The Best Laid Plans

by Twisted_Barbie

Summary

AU. Fearing the closeness of his sister-sons King Thorin arranges a marriage of convenience for his youngest nephew. The best laid plans often go awry.
Thorin kneaded the heel of his hand against his aching left breast, above his racing heart that threatened to burst asunder. He paced fretfully, cursing beneath his breath, damning the Maker for the burden that was his sister sons.

“Thorin, calm down laddie.” The Hand of the King, Balin son of Fundin, whispered like a snake charmer. He met his whispered pleas with a derisive snort and continued to pace.

“It is a ruse!” He announced at last. “Yes, of course. He desires the throne, why else would he see me parted from this earth? Usurper!”

“You’re being rather dramatic…” he turned abruptly and glowered at the white-haired dwarf. “My liege,” Balin finished amicably followed by a brief bow of his head but even he could see his lips twisted into a smirk beneath the white forked beard.

Thorin paused and swallowed the bitter retort. It was possible he had misread the situation but it had been the fourth misunderstanding in a month and one that had not gone unnoticed.

The Games were an annual event held in Erebor where dwarves from all over the land could come and show their skills and test their strength in the week-long celebration. The games themselves incorporated strength and skill in both armed and unarmed combat, which was what largely drew the crowd. At week’s end, the victor would be awarded a rose to gift to the most beautiful in attendance. As King, he was precluded from the games and instead presided over them and he had been filled with pride as his sister sons thrived in the games. His heart was further filled with joy as his eldest nephew and heir apparent Fíli pulled victory from the jaws of defeat.

It had truly been his honour to press the emerald stem into Fíli’s hand and see his blue eyes alight in joy as he gazed at the ruby shaped petals tinged with Mithril. It was quite the boon and one not given lightly. Fíli’s marriage had been arranged since his birth, so there was little doubt he would gift the magnificent gem to Darina, daughter of Dain Ironfoot, ruler of the Iron Hills.

There is something to be said about assumptions.

“He gave the rose to Kíli!”

“Well, is Kíli not lovely?” Balin countered.

“Kíli’s appearance is irrelevant! Darina was in attendance with her father and though she is of a certain appearance she is by no means hideous and she should have been given the rose.” Balin appeared less troubled than he thought he would be and it only served to agitate him. “The gifting of the rose is a traditional courtship…”

“Now that’s not strictly true, is it?” Thorin paused and looked at the elder dwarf in suspicion. “Eighty-five years ago, a young dwarf making a name for himself won the games and gifted the rose to his sister.”

“Was Dís not the most beautiful in attendance?” He snaps in defence of himself.

“That she was,” Balin conceded.

“The circumstances were not the same. Dís was married and ripe with child, I gave the rose in thanks for sparing me a loveless marriage.” He pauses once more, feeling as if his argument is lost on the
elder dwarf. “Dain will see this as a slight and you think me hard-headed. Dain’s impulsive and his
vengeance will be swift. Only his desire for position prevents a war but this slight will not go
unpunished. He will move up the wedding, Fíli is of age and now there is cause for speculation…”

“Speculation? It was a thoughtless prank. Fíli and Kíli often goad one another, they are notorious for
it. No one is speculating other than you, my King.” He huffs in annoyance; his eyes had not
deceived him.

“Be that as it may,” he concedes, as the argument has grown tiresome. “Fíli has shown an immaturity
that I cannot abide. His brother proves too much of a distraction for him.”

“He loves his brother.” Balin argues not realising he is simply proving his point. Their love is not as
it should be, it runs too hot, too passionate and has been a cause for concern for him for many
months.

“Indeed,” he agrees. No one will listen to his concerns and have instead labelled him mad, he’d
started to believe them too until he saw what he did. They all seemed in league with one another and
he was tired of it, was he not King? Should his concerns not carry weight?

“They’ve been joint at the hip since Kíli’s birth.”

“It is time they became severed. Fíli is a dwarf grown, he has a fiancée and a duty to his Kingdom.”

“Aye, I don’t imagine young Kíli liking that.”

“That is why I called you here.” Balin’s blue eyes quickly scan the room curious to know the
relevance of the location. Summoning a diplomat to the War Room without word had been
thoughtless on his part but he had been too distressed to think.

He signals Balin to follow as he approaches the stone table with a map of Middle Earth carved onto
the surface. “Fíli’s marriage will devastate Kíli unless Kíli is married first.” Balin lips part to emit
protest so he raises a hand to silence him. “He is of age and his match will be a good one. One far
away, beyond the Misty Mountains where his reputation does not exceed him. Here.” He taps his
index finger twice over his chosen location.

“The Shire? You are promising your nephew to a halfling?”

“I have long since desired a trade agreement with the Halflings. Their land is fertile and their crops
are plentiful and they are alike to our kind. A marriage would make them allies and encourage them
to accept our terms of trade.” Balin was quiet for all of a minute, while squinting at the map as if he
were looking upon it with new eyes.

“What good is a trade agreement with the Shire when they are beyond the mountains? Dale and
Laketown are more valuable to us and a marriage to either King Bard or the Master of the Lake
would see us in good stead.”

“I would not taint the blood of Durin with the blood of man.” He snarls bitterly in reply. His kind
had been slighted and belittled one time too many by mankind and the elves were no better. “No, I
want a hobbit. Their borders are protected by the Dúnedain but only cursory, they would fare better
with ties to our military.”

“They profit considerably, it would seem.” Balin stated, and he could not refute the claim. Rarely a
dwarf makes such an unfavourable trade.

“My father once told me, ’a dwarf that does not search for allies finds enemies in their stead.’ I make
this trade not for Erebor but for Ered Luin. Should they be besieged, allies in the south would be invaluable.” Despite his reasoning, Balin still seems unsure and so he releases a deep breath and lowers his head. “I should mention my sister has decided to make Ered Luin her permanent home.”

“Ah,” Balin says solemnly with a nod of his head. “The princess will be missed.”

“Yes.” He can offer no more, the pain of her departure is as raw as it was the day she left for the blue mountains.

“I shall pen a letter to the Shire immediately. Is there anything specific you require for the chosen spouse?”

“Gender is irrelevant. They need to be of age and accustomed to money, I cannot have the little thing awed and fainting upon entering the mountain.”

“As you wish, my Lord.” Balin bowed low with a sweep of his red cape and departed the War Room. He moved to follow but found his feet would not obey his command. Instead he remained by the stone table looking down on the Shire before dragging his gaze further up to the blue mountains.

“I will do right by you, Dís.” He spoke as if she could hear him. He could not give her solace in the home where she was born and he could only pray to be a good uncle to his nephews since he failed to be a good brother to his only sister.
The Shire

Bilbo Baggins dotted the A before setting his quill down. He had ignored the knocking on his door long enough and by now the lemon cake would be baked to perfection. He climbed out of his chair and walked towards the door. His second cousin Drogo was becoming quite the prankster and would knock on his door and run away throughout the day. It had been tiresome in the beginning but then he had glimpsed blue eyes sparkling with mirth behind his wall and he instantly forgave the lad. It was nice to have company up on his lonely hill and he was flattered that the child found him so fascinating to bother him so frequently. He’d even started to bake cakes for Drogo’s visits and found he had a passion for it.

He enters the parlour and opens the door surprised to find the Thain of the Shire in his cousin’s stead.

“Good day Bilbo, were you very far away? I’ve been knocking for an age.” The Thain says with rosy cheeks.

“My hearing isn’t what it once was.” He lies easily. The Thain seems nervous casting glances over his shoulder looking down upon Hobbiton. “Would you like to come in? I’ve just made a lemon cake.”

“Yes, that would be wonderful, thank you.” He closes the door as the Thain enters and hangs his coat and his hat revealing his short blond curls.

“This way,” he calls while making his way to the kitchen. “I think I know what you’ve come here to say.”

“Oh you do?” The Thain asks surprised as he leans down and removes the cake from the oven. “That’s a relief.”

“Well it caused quite a stir last year.” He admits setting the cake down to cool.

“I’m sorry?” The Thain asks seating himself at the kitchen table.

“My trifle for Midsummer’s Eve. You’ve come late, I’ve already endured a stern talking to. Two bowls this year should suffice.”

