost the same time, came a shout and Bilba saw Legolas appear, also running full tilt toward the outcrop. He leapt forward in long strides as if the ground wasn't inclined and covered in wet, sliding mud.

Galadriel had pulled herself to a sitting position, her husband appearing from nowhere to kneel at her side. She had an arm wrapped around her stomach and was focused on the ground, face twisted in pain and exhaustion. At the shout, she raised her head shakily, and her eyes widened in horror.

"No! Someone stop them!"
It was a cry of fear, and command, and Bilba reacted as anyone who'd spent a lifetime in bondage might.

She ran.

She didn't waste the time to retrieve her sword, or see if anyone else would come after her. She simply obeyed, eyes fixed on Kaia as the other girl fled up the mountain. Dragons, elves, humans and dwarves simply watched her go, too exhausted to stop her or simply not caring too. Perhaps they hadn't heard the shout, or had and saw no reason to obey it.

Bilba wasn't entirely sure why she was obeying. Kaia and Legolas had clear intent and, truly, what did it matter who struck the final blow? One less monster couldn't hurt. Perhaps Galadriel was simply proud, and wanted the accomplishment all to herself.

And yet...

Her foot slid in the mud and she grimaced as her knee collided sharply with the rock. She'd barely landed, however, when hands grabbed her under her arms and then Fili and Frerin were dragging her back up to her feet again. Past them, she caught sight of others also heading up, one of whom could have been Thorin, while another had the shadowy form of her father and brought a jolt of hope and longing to her chest.

She wasn't the only one to hear, and respond, to the call then.

She surged forward, just as a dragon stretched out its neck, tripping Kaia as she tried to rush past. She hit the ground, hard, and Bilba darted under the dragon's neck as it lifted its head, leaving the girl to the other two as she charged forward.

She didn't have to look to know that Legolas would not be stopped so easily. She reached the edge of the outcropping and dragged herself up on it, just as Morgoth casually waved a hand and threw both wizards away from the edge, and from where Gothmog knelt. They slammed into the rock of the mountainside and fell in a crumpled heap, leaving the stone temporarily clear of everyone but him, Bilba, and Gothmog.

Bilba started forward, only to find herself frozen in place as Morgoth lifted a hand.

"Tsk," he said, shaking his head at her in a patronizing manner. "We wouldn't want to destroy all the fun, would we?"

Rock scraped under a boot heel, and then Legolas was pulling himself up, staring wide eyed at Morgoth.

"By the resemblance I'd say you're here to save your father," Morgoth nearly purred. "Afraid I can't help you." He gave a short nod to Gothmog, who was still struggling to rise. He had one hand pressed to his chest and Bilba could see a veritable flood of black oozing from between his fingers to splash down into what was already a thick puddle on the stone. The ring flashed from the finger of his other hand, pressed against the rock to brace himself. "He's quite locked me in."

Legolas hesitated, chest rising and falling in harsh pants.

Movement came from the edge of the outcropping again and Morgoth frowned in annoyance. He motioned with a hand and a solid wave of darkness was suddenly surrounding them like a dome, rising from the outcropping and passing over them until it met the wall of the mountain to their sides and overhead.
Silence fell, save for the labored breathing from Gothmog.

Bilba could see nothing past the darkness, could hear nothing either. The world had shrunk down to the four of them. Or the two, for Legolas seemed entirely fixated on Morgoth.

A strange shudder seemed to pass over Morgoth and he staggered, one arm going toward his head. Legolas shifted and made as if to move forward, only to stop in indecision.

Morgoth straightened, and his face was contorted with suffering, eyes clear and focused on Legolas.

"Quickly," he commanded. "Kill him! It’s the only way to free me!"

Bilba felt her breath catch in her throat, and horror settled in her bones. She still couldn’t move, and the force holding her in place was as unshakable as it’d been since it’d first taken hold.

No! she mentally screamed as loudly as she could, cursing her inability to speak, or raise her hands to sign. Don’t listen! It isn’t him!

Morgoth gave a sudden cry as if in intense pain, eyes squeezing shut and partly doubling over.

"Legolas! Hurry! Kill him now!"

The sight seemed to snap Legolas out of whatever horrified stupor he’d been in. He pulled a sword from a sheath strapped to his back and ran toward where Gothmog had pulled himself fully to his knees.

Gothmog gave Morgoth an amused look, still unaffected, even at the point of death. "Well done, my Lord," he said, tilting his head in the barest nod of respect. "Well done."

Then the bright steel of an elven sword was slicing into his neck and the time for words was past. Gothmog’s head tilted back, eyes going blank, and then his head was removed entirely from his shoulders. A geyser of black erupted from his neck, and his body swayed for a brief second before slowly slumping over to land with a thud on the bare rock.

No one spoke.

Legolas stood over Gothmog’s corpse, staring down with a stunned look as if he wasn’t quite sure what had happened.

The force around Bilba vanished and she staggered before straightening again.

A few feet away, Morgoth began to slowly clap.

"Well done," he mocked, repeating Gothmog’s final words, eyes fixed on Legolas. "Well done, indeed."

And then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed in an ungraceful sprawl. Legolas’ sword clattered from nerveless fingers and he scrambled forward to drop to his knees next to his father’s body, gathering the elven king in his arms. Bilba saw Thranduil’s eyes flicker open, and one hand come up to weakly clutch at his son’s arm.

The darkness blocking them in began to recede, fading away to reveal the battle had resumed in their short absence, a loud cacophony of noise and chaos as the orcs pressed their advantage and the forces of Middle Earth refused them passage.

Frerin and Fili scrambled over top of the outcrop, with Galadriel close behind, aided by her husband.
The two wizards followed, dazed but conscious and, on the far side of the outcrop, Bilba caught sight of her father and Thorin also climbing over the edge of the stone ledge.

*Are you all right?*

Bilba jumped in surprise at her father's voice in her head, and then felt an explosion of happiness at the realization she could feel her soul bonds again, as well as her mental links. She started to respond, only to cut off as Galadriel stepped forward, eyes fixed first on Gothmog's remains and then on Legolas.

"Oh, Legolas," she breathed. "What have you done?"

He never got a chance to answer as, beneath their feet, the mountain began to rumble. From the top a river of mud, and rock began to tumble down in thick streams as the shaking grew worse. Near her, Bilba could see loose rock and grit near her feet visibly bouncing up and down like water in a boiling pot.

"Watch out!" a voice shouted. A heavy body slammed into her and she fell forward onto the ground, just as it cracked and vanished under her feet. She hit the rock with a thud, and felt her entire body jerk with fear as her lower body was suddenly suspended over nothing. She scrabbled, lunging forward and struggling to gain purchase. Her fingers found cracks and crevices in the stone and she dragged her body forward, ignoring the way the edges of the rock sliced into her waist and tore at her fingers as she pulled herself back up.

Her heart thundered in her chest as she got to her knees. She looked over her shoulder, and sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of nothing where a majority of the rock ledge had stood just a few minutes before.

*Fili?* she thought frantically, *Frerin?* A look to the other side of the outcropping showed Thorin and her father in the process of pulling themselves up. Gandalf had managed to stay up as well, already standing, supported by his staff. Of Gothmog's corpse, or Legolas and Thranduil, there was no sign.

*We're fine,* Frerin's voice came back. *Just annoyed.*

Bilba started to rise, only to be thrown back to the ground again as the entire mountain shook with a violence unlike anything she'd ever seen before.

The top of the mountain exploded.

Bilba gasped, and felt her eyes widen in horror as a river of the red liquid she'd seen from within burst from the top in a geyser. More spurted from cracks in the stone and bubbled out from the entrance to the mountain. Blistering heat washed over her and Bilba tensed as the stream started to flow straight toward her. She scrambled to her feet, only to realize there was nowhere at all for her to go.

Gandalf stepped next to her, staff raised and a pure, white light shone from the tip. The river split around them while, overhead, the stuff raining down shifted away and back toward the mountain. A look over her shoulder showed the armies running from the molten whatever it was, many being ferried by dragons. They carried fire within them and, as such, were invulnerable to it.

An earth shattering roar rang out and Bilba crouched instinctively, as if she could somehow make herself appear smaller the way a mouse might in the face of a cat.

Gandalf raised his head upward and she saw a slack jawed look of horror on his face. The sight of him scared terrified her in turn and it was with trepidation that Bilba forced herself to raise her head.
She could ignore something as much as she wanted, but that wouldn't make it go away.

As soon as she'd lifted her eyes to the top she wished with everything she had that, for just once in her life, that saying could be wrong and she could make something away by simply ignoring it.

Just once.

A shadow was emerging from the ruined top of the mountain, black and so enormous it filled her vision and seemed to block out the whole world behind it. Through the entrance into the mountain she could see more of it, rising upward as the thing crawled out to wind its body around the rock. Talons, each the size a tree trunk if not larger, dug into the rock, shattering it into dust under the pressure.

The stench of rot and decay hit her like a physical wave and she gagged, clamping a hand over her mouth as nausea rose in her throat. The form shifted, dragging more of its body out and she saw dull, black scales scattered in uneven patches. In the areas without scales, gaping rents in the skin presented direct views of cracked bone and unmoving, decaying organs.

With a burst of movement, leathery wings unfurled, one clearly snapped in half while the other sported torn membranes and was held to the body with a stringy, putrefied mass of what had probably once been muscle.

The neck twisted and Bilba was looking straight into eyes she could have sat in with room to spare. They were occluded and white, the color of a corpse's eyes, but she had no doubt they could see her perfectly well.

"Sauron," Gandalf whispered next to her and, with a start, words she'd heard what felt like an age ago ran through her mind.

_Morgoth, the dark enemy; could not be killed. As the Valar exist in spirit form it was decided he would be imprisoned in the corpse of his most corrupted creation and sealed away for eternity."

Sealed away.

Within Sauron.

"The greatest and deadliest drake the world has ever known. It's said his fire burned stronger than the hottest forges of Moria."

"His teeth and talons were more unbreakable than mithril and his roar was so loud it vibrated the very earth when he unleashed it."

"He was so large that when he flew he blotted out the sun and when he landed on a mountain he left it a pile of rubble when he left."

Above, the great jaw gaped to reveal teeth larger than the columns used to hold the treasury's roof.

And then, Morgoth, the great enemy of Middle Earth...

Began to laugh.
Chapter 39

Bilba had spent a lifetime in the presence of evil. A lifetime watching the innocent slaughtered for sport, the strong broken, and the helpless crushed, until the very rocks of Moria seemed to weep with despair.

A lifetime, and if there was one thing she'd learned in all that time, it was how to read the inner workings of a mind bent on malice. She'd known which orcs to avoid, learned to tell when a fellow slave in the Arena meant to harm her rather than help, and could read Azog's moods well enough to avoid the worst of his temper.

And as she stared up at the creature laughing on his rocky throne, a gleam of pure evil in his eyes as he stared down at them all, she knew.

She knew his plans, because after years of living in the shadow of evil she understood there were fates far, far worse than death and this creature was evil enough to exploit them.

She knew because it was what she would have done were their positions reversed. What that said about Moria's influence on her she didn't know, or particularly want to contemplate, but one thing she did understand with utter certainty was this.

They had made a devastating error in judgment.

She was running before she knew it, before the sound of crunching rock told her that Morgoth was crouching down in preparation to take off. Find the ring! she broadcast to everyone she had a link or bond with. There was no time to explain. To the credit of those she reached, no one asked her too.

If they could find the ring, and get it to someone capable of using it...Galadriel perhaps, or one of the wizards...

A thin line of the red liquid was nearby and she dodged it, running parallel until she reached the edge and could see down into the mass of people and dragons below. If Gothmog's corpse had fallen into that...

Morgoth roared, and then they were out of time. He pushed up and forward, half leaping and half falling off the mountain toward them. Rocks shattered and flew off the mountain, crashing to the ground. Some hit the red liquid at points, sending showers of it into the air. Screams of fear and pain broke out from below and Bilba let out a hiss of her own as drops of the stuff grazed her shoulder and sent white hot, burning pain shooting through her.

A dark shadow eclipsed the sun and Bilba instinctively crouched. Wind rushed over her and she looked up to see the massive, decaying carcass of Morgoth's greatest servant rushing by overhead. There was no way the thing should have been able to fly with one wing broken and the other nearly rotted off but the membranes snapped out and caught the wind as if in perfect health.

A dark shadow eclipsed the sun and Bilba instinctively crouched. Wind rushed over her and she looked up to see the massive, decaying carcass of Morgoth's greatest servant rushing by overhead. There was no way the thing should have been able to fly with one wing broken and the other nearly rotted off but the membranes snapped out and caught the wind as if in perfect health.

The back claw whipped past her, with the tail looping and spiraling behind. Most of it was little more than naked bone, held together by whatever dark power Morgoth was using to animate the rest of the
abomination.

Bilba shook her head at her own stupidity, took a deep, somewhat resigned, breath, and then leapt just as the tail lazily snapped over her head. Her hands curled around bone, and then she was being wrenched off her feet so hard it was a wonder her arms weren't pulled from their sockets. Pain shrieked through her injured shoulder and she grit her teeth as a wave of nausea rushed through her and a sheen of sweat broke out on her forehead.

Bilba! So focused was she on holding on, she couldn't even be sure whose voice it was. What are you doing?

We have to stop him!

No kidding. That was Frerin. But I'm not sure how you plan to do that holding onto his tail without a weapon. Are you going to gnaw him to death?

Bilba grimaced. She'd forgotten she'd left her sword behind when Galadriel had yelled for someone to stop Legolas. Past that, however, the mental image Frerin had just provided made her more nauseous than the pain in her shoulder.

Morgoth rose, giving her an excellent view of the battlefield. The armies of Middle Earth appeared incredibly small, surrounded by an ocean of orcs on one side and a river of red liquid and falling rock on the other. Dragons still swooped about, trying to protect those on the ground while simultaneously moving others away from rock and the hot, red mass.

Then she was forced to look away, tightening her grip and struggling to pull herself up. She was far too high now to risk falling.

Morgoth leveled out, roared again, and then took off, body twisting and curving as he raced toward the outer borders of Mordor. He seemed either unaware of her presence or, more likely, simply didn't care.

I need the ring! Bilba shouted. And Galadriel, or the wizards!

Anyone capable of using the thing because she knew she certainly wasn't. Wind buffeted her, tearing at her body until her arms felt like they were going to be ripped off if she hung on for even a second more.

What is he doing? Where is he going?

That was Fili. Bilba clenched her jaw and dragged herself an inch forward, only to suck in a gasp of pain as the the wind forced her back three inches.

The pain in her shoulder suddenly increased exponentially as the bone popped right out of the socket. Sharp, blistering pain burst through her shoulder and sent shockwaves radiating down the nerves in her arms all the way to her fingertips. The hand, now useless along with the entire arm, ripped free from the tail. Her second hand followed quickly, unable to hold her on its own, and then she was being flung backward with all the force of a mine collapse.

Bilba had just enough time for a bolt of pure panic to race through her, and then an arm like an iron bar was wrapping around her waist and yanking her forcefully against a broad chest.

Bilba found herself settled on the back of a dragon, held securely in front of a much larger body. She looked down, and felt her heart jolt at the field of gold and black scales spread out underneath her hands.
Clutching her injured arm to her chest, she twisted to look over her shoulder, and looked straight into her father's face. He was pale, expression set in the all too familiar way she'd seen in the mines when someone was in pain but knew they had no choice but to keep moving.

It probably matched her current expression.

*Adad?* she asked, a spike of fear rushing through her. *Are you all right?*

"Told you I wasn't going to let you down again," he said, which wasn't the answer to her question, and yet was at the same time. He held his hand out and she saw the ring resting in his palm, along with enough blood streaking his arm and armor that she desperately prayed it wasn't all his.

*You never let me down to begin with,* she blurted, eyes wide.

He frowned at her, and then grabbed her arm and unceremoniously shoved her shoulder back in place. The bolt of pain caused her to see stars and she clenched her teeth against a scream. Squeezing her eyes shut, she focused on breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth until the worst of the pain had crested and then abated. When she came back to herself, her father had a secure grip on her. She tested the arm with a frown, and knew immediately she'd have limited use. There was far more damage than could simply be shrugged off.

Damn.

*Thanks,* she sent.

*No problem,* her father answered.

*The creature is faster than I am,* Xalanth broke in. He sounded put out, even though a look behind showed he was the only one anywhere close to Morgoth. They'd already risen high enough that the orcs were little more than a black mass carpeting the ground down below. Far behind them other dragons, those that could be spared, were giving chase but it was clear they were never going to catch up.

*Galadriel?* Bilba asked.

"Injured," her father said shortly, "and the wizards are trying to keep the mountain from burying the armies in fire. The whole thing went up just after the bastard took off."

That would explain the sudden silence from Fili and the others. They were too busy trying to survive. She closed her hand around the ring in her father's palm before carefully pushing up into a low crouch, bringing her head up just under her father's chin. *We have to stop him.* She looked over her shoulder at her father. *You know what he's doing?*

*He's planning to rip Middle Earth's throat out.* Her father's face was grim. *If we're lucky, Arathorn and his remnant will have a chance to muster. There's no way anyone can miss him coming.*

*We can't rely on that.* Bilba started to move forward, barely hesitating long enough to shove the ring in her pocket. It might as well be useless now without someone strong enough to use it. They'd have to find another way. What that way would be she had no idea, but there was no one else. *We need to get closer,* she sent to Xalanth.

Xalanth grumbled, but put on more speed, rising as he did to try and take himself out of the gale force winds being put off by Morgoth.

A silver blur raced past, spinning around them in a smooth, easy motion.
Show off, Xalanth grumbled.

The blur resolved itself into Sardin, riderless, as he settled directly in front of Morgoth's face, and let loose with a massive bout of flame.

The creature roared in rage, jerking back and up. In a normal dragon it would have put his stomach, the most armored part of a dragon, toward the attacker. With this thing, decaying as it was with portions of its stomach gaping, it did little good and Bilba saw charred hunks of what she could only guess were internal organs falling out and spiraling toward the ground below. The stench of rotting meat hit her nose and she gagged, grimacing at the acidic tang of bile in the back of her throat.

*Maybe we can stop it the old-fashioned way.* Her father's voice sounded in her head. *Hack and burn it into as many pieces as it takes to stop moving.*

Bilba nodded. It was as good an idea as any.

Xalanth had swerved, trying to avoid a mid-air collision. The action brought him close to the creature and, without hesitating, Bilba launched toward it, straining to hook her hands into one of the giant rents in the creature's skin.

Unfortunately, in her haste, she somehow managed to forget she was down to only one arm. By some miracle, her shoulder held even with the weight of her body suddenly hanging from it. The pain was excruciating but she'd always had a high pain threshold and fought through it.

In the end, none of it mattered, as the piece of hide she'd hooked onto tore under her fingers. Then she was being flung backwards for the second time. She was thrown straight past her father, barely catching a glimpse of his horrified expression, and then she was falling, Xalanth and the monster already high above her.

A blur of silver and then Sardin was diving toward her, easily catching up. His jaw opened and then he was gently scooping her out of midair and into his mouth.

*Thank you,* Bilba responded. Moving carefully to avoid the jagged edges of his fangs, she got herself up, over his snout, clambered over his head and onto his back. *Remind me to support you the next time you brag about being the fastest dragon in Middle Earth.*

*Can you tell Lyth how heroic I was?* 

*Of course.*

He sent a burst of happiness in reply and then he was streaking upward again.

Morgoth, meanwhile, had changed direction, and was now heading almost straight upwards. Bilba had no idea how high he could go but had a sinking feeling it was probably higher than a living dragon.

*We need to be on him,* she sent to her father. *Before he gets too high!*

There was now no sign of any other dragons, all of them having been left behind. It was just her, her father, and the two dragons, against a monster of myth and legend.

Bilba shook her head in disbelief. She was definitely getting that vacation Frerin had mentioned. Moria would be nothing in comparison to all this.

Sardin fell in alongside Xalanth and, together, the two of them soared upwards after Morgoth. It was
exhausting, the dragons forced to fight against the wind rather than flying with it. They were already worn from battle, their movements sluggish and lacking the crispness of a well-rested dragon.

Bilba was exhausted as well and her father...she glanced at him and felt yet another flash of fear at the sight of blood speckling his armor, particularly near his side where the metal appeared torn. She saw him give her a look and jerked her eyes away. There was no point in questioning him over it. He’d dismiss her concerns the same way she would had their positions been reversed.

Sardin moved closer to Xalanth. They had managed to overtake Morgoth to the point they were just above the base of his tail, but they were losing ground, quickly. Xalanth's sides were laboring and Sardin had gone silent and stoic in the way of one desperately trying to push past the limits of their own body.

Sardin and Xalanth were flying as close as possible now, Sardin just underneath Xalanth so their wings didn't accidentally tangle.

Sardin rocked, and Bilba felt a presence looming over her. She looked up to see her father standing over her, feet planted firmly on Sardin's back. He grabbed her good arm and pulled her up, wrapping his arm around her waist.

Bilba obediently held onto him as best she could, and then he was shoving off, aiming at Morgoth's back. He held a sword in his other hand and sunk it deep into the muscles of the creature's haunch. It held.

Behind them, Sardin and Xalanth fell back, soon lost in the bank of clouds now laying below them.

**Don't die, or I'll kill you,** Xalanth's voice came and it was impossible to tell which of them he was addressing.

It was probably both.

Her father still had an arm around her waist, holding her in place. Morgoth was nearly vertical and the full weight of her body and her father's was hanging on that sword plunged into the creature's back.

**Is it bad,** Bilba asked, **that he hasn't seemed to care about what we're doing?**

**Probably.** He hefted her up and Bilba shoved her hand through the rent in the dragon's carcass, finding a bone and grabbing on. Her bad arm was still pressed against her chest, bolts of pain ricocheting through it every time it bumped against her father's body, but she bit her lip and fought it back. She'd lived through worse. It hadn't been fun, but she'd done it, and she'd do it again.

She tried to take a deep breath, and frowned as the amount of air she wanted refused to enter her lungs.

**The air thins the higher you go,** Dwalin said in answer to her unspoken question. **Syrath's too young to get that high yet.**

The air was thin, but more than that, it was getting hot. Why was it getting hot?

**Now that I don't know.** Her father's face was slick with sweat and he was ashen. **I'm guessing it won't be good for our health though.**

Bilba shook her head. She sent an idea toward him, more a mental picture than anything else, and he nodded. He reached to hook his own hand around the bone she was holding, using the weight of his
body to hold her in place against the creature's hide. Bilba began to squirm forward, staying under him as much as possible to try and protect herself from the wind. There were no straps here, and no dragons to catch her if she fell. One false move, and it would be her last.

Just past where her father had stabbed the creature, was a larger opening in its hide. As the heat continued to intensify, sweat soaking her hair and clothes, Bilba reached the hole and tumbled in, sliding under the ridge of the creature's hip bone. Her father joined her a moment later, struggling to get his much larger body in and under the bone. Bilba helped him as best she could and then, together, they moved, holding onto vertebrae to steady their passage. The body was more intact farther up and they made their way slowly, avoiding gaping holes with sucking wind whipping through them, and a long, long drop below.

They had to push aside several organs, mercifully dry and absent of liquid but still holding a stink strong enough to make her eyes water. The heat chased them, though not as strong as it had been outside. They clambered along the ribs of the beast until they reached the heart. It was still and unmoving and, with a muttered curse, her father used a knife to cut into it. They clambered in and settled in a lower chamber, Bilba reaching to grab the membrane and pull it closed as much as possible.

"All right," her father muttered. "Dragonhide is supposed to be fireproof and I figure it must hold true for their organs, right?"

Bilba nodded. Dragons produced fire from within their bodies, so it must hold that their internal organs were designed to withstand heat. Whether or not the theory would hold to the insides of a dead dragon, or if it would protect them, remained to be seen. Waves of heat were washing over them now, as stifling as when Gothmog had dragged her and Frerin across the wastelands just before Mordor. It beat against them like a physical thing, sweat running down their bodies in near constant streams. Bilba could feel her mouth drying as her body lost its water, her tongue sticking and her throat beginning to burn.

As if all that weren't bad enough, sheltering inside the beast did nothing for the rapidly thinning air or the way her lungs were aching as they strained for breath. Morgoth clearly did not have to breathe, but they didn't have the same good fortune. If they didn't change course soon, the heat wouldn't matter.

Something in her gut shifted and she tensed.

_We're turning_, her father said, bracing himself.

Bilba felt a rush of relief. She shut her eyes, feeling the movement as her sense of balance went haywire, and then tried to orient itself.

For a brief, brief second, they were suspended, moving neither up nor down.

And then they were falling.

Fast.

Bilba clenched her jaw, and didn't resist when her father wrapped an arm around her as if he could hold her in place. He punched his hand through where the membrane of the heart was thinnest and grabbed hold of a rib. If possible, the heat seemed to get worse, before just as suddenly getting better.
Fresh air rushed into her lungs and she sucked in a greedy mouthful, lungs relaxing as they suddenly had access to what they needed.

Bilba's heart was thudding and she was shaking from the adrenaline rush. The sensation was similar to what she and Syrath liked to do but a thousand times more extreme. If they had been outside, without straps, they'd have been ripped off by the sheer force of the wind.

Black spots danced in front of her eyes and Bilba tried to concentrate as blackness threatened to overtake her. This was not the time or place to pass out, especially not when her father didn't look to be similarly affected.

It felt like forever before the creature began to level out. As it did, her father grabbed her hand and pulled her up. "Let's go. We're not doing any good sitting here."

*Should we stab the heart?* Bilba asked.

He shook his head. "Doubt it'd do any good. The thing doesn't appear to be using it anyway."

There was an odd note in his voice as he spoke, and a strange feeling coming across the soul bond. Unwittingly, the last time she'd seen her mother flashed across her mind and her heart shuddered in her chest.

Her father had to have felt across the bond but he didn't react, simply leading the way out of the heart and toward a new hole in the hide. He got out first and then reached back to pull her out next to him.

*We have a problem,* she heard him say and frowned.

*We have a lot of problems, don't we?*

His only response was to point ahead of them. Bilba followed his gaze, and knew why Morgoth hadn't cared about their presence.

He knew they wouldn't have time to do anything of consequence because, there, rising from the landscape and towering toward the sky, was Erebor.

Bilba let out a breath as if she'd been punched, eyes wide. *How? It's not possible, even as large as he is! We shouldn't be anywhere near here! No dragon can fly that fast!*

"No living dragon," her father responded grimly.

Cold rushed through her as Bilba realized they were already in the vast plain that lay between Mirkwood and the Iron Hills, the river scrolling lazily through it beneath them. Directly ahead was the Long Lake, upon which sat Lake-town. There was no way Arathorn could rally whatever forces he had left in Gondor in time, no way those left behind in Mirkwood or Erebor or Lake-town could muster any sort of response.

And what sort of response would it even be?

Who had been left behind?

The injured.

The young.

The old.
Those unable to fight.

The dead.

All of them left behind because, in their darkest nightmare, no one had conceived of a mind so twisted by evil that it would choose to target them.

**What do you think?** Morgoth's voice suddenly boomed in her mind and she jerked upright with a gasp. Behind her, her father also tensed. **Should I start with the elves? They provide their own kindling. Or perhaps your precious dwarves? Tell me, how well do you think stone will stand up to the likes of my servant?**

*Don’t do this,* Bilba thought desperately but the only response she heard was mocking laughter.

They lowered yet again and now the land was rushing by just below them, close enough that small waves were whipped up on the river by their passing. The wind lessened as Morgoth slowed, approaching the town on the lake. From this distance, Bilba could make out the individual homes, and see the slowly growing panic as people realized death was storming toward them.

In her mind she remembered her first trip there with Fili, and the resulting assassination attempt against Dis. Cassie's face rose in her mind, and she swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat.

Boats were fleeing the town, rushing haphazardly in every direction. Bilba found it hard to breathe, flashes of the Shire rushing in. How many had died then? How many now, and how many more would have to die before it was all over?

Morgoth roared, and overshot the town, racing past toward the other end of the lake. Bilba didn't fool herself into thinking he was passing them by.

*He was prolonging it,* toying with them.

Just as he reached the opposite shore, he turned, spinning back around to head toward the town again. The move threw Bilba off balance and she dropped to one knee, barely managing to grab onto rough patches of the hide in time to catch herself.

It took nearly ten seconds before she realized she no longer felt her father behind her.

*Adad?* she sent, shakily. *Adad?*

She tried to look behind her but they were already far past the point where Morgoth had made the turn. Bilba struggled to stay calm. She could still feel the soul bond with her father, she reminded herself firmly. It hadn't broken.

Of course, that could simply be because he was drowning and it would take a few minutes.

A strangled cry escaped her, and then her attention was distracted by Morgoth unleashing an inferno of flame from his maw.

*That just isn't fair,* Bilba thought in a mix of anger and despair. The thing was dead, decaying. How was it able to still produce flame?
The dragon spun for another pass, and Bilba clenched her teeth until her jaw hurt at the sight of the wooden buildings and walkways as they caught and burned. Screams of fear and panic split the air, adding to the long litany of screams already in her head.