“Oh.”

“Oh? Surely you can’t mean three.”

“No, that’s not why I’ve come. I received some news I wish to share with you. If you would like to sit down.” He places his kettle on the stove to boil and takes a seat at the table. “Erebor wish to open trade with us. Apparently, the King’s sister will be taking up permanent residence in the Blue Mountains and the King believes we could be beneficial allies. Dwarves are known for mining the earth not tilling it and the King has offered full price for a portion of our harvest and help should it be required now the size of our harvest will be increased. Our contract even binds us to their military should we ever be in danger.”

“That is a very generous offer.”

“I’m glad you think so. You see, it is a very generous offer but it is contingent upon something.” Just then, the kettle whistles and Bilbo climbs out of his seat and takes the kettle from the stove.
“What could the King of Erebor possibly want?” He asks over his shoulder while turning off the stove and collecting two cups.

“A spouse…for his nephew. Bilbo please sit down.”

“Don’t you want a cup of tea?”

“I just really need you to sit down.” It sounds ominous and so he abandons the cups and sits at the table once more with a brow arched in query. “The King has asked for you.”

“By name?” He asks, stunned.

“By description.”

“I have never met the King of Erebor, how could he possibly describe me?”

“The King had some requirements for the spouse. Gender was not a concern, they must be of age but most importantly accustomed to money. As you can see, he practically asked for you.”

“Me and half of Buckland, who put you up to this?” He demands as the Thain lowers his gaze to the table as good as admitting his guilt. “Don’t tell me, it was your cousin, Lobelia.”

“It is not as nefarious as you are making it sound.”

“It sounds as if you have all conspired against me. Lobelia has always desired Bag End, she has made no secret of it.”

“Are you not lonely here all by yourself? It is a lovely home Bilbo, but you share it with ghosts. You regularly tell the children about fantastical adventures and your study is full of maps. I honestly thought you’d see this as the adventure you have always craved and by journeys end you will be married. Into the Royal Family. You’ll never be forgotten and you’ll never be alone. What more could one want from life?”

He sits back deflated knowing his argument is lost and crosses his arms in front of his chest. “A choice would have been nice.” He mutters. “When do I leave?” He’d have to put his affairs in order and give away all of his property to those that deserved it. Lobelia could have the hole but not the home he and his parents had made of it.

“Well they should be arriving shortly.” He takes a deep breath and swallows the words he may later regret. “If we go outside we should see them.” He agrees with a nod of his head still afraid to use his voice should he accidentally speak his mind.

He follows the Thain from the kitchen to the parlour and out of his door, and there they stand watching a small party of dwarves make their way up the hill. “Think of this as a holiday Bilbo, one that you will never come home from.” The Thain whispers to him positively.

“That isn’t a holiday.” He snaps and fights his instinct to cross his arms indigently. The company of dwarves are too close to endanger his reputation and first impressions meant a lot. He tries to school his features to not outwardly show his displeasure when Lobelia walks by with a wide smile.

“Would you jump in my grave as quick, witch?” He barks, wiping the smile from her face. The dwarves are too close to holler again but he enjoyed his revenge as short and impotent as it had been.

There are six dwarves in total. The shortest and by the looks of it, the eldest leads them and opens his gate. He has a kind aged face with small warm blue eyes and thin lips turned up in a charming smile beneath a white forked beard.
“Welcome,” the Thain speaks opening his arms wide to encompass the Shire. “I trust your journey was well?”

“As well as could be. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Balin, Hand of the King and this here is my brother Dwalin captain of the King’s guard.” His brother stands a good foot taller than Balin, an impressive and intimidating height for a dwarf. His frame is stocky and muscular and his brown eyes do not have the same warmth his brothers possess. “Oin and Gloin.” The similar names suggest that they are brothers and they are of similar height and wear their hair and beards much the same way only one is a fiery red and the other is grey. “And Bofur and Nori.” Those two were at the back squabbling over a dirty piece of rag. One had star-shaped dirty blond hair and the other wore a furred hat with two black braids protruding from the bottom.

“I am the Thain of the Shire and this here is Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit chosen for the contract. His reputation is impeccable and you’ll find none better in the Shire.” In other circumstances he would be flattered by such an introduction but he knew it for what it was.

He isn’t accustomed to dwarven culture and he isn’t sure how to behave when Dwalin passes by himself and the Thain and into his home. “Which way laddie?” Dwalin calls out. “Is it down here?”

“Is what down where?” He questions back, confused.

“Breakfast. I was told there would be food and plenty of it.”

“There’s lemon cake in the kitchen?” It sounds like a question but it is taken as invitation as Dwalin disappears down a tunnel and Oin and Gloin follow. The star-shaped haired dwarf is next to enter his home followed by the one with the hat who doffs his hat with a charming grin before disappearing into his home leaving Balin alone.

“Shall we sign the contract then?” Balin asks producing a scroll from his red cloak.

“After you,” the Thain offers magnanimously allowing the Hand of the King into his home before following him inside leaving him outside of his own home. He takes a moment to steady his nerves and enters his home finding Balin and the Thain in the living room bent over the table signing the contract. “Here you are,” the Thain offers him a quill as he approaches and he looks down at their drying signatures.

“Would you mind if I read it first?” The Thain’s expression becomes pinched but Balin’s remains the same.

“Go ahead.” He lifts the contracts and starts to read moving his lips to frame the words without sound. Dwarven contracts were known to be wordy and terribly clever and above all things, binding. His choice had been taken from him but he would like to know what was required of him.

“The marriage shall be binding until death,” he reads aloud. “About that…what if we do not get along?” The Thain’s face reddens but Balin only chuckles in response.

“We are not asking you to love the Prince. It is a marriage of convenience and nothing more. Of course, we do hope you’ll be fond of one another but it is not a requirement.”

“And I am male, I cannot give him an heir.” It sounds silly saying it but it does appear to be a dreadful oversight.

“Kíli is the second son of Princess Dís. I’m sure you’ve heard the old adage, an heir and a spare?”

“But should his brother be unable to produce an heir or should die, what then?” The Thain looks as
if he is about to have an aneurysm from his tactless questioning.

“The Prince has just come of age, forgive me for saying so but you will pass while he is still in his prime.”

“Ah.” Well he had to ask and he appreciates the honesty. He takes the quill from the Thain before the hobbit faints and signs his name to the contract. “I’ll set up the guest bedrooms.”

“No need, we’ll have a hearty feast and then we must be on the road to make it to Bree before nightfall.”

“So soon?” He asks alarmed.

“The King is eager for his nephew to wed.” Balin says no more and his silence suggests there was much left unsaid.

“I shall go pack then.”

“Just enough for the travel. Your every need will be taken care of in Erebor.” He offers a tight smile in response as Balin and the Thain walk towards his kitchen. He walks over towards his mantel piece and looks upon the portraits of his mother and father that hang above it considering if he should take them. The Thain was correct, he had been living with ghosts, clinging on to a past and stunting his own growth as an individual. In a way, he was almost grateful for the cloak and dagger approach the Thain had taken to get him to sign as he would have talked his way out of it.

He leaves the portraits where they are. This was their home and always would be, but he would be going on an adventure.
Gloin had been married for seventy-one years and had a son. A flame-haired ruffian who had his father’s strength and his mother’s quick temper. Bilbo hadn’t asked but Gloin was keen to tell him as he desperately missed them both and the others were threatening violence if he were to come to them again saying the same things. Gloin was King Thorin’s third cousin, not as illustrious as it had sounded, he was quick to say, since the King had many cousins. Balin and Dwalin were Thorin’s second cousins but Bofur and Nori had no relation to the throne. Hailing from Belegost originally, both dwarves travelled to Erebor for work and were assigned to the same tunnel and that is where they met and fell in love. They were visiting kin in the Blue Mountains and were returning when they happened upon the foursome in Bree. The roads were safe now but one could never be too careful and so Balin allowed them to join their ranks finding safety in numbers.