From Moria.
The Arena.
The Shire.
Erebor.
Mordor.
Everywhere she'd ever been.
Blood, and pain.
And screams.

Some of them were hers.

They swung around for another pass. It took them near the spot where her father had fallen and she cast about desperately, trying to find him. She couldn't jump off herself, they were going so fast the impact with the water would probably knock her out.

It may well have knocked her father out. 

I'll get him. The voice was exhausted, and so faint she barely heard it. Movement came from her left and then Sardin was there, diving straight down toward the surface of the water.

Bilba sucked in a harsh breath when she saw him. His scales were dulled and near colorless and his tail hung limply as if he lacked the strength to lift it. He flew in an unbalanced, staggering fashion, losing the wind under his wings a few times and falling before, somehow, managing to recover. Dark streaks marked his body and the edges of his wings, though not the membranes themselves for some reason. They looked suspiciously like burns, something Bilba had never seen, and shouldn't even be possible, on a dragon.

Bilba had only seen one other dragon look that bad.

Quenth.

Sardin, she called out to him. What did you do?

I made a promise. He folded his wings, and hit the water, vanishing in a single knife stroke.

Bilba? a new voice asked. Is that you? What's happening?

Bilba's heart froze in her chest.
Syrath.

What's this? Morgoth nearly purred in her mind. Does the gnat have a dragon of her own? I thought the upstart was yours. Hmm, perhaps we should say hello?

No. She didn't beg. She wasn't stupid enough to think it would make a difference.

Morgoth turned toward Mirkwood, having already dismissed the burning remnants of Lake-town behind them.

Bilba? Syrath asked again.

Bilba couldn't breathe. She kept trying, her chest heaving as she struggled, but her lungs refused to expand. Behind her, neither her father nor Sardin had reappeared yet. Before them, Mirkwood was rapidly growing larger.

Lyth was there, as well as the baby ringleader dragon and the other young dragons, and Inilth, and countless injured and non-fighters and Syrath. All of them, and with help leagues away.

Something inside her seemed to settle. Then, slowly, a burning, liquid anger began to spread through her.

Azog.

Gothmog.

Morgoth.

They were all the same. They enjoyed suffering for the sake of suffering. They preyed on the helpless and the weak.

They were the literal embodiment of everything she'd fought since leaving Moria.

Her eyes narrowed and she unconsciously straightened, hands curling into fists at her side. She raised her chin and her eyes narrowed. Time seemed to slow, the trees of Mirkwood approaching at an almost leisurely rate. Above the treetops, dragons began to appear. Many were clearly struggling, others were scared, and some were far, far too young. She caught sight of Lyth, pale and stiff but still there, still willing to do her part.

As Fili was, and Kili, and Dis and Thorin and Frerin and her father and Sardin...

As was she.

It simply wasn't true that help was leagues away.

There was still one person left.

Orcrist.

She existed to protect those who could not protect themselves.

And so she would.

Bilba slid her hand into her pocket and curled her fingers around the cold metal of the ring.

Oh, does the gnat think to bait the dragon? Morgoth almost purred in her mind. You know you
have no chance.

Bilba ignored him. She didn't have to defeat him. She just needed to slow him down. Even a little, anything to give those about to fight him a chance.

**Bilba?** Syrath asked again, a note of panic in his voice. **What are you doing?**

*Don't worry,* Bilba sent back. *I'll be all right.*

It wouldn't be the first time she'd faced death. She'd faced it in the mines, in the Arena, and countless times since she'd escaped. She'd faced it just a short time ago on the gates of Erebor.

She'd long lost her fear of it.

**There are fates worse than death,** Morgoth reminded her, sounding almost cheerful. **You don't have the strength to resist me. I doubt your pitiful little mind will survive.**

*Words from the past floated through her mind.*

*You want me to just stand here and let it happen?*

The words she'd said to Frerin as Gothmog had prepared to murder innocent citizens of Erebor in an attempt to force Fili to give himself over.

"*Yes, I do.*"

She'd obeyed him then.

Not this time.

She pulled the ring out from her pocket.

**Bilba?**

She'd been saved so many times, by so many people.

Her mother, Frerin, Syrath, Primula and Drogo and all the people and dragons of the Shire. Aragorn and the Rangers, the elves of Rivendell, Fili and all the Durins. Xalanth and Sardín and baby dragon and so many more.

Her father.

All of them had saved her at one time or another.

It was her turn now, to save them.

*It'll be all right,* Syrath. *You'll see.*

And, then, with a smile,

She slid the ring on her finger.
Chapter 40

Bilba had always loved flying in storms.

Not because of the rain, but the wind.

The wind was fun.

Syrath could glide forever with little to no effort, the wind buffeting them upwards and down, whipping her clothing about her body. It was truly a feeling like no other. They didn't go out in the truly bad storms, or ones with lightning, because neither wanted to die in the pursuit of a good time, but even those were still fun, if only to watch from the safety of the ground. There had been no storms in Moria, or weather of any kind, and it was one of the many things she'd become fascinated with after her escape. The more violent the storm, the more she loved it. Perhaps it was because violence was so ingrained in her after a lifetime surrounded by it, or maybe it was simply because it was like seeing her joy at being free expressed in the world around her. In either event, she had always loved them.

Had always loved them

The storm she was thrown into upon placing the ring on her finger was like nothing she'd ever experienced. Black clouds pressed in on her from every side while wind slammed into her with all the force of a rock slide. It stole her breath, making her lungs scream for oxygen as if she were drowning. Rain lashed her body, each streak a knife blade that sliced strips of skin off until she was bleeding from a thousand, stinging cuts. Bright bursts of lightning splintered the sky around her, revealing, for just an instant, banks of clouds above and below and no sign of land or sky or anything else.

And the noise.

Thunder, but at a level she'd never heard, so intense her ears nearly burst with every peal, and so loud she couldn't hear the sound of her own screams.

It seemed to go on forever, without pause, until she was convinced the only break she would receive would be her own mind giving out from the bombardment.

The storm vanished.

Just like that. One second it was there and the next...it simply wasn't.

Bilba sucked in a harsh breath, her heart thudding in her chest.

Around her was nothing but blackness. She couldn't see, or feel, anything. She couldn't even say if she was standing on a surface, or floating. It was simply...nothing.
Fool, now do you understand? Morgoth's voice thundered around her and she clapped her hands over her ears, grimacing in pain as it reverberated through the air. Your friends are already dead. They are ash on the wind.

"You're lying." She thought the words, only to jump as they resounded through the air as if she'd spoken.

Am I? How long do you think you've been in here?

"It doesn't matter," Bilba replied with confidence. "If they'd died I'd have felt it."

Communication had been blocked as the Erebor forces had returned from Rivendell but, even then, they had still felt the breaking of soul bonds when it had happened.

Are you so sure? Morgoth nearly purred. I am a bit stronger than that insect who thought to betray me.

The smallest flicker of uncertainty settled inside her, but Bilba still shook her head. "No. I know you're lying."

You know whatever I want you to know! Morgoth thundered, a rage in his voice that had her instinctively crouching in anticipation of an attack. Do you even know how the ring works? His voice was back to being perfectly pleasant, as if the earlier outburst had never happened. It opens a pathway between my mind and yours. Pathways, my dear -

The darkness shifted, like a snake in the throes of death, before pulling away from her. Rock formed under her feet, uneven and chipped beneath her -- suddenly bare? -- feet.

- work both ways.

Walls towered over her, ringing her in a wide, bowl shaped area. Blood splattered the stone beneath her feet, decorated the walls in whorls and patterns, so thick in places it was nearly black. Past the top of the wall ran crude tiers cut from the rock. All were currently swarming with orcs, screaming, shouting and fighting with each other. The roar was deafening, nearly enough to drown out the cries of the human woman in the center of the bowl currently bleeding out onto the dirt and stone. Past her was the tunnel, a thick, rusted iron gate blocking it off.

She was back in the Arena.

Bilba glanced down at herself and found she was wearing little more than rags, her skin caked in dried dirt, sweat and blood. A weapon that barely qualified as a sword hung limply from her hand, blade darkened with blood. More was splattered on her arm and across her chest. Her eyes flickered to her right, into the stands. Azog lounged there, at the top of the tier with a bored expression. He was alone, his spawn and the female rarely came as it was, but she remembered clearly neither had been there on that particular day.
A low, throaty noise came from the other end of the room and she closed her eyes for a second in resignation. Then she let out a slow breath, set herself, and opened her eyes, hand tightening around the hilt of her sword.

She raised her head, and focused on the far side of the Arena, and the cave troll standing just outside the tunnel entrance.

"If you think this is going to stop me," she whispered, "think again." She'd beat the thing once. She'd do it again.

Fool. Morgoth mocked. Did you think I'd make it fair?

A second troll stepped out from behind the first, followed quickly by a third, and then a fourth. The orcs in the stands screamed their approval. Bilba went rigid, chin lifting slightly in defiance as she struggled to control the way she'd started to shake. "I thought you said there were things worse than death." she taunted. "Isn't this a little quick for you?"

Hmmm, perhaps, Morgoth agreed.

The trolls vanished, as did the orcs in the stands and Bilba was standing alone in the Arena, a silence she'd never heard in the mines falling over her.

You may regret having said that.

Bilba ignored him. She wasn't as blind as he supposed her to be. Her goal had never been to fight him, only to distract him. Long enough for those at Erebor and in Mirkwood to resist, or flee.

I told you already, they're dead. Your precious mountain burns.

"I don't believe you," Bilba repeated.

Then it is a good thing the truth is not based upon your belief. Let's have some fun, shall we?

Bilba blinked, and then someone was standing in the center of the Arena. She frowned, trying to see clearer, and then sucked in a sharp breath and jerked back reflexively. Her back hit the stone wall of the Arena with enough force to jar her.

It was a young, human male. He was short for a human, but still a head taller than her, with a slender frame. A fringe of dark hair hung over terrified blue eyes set into a face that, seeing it again, appeared even younger than she remembered. She'd always had trouble with guessing human ages, but she believed this one had been particularly young, barely on the cusp of adulthood, if that. He'd certainly fought with all the terror of youth, just as she had.

Blood stained the front of his shirt, and there was a gray pallor to his skin. His had been the first life she'd ever taken. It had been an exceptionally close thing. Neither had fought before, and certainly not to the death. She'd had no choice in the end, one of them was going to die, and it'd been sheer luck that it hadn't been her.

It didn't make it any easier.

It didn't make any of them any easier.
A second figure appeared next to him, and then a third and a fourth. The people who'd died at her hand and, then, because Morgoth was a bastard, the crowd began to grow to include those she mentally listed as having died because of her. The ones she'd failed to save on caravans, and the hobbits who'd fallen in the Shire. She saw Filith with great, gaping wounds, Drogo with his skull crushed and Snapdragon with rotted wings. They all stood in silence, a great crowd, staring at her with empty eyes.

So many, Morgoth said casually. And they call me the monster. Should I add all the orcs you've killed? Or perhaps simply the blood you've spilled? I do believe there'd be more than enough for you to drown in.

Bilba swallowed past the sudden rock lodged in her throat. Her free hand opened and closed convulsively, and the bridge of her nose burned. She didn't try to justify herself to the bastard. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Oh, wait, Morgoth's voice thundered around her. We've forgotten one, haven't we?

Cold washed over Bilba and she pressed against the wall of the Arena as hard as she could, as if she could physically press herself through it. "No," she whispered.

A hobbit woman was standing at the front of the crowd. Unlike the others, her skin was flush with a healthy glow and there was a vibrant light in her eyes. She wore a sundress and straw hat and her long, curly hair was as tousled as if she'd just stepped in from a breezy day.

She looked nothing at all like the ones gathered behind her.

She looked nothing at all like how Bilba remembered her.

"Amad." The word was torn out against her will. It wasn't a word she'd have ever chosen to utter in such a place, in the hearing of such an utter bastard like Morgoth.

The crowd surged forward suddenly, and she gasped, jerking away instinctively. Her head rapped sharply against the stone wall, sending a bolt of pain radiating through her skull. The sword clattered to the ground beside her. It was useless anyway, there was no way she could use it against any of them, least of all her mother, real or otherwise.

They'd all suffered enough.

They all seem quite eager to talk to you, Morgoth mused and Bilba felt white hot hatred rush through her. She'd never hated anyone more than she hated him.

"Easy to sit back and taunt as a disembodied voice," she said through gritted teeth. "Why don't you come face me?"

I doubt you truly want that, came his languid reply. The confrontation wouldn't last long, and I don't want that.

The crowd reached her, crowding around her with her mother at the front. Bilba squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head away, digging her fingers into the stone while a groan worked its way
between her clenched teeth.

Fingers touched her face, lightly.

"That's quite enough of that," a voice said gently.

Bilba opened her eyes.

The Arena, and the crowd were gone.

She was standing in a black void once more, and the only other person there was her mother. Hesitantly, Bilba put her hand over her mother's where it lay on her face. It felt warm, as if her mother had just stepped in from outside, or almost as if she were still standing in the sun.

"Amad?" Bilba whispered.

"Hello, sweetheart." Belladonna smiled and Bilba threw herself forward, wrapping her arms around the woman and burying her face in her mother's neck.

Belladonna hugged her back, quick and fierce, before firmly pulling away. "I don't have long."

Bilba nodded, reaching up to wipe at the tears running down her face. Her vision was so blurred she could barely see and her breath was hitching in her chest.

Fool, Morgoth's voice growled from the blackness. What good do you possibly think you can do? I'll destroy you, and make her watch!

Belladonna rolled her eyes. "Oh, do shut up. No one can harm the dead. Not even you."

Morgoth began laughing, a low, cackling sound that bled evil. You are worthless then, a specter capable of nothing but watching.

"Am I?" Belladonna asked cheerfully. "You really think I came here on my own power?"

Morgoth gave no answer.

Belladonna gripped Bilba by the upper arms and leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the forehead. "I am so proud of you," she said, giving her a tiny shake to punctuate her point. "Even when you do things out of order."

Bilba frowned. "What?"

"There's only one thing able to resist darkness," Belladonna said, looking amused. "And you went and didn't bring it with you."

Bilba frowned in confusion. "Do you mean Syrath?" She still remembered the intense joy at her bond with Syrath, in part because it meant someone like Azog could never rip through her shields again. "Syrath isn't strong enough. The bastard has him blocked out." Gothmog had done the same, and she could only imagine Morgoth's block was several times stronger.

Belladonna gave her a patient look before leaning in quickly to whisper in her ear, "Syrath isn't the only dragon in Middle Earth, sweetheart."
She released Bilba's arms and stepped back. Bilba took a step after her, but her mother held up a hand and she stopped, instantly. "I can only give you ten seconds, sweetheart." She smiled, pride shining in her eyes. "But I think that should be more than enough for Orcrist."