Dwalin wasn’t much of a talker, and he was always on edge, scanning the surrounding area expecting an ambush. His constant paranoia made him paranoid so he quickly learnt to leave Dwalin alone. Oin wasn’t much of a talker either. The second eldest of the group, he would regularly stuff a handkerchief into his ear-trumpet when he had had enough of a conversation and carried on smiling and nodding. His actions were brazen and the first time Oin did it to him had been the last as he chose not to converse with him.

Balin was a diplomat and so his words were carefully chosen. He was approachable and friendly enough but his position as Hand of the King prevented him from answering his questions truthfully. He would speak of Kíli’s attributes but none of his flaws and the way he ended a line of questioning he was uncomfortable with, with abrupt straight-forward answers was masterful.

Fortunately, Bofur and Nori had no such qualms about telling him the truth. Late at night while the others slept and Dwalin patrolled they would regale him with tales of the prince around the campfire. They didn’t know him personally but Kíli and his brother Fíli were the talk of the taverns. Balin would not tell him why the King was so keen for his nephew to marry but Bofur and Nori believed it had something to do with the Games. What exactly happened there, they were unsure as they were more interested in the jewellery-making part of the contest but they assumed it would have been a thoughtless prank. Fíli and Kíli would often goad one another and Thorin saw their actions unbecoming of dwarves of their position. Apart, the lads still had the devil in them but together they were dangerously stupid. Fíli was engaged, an arrangement made at his birth which left Kíli as a spare part as since his birth he had become his brother’s shadow. It would seem the King did not need a spouse for his nephew but rather a distraction and most daunting of all, a babysitter. Each story he heard cemented one fact within his mind.

Kíli was young.

Too young for him. Balin assured him that Kíli was of age and had lived thirty years longer than he had but dwarves aged differently to hobbits and that was what worried him most. He doubts the age difference would worry the King, this marriage was only a distraction and would last as long as he had left which was a blink of an eye for a dwarf. Still, it was the Shire that benefitted from this arrangement not himself, he knew that, he was just an unwilling martyr for the cause.

Their journey was uneventful regarding trouble but awe-inspiring and intriguing for his personal growth. It was like opening his eyes for the very first time and learning things anew. Within the mountain he would have to adapt to a whole new culture and so he tried to study the behaviour of his companions in order to one day mimic it. He may have fit the King’s description but his age continued to weigh upon him. He’d have to do better, and though the King had asked for a hobbit,
he wanted a hobbit in race alone.

Now they were at journey’s end and his mouth was dry and stomach aflutter. Bofur, Nori, Oin and Gloin had ridden ahead to inform the King of their arrival while himself and Balin had climbed into an ostentatious carriage in Dale. It was beautiful and elegant but he felt ridiculous all the same and stared out of the window at the intimidating mountain that he would soon call home. Dwalin had remained by their side as security and rode beside the carriage, with his shoulders straight and eyes ahead wearing full regalia. A dwarf proud of his position, and from what he had seen it was a position very much deserved.

“Almost there,” Balin chirped merrily with a look of contentment on his face. He wished for a fraction of Balin’s calm temperament as he was sure he looked panic stricken and ill.

Thankfully there was not much of a gathering at the gates of Erebor and as he scanned the few faces in the crowd, he realised he had no idea which one was Kíli.

“What does Kíli look like?” He asks, turning away from the window and feeling woefully unprepared.

“A handsome lad, you’ll not be disappointed.” His face fell in response. Bofur had said Kíli was attractive and no more than that. He scanned the faces again. “Only one thing,” Balin spoke up hesitantly. He turned back around. “Kíli is young, his beard hasn’t grown yet, best not to mention it.” He nodded and refrained from looking out of the window as they crossed the bridge and the carriage came to a stop.

He wrung his hands nervously and then fiddled with his cravat. It was silly to be so nervous and he must calm himself or fear the wrath of King Thorin. It was a sobering thought, as it was said the King could end wars with one withering look. He did not wish to displease him but most of all he did not wish to displease Kíli.

“You’ll be introduced to Prince Kíli first and then you will enter Erebor and meet with King Thorin who will or will not give his blessing on your union.” Balin then lays a calming hand on his trembling knee. “Do not fear, you will have the King’s blessing.” He nods along vaguely wondering what prank the Princes could have done to make the King so desperate.

The carriage door is opened but his name is not announced. He takes one last deep intake of breath, nods stiffly at Balin, mustering what little courage he had and leaves the carriage. There are thirteen dwarves in total, ten stood together to the right while Oin and Gloin stand side by side to the left of the door. In the centre stands a lone dwarf wearing a long black fur coat who he assumes is Prince Kíli and as he sees him for the first time his fears are forgotten and he smiles warmly in his direction.

He had feared Kíli was a child and would look as such but there stood a dwarf grown. An inch or two shorter than Dwalin, the Prince still stood at an impressive height with broad shoulders and a slim waist. His hair was raven and long and cascaded down his shoulders in waves.

Balin climbed out of the carriage and they began to approach the Prince. His eyes were a soft hue of sky blue and on closer inspection there seemed to be strands of silver in his hair. He held himself stiffly appearing as hard as the rock dwarves were born from and his features were stern, thick eyebrows furrowed while his thin pink lips were tightly pressed together and framed by a short black beard. He turned his head, looking back to the entrance of the mountain and he could see a braid tied behind his ear which was small in comparison to his own ears.

His skin was pale and flawless as if he had been chiselled from white marble and his nose was long and regal. He wore a crown of gold and black onyx and he looked every bit a king he would never
be. Time had not been kind to him as he appeared older than his years. He was only eighty, a dwarf just reaching maturity and yet it appeared he had lived every one of those years to the fullest.

It was a gift really, as it put his cradle-snatching fears to rest. Appearance-wise they were a match and it made his wedding night far less daunting. He hadn’t brought up their consummation, he didn’t know how without a blush staining his cheeks. It was just not done. The marriage was a sham in regards to what marriage truly meant, but it was a marriage and it was binding and the consummation was a part of the marriage. If they did not get along then they may never have to touch again but the night of the marriage was a given, he assumed.

Unconsciously he wet his lips and then schooled his features before his eyes raked down the Prince’s body hungrily. He truly hoped they would get along as one night would never be enough with the handsome prince.

Kíli turns his head to look forward and his features are less severe as he looks at him. His smile is forced, a brief twitching of his lips suggest he does not often smile, something he hopes to one day change. There’s something worldly about his eyes, age, wisdom, a dwarf that has made use of the eighty years he was blessed with and perhaps seen more than he should have. They remind him of a warm spring day in the Shire and the reminder makes him long for home. Kíli is the second son, not as guarded as the first, so there was a chance that he could one day return home with his prince and they could relax in the Shire beneath the old oak tree and smoke a pipe.

Balin is slow to introduce them and he believes his hesitancy is a test. He had spent three months travelling with dwarves learning their ways and so he takes Kíli’s left hand and bows.

“Prince Kíli you are more handsome than I could have imagined. I look forward to our upcoming nuptials.” Bold but true statement and sealed with a kiss as he presses his lips to the back of the Prince’s large hand and spies a tattoo peeking out from under his sleeve.

Silence.

He releases his hold of the Prince’s hand.

Had he been too bold?

His smile is waning giving way to his fears as he chances a look at Balin out of the corner of his eye. The Hand of the King looks startled and the Prince had lost his forced smile and simply stares stone-faced into the space between himself and Balin.

“Bilbo Baggins of the Shire,” Balin finally begins waveringly and clears his throat. “May I introduce you to his Royal Highness King Thorin.” His smile is lost as he quickly ducks his head in a shallow bow to the King, taking the time to recover. Had Balin made a mistake? Had he misheard?

His knees are trembling as he plasters a smile onto his face and lifts his head. He still requires the King’s blessing and he hadn’t travelled this far to only come this far. “King Thorin, I can only hope prince Kíli is half attractive as you are.” His cheeks colour over his own misguided words but he does not waver nor apologise for fear his words would seem insincere. He had meant them, only he had not meant to speak them aloud but dwarves were bold in their words bordering on rude.