She gave a bright smile

And then she was gone...

And Syrath was shouting in Bilba's head.

"Bilba! Answer me! Are you okay? Bilba!"

"Syrath isn't strong enough."

"Syrath isn't the only dragon in Middle Earth."

Oh.

A slow, feral smile began to spread across her face.

She got it now.

She reached out to Syrath, and told him exactly what she wanted. He was startled, but didn't question her.

She chose Lyth first.

No one outside the mountain really knew who she was, or had any reason to trust her. Lyth, in contrast, had the rank and status among the dragons to garner trust, and instant obedience.

She barely felt the soul bond with Lyth settle in place.
She had to set aside the traditional exchange of memories and emotion, because she was already soul bonding with Inilth, and Mayre, who'd stayed behind with a fractured wing.

It wasn't like there was anything the least bit traditional about what she was doing anyway.

She managed six bonds before the ten seconds were up and the Arena reformed around her. The crowd reappeared and surged forward again but, this time, Bilba felt nothing but triumph because she could still feel her bonds. They were faint, but there, coiled about one another like a thick coiled rope punching through the darkness to get to her.

It was more than enough to allow her to add in five more dragons. One of them, dimly felt through his exhaustion and pain, was Sardin who, with slurred speech and confusion, reported he'd retrieved her father. Then she was moving on, adding more and, with each one, that mental rope became clearer, and stronger, and she felt less and less alone.

What are you doing? Morgoth demanded. You think this will save you?

"I know it will," Bilba shot back.

The crowd attacked, driving her to the ground beneath their fists and feet. They might not have been real, but their attacks felt as if they were. Bilba curled in on herself, wrapping her arms around her head to try and protect herself.

The dragons inside her roared in anger, and the crowd fell back, flickering in and out of existence. Bilba pulled herself into a seated position, one arm wrapped around her stomach. She felt bruised and battered, one eye nearly swollen shut and her chest tight in the way it was when she had fractured ribs.

There were enough dragons now that she could leave her shields completely down without fear, which allowed still more to join on their own.

And more were coming every second.

Dragons bonded with each other the same as any other race with one notable difference. In the non-dragon races only riders had the ability to create a soul bond. Dragons didn't have that problem; every dragon of any race was capable of bonding with a dragon of any other race.

And she was reaching every last one of them.

With every dragon her range increased, allowing her to reach farther, and bringing in more all the time.

And none of them were joining because of Lyth.

She felt the rogues in the wild respond to her plea, recognizing her by name and answering.

The non-fighters at Rivendell.
The dragons of the Shire.
Even distant, and distracted with trying to survive, those she'd left behind at Mordor.

All of them.

All of them knew her, or knew of her, and every last one of them answered when she called.

If asked in the past, Bilba would have insisted she was known by very few, and trusted by none. That those in the Shire, no matter how they smiled when they saw her, were just as happy to see her gone. That the denizens of Erebor and Gondor viewed her as an interloper, and the elves saw her as simply a burden, and that the dragons of each and every kingdom watched her to see what misfortune she would bring in her wake.

She'd been wrong.

Completely.

She could feel their emotion, and hear their whispers echoing along their bonds.

Hero, they said.

Friend.

Protector.

Orcrist.

Cassie and Ori's faces appeared in their mind, voices shaking with excitement as they met her and, for the first time, Bilba truly understood why.

She'd spent so much time feeling like an outsider trying to find a way in...only to find she'd already belonged.

She laughed in delight, and Morgoth roared in anger. The crowd and arena dissolved into a massive, towering fountain of smoke. The storm reformed inside it, a violent, swirling vortex arching high over her head. The sound of it was like a thundering waterfall and the wind was strong enough she felt it could tear her apart if it got close enough. The sheer size and violence drew an instinctive flash of fear as it surged toward her, and slammed into an unbreakable shield that formed just in front of her. It was made of interlocking, honeycombed shapes, of every color and hue, unyielding even in the face of Morgoth's rage.

Bilba straightened. A glance down showed she was wearing her armor again, the very set the orcs had taken from her in Erebor. In her hand she clutched the sword Fili had given her and, at her neck, she could feel her mother's ring pressing against her collarbone. The cuts and bruises inflicted on her by Morgoth faded away, and when she reached to wrap a hand around the ring at her throat it was warm and light in her hand.
Around her, the shield expanded, forcing the vortex back and slicing it to ribbons in the process. The darkness faded, and then Bilba was back in her tunic and trousers on Morgoth's back, the woods of Mirkwood just below her. Between them and Morgoth flew a company of dragons, many wounded and lagging, but all fighting to protect the ones huddling in the woods below.

Bilba was bonded to every single one of them, could feel their pain and exhaustion, as well as their dedication and determination.

*We're almost done*, she sent.

Then she turned her attention to the corpse of the dragon under her feet, and the thing currently inhabiting it. With all the force she could muster, and all the hatred and rage of what this monster had done to her and the ones she loved, she gave one, pointed command.

**BURN**

The corpse that had once been Sauron shrieked, and the mind of Morgoth came against her in full fury. Alone, Bilba would have stood no chance. With all the dragons of Middle Earth behind her, however, it was Morgoth who lacked the power to stand against her.

Bilba felt the hide beneath her feet lift and she crouched, hooking a hand over a protruding section of rib to hold herself as they rose into the sky.

*Bilba!* Syrath's voice broke through the babble of others in her head. *Jump off!*

*Not yet,* she returned. *I have to make sure he can't turn back.*

She didn't know the full extent of the ring's power, if proximity was needed to make it work and couldn't risk losing the chance she'd been given. They rose higher, the angle growing steeper and Bilba added her second hand to the rib, holding herself in place. They didn't go straight up as they had the last time, but headed instead for the sun where it sat in its place in the western sky.

Beneath her, those dragons capable of it gave chase but were soon left behind as they flew too high for any to follow. Heat began to build and Bilba could feel sweat running down her face in rivulets and soaking her clothes. Her lungs grew tight and began to struggle for oxygen and black spots danced in her vision. Around her chunks of the dragon, damaged by the others left below, began to break off and fall into the expanse of sky about them. The hide and rib under her hand grew almost unbearably hot, and the pain in her shoulder increased, threatening to pop her shoulder back out of joint.

*Do you think this is the end?* Morgoth asked. He'd grown silent the higher they'd gone, until the only sound was the rush of wind and the thrum of his wings. *You cannot kill me, only send me away for a time. I will return. I will always return.*
And someone will always be there waiting to face you, Bilba returned shortly. As they were the last time, and this time.

**I will return**, Morgoth threatened again. **And I will remember you.**

*I look forward to it.* Bilba replied and, then, as the heat became nearly too much to bear, she did the only thing left for her to do.

She let go.

The wind caught her, and then she was falling, toward a ground so far away it appeared to be little more than a flat piece of parchment. She managed to flip herself about and watched as Morgoth grew smaller and farther away.

She laughed, throwing her arms out wide and arching her back as the wind buffeted her. The last time she'd done this had been when she'd leapt off Syrath to go after an orc, but that hadn't been nearly so high as this.

**This is why I don't bond with children,** a deep voice informed her, a dragon but not one she knew. **They're so reckless.**

**Oh, hush,** a female voice cut in. **Leave the girl be. She's earned a bit of a break.**

**Hunting for whales is a break,** yet a third voice chimed in. **Falling from great heights is not.**

**Whales?** That was Syrath, excited. **You hunt for whales? Can I come?**

Bilba allowed the babble to dwindle away as her adrenaline faded. There was nothing more she could do, and her body knew it. Tension leached from her muscles and the stiffness and pain of the past battles clamored for her attention. The air was still silent, and the wind gentle. Overhead, the black speck that was Morgoth was beginning to separate into many as the tortured body he inhabited gave way to greater forces.

It was over.

Bilba sighed, and allowed the wind to flip her back over, to face the ground as it rushed toward her. Blackness ate at the corners of her vision and she gave into it gladly, grateful for the respite. The last thing she saw before it took her completely was a wave of shapes rushing toward her, led by a glittering, twisting spark of blue that was calling her name.

And then she was gone, and the safety of Middle Earth became someone else's problem.

At least for a time.
Chapter 41

Fili sighed and stopped in his tracks, digging the heel of one hand into his left eye as if he could physically push the headache currently residing there out.

*I don't think that's how it works,* Syrath's voice informed him, and Fili scowled.

"I'm a Crown Prince," he muttered, "it should do as I say."

"What was that, your Highness?" One of his guards straightened from where he'd been crouched a few feet away.

*I think Bilba has been a bad influence on you,* Syrath broke in, and Fili snorted.

*You're one to talk,* he sent back before turning to the guard to say, "Nothing."

They were all exhausted, but he hadn't heard a single person complain and certainly wasn't going to be the one to start.

The guard nodded and turned back to the corpse he'd been in the process of lifting, not that removing it would make much difference in the massive pile of bodies littering the slopes and valley of Mordor.

From where he stood on the slope, just under the wreckage of the ledge where Gothmog had met his end, all he could see were the dead. The battle had been brutal, and hadn't ended when Morgoth died.

It had become easier, though.

The orcs must have been able to sense the death somehow because, at the moment it happened, discord and chaos had erupted in the ranks. The organization the orcs had shown to that moment had collapsed and many had simply fled, or tried to. The rest had tried to fight, but hadn't gotten far.

The orcs hadn't been the only ones to receive word of Morgoth's death. With communication restored, word had been passed back from Erebor. The news had given the forces of Middle Earth the second wind they needed, while the tapering off of the rainstorm had given the dragons back their fire.

The orcs, exhausted and demoralized, had stood no chance and the fight had soon turned into a rout.

After that, all that was left was the cleanup.

A rush of air swooped by overhead and Fili looked up to see a dragon carrying another load of orc corpses to dump down the ruined crown of the mountain. The stone had long since stopped shaking, and the molten rock had stopped flowing, but a veritable lake of it still ran deep within and was more than adequate to handle the mass of dead orcs and the vermin they called dragons.

The others who had died were being burned on pyres. There was no possible way to transport them back to Erebor before decay set in, especially not when a second mountain of dead already waited there. Instead they were laid out respectfully and burned, a grim activity that had already been going on for the better part of a week now. The pyres lined the valley below, smoke giving an acrid sting to the air that caused his eyes to sting and his throat to burn.
Fili didn't know what was worse, the stench of burning flesh or the smell of the dead they hadn't yet reached, but he did know that both would be haunting his sleep for a very long time.

Shaking off his torpor, he trudged on toward another mound of bodies, to begin the long process of sorting, and identifying if possible, before they were consigned to the pyres. Rings, necklaces, weapons and other potentially sentimental items were removed first in the hopes they could be returned to loved ones.

Fili knelt stiffly, grimacing as his sore knees sank into the thick mud and glop still covering the area. The rain had been heavy, and the ground unwilling to soak it up leaving most of the battlefield covered in a thick layer of mud mixed with blood. Bits of broken armor and other debris littered it, forcing them to wear full armor in order to search. It was an added burden on an already exhausted army, but one they were shouldering in silence.

It was unnerving, in fact, just how quiet it was in comparison to how many were there, shifting through the wreckage left over from the battle to save Middle Earth. They were working in shifts, trying to give people time to rest, but he'd seen more than one person working multiple shifts without comment, haggard and worn but moving, unwilling to leave their comrades to rot on the field a moment longer than necessary.

Fili shifted the orc corpse beneath his feet, and immediately jerked his head away as the wave of flies covering it rose up in a cloud around him. He shut his eyes, and put a hand to the cloth tied around his mouth, trying not to gag against the stench, and sight, from the corpse.

I could just burn them for you, Syrath said quietly in his head. The dragon had insisted on coming to join him, and was curled up several meters away in a relatively cleared patch of ground. Xalanth was curled up near him, sound asleep. There were still pockets of orcs roaming about and Syrath, young and still weak, would be a prime target for them. Fili had refused to let the younger dragon come without another dragon and Syrath had needled his father into accompanying him.

Fili knew why the younger dragon had insisted on Xalanth. The larger dragon had been near catatonic once he'd gotten back to Erebor, refusing to eat, and barely reacting to anyone other than Balin. He'd responded to Syrath's request of course, but even here he wasn't much better. Balin had been worried enough he'd actually left organizing relief among the various races back at Erebor, and negotiating for aid between the kingdoms to come with Xalanth. He was out there somewhere, slogging through the same mess the rest of them were.

No, he sent back to Syrath, looking in distaste at the orc corpses he was knee deep in. They don't deserve the honor. He ran an arm across his forehead, accomplishing little more than smearing the muck coating what felt like his entire body.

Syrath didn't respond, and Fili glanced toward him with a frown. The smaller dragon was still sprawled out next to Xalanth but his focus, Fili noted, was on a large fire burning just at the base of the mountain.

I know it probably doesn't help, he sent to Syrath, but Barahir didn't suffer.

Syrath didn't answer. Beside him, Xalanth stirred and shuffled closer. Syrath curled against him and rested his head on his father's forearm, the rest of his body nearly vanishing as Xalanth, still mostly asleep, put a wing around him.

Fili gave a nod and went back to work. He knew the platitude didn't particularly help, any more than it had helped Aragorn. To be honest, he wasn't sure the man had even heard anything said to him. The last Fili had seen of him, he'd been in a near trance, eyes fixed on nothing, and face pale. Arwen
had taken him back to Gondor, steel in her voice and fire in her eyes as she insisted he'd be all right. Fili had no doubt he would be, eventually, but he'd never be completely back to normal. He'd live, but the man he had been before Barahir had died was gone, and wouldn't be returning.

There were many who wouldn't be returning, in one form or another.

He pulled on another orc, shoving it to the side with fingers stiffened and sore from having clenched a sword for hours, and paused at the sight of the young, dwobbit female at the bottom of the pile.

Fili let out a breath of relief, and knelt next to her. "Finally."

**You found her?**

*Yeah,* Fili responded.

He'd been searching for days. A few had advised him to let it go, citing how unlikely it was he'd find her before the ravages of decay had made her unrecognizable. He'd refused.

He'd made a promise, and he damn well intended to keep it.

He knelt carefully next to the young woman's body, eyes noting the rents in her armor and the arrow shaft protruding from her right shoulder. She was surrounded by dead orcs, many with wounds that looked as if they'd come from the sword still clasped in her hand.

She hadn't gone down easy and, when she had, she'd made damn sure to take as many of the enemy with her as possible.

"Well done, Opal," Fili said softly. He straightened and gestured toward one of the guards. "Get a litter. I want her put with the rest of Vanguard."