The King’s face remains expressionless and because of it the exchange becomes awkward. Only the King could rescue the disaster of their first meeting with a smile or a laugh but he does neither and only stares desperately at Balin. He opens his mouth but chooses not to speak and make a third pass at the King. He dreaded to think what the King must think of Shire-folk if he were the best they had to offer, boasting of an impeccable reputation and then behaving as he had.
“Prince Kíli has been called away on urgent business.” Balin lies to break the tension. He did not know why Kíli was not present and nor did Balin but he appreciated the save, as delayed as it had been. “Allow me to show you around before he returns.” It is with great effort that he prevents his jaw from dropping as he believed he would be sent back to Dale. Now it appeared he had the King’s blessing even after such a faux pas. “This way,” Balin says while taking a hold of his forearm and leading him into the mountain and away from the King. “The floor you now walk on is made of solid gold. Thorin’s grandfather would have you believe it was intentional but I can confirm it was accidental as one of the lines to the bust severed…” Balin goes on but he does not hear him as he turns his head to look at the King.

It was only meant to be one glance but his eyes connect with blue as the King has turned his head to look back at him. There’s a softness in his expression that had not been there before and he could almost imagine a slight colouring of his cheeks from being caught staring. As a dwarf he will not look away and own his actions, and so he can only do the same and offer a sincere smile.

It’s a slow process but eventually the King returns his smile with a genuine one of his own and he takes it as forgiveness. He imagines the King’s smile is a rare gift and it is one he will cherish.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to your room.” Balin says quite abruptly and he realises he had been ignoring the elder dwarf. Balin appears displeased with him and mildly suspicious as he eyes him warily with narrowed blue eyes.

“Very well,” he agrees having nothing more to say for himself. He thought he would be met with Thorin’s ire not Balin’s.

“I’ll have Prince Kíli meet you there.” The emphasis on his fiancé’s name does not go unnoticed and for a moment he fears Balin was privy to the carnal thoughts he had entertained about the King before he knew who he was. It was an error, an embarrassing one and if this was the equivalent of being sent to his room then he would take it. His façade was slipping and he needed time to recover, re-evaluate and then prepare to meet his fiancé all over again.
“My Lord…” Thorin raised a silencing hand and poured the sealing wax onto the scroll before pressing his ring against the rapidly cooling liquid.

“Yes?” He asked, setting the scroll aside and looked up at the red-haired dwarf. Gimli was his third cousin once removed and had aspirations of joining the King’s Guard when he came of age. Meanwhile he was merely shadowing the King’s Guard and being lumbered with menial tasks which he took far too seriously and overzealously.

“My father has returned.” Gimli stated proudly, standing straight at the mention of his father. He doubted his nephews showed him that much respect in his absence. “Our guest will be arriving in twenty minutes.”

“Excellent. Notify the council and have Kíli meet me at the gates.”

“Yes, my lord.” Gimli bowed and shut the door behind him. Young and respectful, Kíli could learn from him.

He climbs out of his chair and walks over to the corner of his study where his crown sits on a table in a glass case. He doesn’t wear it often as he finds it an encumbrance but duty comes first and so he removes the glass case and collects the crown. It was his grandfather’s creation, two ravens depicted in black onyx on either side on a gold band with their beaks pressed together completing the circle. He puts it on, feeling the weight of it, a constant reminder of his position and then collects the large black warg-fur coat. His golden armour is unnecessary as he will give no rallying speech to his troops. Instead all he must do is nod his head giving his blessing as they stand before him and Kíli’s behaviour of late would have him give his blessing to a cave troll at this point.

He puts the coat on and untucks his hair allowing it to fall down his back. Balin had made excellent time bringing the hobbit to Erebor. A male named Bilbo was all the information he had and it was all that he would need. He hadn’t specified a male though he should have. He had been too distressed to think and as much as he thought of marriage, he hadn’t considered the rights of a husband or if Kíli would act upon them. In that regard, Kíli would always remain a child in his eyes.

The marriage was of convenience, a stop-gap to allow Kíli to mellow and mature for the role he was born in to. Having half-breed prince and princesses was a scandal the line of Durin could ill afford. His own rule was questioned enough as it was and already, he had heard whispers about his inefficiency not only to reproduce but to make a pointless match in an unfair trade agreement.

He releases the breath he had been holding. Heavy the head that wears the crown. He gives his reflection a cursory glance before leaving his study and marches towards the Grand Gallery. It is a good distance walk and so he quickens his pace to make time to offer Kíli advice before meeting his intended.

By all rights he should be seated upon the throne and have his nephew bring the hobbit to him but his trust in Kíli had worn thin. It was a long walk from the gate to the throne but he was quite curious about what a hobbit would look like as he had never seen one before. If he tarried too long, he could always ask one member of the council to waylay Kíli as he ran to his position and composed himself.

The five-minute warning horn sounds as he makes his way across the golden floor to the double doors where the small council are gathered.
“My Lord!” He turns in time to see Gimli skidding across the golden floor, face flushed red to match his hair.

“Yes?”

“Prince Kìli…” Gimli falls silent as he eyes his father and his head lowers in shame. He turns to eye those gathered and becomes aware of Kìli’s absence.

“Where is Kìli?” He demands, feeling a dull ache behind his right eye.

“Ravenhill, putting the war goats through their paces.” His teeth grind together.

“Find him! I need him here now!”

“Yes, my Lord.” Gimli bows and then runs off to do his bidding. Kìli would not have behaved so rebelliously had Dwalin been here but he could not, in good conscience, allow Balin to travel alone. The council eye him in silent judgement and he must act swiftly or suffer more whispers of his incompetence.

“Let us welcome the hobbit,” he says with false bravado and strides past the council and out of the mountain. The small council are quick to judge but even quicker to obey his command and they stand with him metres from the gate. “Oin and Gloin,” he calls and the Master of the Coin and the head physician stand before him. “The hobbit is familiar with you two, so I’ll have you two stood apart so he can see a friendly face if he should need to.” They nod and part from the council to stand at his right while the council remain to his left.

The horn sounds again as the carriage comes within view. He can see the curtain twitching but no more than that as his eyesight was poor due to living in the mountain. The carriage crosses the bridge and the curtain ceases to twitch. He had foregone a fanfare for fear it would overwhelm the fragile hobbit and as the carriage becomes stationary, he tries his best to keep his eyes forward instead of casting desperate glances toward Ravenhill.

There is a short pause and he imagines Balin is calming the poor thing. A hobbit was of a wrong disposition to live within Erebor but had the best qualities for tempering the storm that was his sister-son. Dwalin climbs down from his pony and opens the carriage door. Nothing happens from one breath until the next and then a small figure exits the carriage. He’s too far away to see much other than a mop of honey blond curls and alarmingly large feet. He’d heard the stories and seen the pictures but was still ill prepared to see them in person.

He chooses not to stare at them as it is unbecoming of a King. Instead he lifts his gaze towards his face and is almost blinded by a bright winning smile. Balin then exits the carriage with some difficulty and he begins to regret sending his old friend to do his dirty work. He could see the value in Balin where his father did not and he has come to depend on the diplomat in all aspects. Too much, it would seem.

They begin to approach with Dwalin following a few paces behind and he can see Balin arch a brow in query. He should not be stood here, Kìli should be. There is still some distance between himself and the hobbit and so he turns his head to look towards the doors hoping against hope that Gimli has found his charge.

He can hear the others approach while the gate remains clear and he grudgingly accepts that time has expired. He turns around and forces a smile onto his downturned lips as the hobbit stands before him. Older than he had imagined, and not as short as he had guessed as he stands an inch taller than Balin. His eyes are chestnut brown and look up at him in awe and he has not lost that winning smile.
revealing the top row of straight white teeth. Pretty. Kíli will like him.

Balin is slow on the introduction as he appears perplexed. He hadn’t gathered his wits by being thrown by Kíli’s absence and in the ensuing confusion Bilbo takes his left hand and bows.

“Prince Kíli you are more handsome than I could have imagined. I look forward to our upcoming nuptials.” His bold words are sealed with a kiss, feather-light against the back of his hand. He tightens his jaw to prevent it from falling open in surprise and schools his features as his anger boils. This exchange is embarrassing for all involved and it is all Kíli’s fault.

Bilbo drops his hand as the silence persists and his smile wanes as he looks at Balin out of the corner of his eye. Balin looks startled as he too looks at him to salvage the disaster and then he spies Dwalin stood between the two of them some distance back doubled over in quiet laughter.