He'd ordered them kept aside, those few from Vanguard who'd survived Erebor just to come and die at Mordor, waiting to send them off as the team they'd been in life. He'd promised Bilba, and was relieved to see it done.

There was little else he could do for his One, as much as he wished there were.

The guard nodded and left. When he returned, they carefully transferred the body onto the litter and took her down to the pyres, Fili holding the front and leading the way himself.

The pyre for Vanguard had already built and it took only moments to place Opal gently alongside her comrades, and light it.

As Fili stood back, fatigue dragging at his body, he heard a shout from somewhere nearby. A glance in that direction showed a full wing of dragons heading their way from the direction of the gate.

They landed a few yards away and Fili went to meet his father and Kili as the two dismounted. Kili's left arm was in a sling from a barely dodged sword blow, and his right fingers were bandaged as, even with a finger tab, he'd ended up firing arrows until his fingers bled.

"I thought you were staying behind," Fili said, weariness making him more irritable than usual. "You won't be much use with only one arm."

"I'll find something to do," Kili said sharply, his own agitation coming through. He'd been back in Erebor, but, knowing him, he hadn't spent any time resting. He moved off, heading toward a knot of
Ereborean dwarves working on removing what was left of a comrade from near where a molten stream had flowed. Those who had ended up within the stream were gone entirely, but those who had simply been burned, or who had already been dead and in the way of part of the stream, were still at least partly recoverable.

"Go easy on him," Vili said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "He had it rough back home."

Fili frowned. "Cassie?"

He knew the young woman had survived the destruction of Lake-town, but had been injured, and deeply traumatized.

"She's decided to go to Rivendell to be with her family," Vili said, voice quiet.

Fili frowned in confusion. "He can always go visit her."

"She was rather distant when he suggested it," Vili said simply. "I think she'd rather not think of Erebor, or Lake-town, ever again."

Fili hid a flinch. On the one hand, he could understand. Cassie was young, and had been through a lot in her life. Not everyone handled trauma in the same way, and he couldn't blame her for struggling with having lived through death and destruction for the second time.

On the other hand, he couldn't help the burst of resentment. His brother had been growing to care deeply for the young woman, and her leaving would hurt.

His father's hand tightened on his shoulder, and he nodded toward Xalanth. "It's time for you to get back, don't you think?"

Fili frowned. He wanted to go back, of course he did, but it galled him to leave when there was so much work left to be done.

"Don't worry about it," his father said, as if reading his mind. "I can assure you, there's just as much work in Erebor."

Fili nodded, spirits flagging. "Yeah." He'd seen it when he'd been back a few days earlier, and doubted it had improved much since then. He waved a hand absentely at an empty tent set up a few yards up the slope. "I think Galadriel and Celeborn are in there, and Gandalf and that other wizard are around somewhere."

The four of them were officially in charge of things in Mordor. Arathorn was needed in Gondor, and Aragorn wasn't capable of leading anyone at the moment. Thorin had returned to Dis and Erebor, which was desperately in need of her king, and Thranduil...

No one had seen much of him. He'd spent every minute under Morgoth's control fighting him and it had taken its toll. He'd looked faded, washed out as if being seen through a thick mist. Legolas had taken him back to Mirkwood where, reportedly, he was recovering, while his son ruled in his place.

Fili started toward Syrath and Xalanth, Vili in step beside him. "How's Lyth?"

"Frustrated," Vili said with amusement. "You know how she is."

"Angry to be out of the thick of things," Fili said dryly. Her agitation was probably another part of what was making Kili so upset. He wouldn't be surprised if Lyth showed up on her own in the next few days, silently daring anyone to scold her.
He got ahold of Balin through his mind link, and was informed the older dwarf wished to stay behind.

*Xalanth will be happier in Erebor anyway.* Balin said, worry coloring his tone. *I'm still needed here a few days, and then I'll follow.*

*All right.* Fili returned.

Ahead of him, Xalanth woke up and lifted his head at their approach. Fili hugged his father and then easily clambered up onto the dragon's back, strapping in as Xalanth lumbered to his feet, Syrath beside him. It'd be a slow trip back, especially with Syrath injured, but they'd get there.

"Come on," Fili said, reaching forward to pat Xalanth's hide. "Let's go home."

***

The journey was relatively pleasant, a time to pretend nothing was wrong down below and he wasn't going from one scene of devastation to another.

Too soon it was past, and they were dropping through the clouds to see the peak of Erebor. As with Mordor, she was currently surrounded by pyres, smoke rising overhead as the mountain burned her dead. There were simply too many, and not nearly enough time, to bury them all, not to mention the crypts at the root of the mountain were damaged thanks to Gothmog and his oversized worm.

Xalanth dropped him off on one of the, relatively, undamaged ledges on the upper levels and left to join Syrath who'd already headed into Mirkwood. The smaller dragon had begun to lag during the final leg of the journey, becoming quieter and more stoic as he struggled to reach a place he could land and rest. The dragon levels inside Erebor were still damaged, and the landscape was as covered with the dead as it was in Mordor. That left Mirkwood as the only place for the dragons to rest in relative comfort.

In the back of his mind, he felt the young dragon settle down near Lyth who was in the same place she'd been in when they'd left, curled up next to Sardin. He was being hailed as a hero, not that he was aware of it at the moment with the number of drugs the healers had pumped into him. His hide would heal, but would be heavily scarred, a fact he would probably be proud of and would wear as the badges of honor that they were.

Fili let his uncle and mother know via link that he was back, and received vague acknowledgements in return. After that he headed to his rooms, which were undamaged, and proceeded straight into the bath.

He bathed quickly, changed into a tunic and trousers and headed down to the lower levels. He was so tired he could barely see straight, but he couldn't relax yet. It was important the people see their leaders, especially when most were currently in Mordor, recovering in Mirkwood or away in Gondor. It was vital the people not feel abandoned, and that they see someone in charge doing something to help them. Fili knew Lord Bard was helping the refugees from Lake-town so it was up to him and his family to keep the presence back at Erebor.

The ruins of the marketplace on the lower level had been turned into a makeshift home for those displaced by the attacks. Nori was leading teams into the other levels, verifying which areas were safe to move people into, and which would need reinforcement or repair to be made safe again. The last Fili had seen of him, he'd had Dori and Ori with him, insisting there was no need for them to be out of his sight ever again.
Fili visited the lowest levels, stopping to talk to and reassure people as best he could before heading to the infirmary to do the same. Kaia was in there, griping about being forced to recover from a nasty gash she'd gotten on her leg when Morgoth had decided to resurrect a Mahal damned dragon.

He was slightly ashamed to admit he wasn't entirely aware of what he said to anyone, or what was said to him by that point. He hadn't been able to sleep much on the way home, his nerves still too on edge to relax. Now that he was back, his body was doing its best to send him to sleep on his feet. Every word someone said to him seemed to be coming from a long way off and his own responses were sluggish.

Someone finally pushed him out into the hall with a firm order to go get some sleep. Having nothing better to do, Fili headed for the royal level. He was vaguely impressed he made it and didn't fall asleep on the way, simply collapsing against a wall or in a doorway somewhere.

He made it, however, and walked with heavy steps down the corridor to the rooms at the far end. Silence greeted him as he entered, quietly shutting the door behind him. His head was pounding, and he had the vague feeling of illness one got when pushed several leagues past their limit.

The door to one of the bedrooms was closed and he paused in front of it for a brief second, before taking a deep breath and pushing the door open.

Dwalin lay in the bed in the center of the room, arms crossed over his chest, eyes closed and face pale. The only movement was the slow rise and fall of his chest, the only sign of life any of them had seen since Sardin had dragged him out of the lake days earlier.

He hadn't been breathing when he'd been pulled out. It had been one of the survivors from Lake-town who'd somehow managed to get him breathing again, but she hadn't been able to wake him. No one had been able to wake him since.

Doctors came in to check on him regularly, but there was nothing they, or anyone else, could do for him.

He would either wake up, or he wouldn't.

Fili moved forward as silently as he could, carefully walking around the end of the bed to where a long, cushioned lounge chair had been dragged up to sit alongside the bed.

_I will stab you in the throat_, a tired, half-asleep voice informed him, and he smiled in spite of himself.

_I'd appreciate it if you didn't, it's just me._

From her position, stretched out on the lounge chair, Bilba made a non-committal sound and relaxed, having never fully awakened to begin with. She slept on her side, one hand under her head, the other under a pillow and no doubt clutching a very sharp knife. Her rest had been uneasy until Fili had handed her one of his boot knives. She'd clutched it, still sound asleep, shoved it under her pillow and immediately dropped into a deep sleep.

She certainly needed it.

Syrath had been the one to catch her as she'd fallen, and then had been supported in turn by the host of other dragons who'd flown after.

All of them soaring upwards to catch their rider. It was unprecedented, and insane, and absolutely the sort of reckless, insane thing he'd come to expect from Bilba. She was every bit as bad as his uncle
Frerin who, after having an emotional reunion with his brother and sister, had refused all but the most basic aid before throwing himself into the relief efforts.

It was also, apparently, headache inducing to a degree that made Fili's current headache look like a papercut. All those soul bonds, all at once, trying to settle into place in her mind had created a pain so intense she'd been left nearly paralyzed with it. Fili and Syrath had taken on as much as they could and, as the others had slowly settled, they too had taken some until she'd finally been able to relax enough uncurl from the ball of misery she'd been locked into.

Fili approached and gently coaxed her up enough to allow him to sit down. She grumbled, but complied, settling again with her head on his thigh and her hand curled under his leg.

*Did you find her?* she asked sleepily.

*I did,* Fili answered simply. *They're all taken care of now.*

*Thank you,* she managed, and then was gone again, sleep pulling her back under.

As he settled back, Fili could hear the faint squabble of multiple dragon voices bleeding over from her soul bond into his. The dragons had sorted themselves into some sort of strange hierarchy that only they understood, with two or three self-naming themselves the leaders and keeping the others from overwhelming Bilba, which would make it hard for her to think and probably cause yet another headache.

Syrath wasn't thrilled with having to share his rider with every other dragon in Middle Earth, but was happy to know there was no nowhere she could go without having someone there ready, willing and able to protect her.

Not that she'd be able to get in trouble any time soon. The bondings had taken just about everything out of her, and that was before the injuries she'd taken, the worst being her shoulder which was heavily bandaged. She'd been dead on her feet for days, barely able to muster the strength to sit up, much less stand.

Not that there was anywhere she'd have gone, not with her father in the state he was in.

He sighed, and ran a hand over his eyes, before frowning at Dwalin. It was such a strange thing, to see him so still when he was used to the Captain of Erebor's guard being anything but that.

*He'll wake up soon,* Bilba's voice muttered in his head and Fili frowned.

*I'm sure you're right.*

*I am right,* she returned, voice slightly stronger. *He promised if I needed him, he'd come.*

Fili didn't respond. There was nothing to be served by pointing the fact that not even Dwalin could overcome the limitations of his own body.

She already knew.

Instead, he settled his arm on the armrest, put his other lightly on her waist and relaxed against the back of the chair.

*You'd better wake up,* he managed to think in Dwalin's direction just before sleep forcibly claimed. *If you disappoint her, I swear I'll kick your ass myself.*
Chapter 42

He found her where he'd always known she'd be.

Dwalin dropped down heavily on the bench next to Belladonna.

It was a pleasant day, as it so often seemed to be in the Shire, with a warm breeze rustling the branches of distant trees. Laughter, and the sound of quiet chatter reached his ears, coming from hobbits and dwobbits scattered about the landscape. Some he felt he recognized. Others he did not.

The sun shone down brilliantly, and insects buzzed about flowers dotting the fields. Small, green lumps outlined Shire dragons, basking in the sunny day.

Dwalin rested his hands on his legs and clasped his hands together, absently studying the fine lines and creases, many marred by scars or cracked skin. His nails were ragged and several of the cuticles were permanently torn.

They were the hands of someone who worked.

A warrior.

A protector...except for the one time it had really mattered.

"Bella." He dragged the word from a throat firmly closed against it. "I'm--"

She gave an exaggerated sigh and closed the book she'd been reading with a sharp snap. "Dwalin, I swear, if the next word that comes out of your mouth is 'sorry' I'm going to smack you."

She turned to face him, pushing her sunhat up as she did, and there was the fierceness in her eyes she'd had even in Bilba's memories, when nothing else about her had been recognizable.

She didn't look like that now. She was Bella as she'd been, as she'd existed in his mind's eye from the last time he'd seen her, better even, younger and more alive somehow than she'd been before.

"I should have been there," he insisted, and she rolled her eyes in the way she'd always done when she believed he was being especially thick-headed.

"Whose decision was it to leave the Shire?" she challenged. The briefest hint of deep pain flashed across her face, and her voice took on the slightest waver. "It was my mistake. I deserved the consequences. She didn't."

Dwalin let out a breath as if someone had punched him in the gut. He gripped his hands together until the knuckles turned white. He wished he could say more, that he could tell her he'd never blamed her, but he'd be lying.

He'd been angry at her, for a long time. In moments when he felt like being honest with himself, which were few and far between, there was a small, deeply hidden part of himself that still was. Bilba probably knew about it, from the soul bond, but she'd never said a word. Most likely because there was a part of her that felt the same way.

Still...

"No one deserved that," he said, hoarsely. "And it was my responsibility. I was supposed to protect you."
Belladonna scowled. "And I was supposed to stay in the Shire." She ran her hands over the cover of her book, and then absentely smoothed her skirt where it already lay perfectly over her legs. She was quiet for a few seconds, studying her lap with the same intensity that Dwalin was expending on his hands, before finally saying, "I was quite convinced of my own ability to take care of myself." Her hands tightened, bunching the material of her skirt under her fingers, before she added, in a near whisper, "I was rather spectacularly wrong."

She sniffed, eyes still focused on her lap, and Dwalin reached over to place a hand over hers. She gave a watery laugh, and put her free hand tightly over his, before giving him a sidelong look that was full of pride. "Speaking of people being able to take care of themselves--"

Dwalin snorted. "She certainly thinks she can. Half the time she's right, but I don't plan to tell her that."

"No," Belladonna agreed. "It'd only make her worse." She smiled. "Fili's grown into a fine young man. He's good for her."

"He spoils her," Dwalin corrected in exasperation. "And it's only going to get worse now that Frerin is back." He wouldn't deny the burst of joy that had filled him upon hearing his friend had seemingly returned from the dead, but that didn't disguise the burst of near terror at imagining him and Bilba together.

"It should be interesting,"

"It will be irritating." Dwalin muttered.

Belladonna gave a huff. "I suppose this is the time you're supposed to decide whether or not you want to stay or go back." She turned her gaze, the one that used to make grown hobbits who'd chosen to cut through her flower beds quake in fear, on him. "I'll never forgive you if you stay."