“Bilbo Baggins of the Shire,” Balin finally begins waveringly and clears his throat. “May I introduce you to his Royal Highness King Thorin.” Bilbo quickly ducks his head in a shallow bow but not quick enough to see the smile wiped from his face and the fear in his eyes. The poor thing’s knees are trembling and he grits his teeth thinking up suitable punishments for his wayward nephew.

Bilbo recovers well but his smile is forced and no longer genuine and his shoulders are tense. “King Thorin, I can only hope prince Kíli is half attractive as you are.” Bilbo’s cheeks colour beautifully but he does not look away and he is unsure how to respond.

Dwalin’s laughter is renewed but he knows better than to give it voice. Balin is the seasoned diplomat and so he looks to him desperately for help. Bilbo picks up on his desperation and opens his mouth only to quickly close it. This meeting cannot be saved it can only be hurried along.

“Prince Kíli has been called away on urgent business.” Balin lies to break the tension and he breathes a sigh of relief. “Allow me to show you around before he returns.” Bilbo appears surprised that he has been accepted as he stares wordlessly at Balin. “This way,” Balin insists taking a hold of the hobbit’s forearm and escorting him into the mountain.

The council are quiet making it hard to decipher their reaction and he tenses as an arm drapes over his shoulders.

“Finally, someone wants to marry you.” Dwalin quips and he shrugs his arm off his shoulders and glares at his childhood friend.

“He thought I was Kíli.”

“No,” Dwalin contradicts him. “He wanted you to be Kíli.” He looks over at the hobbit convinced Dwalin is mistaken and he imagines his gaze is heavy as Bilbo turns and captures him staring. He cannot look away for fear he would appear lesser for it and as Bilbo offers him a warm smile, he feels his own lips turn upwards and return it.

It is a moment he could get lost in and he is rudely awakened from it by Balin’s withering look. The hobbit is then removed from his line of sight and his smile falls as he turns to Dwalin.

“Find Kíli and have him brought to my study.”

“What if he is unfit for company?”

“I don’t care if he is covered in goat dung, bring him to me.”

“Are you giving me permission to douse the princeling in goat dung?” Dwalin asks with a grin.
“If there is a fresh pile feel free to trip him.” He replies half-jokingly and then sober. “Find him.” He orders and takes his leave then, hyperaware of the judgemental gazes of the council members.

He stomps towards his study keeping his vile thoughts to himself instead of screaming them to his Kingdom. He hopes the walk will calm him but his nerves are frayed and he doubts his temper will simmer any time soon. If he were to see Kíli now, he might just throttle him and so, as much as he wanted him found he was willing to wait a little longer as Dís would never forgive him.

When he enters his study, he immediately removes his crown and sets it back in the case. He leans against the mirror and takes a long hard look at himself wondering how he could possibly be mistaken for Kíli. Had he been, or was it the hobbit’s wishful thinking and if so, would the hobbit truly wish for him? He shakes his head, angry at himself for entertaining such childish thoughts and continues to glare at his reflection. He looks like his grandfather and if things continue as they have been, he’ll be just as mad as he was.

He looks towards his table wondering if there is some work he could lose himself in but the only document that remains is one from King Thranduil that required Balin’s sugared words opposed to his brash ones. He paces instead, hoping to burn off some excess energy. He hasn’t slept for days and his insomnia hasn’t helped with his mood and the throbbing behind his right eye has increased tenfold.

The pacing isn’t working. He takes a seat at his desk and lays his head upon it. If there was any justice in this world he would sleep and drool over Thranduil’s condescending words.

Knocking on his door awakens him and he starts in surprise of having a few precious moments of sleep. “Come in,” he barks knowing the familiar rap on his door. Kíli struts in, shoulders back standing tall and unapologetic. “You embarrassed yourself today.” He starts immediately, taking no prisoners. The young fool needed to understand the enormity of his childish actions. “You embarrassed me and worst of all, you embarrassed Bilbo. You do understand the importance of your match and yet you continue to defy me, you foolish boy.” Kíli’s eyes-ones he inherited from his mother- narrow and he crosses his arms defensively. “Have you no love for your mother? I made this agreement for her benefit and you will see it ruined.”

“You marry the hobbit if it’s so bloody important!” Kíli snaps. He has never taken criticism well and he was a slave to his fiery temper.

“Maybe I will!” He snaps back, standing up and towering over his nephew.

“What?” Kíli asks seemingly shrinking in disbelief. “You can’t.”

“Am I not King?” He’s beginning to ask that with alarming regularity that’s he’s unsure if it’s not a genuine question.

“He’s promised to me!” He tightens his lips to prevent the smirk from crossing them. Balin always used to trick him with reverse psychology when he was a boy and he’s glad to be the one wielding the power. Kíli has always coveted his things, whether it be sleeping in his bed as a child or sitting on his throne when his back was turned. To wearing his crown and lately sparring with his sword, Orcrist.

“This is your last warning, now go and introduce yourself to your intended.”

“Must I?” Kíli whines. “But I’m so tired.” He yawns to add effect.
“Are you tired?” He asks with false sincerity which Kíli seems to miss as he nods with big doe eyes. Maybe he was tired.

“Well then, after you meet your fiancé you can go to the arena and have Dwalin put you through your paces.”

“But…”

“The only butt will be yours being whipped by Dwalin now get out of my sight!” If looks could kill, he would be walking down the Halls of Waiting. He despises that look on his nephew’s face and he desires to smack it off. His intention must be expressed on his face as Kíli cowers and ducks his head in subjugation before leaving his study with what little dignity remained.

He kicks his chair out and begins to pace, angry all over again. He was fortunate to get those few precious minutes of sleep, he doubts he will be so lucky again. He shrugs off his fur coat and hangs it up once more and sees Orcrist out of the corner of his eye. He approaches and lifts his sword and attaches it to his waist, deciding then that he would go to the arena. Watching Kíli being pummelled might lighten his mood and if the mood strikes he might even go one on one with him himself.
Bilbo sat down on the end of the bed and looked around his spacious room. It didn’t seem to matter how hard he tried, he could not shake the sense wrongness he felt. It was like being in the wrong skin. The walls were too bare, the ceiling was too high and the smell was all wrong.

He drags one of the pillows from the mattress and presses his face into the green material and lets out a stuttering breath.

“Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.” He whispers to himself feeling the tears welling in the corners of his eyes. Despite his best efforts, his tears begin to fall and he is helpless to stop them. He’s helpless to do anything sat in his fancy prison cell while Lobelia ran amok in his home.

He shakes his head trying to dislodge the thought. It was no longer his home and would never be again. Erebor was his home now, he would live here, he would die here and he would be buried here. Balin had said it as though it was a blessing not realising it was a curse. Yes, he lived under a hill but he was never too far from a door and he had a lovely garden, the best garden, the envy of all gardens in the Shire he was willing to boast. His flowers would have wilted by now, Lobelia had a habit of sucking the life out of anything she comes in contact with, Otho was a testament to that.

He tosses the pillow aside and climbs from the bed. It was doing him no good feeling sorry for himself and his bag wouldn’t unpack itself. Not that he had brought much. He collects his bag from the chair beside the door and hears the rattling of metal as he lifts it. Just the essentials, Balin had said but the thought of Lobelia opening his kitchen draw and finding all the silver spoons missing was an opportunity he could not miss. A shame he may never see her sour face red with anger but the thought of it brought him joy in the misery she had caused him.

One of the rooms he was given was a kitchen and he makes his way there, setting his bag onto the marble counter. He wonders if it was made for him as it appears brand new, yet the rooms he was awarded seemed aged and disused. A nice gesture if they had, simple good fortune if they had not. He places the spoons in the draw with a smirk, it was his little joke and he would savour it. The cutlery draw was fully stocked but having his spoons there was like having a piece of home in an otherwise alien surrounding.

Knocking on his door awakens him from his thoughts and he looks other towards it. It’s drumming rather than knocking and so he leaves his bag upon the counter and walks from the kitchen into the shared lounge-bedroom and over to the door. He considers opening the door a fraction to see who it is but dwarves are suspicious in nature and he has nothing to hide and so he wipes at the tears on his face and opens the door with a flourish.

There an unknown dwarf stands with straight chestnut brown hair that rests on his shoulders. He’s young with the makings of a black beard around his mouth and chops and despite the brown eyes he has an uncanny resemblance to the king but not the height.

“Mr Boggins!” The youth announces with a wide charming grin and bows far too low to be genuine. He considers returning the bow unsure of the proper etiquette and doesn’t have a chance as the dwarf steps forward and sweeps him up in an embrace. He freezes, unsure of himself as the dwarf hugs him, nuzzling his neck briefly before releasing him.

“Can’t stay, come find me in the arena, I might have my shirt off and you can see what you’re getting.” He winks lewdly and then leaves.

He blinks owlishly, not moving from the door. So that was Prince Kíli. An archer, judging from the quiver on his back. Vain but personable, perhaps overly friendly but that could be nerves given the
circumstances they’ve found themselves in. His actions might have been genuine and a testament to his youth and position. He was clearly a dwarf unaccustomed to the word no given his carefree nature. He was bold as dwarves tended to be, forward as well but there was something in his eyes, alive, dangerous, the folly of youth for all to see. It was charming as well as daunting, like watching a lit fuse. Little wonder why the king was so wary of him.

“I saw Prince Kíli leave your room.” He’s so lost in his thoughts, standing by his door with his mouth agape that he hadn’t seen Balin approach with a pleased grin.

“Nothing untoward happened.” He quickly informs him.

“I didn’t think so.” Balin replies, putting him at ease. “Handsome lad, isn’t he?” He can’t decide if the question is leading or probing but he nods his head regardless.

“The stories about his appearance do not do him justice.” He had feared what a dwarf found attractive a hobbit may not but it was unwarranted as Kíli was handsome only he was not stirred by him.

His answer seems to be the correct one as Balin grins to himself no longer displeased with him. “I promised you a tour.” He had, right before he sent him to his room. He decides to ignore that detail as Balin seems to have forgotten about it and nods. He’d been too bold before and so he would act submissive now. “Anywhere you’d like to see first?” Balin asks him as he steps out of his room and closes the door behind him.

“Err…the arena?” He suggests earning a wink from Balin. So he had heard his exchange with the prince.

“We’ll let the prince work up a sweat first, he might actually put more effort in knowing you are going to watch.” He believed it, given Kíli’s own words. His confidence bordered on arrogance. He was gifted as well as handsome and he knew it which made a terrible combination. “We’ll go to vaults and work our way up.” He agrees secretly hoping the vaults were not the tombs. His mask was already slipping and he did not wish to fake happiness on seeing his final resting place and being reminded of his own mortality.

The route they take is a curious one as they encounter no others. Surely for a mountain of this size and a population doubling the entire Shire they would see at least one other person but they do not. The tunnels are either private or secret and the knowledge makes him stand a little taller. He’d been looking at his marriage all wrong, yes, he missed home and always would but that did not mean his new home needed to be looked upon in disdain. He would marry into the wealthiest kingdom in Middle Earth, not that he was so swayed by riches but even he could see the value and privilege. More importantly he would make history and his name would be spoken in the same breath of ancient kings.

“Here we are.” Balin states stopping in front of two iron doors. “King Thrór’s hoard.” He opens the door on his right and steps back allowing him to enter first. He does so with thanks and steps out onto a balcony and his breath catches in his throat.

Gold.

Piles of gold as big as the hill he lived under. Haphazard stacks of coins and gems, trinkets and jewellery as far as the eye could see. There seem to be no order to them and some of the piles had fallen and gold was scattered across the floor.

“Should I be here?” He asks unable to take his eyes off the treasure trove. It’s a stash, a hoard,
private for the one who kept it. No ordinary person should see this wealth.

“King Thorin insisted that you must.”

“Why?”

“This was his grandfather’s hoard. I’m sure you’ve heard of his grandfather’s illness before he passed.” He nods, even beyond the mountains word spread of the king’s desire for gold. Dragon sickness, they called it, when a dwarf takes leave of his senses and hoards gold and attacks those that would take it from him as a dragon would. “In this very hall Thorin tried to speak sense to his grandfather despite his father’s protest and he was slapped in the face for it. Now Thorin’s a big lad, even then and could take a hit but it hurt him and that day a fear of gold, not a love for it took root in his heart. He always remembered that slap and he also remembered the look in his father’s eyes when he suggested they get rid of the hoard. He feared his father would suffer the same and that by default he too would succumb to the call of gold. Upon his father’s passing, Thorin kept the hall not as a hoard but as a reminder and a warning to others. I’m showing this to you now because you will be one of the members of the royal family and you must see to it that he never succumbs to the sickness.”

“How would I know?”

“Oh you’ll know. It will start small, insignificant things but then he will start visiting this hall more often. Guests will no longer be welcomed and the doors will start being locked and his attire will change. He is stronger than his grandfather and his fear of the sickness could very well save him from it but he is not immune.”

“I don’t know how much of a help I’ll be but I’ll do my best.” Kili’s minder and Thorin’s as well, none of this had been written in the contract.

“That’s all any of us can do.” Balin concedes. “We’ll go to the market next and fill your belly, my treat. You’ll soon have an allowance once the appropriate paperwork is signed and then we can buy you a whole new wardrobe.”

“Can’t I wear this?” He asks holding the lapels of his burgundy coat. Balin looks him up and down and gives him a tight smile.

“For now.” He offers in polite decline and walks off before he could muster a reply.

His footsteps are heavy as he follows behind Balin but he doubts the dwarf would notice his sullen stomping given dwarves flat stomping feet. The King wanted a hobbit in race alone, it was foolish of him to think he could walk around as he was.

The smell of freshly baked goods lifts his spirits and brings a smile to his downturned lips as he looks around the busy market that happily reminds him of Hobbiton. “This is Erebor market, several levels above is the open market.”

“What is the difference, if you don’t mind me asking?” He asks eyeing a fresh red apple.

“This market is for the inhabitants of Erebor.” A clever way of saying dwarves only, Balin was a master with words. “The open market is for traders from Dale.” He nods, looking around. Clothing, weaponry, musical instruments and food. “Let’s get you that apple and we’ll see what else you fancy.” A faint blush stains his cheeks having been caught staring at the fruit and he does not like that his own pockets are empty. He had been too generous on their journey to Erebor, desperately trying to prove a point that didn’t have to be made and had only left him in poverty. He had read the
contract, he knew his expenses would be taken care of but he didn’t like being beholden to anyone.

They walk around the market seeing what is available. There are several butchers but only two bakeries and neither served lemon cake. However, looking around and with permission to travel to Dale he could make the cakes himself. He’d said to Balin that he could start his own business selling Shire delicacies but it was quickly dismissed as it would reflect badly on the royal family and compromises the treaty. He still had his own kitchen and was allowed the ingredients and so he was happy with that. Only he wanted to make his own money because he felt too much like a Sackville-Baggins than he cared to.

They settle on soup in a mug so they can continue to peruse the market before it closes. It’s more of the same as the tinkers and jewellry makers prefer to trade in the open market. That would be closed now, along with the great gates of Erebor. This was the time of night when Erebos earned its name, The Lonely Mountain. He could understand, the wealth of Erebos was unsurpassed and he was surprised they even invited traders within their home given their reputation, which he found so far was unfounded.

“Well,” Balin states, setting his cup down on a disused table. “We’ve let the prince suffer enough, now let’s go reward him, shall we?” He nods setting down his mug beside Balin’s and they leave the market.

They do not advance another level as he thought they would, instead they walk for a while to the other side of the mountain until they come to two oak doors that stand open. He can hear the clash of swords before he even crosses the threshold and he finds himself looking down on a circle of sand where two combatants fight. It reminds him of a macabre theatre with the semi-circle of high staggered seating looking down upon the violence below.

Balin leads him down the stairs to the front row and they pass a few dwarves watching the spectacle. They do not sit down but stand at the wall looking at the fighters. “Oh.” Balin says no more than that. It is strange reaction and so he focuses his attention on the fighters and realises one is his brother Dwalin but his opponent is not Kili but King Thorin.