Dwalin snorted. "I'd never forgive myself. I made a promise to that girl, and I aim to keep it."

Bella tugged her hand free from his, so she could lay it on his cheek. "I knew there was a reason I married you."

Dwalin grinned and leaned into her hand. "I thought it was for my rugged good looks."

She laughed, a sound he'd never thought he'd hear again, and then sighed in resignation and reopened the book on her lap. "I'll still be here," she said, focusing down on the pages, fingers holding so tight the paper was indenting under the pressure. "The next time you return, we can sit and wait for her together."

Dwalin reached out and, as gently as was possible for him, wiped away the tear currently tracking down her face. "Don't think you're supposed to be crying here, my dear. Kind of destroys the illusion."

She gave a watery laugh and lightly smacked him with the book. "Shut up, you. I'll do as I wish."

"There's my Bella." Dwalin said, pleased. He settled back, and grabbed her hand, interlacing their fingers. "You don't mind if I sit here for a few minutes, do you? Enjoy the view?"

She shifted the book to one knee, holding it open with one hand, before giving him an exasperated look. "You're not seeing much of the view if I'm the only one you're looking at."

"You're the only part of the view I care about," he replied.
She blushed, a look that took him right back to the early days of their courtship, squeezed his hand and looked back down at her book again.

He sighed and settled back to watch her read, content to simply soak in the return of something he'd though was lost forever. Once, and not so very long ago, he'd have chosen to stay with her without hesitation.

Things had changed. His daughter needed him, and he had no intention of ever letting her down again.

But, for now, for just this single moment, he was going to relax, and relish the sight of his wife.

***

Bilba wasn't used to inactivity.

She was curled up on the window ledge in her father's room, idly staring out the open window. The air was cool, and from this high up, she could hardly smell the stench of death, or the sharp tang of fires from down below. She couldn't see any of it either, so long as she didn't look.

Fili was somewhere in the midst of it all, even then, helping bring Erebor back from the brink little by little. Bilba should be there as well, but Fili had bluntly informed her she'd done quite enough already. He'd also made some sort of comment about it being easier without her causing a mob scene, but she was fairly certain he was exaggerating. She'd only done what anyone in her position would have done. There was no reason to cause a fuss.

_I hope you're prepared for disappointment then_, his voice sounded in her mind. She rolled her eyes and sent him back a rather rude response, to which he simply laughed before returning to whatever he'd been doing.

A glance over her shoulder revealed her father, still soundly asleep in his bed. He was going to wake up, there was no doubt in her mind about that, but she'd prefer to be there when he did anyway. If their positions had been reversed, she'd have wanted to see him first thing, so it only made sense to do the same for him.

The baby ringleader dragon, whose name was apparently Varegeth, was sleeping near him on one of the extra pillows. Bilba had no idea where he'd come from or how he'd gotten into the rooms. She'd woken up from a nap to find him sitting imperiously on her chest with his face inches from hers as if trying to will her awake.

Once he'd realized his mission had been achieved he'd happily announced that, because they were now soul bonded, it was okay for him to talk to her no matter what stupid Syrath said. He'd then grandly told her his name, before promptly removing himself to the bed where he'd been lying ever since. According to Syrath, the little dragon wanted to talk to her about something but, as of yet, he seemed rather content to settle into a routine of sleeping, eating, and acting pretentious.

Syrath had been quite insulted when Bilba had commented the little dragon reminded her of him at that age.

With a yawn, she settled in a little more against the window frame, idly asking Syrath to make sure she didn't fall asleep and end up tumbling right out of the open window. That would just be
embarrassing. The fact she still felt as tired as she did, and kept falling asleep at the most inopportune moments, was annoying. She was healing, and the pain was nothing she couldn't handle, but the fatigue was simply obnoxious. She knew it wouldn't last forever but, for the time it did, well...she was not enjoying it.

Inside her head, at least half a dozen souls sent waves of sympathy toward her, and she bit back a smile. The dragons had continued sorting themselves out, establishing hierarchies and doing their best to lessen the strain on her. She never would have thought that it was possible to have too many soul bonds, but was fast finding out it was quite possible indeed.

She still got headaches, and probably always would, and there was a constant low babble of voices, but they were trying to make it easier. A few of the older dragons had begun to take turns creating...bubbles almost, comprised of their shields, where she could settle in and relax for a few minutes. It couldn't be for very long as it virtually cut her off from the others, an action which hurt her and them, but without it she wasn't entirely certain her sanity would have remained intact.

There was a plus, however. At night now, she dreamed of dragons. Gone were the nightmares of darkness and pain, either lost forever or so buried beneath other minds that they no longer had the ability to threaten her. She soared now in her dreams, flying over landscapes she hadn't yet seen, frolicking with baby dragons in brilliant forests, and trying to outrace the dawn as other, dark shapes danced around her. She actually looked forward to sleeping now, and woke up feeling more refreshed than she could ever remember having done before.

A soft knock had her looking at the partly opened bedroom door. Before she could do anything, an exasperated voice said something, and the door was simply pushed open to allow Frerin to stride in.

He looked very different from the last time she'd seen him. He was still thin, but he was clean, hair neatly trimmed and braided, and sporting a short beard similar to the one his brother wore. Dressed in the clothing of his rank, he looked every bit the royal he was, even if the glint in his eye trended far more to a rogue than a prince. The scars at his wrists and neck from the shackles were easily visible if one looked for them, and she had a strong feeling he'd wear them proudly as badges of honor for all that he'd endured.

Ori came in behind him, nervous, and clutching a narrow, rectangular box in both hands. He was a sensitive soul, unused to the sorts of horrors visited on Erebor, and when Nori had asked if she could find something to occupy his time Bilba had been more than happy to oblige.

Ori settled the box on a table near the ledge carefully, as Frerin went to stand near the bed. "Still being lazy, are you?" he directed at Dwalin. He shook his head and turned to face her. "We should take that vacation we were talking about before. Bet that would wake him up."

"I think Fili already forbid us from doing that," Bilba said, amused.

Frerin rolled his eyes. "Upstart. Gets officially declared Heir and suddenly has all these ideas about pulling rank." His eyes took on the distant look that suggested he was talking to someone via mind link, and he snorted, sending her a mischievous grin in the process.

Bilba shook her head at his antics, and turned her attention back to Ori. He'd opened the case he'd brought in and pulled out a few pieces of paper that he handed to her. "These are the designs I came up with," he said timidly, "based on what you said you wanted. If you don't like them, it's fine, we can always come up with something else."

He said the last in a rush, the words blurring together until she almost didn't understand what he said. She sat up straighter, crossing her legs, and putting the papers down in front of her, holding them
tightly to avoid the wind catching them.

The first was a very accurate drawing of her hands and wrists. Ori had been coming in a little every day to do them, a fact she'd have thought might do away with some of his shyness but, to date, hadn't made much difference. She'd sat with her arms out, allowing him to carefully sketch out her hands and arms from multiple angles, meticulously adding in each and every scar marking the skin.

She hadn't been entirely sure what his plan was when he'd done it but, looking at it now, all she could do was draw in a sharp breath and fight against the sudden blurring of her vision.

Frerin wandered over from the bed, standing with his arms crossed just behind her shoulder to see the sketches himself. On the bed, Varegeth got up and hopped down to the floor with a dainty thud. He made his way over and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, proceeded to climb Frerin's pant leg and wind up under his arm and around his back before finally settling on his shoulder, tiny claws holding onto the side of Frerin's head to steady himself. The fact Frerin didn't appear to even notice spoke to his history with dragons, as well as suggested volumes about how often he'd interacted with baby dragons.

"That's gorgeous work," Frerin murmured now. "Well done, Ori."

Ori went bright red, and looked down at his hands, stammering out a quiet thank you.

Bilba, meanwhile, was still staring at the drawing.

Ori had positively transformed her scars. Using color against the black and white sketches, he'd changed each and every scar to winding, delicate green, dotted with fragile leaves and intricately drawn, bell shaped flowers.

And not just any flowers.

"Belladonna," Frerin said softly. "A good choice. Pays homage to your mother, and reminds your enemies of how dangerous you are at the same time."

Bilba rolled her eyes. I don't need a tattoo to remind them. I have a sword.

Or at least she would soon enough. Fili had already started working on replacing the weaponry and armor she'd lost during the fight, and she'd soon be as well outfitted as she'd been before. She had a vague feeling he was dragging his heels on it all, with the misguided thought it would keep her from running out and getting in trouble. Unfortunately, for him, armor and even weapons had always been a luxury, not a requirement.

"Fair enough." Frerin leaned sideways against the wall, crossing one leg over the other. Varegeth leaned with him until he was practically flopping against Frerin's head, but the prince still didn't seem to notice, or mind.

"This is the other," Ori said shyly, handing her the second sheet. "I tried to do what you said, but with kind of a twist on the style."

Bilba took the sheet, and felt something inside her relax at the sight. She'd made the decision, early in talks with Ori, to keep the scars around her neck as they were. She didn't wear them as badges of honor, at least not yet, but she also didn't fear them or care what others thought of them and refused to cover them all up as if she did.

Her wrists were a way to honor her mother, and her back? Well, she doubted anyone would blame her for wanting to cover where Azog had branded her like she was his personal cattle.
As with her wrists, Ori had worked what seemed like a miracle. She couldn't even see the brand that he'd painstakingly sketched from her back, while Fili stood over him and glowered. Instead, she saw a circle, within which was drawn the most finely detailed map of Middle Earth she'd ever seen. Sitting on top of the circle, tail curled protectively around it, wings outstretched and fire spurting form his maw as if driving off an unseen enemy, was Syrath.

She felt a burst of pride from Syrath and mentally acknowledged his ego was probably going to get several times larger after this.

"Damn, kid," Frerin said. "I think I may need you to work on the one on my back when you're done with hers."

Ori looked like he might pass out, but simply nodded in silent affirmation.

*I love them*, Bilba said, reaching out to touch his hand gently. *Can we get started right away?*

"Of course," Ori stammered. "I brought my tools."

He opened the case again and began laying out needles of various widths, tubs of whatever it was he used for color, and other odds and ends.

"After you get that done," Frerin said casually. "We should go find some orcs to show them off too."

Bilba grinned, and opened her mouth to answer, but never got a chance.

"Bastard. I'm asleep for five minutes," a sleep roughened voice grumbled from behind them, "and you return from the dead and try to abscond with my daughter."

Bilba was off the window ledge without consciously moving, only barely aware of Ori's squawk as he lunged to save his equipment.

Her father's eyes were open, glassy and not entirely focused, but aware. He'd raised a hand to his forehead as if in pain and Bilba sent a near panicked look over her shoulder at Frerin, who smiled in reassurance and placed a hand on her shoulder as he came up to stand beside her.

"Doctor's on the way." He turned his attention to Dwalin and added, "Fine way to greet your long-lost best friend, you arsehole. Not to mention, someone had to take charge of her while you lazed about in bed all day."

"There are plenty to look after her that aren't you," Dwalin growled without heat.

Frerin snorted. "Don't I know it." Dwalin had extended an arm shakily, and Frerin reached out to grip his forearm. "Don't worry, old friend. Pretty sure there'd be an army after me if I tried to run off with her, with Fili at the front."

"Always did like that boy," Dwalin muttered. "Don't call me old, bastard."

Frerin laughed. Bilba, shaking her head at their extremely strange relationship, climbed onto the bed and sat next to her father, tucking her legs under her and sitting on her heels.

Dwalin sighed and reached out to gently trail his fingers along her face. Bilba caught it and held it, trying to her best not to cry.

"Now, now," Dwalin murmured, moving his hand to wipe away the traitorous tears that had leaked out in spite of her best efforts. "Can't have all my womenfolk crying today, people will talk."
The words didn't entirely make sense, but they didn't stop Bilba from bursting into tears and flinging herself forward onto him, burying her face in his chest.

Dwalin lightly rubbed her back, while continue to engage in mildly threatening banter with Frerin because, apparently, it was what they did.

*Did he make you cry again?* Fili asked in her mind. *I really may just have to kill him.*

Bilba laughed in spite of herself and then curled in tighter against her father. In her mind a chorus of dragon voices joined in, all offering to aid Fili in murdering whoever upset her, Syrath's voice loudest of all as tried to over shout them all.

Varegeth landed smugly on her hip and curled up, much to the outrage of Syrath and a few other dragons.

Bilba shook her head at their antics, buried her head deeper in her father's chest, and proceeded to laugh until her sides hurt.
Bilba tucked the last of her braids into place and grabbed her sword where it was resting against the bedpost. Fili had made her a new set of weapons to replace the ones lost or damaged during the battle, most of which were already strapped to her legs, wrists, arms, and back. She settled the sword around her waist and was doing a final check of the fit of her armor, also a new set courtesy of Fili, when someone knocked on her bedroom door.

Already aware of who it was, Bilba sent a mental acceptance, and then turned to face the door as it opened.

Frerin walked in, similarly armored. Varegeth was coiled across his shoulders, where he'd pretty much taken up residence over the past month, sound asleep. Frerin didn't seem to mind, most likely because he didn't have to put up with the small dragon's constant chatter, Bilba imagined. Frerin grinned at her and held his arms out like a doting parent to a small child. "There's my girl. You ready?"

Something very much like pure, unadulterated adoration rushed through Bilba and she ran forward to literally throw herself into his arms. It was a bit awkward with weapons and armor in the way but Frerin still caught her easily, spun her around and then set her carefully on her feet again.

In the month since the battle for the heart and soul of Middle Earth, Frerin had undergone a dramatic change. Though Thorin, and others, had insisted he rest and recover, he'd instead thrown himself into the recovery of Erebor. His body had lost the gauntness from the mines, and he'd slowly began to walk straighter and with his head up as the darkness of the mines had receded. There was still a shadow to his eyes in moments when he thought no one was looking, and Bilba doubted he'd ever be exactly as he'd been before Moria, but he now looked every bit the prince he was, instead of the Arena slave he'd been.

"Come on," Frerin said, throwing an arm across her shoulders. "Let's get out of here, shall we?"

Bilba nodded, relief flooding her. The very last place she wanted to be on that day was Erebor.

They left her room, moving into the main living room, and Bilba felt a second burst of relief to see that it was empty. She'd barely seen her father over the last few weeks as he'd worked in the recovery. Bilba had been working with the dragons to clear out rubble and had only caught quick glimpses of her father as he directed the guard in similar efforts.

They reached the main door leading out into the halls, and Frerin stepped forward to grab the handle and pull it open. Bilba walked out, and immediately felt her heart drop at the sight of her father, and Fili, leaning against the far wall, arms crossed and wearing matching expressions.

They were not amused expressions.

Bilba studied them both, considering, and then made her decision. She stepped forward to Fili and reached out for him. He obediently pushed off the wall to allow her to loop her arms around his neck. She considered trying the weird looks the court ladies were always sending toward males but decided against it. She couldn't deny it seemed to get results for them, but it was also downright ridiculous.
Fili's eyes narrowed, even as his arms came up to wrap around her waist. "I think I'm insulted. Why'd you decide I'm the pushover?"

"Because she's got a brain in her head," Dwalin growled from next to them. He scowled at Frerin. "Where do you think you're going with my daughter, asshole?"

_We're going to go hunt orcs_, Bilba informed him flatly.

Fili frowned. "The ceremony is today."

_Hence why we're going_, Bilba replied, rolling her eyes. _They can hold it without me._

"You're one of the guests of honor," Fili replied dryly. "Pretty sure they can't."

_I don't want to_, Bilba insisted, mutinously.

Fili sighed. He shot a look at Dwalin and Frerin, but they were both bickering and clearly not going to be of any help. Instead, he rested his forehead against Bilba's and said, "Primula and Bofur are going to be there. I hear a lot of dragons flew in as well, hoping to meet their new soul bond."

Bilba stared at him for several long minutes, and then pulled him forward, tightening her grip and burying her face in his neck.

This was like the Coming of Age all over again.

_You won't be alone_, Fili told her privately. _We'll all be with you._ He nudged her back, so he could look her in the eyes. _We can always go orc hunting afterward, assuming we can find any._

The orcs had crawled back into their respective holes after the defeat of Gothmog and Morgoth and had been relatively quiet since. Bilba knew it wouldn't last. She also knew she shouldn't be hoping for them to come back. It wasn't that she wanted anyone to get hurt, it was just that fighting was so engrained in her that she didn't know what to do with herself otherwise. The recovery was taking up her time now, but it wouldn't last forever.

_Azog is still leading them_, Bilba said. Not to mention that female of his. _They'll be back soon enough._

_See?_ Fili said cheerfully. _Positive thinking. There's also the goblins too._

_I do hate the goblins_, Bilba agreed. She let her shoulders slump in resignation. _Fine, but I won't like it._

Fili frowned critically at what she was now going to be wearing to an important ceremony, but wisely chose not to comment. Instead, he simply grabbed her hand, and pulled her past Dwalin and Frerin. The act caught their attention and they shut up enough to fall in behind her, one on either side, as they headed down the corridor.

It was fine, for the first dozen or so yards, and would have continued to be fine if her stomach hadn't been clenching and her nerves on edge. She didn't want to have to face a giant crowd, most of whom would be strangers, and she certainly didn't want to be up on a stage, facing said crowd with absolutely no protection from a well-placed arrow or thrown dagger.

Around her, the walls began to narrow, and the passageway darkened. Fili, Frerin and her father faded, and suddenly it was orcs behind her and to her side, walking her down the long passageway toward the arena.
Bilba clenched her teeth and curled her fingers into fists. Stop it, she ordered herself. Her mind wasn't in a mood to listen, however, and so she tried blocking it off, from those around her and even herself.

It didn't help. Dimly, she thought she could hear the roar of the crowd, and she could swear the air held the faintest metallic tang of blood.

It probably did. Many had died in these halls, and while the bodies were gone, not every inch of stone had been scrubbed clean yet. If she looked closely, especially as they passed the treasury, it was possible to see small stains marring the rock, splashed down into broken crevices between stones, or just under the hinges of the door.

Bilba took a deep breath, fighting to calm down, even as her stomach clenched so tight it physically hurt. It was becoming difficult to breathe, and dots were dancing in her vision. She was rapidly approaching a full-blown panic attack.

Some hero she was, she thought bitterly. She could face down a legion of orcs, and a giant, rotting dragon, but couldn't face the combined nobility of Middle Earth?

The memory of some of her more notable interactions with nobility crossed her mind and she realized that, no, no she absolutely could not.

Tiny claws suddenly dug into the juncture of her neck, just above the collar of her armor, and she jumped in surprise. A second later, she felt a heavy weight on her shoulder, as Varegeth carefully transferred himself from Frerin over to her. He set his hind legs on her shoulders, stretched his body up behind her, and plopped his head on top of hers.

Somewhat to her surprise, Bilba felt herself begin to settle.

Fingers lightly traced along the edge of her hand, before interlacing with her own fingers in a tight grip. Bilba glanced to her side to see Fili giving her a sharp look.

"I think we should go to Moria," Frerin said suddenly. "You can bring all your new dragon friends, and we can just sit outside and demand Azog come out and face us." He grinned at her broadly. "Then we can kill him. It'll be fun."

An arm slid around her waist and, without thinking about it, Bilba curled into her father's side, wrapping her free arm around his waist. It was awkward, but it was better than allowing her mind to convince her she was back in Moria.

"How about I kill you instead?" Dwalin asked conversationally to Frerin.

That, of course, set off another round of bickering as they continued moving down the hall. The sound of their voices, combined with the feel of her father's arm, Fili's hand and Varegeth's weight on her shoulders, broke through the darkness in her mind and helped ground her in the moment.

Hesitant, Bilba carefully reopened her soul bonds, and immediately felt a rush of love and acceptance from every direction, slicing through the last vestiges of blood and bone haunting her mind.

_Falling back on bad habits?_ Fili mused casually.

Yes, Bilba admitted. Sorry.

She was doing better than she ever had but years of being on her own, and having to rely on her own strength, didn't disappear overnight. She knew she'd have both good days and bad ahead of her.
We'll all be here for both, Fili told her.

Bilba nodded and focused on relaxing. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all, she told herself firmly. Who knows, she might even have fun.

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She did not have fun.

Not because of her nerves or anything like that. Fili, her father, Frerin and Varegeth all stayed with her, as did Vili, Dis and Kili so she was far too surrounded for her mind to play any tricks on her.

No, she didn't have fun because the remembrance ceremony was profoundly, utterly, entirely, mind-numbingly boring.

At Fili's Coming of Age, there had been dancing she could watch, and food, and people she could spend time with.

Here, there was simply a lot of talking.

Endless, hours' worth of talking.

The ceremony was being held outside, on the plain between Erebor and Dale. It was the only place that was not only large enough for all the delegations of Middle Earth, but that also would allow room for their respective dragons, all of whom sat or lay coiled about the perimeter of the crowd or even crouched on the mountain slopes of Erebor or the rooftops of Dale.

Many were the ones who'd come from all corners of Middle Earth to meet her. She'd already been introduced to several, including the two who'd stepped up to take leadership roles inside her head in terms of working out the tangles of so many soul bonds, and keeping them from overwhelming her. They were older drakes, and bonded to one another, which she should have realized given how they interacted. Prygrasse, the female, was a golden drake who'd drawn sharp double takes from both Frerin and Thorin when she'd swooped in, while the male, Jarsun, was a mix of brown, gold and dark red scales. Both were crotchety, and prone to having their own way, but they'd also seemed to genuinely care about her in the short time they'd been bonded, and quite liked Syrath.

Bilba had never seen so large a gathering in all her life, couldn't even fathom one. She'd been skeptical of the need for the massive, temporary stage constructed for the event but could now see it had certainly been necessary.

Contingents from every race were represented, including the Thain who had been convinced to come all the way from the Shire. While hobbits had not been directly involved in the battle, the Shire had joined in with Rivendell, Gondor, Lothlorien, Mirkwood and Rohan to provide supplies and aid in the recovery. The devastation was widespread, and winter was coming quickly.

The other kingdoms had all sent food, blankets and warm clothing to help stave off the cold until holes could be patched and doors reset. They would need more help through the winter as the orcs, from sheer spite alone, had spoiled the food stores meant to get them through the colder months until new crops could be planted in spring. It would be difficult, but they hadn't survived Gothmog and Morgoth simply to give up because it was cold, and the food was a bit scarce.
Aside from the Shire, royalty from the other kingdoms were all present on the stage. Arathorn had come to represent Gondor, along with his wife, Gilraen. Neither Aragorn nor Arwen had made the trip, not that Bilba had expected them to. She'd asked after the two before the ceremony had started, specifically whether or not Aragorn was all right.

"No," Gilraen had responded, fire and defiance in her eyes, "but he will be."

Beside her, Arathorn had nodded, a similar determination in his eyes that had immediately set Bilba's mind at ease. Losing one's dragon was a life altering event that could easily send someone into a deep depression from which many never found a way out. It was clear, however, that Aragorn was surrounded by far too many who were simply too stubborn to allow such a thing to happen.

Thranduil had come to represent the Mirkwood contingent, along with Legolas. Fingalon and his brother Elador were both there as well. Thranduil was pale, but steady. Rather than emotionally damaged or run down as many had feared, Legolas had informed her before the ceremony that Thranduil was angrier about being used by Morgoth than anything else and that his only regret was he hadn't been able to strike the killing blow to the creature himself.

Beside Bilba, Frerin shifted and muttered something under his breath. Pretty much every ruler was being given the chance to speak, and many of them were taking full advantage of the opportunity. The Thain, Elrond, and Arathorn had already spoken. Thorin was currently speaking and then there would be Bard and Thengel of Rohan. Thranduil, and Galadriel who stood near him, had declined, an act that had raised their esteem in Bilba's eyes.

The wizards were on the stage as well, Gandalf and Radagast. Both had survived the battle and stayed behind to help in the clean up and recovery. Radagast, in particular, had been helpful as he'd summoned an army of animals to help clear the smaller bits of rubble and debris from the battlefield and homes.

She shifted, looking out across the heads of all those who'd come to listen. She saw Kaia near the front, trying to pretend she wasn't staring at Kili where he stood on Fili's other side. Bilba had vaguely noticed the interest from the other girl in the days after the battle but thought little of it. There were scores of women with their eyes on Kili, but he had yet to notice any of them.

He'd stood up straighter when the group from Rivendell had arrived, searching for a familiar face. Cassie hadn't come, however, and was unlikely to ever come. Fili had assured Bilba that Kili would bounce back, but it was still difficult to watch him struggle with it.

There were gaps in the crowd, not physical, but there all the same. Places where loved ones had stood, and never would again. In Bilba's mind, she could almost see the members of Vanguard gathered near the front, raising an invisible toast before fading like mist torn apart by the wind. Thorin had promised a permanent memorial would be built to honor all those lost in the battle, and that Vanguard would feature prominently. Bilba planned to make sure that Opal was portrayed with a sword in hand, rushing headlong into battle. She knew it was what the other dwobbit would have wanted.

Quinlan was behind the crowd, close to the gates of Dale, with Inilth curled up next to him. Her rider, Yari, was around somewhere, taking her job as a scribe seriously as she tried to record the proceedings. Nori was most likely doing the same. Bilba knew he would sometimes follow Ori around and pretend to be a scribe in training in order to listen to those who were dumb enough to say in front of a scribe things they would never say before a Spymaster.

Lyth was in the back as well, fully recovered from her injuries. Sardin was next to her, head resting on her back and seemingly sound asleep. His recovery was far slower, but steady. Though nothing
had been officially declared between them, it was pretty well accepted that Lyth had decided he was hers, and he wasn't complaining.

Bilba shifted enough to see Vili, standing near Dis on Kili's far side, and saw him studying Sardin where he lay sleeping. The two had finally gotten around to talking, after practically being ordered by Dis, which had led to Vili now being the exceptionally proud rider to one very young, very reckless dragon. Bilba imagined it would work out to be an excellent pairing. Sardin would push Vili to have a little fun once in a while while Vili would, hopefully, keep Sardin from doing anything for which Lyth might get angry and kill him.

I think it's going to rain, Syrath's voice said hopefully in her head, and Bilba shot an amused look toward where he was lounging, or more accurately pouting, to the side of the stage.

Overhead, it was indeed becoming increasingly cloudy, and a stiff, cool breeze had kicked up, swirling loose strands of hair back from her face. The sight of the sky, and feel of the breeze in her face, sent a thrill of pure adrenaline and exhilaration right through her.

She wanted to fly. She'd refrained out of respect for Syrath's injuries, and how put out he'd be if she rode another dragon now that she was soul bonded to all of them, but he'd been given the all clear days ago and she simply hadn't had the time.

At the front, Thorin finally stopped talking and stepped away from the front. Bilba felt a burst of hope, only to have it die a tragic death as Thengel stepped up to start his speech.

They were all going to die there, she just knew it. She'd helped save Middle Earth, simply to die from boredom.

She should have stayed in the damn wild.

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The ceremony ended, finally, by early afternoon. Varegeth scampered off to go see his parents. Bilba wished she could be so lucky but, instead, ended up being swamped by people wanting to talk to her and shake her hand. Thorin had insisted on making her come forward at the very end to be recognized, which had led to far more attention than she was comfortable with. After that it had been meet and greet time with what felt like everyone who lived in Middle Earth. Fili stayed by her side, but Bilba had a feeling it was less for her comfort and more to make sure she didn't snap and do, or say, something she wouldn't regret.

About the only positive in all of it was that they finally brought out food. During the battle, Bombur had reportedly defended his staff with a soup ladle and a pot, so successfully that the kitchens had come through virtually untouched.

Now, with just a pile of mismatched food provided by the other kingdoms, and largely consisting of things which had been salted or brined for preservation, Bombur had outdone himself in the feast he presented. Bilba had heard he'd conscripted everyone within reach, including Bifur, who'd happened to wander by at an inopportune moment. Bifur would be one of the members of the new Vanguard unit once it was established but, for right then, he was helping set out giant platters of food.

At some point, being constantly surrounded by people, all of whom wanted something from her, even if it was just to thank her, became too much. It wasn't that she disliked them or didn't
necessarily want them around her, it was just literally...too much.

Catching sight of a new group heading toward her, Bilba ducked behind Fili, and then proceeded to drop to the ground and crawl underneath the tablecloth and the table. She popped out the other side, near the outer wall of the mountain where the area was shadowed and stood up quickly to grab a plate of food. As she did, Fili easily stepped forward to greet the newcomers, blocking their view of her long enough for her to grab what she wanted and vanish through the gates into the mountain beyond.

Priority had been given to getting people back in their homes meaning that, while the rubble had been cleared from the lowest floor, the marketplace had not yet been rebuilt. Bedrolls and other items were still strewn about, placed there by residents of Erebor and Dale who still didn't have a home to return to. Others had been taken in by Mirkwood, ensuring no one was forced to stay outside in the increasingly cold weather.

The area was relatively empty and Bilba soon found a quiet, secluded corner to sit and relax for a few minutes. It was the first chance she'd had to sit since that morning and she couldn't resist a sigh as she was finally able to get off her feet for a few minutes.

It was a sigh that soon turned into a groan as she realized people were approaching her, only for to cut off midway through as she realized just exactly who it was coming.