He considers parroting his reply but watching the king fight has him mesmerised. He has forgone his crown and his long fur coat and instead wears a simple green shirt with a chain-mail surcoat and a black leather surcoat over it. His trousers and thick furred boots appear the same and though he had met the King earlier he realises he is seeing the true King now.

Free of the role that defines him, he appears younger and relaxed. They fight with real swords and though he does not know much about the art of war or fighting in general, he can see that Dwalin is not holding back despite the position of his opponent. Balin had said that the pair had grown up together so if there was one person that would never be afraid of Thorin it would be Dwalin because he saw him as his brother. So, as his brother, he would not treat Thorin any differently than anyone else. Something, he imagines, the King would respect, and need.

Dwalin is taller than Thorin and broader and perhaps muscular or simply heavier he cannot tell which from the amount of clothing Dwalin wears. Despite the odds, Thorin is lighter on his feet and he evades clubbing blows in a macabre dance. In every way he is outmatched but in skill he is not and it is a pleasure to watch the King in his element seemingly having fun.

In a flurry of movement Thorin disarms Dwalin and the taller dwarf lunges for him but Thorin sidesteps him and as Dwalin reaches down to retrieve his sword he kicks him on his behind for good measure. It was a good showing and so he begins to clap…while no one else does.

Thorin looks up at him, distracted, just as Dwalin rights himself and swings his sword at him wildly
catching the King in the face and cutting him open. Dwalin drops his sword aghast and there’s a collective gasp from the people in attendance while he slaps a hand over his open mouth as the King falls on his back in the sand.

“No!” Balin shouts as Dwalin shouts the name of his fallen brother and drops into the sand pulling him into his arms. He follows after Balin, quite sure he should be running in the opposite direction instead of down the stairs and into the arena.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” He repeats as he rushes across the sand.

“Get off me!” He hears the King gripe and swipe at Dwalin as he sits up and the heavy pressure on his chest is gone allowing him to breathe again.

“I thought you would duck that blow.” Dwalin says. It was true, it was a sloppy swing but the King had been distracted and in answer to the statement he looks at him meaningfully.

“I am so sorry,” he apologises and takes the handkerchief from his pocket. He considers pressing it against the bleeding wound but instead places it in the King’s open hand. “In the Shire we applaud feats of strength and skill.” He says trying to appease him. Thorin offers him, what he interprets as a tight smile but could just be pressing his lips together to bite back the names he wished to call him. “I’m sorry.” He offers uselessly and Thorin simply nods and presses the handkerchief to his bleeding forehead.

“Come along Bilbo, that’s enough excitement for one day.” Balin says sending him to his room once more. Balin grabs his forearm as he is reluctant to move and drags him along as he stares at the King as Dwalin inspects the wound.

“Could you tell him I’m sorry?” He asks Balin as he watches the King wince.

“He knows you are. His ego is a little bruised right now, that’s all.”

A thought occurs to him. “Will he take back his blessing now?”

“No, you’re quite safe.” During the exchange he hadn’t taken his eyes off the King and so he catches when the King looks at him out of the corner of his eye and he is able to mouth ‘sorry’ to him before he is led out of the arena.
Bilbo looked around his room once more and then patted his pockets feeling for his coin bag and his second favourite handkerchief. He drops his hands by his sides satisfied and then looks at the clock upon the mantle. It had been eight days since he had arrived in Erebor and after the first day of errors he had seen no further than these four walls. Today would be different. Today there would be no more contracts to sign. Today he would visit Dale and be able to shop now having an allowance and most exciting of all, he would spend the entire day with Kíli.

He had begun to forget what Kíli had looked like given their very brief introduction and he longed for an opportunity to get to know his fiancé. A date for their marriage had not yet been set but he was told it would be a very small affair with only the royal family and the council in attendance. The Thain of the Shire would be invited to oversee the fulfilment of the contract but he knew in his heart that he would decline. The Thain had done his part and trusted he would not blemish his reputation and fulfil his obligation.

Despite the lacklustre ceremony he was informed that the residents of Erebor would receive a day off from work to celebrate their marriage and so he had already garnered good will from the dwarves. It pleased him to know as he feared how they would react to the Prince marrying outside of his own race. If celebration, good cheer, beer and song pacified them then they were more alike than he knew.

He pats his pockets again and hears the sound of coins. Twenty gold pieces a week was far too much, but the surprise on his face had been misinterpreted and Balin quickly informed him should he exceed his limit he would also have a tab. He hadn’t known how to respond and he has a horrible feeling he came across as ungrateful when he certainly wasn’t.

Beyond food he wasn’t quite sure what he would spend his money on now that clothing would no longer be an issue. He had used his quick wit to imply dressing him as a dwarf would make them appear as if they thought hobbits were lesser and they were ashamed of their alliance. Balin had looked thoughtful and after a talk with the council he conceded the fact that it could potentially jeopardise the treaty and he was welcome to dress as he so pleased.

He’d been pleased with himself thinking his argument carried enough weight to sway the council but now the ringing in his pocket is sounding suspiciously like a wage. He had started to think that he was doing them more of a favour by marrying Kíli than they were of having him dress as he pleases.

A knock on his door awakens him from his thoughts and he quickly pats his pockets and straightens his white cravat before making four strides to the door and opening it with a smile.

Kíli does not stand there and his smile becomes forced as he eyes a young ginger dwarf stood at his door wearing a version of the King’s Guard regalia. The colour is plain black opposed to the blue and gold Dwalin wore but the significance of it is lost on him. The Durin coat of arms is depicted above the breast in black rhinestone which he takes as a good omen and there is something familiar about his face, as if he has seen him somewhere before.

“Good morning,” he greets but the dwarf appears perplexed.

“Is it?” He takes a step back and peers at the clock on the mantel. 11:44am.

“It is.” They were to leave the mountain at twelve. Perhaps Kíli awaited him at the great gate. “Did Prince Kíli send you?” He asks to fill the awkward silence.
“Oh yes, I’m to escort you to the main gate.” The dwarf announces and straightens, bolstered by his task. He nods once in reply, casts another glance at the clock before patting his pockets and then leaving the room and shutting the door behind him.

He fidgets during the walk to the gate, picking at imaginary flint on his jacket and flattening a non-existent wrinkle on his trouser leg. His cravat feels rather tight but he chooses to leave it be as the knot had been executed perfectly. He glances at his nails, convinced he should have cut them when he notices he is striding across the golden floor towards the gate.

“Gimli,” Balin says with enthusiasm and he pauses suddenly realising why the dwarf looked familiar to him.

“You are Gloin’s son. He carries your picture.” If it were possible it would appear Gimli stands a little taller after hearing that.

“Good day to you both.” Gimli states with a very deep bow and then leaves.

“Where is Kili?” Balin asks him and his face falls.

“I thought he was waiting here with you?” Balin appears taken aback but he recovers well.

“Oh yes, I sent him to the woods to patrol for wargs. Dreadful beasts.” Balin is a master with his words but not so good with blatant lies which can be seen in his suppressed lower lip and the wide pleading eyes.

He takes pity on him and nods in acceptance of his lie. Kili not wishing to see him hurt him but he would not let that show otherwise he might be confined to his prison again and even without Kili, being outside was a pleasure. His four walls had driven him stir crazy and so he steps forward and when Balin says nothing to prevent him he takes two steps more. There is an open market in Erebor but he would much rather walk the streets of Dale.

“I shall accompany you.” Balin says striding after him proving once more that Kili should be here. He ignores that fact because if he were to dwell on it, it would only cause him heartache. He’s outside, that is what matters most. He has money, and the ingredients he needs won’t buy themselves.

The walk is further than he had imagined as he had grossly miscalculated having journeyed in the carriage before. He doesn’t mind as it gives him the opportunity to stretch his legs and before he knows it, he is at the back-gate to the city of Dale. Two guards stand at attention by the gate dressed in burgundy but they do not ask for identification or purpose and he casually walks by them.