Setting her plate down, she scrambled to her feet and ran forward to throw her arms around Primula, albeit carefully as she was still wearing a full set of light armor, complete with weapons.

The other woman hugged her back. She pulled away, but only to greet Bofur who was walking up, carrying Frodo in one arm.

"Hey, Bilba," he said, pulling back to wrap an arm around Primula's waist. "How have you been doing?"

*Fine.* Bilba raised an eyebrow at how the two were standing. *Did you finally get your act together and say something?*

"Hey," Bofur said in mock censure. "I said something a long time ago. She's the one who finally realized what a catch I was."

Bilba rolled her eyes. *I'm sure it's still your fault, somehow.*

Bofur snorted. Primula, meanwhile, happily dragged Bilba back to sit down, handed her back her plate, and said, "Now, I want to hear everything. It's not every day you can say you've had the hero of Middle Earth in your house for tea!"

*It wasn't just me,* Bilba said, flushing in embarrassment. *I wouldn't have saved anything if it weren't for everyone else.*

Primula nodded, and then clasped her hands together in her lap. *Tell me everything!"

Bilba frowned, not sure the other woman had heard a word she'd said in her excitement. Bofur, who'd set Frodo down a few feet away to play, gave her an amused look. *Best do what she wants,* Bilba heard him send. *She won't rest until she's heard it all.*

*All right.* At least, with a link, she'd be able to at least eat while she related the story. She settled back, got her plate situated, and started.
She had no idea how much later it was that the story was done, and Primula left with Bofur to return to their lodgings in Dale for an early evening. Bilba vaguely noted that Bofur seemed to be behaving extra carefully with Primula, and she seemed more tired than usual. It seemed vaguely familiar, but her own brain was beginning to shut down from fatigue by that time as well, so she had little energy to spare to the thought.

Instead, she decided to head upstairs and try to take a much-needed nap for a few hours until sunset. Orcs and goblins tended to come out after dark, and she still wanted to go out and try to track a few down if she could.

She made it all the way to the royal levels, only to stop short at the sight of Varegeth sitting imperiously on the Treasury steps, waiting for her.

Damn it.

_I'm tired_, she sent toward him. _Can't this wait?_

He dropped forward onto all four legs and scampered forward until he was sitting at her feet, where he proceeded to sit up on his hind legs, and _gaze_ at her. Piteously.

_Damn it._

_All right_, Bilba said. _Come on._

Varegeth sent a shout of excitement into her mind, before scrambling up her leg, winding around her torso and ending up perched on one shoulder, with his claws digging lightly into her scalp for balance.

_You spoil him_, Syrath muttered petulantly.

_Just think_, Bilba sent back. _If I do what he wants, and it goes well, he'll probably start leaving me alone._

_In that case_, Syrath replied, _what are you waiting for?_

Bilba rolled her eyes, and then reached out to Fili to ask where Thorin was. He reported his uncle had retired to his office for a bit, apparently as tired of the crowd as she was, so she headed in that direction.

Once there, she knocked, was granted admission, and entered. Thorin was seated behind his desk, and Bilba was gratified to see Frerin half sitting, half leaning against the edge. Having them together meant she wouldn't have to do this twice.

"Bilba," Thorin rumbled in that deep bass of his that seemed to vibrate her very bones. "We were just discussing your request in regard to Beryl."

"I think you're out of your mind," Frerin said shortly. His arms were crossed, and he looked uncharacteristically serious. "At the very least she shouldn't see the light of day again. Personally, I'm in favor of her being executed. She's a traitor, not just to Erebor, but to Middle Earth."
Bilba shook her head. *There's been enough death.* She frowned. *Beryl is self-centered, and conceited. If left alone, she'd have simply grown up to be a self-absorbed, selfish noble. If we imprisoned or executed every noble guilty of that, we wouldn't have many left.*

Thorin raised an eyebrow. "She isn't being tried for being a terrible person, Bilba. She's being tried for her actions. She helped break into the treasuries of the other kingdoms to steal their keys, and aided in the attack on Erebor, not to mention the assassination attempts on almost every member of the royal family, including Fili and Syrath."

Bilba flinched. She would never get the sight of Syrath falling to the ground out of her mind, or the pain of having to leave him to go and search for Fili.

*She made her own choices,* she agreed, *but she was also driven by the hatred and revenge of her father. She hesitated, before lifting her chin. It could have been me. I understand that kind of hatred, and that need for vengeance. If my mother had been like her father, if I hadn't had Syrath, or Primula, or Fili and the rest of you...*

She took a deep breath, mind physically jerking away from that train of thought. It made her sick to think of what she could have done, of who she could have been, had it not been for a long, long trail of individuals who'd simply refused to let it happen.

Beryl hadn't had any of that. All she'd had was her father, feeding her anger, convincing her of her right to the things she didn't have, pushing her to aid him in his own quest for vengeance over the loss of his sons at Moria.

Bilba could remember the grief and pain after her mother's death. If Beryl had felt that over her brothers, and she had no reason to believe the other woman didn't, and had her father right there fueling it, never letting her move past it...

*Exile would still be a punishment* she continued. *Beryl is obsessed with her class and status. She's visited, and is known at, every court in Middle Earth, and it's a guarantee she'll never be welcome in one again. No noble will associate with her, no one of any note or status will help her.*

"Sounds promising," Frerin said.

Bilba nodded. *For her, it'll be the worst kind of punishment.*

"Then why not just let her stay locked up?" Thorin inquired. "It'd achieve the same result."

*Because this way she'll at least have a chance,* Bilba answered. *Not everyone in Middle Earth knows her face. There are many who will see her as no different than anyone else. If she's willing to let go of her anger and hatred, the same way I did, she could have a chance to start over.*

Frerin studied her. "Do you think she'd take it?"

*I don't know,* Bilba admitted. Contrary, to what the two might think, she didn't like Beryl. The girl had never been anything but nasty to her, had designs on Fili without any consideration to what he wanted, and showed a complete and utter inability to see past the end of her own nose. Bilba had her doubts that the girl would manage to get past her own ego to change...but even so...

Even so, it was hard not to see herself in the other woman. She'd *hated* her father and been consumed with so much rage for such a long time. But she'd had so many people to point her in the right direction and, granted, in the end it'd been her choice to take the path they wanted her on, but she still couldn't help wondering what if?
"I'll take it under consideration," Thorin said, voice and expression giving nothing away. "Even if we did choose exile, nothing could be reasonably done until the spring thaw."

*Perhaps a few months imprisoned will help her take stock of what led her there,* Bilba said, *and lead her to make some changes.*

"Perhaps," Thorin agreed, "or perhaps not." He frowned, settling back in the seat. "Aside from that, however, was there something you wanted?"

*Not exactly.*

She held her arms out, and Varegeth promptly swarmed down and coiled around her hands and forearms like a snake. Bilba took a step forward and he delicately stepped off onto Thorin's desk and squatted back on his hind legs, wings folded neatly behind him.

*He wants something,* Bilba clarified. *He just dragged me in for moral support.*

The notion that Varegeth needed emotional support for anything had come as something of a shock, but she'd reminded herself that he was, in the end, only a baby.

Frerin settled more comfortably on the edge of the desk, eyebrow raised, while Thorin simply steepled his hands on the desk in front of him and waited.

Varegeth, for his part, proceeded to freeze entirely. After several long seconds of heavy silence, he slowly turned his head to gaze at Bilba with giant, pleading, manipulative eyes.

Bilba sighed. *Really?*

*Look at the bright side,* Syrath said cheerfully in her head. *I'll never let him live it down. Ever.*

Bilba shook her head in amusement. Then she sighed, and sent, *He'd like to know if you two would be willing to be his riders once he's old enough. Before you ask, his parents gave their permission, grudgingly but, whatever. I also spoke to Balin about it. He doesn't see a problem. If another royal is born, you can just have two dragons.*

Kind of like how she had almost all the dragons. Almost, and that was more than enough for her no matter how much the ones who'd been just a little too young to bond with her a month ago whined and pouted about being left out.

Frerin and Thorin stared at her, virtually slack jawed with shock. Varegeth, meanwhile, stretched up to his full height, which wasn't all that impressive but Bilba applauded the effort, and stared back.

Bilba bit back another sigh, shoulders slumping in resignation, and reached for a chair.

Truly, *why* had she decided leaving the wild would be a good thing again?

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It felt like ages later that Bilba was finally, finally able to escape the office and continue her way toward her chambers. Behind her, she'd finally gotten Varegeth to talk to the two dwarves, who'd equally managed to eventually find their own tongues and respond.
She didn't think they'd accept a bond with him at present. He was very young, and quite impulsive, and she imagined they'd want to wait until he was older to be sure it was what he wanted. Still, judging by the twin looks of awe in the eyes of the Durins, and the look of pride in Varegeth's, she had a strong feeling it was a foregone conclusion.

She rounded the corner on the royal levels, and narrowed her eyes in suspicion to see Fili, decked out in his own armor, complete with sword, leaning against the wall outside her quarters.

*I did promise you an orc hunt*, he reminded her, with a grin.

Bilba smiled back, relaxing, and then impulsively broke into a run. She hit him at nearly full tilt, grabbing his shoulders to jerk him forward, throw her arms around his neck, and kiss him full on the mouth.

He grunted in surprise, but quickly recovered enough to wrap both arms around her and kiss her back with enthusiasm.

Or at least he did, until he suddenly pulled back with an exasperated sigh. "Dwalin," he said by way of explanation when she gave him a confused look. "And my mother."

Bilba snorted. *Has the sun set yet?*

He frowned at the sudden shift in topic, but shook his head. "It's on its way down now."

*Perfect.*

Grabbing his hand, she shoved her door open and dragged him inside. Already catching on via their soul bond, Fili gave a shout and broke into a run beside her.

Hands still clasped firmly together they burst through the doors leading on the balcony, ran to the edge, leapt onto the railing, and then proceeded to jump right over.

For a split second they were free falling. Then a blue streak raced by under them, and they were landing on Syrath's back with a heavy thud. They barely managed to get their straps on, before he angled and shot straight up, racing high into the sky.

Bilba shrieked with laughter, and Fili shouted behind her, and wrapped both arms around her.

Syrath leveled off, and Bilba spotted the sun, slowly drifting toward the horizon, bathing the sky and the earth itself in orange light. The rain had never materialized, leaving the sky clear but for a few lazy clouds high above.

*What do you say, Syrath?* Bilba asked, crouching low on Syrath's back. *Want to try and catch it?*

He responded by stretching out, his body streamlining, before he poured on the speed, racing toward the horizon. Bilba shut her eyes, cold air wrapping about her and roaring in her ears. Syrath spiraled and she threw her arms out, laughing as they raced through the sky.

Bilba pulled free from the straps and carefully moved until she was in a low crouch on Syrath's back. Glancing over her shoulder at Fili, she grinned and sent, *Want to see a trick?*

He gave her a decidedly unamused look. *Why do I get the feeling this is a trick I've seen before?*

Bilba responded with a mischievous look and then shoved off and flung herself right off Syrath's back.
Air wrapped around her, and she flung out her arms and legs, laughing in pure joy and happiness as she fell through the air.

Claws closed gently around her body, and a sigh of long suffering ran through her mind. She arched her back and saw Jarsun flying nearby, which meant Prygrasse was the one holding her. Above, below, and around were more of her new dragons, all flying in a tight cluster as they chased after Syrath.

Prygrasse lowered, and then released her. Bilba fell all of a foot or two, before arms were closing around her and her father was pulling her to a seated position ahead of him on Xalanth.

*You just want to watch me lose what's left of my hair, don't you?* he groused.

Bilba simply laughed, and then pushed to her feet, moving behind her father and bracing her hands on his shoulders.

*Can anyone join in?* a new voice asked. *Or is this special invite only?*

Bilba looked behind her and there was Lyth with Kili and Dis, and Quinlan carrying Thorin and Frerin.

Others joined them soon after as word spread. Bilba saw Legolas and Thranduil, and people and dragons from every race flying above, below and around them.

Xalanth rose beneath her, and then they were rising and Syrath was lowering to meet them. Fili hung over the edge, holding onto the straps with one hand, other hand outstretched to her.

Bilba jumped, and he easily caught her hand and dragged her back up onto Syrath.

*Could we maybe keep that trick to a minimum?* he asked, exasperated.

Bilba settled in front of him again. She reached back, curled an arm behind his head, and tilted her own head back to kiss him.

Then she turned back, settled in, and with the whole host of people and dragons she'd come to love and cherish, chased the setting sun.

All her mother had ever wanted was for her to find her freedom, and to love and be loved in return.

And so she had.

And so she did.

And so she was.

Bilba, daughter of Dwalin.

One of Fili, son of Vili.

Called Orcrist.

Rider of Syrath, called Glamdring.
Was alone no longer.

Fin

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to my wonderful, very talented beta, Drenagon, for whom this story is gifted. Without her input, and awesome beta-ing skills, this story would have been far different, and much less awesome. :D

Also, a huge thank you to all of you who gave me awesome comments and kudos and gorgeous fanart and inspired stories and who stuck with me for three years and over 300,000 words worth of writing, AND who trusted that when I said happy ending, I darn well meant it! I do have plans for future oneshots and a possible sequel so feel free to subscribe to the series thingamabob if you want updates on that.

If you like my writing, and haven't done so already, I have several other stories on my profile, mostly LOTR (Modern AU, Fairy Bilba AU, super socially awkward Bilba and many more!) but also one Marvel one featuring a FemCaptain America (that one will also be a series with at least three sequels and several oneshots).

I have two others currently in progress, one is a LOTR story with my own twist and a FemBilba (nearly finished, and a continuation of a Quest story with the same FemBilba) and the other is my current most popular story - a FemBilba Modern AU arranged marriage (FemBilba/Thorin). I also have plans to write many, many more stories in the future in the Tolkien verse, Marvel verse and perhaps others so please feel free to author subscribe or check back for those if you're interested. If not, then thank you again for coming with me on this journey, and for being hugely supportive with comments and kudos and fanart and such and I wish you all the luck on your future endeavors! :D

Works inspired by this one:

- Silence in the Night by InkFire_Scribe
- Companions by akahime4
- First Flame by akahime4
- The Second Rider by Tsume_Yuki (orphan_account)
- Open Wide by akahime4
- Alone in a Crowd by akahime4
- Of Dwobbits, Dragons and Dwarves by Yarra
- Fanart for ‘Of Dwobbits, Dwarves and Dragons’ by yinyangswings
- “Of Dwobbits, Dragons and Dwarves” Fanart by Bellefant
- Bilba from “Of Dwobbits, Dragons and Dwarves” by NamiVaalea
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