The city is immaculate with sand-coloured buildings of varying sizes all built together like an artistic conglomeration. The housing district is situated on the outskirts of the city so here the streets are lined with shops and street vendors selling toys, and treats, fabrics and meats. His eyes alight with joy as he finds the grocer selling fresh fruit and vegetables and among them the lemons he so desires. Out of the five available he buys three and pays the grocer and places the three inside his backpack and looks around. They are near the Town Square where the daily market sets up before the palace and he heads that way with Balin following somewhat reluctantly behind him. He feels bad and he turns to lift Balin’s spirits when he is almost trampled on.

He jumps back, startled as a garrison of armed soldiers march past. The occupants of Dale tended to keep their eyes down aware of their clientele’s short stature but the armed guards stood straight with their eyes dead ahead.
“Do watch yourself Master Baggins.” Balin warns him.

“Is there trouble?” He asks, watching the twelve guards march towards the palace.

“Trouble? Why would there be trouble? King Bard is visiting the town’s folk with his children.” He looks again, through the legs of the guards and can see there are four pairs of legs surrounded by the guards. He assumes King Bard’s presence is a common thing as no one bats an eyelash and continues with their shopping as the King returns to his palace.

He continues shopping as well buying ingredients and crockery and oven mitts and the like becoming red faced when he does indeed spend over his allowance. Instead of having a tab, Balin pays for him as well as employing a passing dwarf to help carry the bags. Balin is strong and can hold five times as much as he can but he has overindulged and an extra person was necessary.

“You’ve enough food to feed an army.” Balin remarks, after paying the dwarf for his help and seeing him from his quarters.

“I like to keep busy.” He says as a reasonable reply. Yes, he had enough food for a week but who knew when he would be called for again? The King could bless his union with his nephew as much as he liked but if Kíli continued to be absent then there would be no marriage. He’s in two minds over that possible outcome but he would very much like to return home if only to see the look on Lobelia’s face when he ejects her from his property. He’d feel a sense of failure if that were to happen, and the gossip doesn’t bear thinking about but he hasn’t made any lasting friendships so at this juncture it was best to separate now before he loses something worth having.

“Anything more I can help you with?” Balin asks shifting from foot to foot as though aware of his thoughts. He’s being a pessimist and self-pity isn’t a good look and so he adopts a smile, but Balin’s expression is unchanged in the face of it.

“I have everything I need, thank you.” Everything except for a fiancée whose absence is becoming painfully clear.

“I’ll leave you to it then.” Balin is a dwarf of few words but his eyes say what his mouth could not. He appreciates his concern but no one is at fault, some things were simply not meant to be.

Balin leaves and as soon as the door shuts his room seemingly shrinks. He knows it is all in his mind and yet he can’t help but think nastily of the vaulted ceiling that’s height amplifies the hollowness of his room. The moment he ponders whether the ceiling reflects the hollowness of the room or himself he moves into the kitchen. It’s not the first time such thoughts had entered his mind and he had kept them at bay by cooking and so he means to do it once more.

Cooking and baking were therapeutic. His mother had taught him at a young age how to cook and bake though she kept her recipes as though she were a dragon protecting its hoard. They had always wanted to surprise his father with breakfast in bed but he was an early riser always up with the sun and out in the garden pruning his cherished roses. It became a game and one he played overzealously as he had awoken his father at 4am just to win. His intention was pure and saved him from a good hiding and after the fourth rude awakening, Bungo learnt to stay in bed and humour him.

He eventually grew out of it but with hindsight he wished he hadn’t. Moments were now memories as he was all that was left of them. He wipes at a stray tear that runs down his cheek and shakes his head with a self-deprecative laugh. It would have been nice to have a family again. He didn’t need the prestige of a royal title, just people close to him.

He’s brought out of his sombre thoughts by familiar drumming on his door. For a moment he is
robbed of breath and his heart freezes in his chest. He gathers his wits, and takes the lemon cake out of the oven setting it to cool while he wipes his hands on the tea towel. The kitchen is somewhat of a mess and a patch of flour decorates his sleeve.

He walks to the door trying to knock it off and then straightens his waistcoat noticing with dismay that flour was also on his coat above the third button. The rapping sounds again but faster, impatient. He opens the door and though he had guessed who it could be he is still surprised to see Prince Kíli at his door.

“Something smells delicious,” Kíli announces and enters his room without permission. He hasn’t come alone either as he eyes the blond-haired dwarf stood at his door. He has Kíli’s height and build and his beard is short as a reflection of his age but his moustache is long and braided. His eyes are a deep blue and smoulder with the same intensity as Kíli’s do and like Kíli, his clothes are made of the finest leather and embroidered velvet.

“Bilbo,” the blond greets and steps into his room engulfing him in a hug. He gently bumps his forehead against his own in a similar fashion as Kíli once did to him and then steps back, holding him at arm’s length. “My brother cannot stop talking about you.” He had an inkling they were related and realises he is standing awkwardly with the Crown Prince Fíli. “Isn’t that right, brother?” Fíli shouts over towards his kitchen were Kíli disappeared into.

“Hmm?” Kíli’s reply is muffled and then he appears in the doorway between the two rooms. He swallows and knocks the crumbs from his mouth. “Oh yeah, I caught these for you today.” He says holding up a brace of rabbits he hadn’t seen him carrying.

“While you were patrolling for wargs?”

“What?” Kíli replies dumbfounded, proving all of his suspicions correct.

“My brother is right though,” Fíli interrupts and drops his hands to his sides. “Something smells delicious.”

“Tastes delicious too,” Kíli adds.

“I’ve just baked a lemon cake.” The words have barely left his mouth before Fíli takes leave of his company and disappears into the kitchen along with his brother. He shuts the door slowly trying to gather his wits. “Sorry the kitchen is a mess.” He calls and joins the boys in his kitchen.

They’ve demolished the lemon cake using their hands as the knife on the side is unused. There’s a trail of crumbs from the oven to the table where he dines alone but now where two young dwarfs sit stuffing their faces with cake.

He stands on the threshold between two rooms unsure of himself but he catches the glances from Fíli. “Come join us, Bilbo!” He invites while Kíli keeps his head down. He goes over slowly, unsure of his welcome and Fíli gallantly raises from his seat and holds it out for him. He sits down and watches Fíli walk around his brother to sit at his left while he sits to the right of Kíli. “My brother is the finest archer in Erebor, did he tell you?” Fíli asks, griping his brother’s shoulders and plastering himself to his side. Personal space seemed alien to them both.

“No, we haven’t really talked.” He answers honestly.

“It’s quite the feat actually,” Fíli continues. “Given dwarves poor eyesight and all.”

“I would happily come and see him practise.” It’s strange talking about Kíli while he is sat beside him and he is unsure why Fíli is behaving as his mouthpiece when Kíli was able to boast about
himself.

“Kíli would love that, wouldn’t you, Kíli?” The nod in confirmation is minute as the young prince remains wordless and eyes the table. It’s disconcerting but through his chestnut hair he sees his cheeks are rosy and realises that he has become shy.

It’s odd that the cocky dwarf he met had succumbed to nerves but perhaps that bold attitude was simply false bravado to protect his reputation. In a way, he is happy with this outcome because it meant Kíli had not been ignoring him and had overcome his insecurity with the aid of his brother to come visit him.

“I imagine you’re a good archer yourself.” He says to be polite. Fíli has gone out of his way to help and he deserved some praise.

“Not archery,” he admits. “But dagger throwing,” he says producing a dagger seemingly from thin air. “I could pierce an apple on your head if you were so inclined to wear one.” He boasts with a grin before placing the dagger back from whence it came. “Are you satisfied with the rabbits my brother caught for you?”

“Err, yes very.” It sounds untrue as Fíli caught him off guard, turning the topic back to Kíli.

“He could skin them for you, make a small rug, or a bag with their fur.”

“I could kill a warg for you.” Kíli offers finally finding his voice.

“Really, there is no need. I don’t want you endangering yourself on my account.” Kíli scoffs.

“I’ve been slaying wargs since I was your age.” He says with the arrogance he remembers.

“Imagine the coat he could make you.” Fíli says, encouraging his brother.

“It will make a great…wedding gift.” Kíli pauses midsentence to lower his voice as if their wedding was a secret. He’d been bolstered by his thoughts but became bashful once he realised why he was entertaining them.

“I’d much prefer the pleasure of your company. Both of you.” He quickly adds. Having them here shovelling cake into their mouths reminded him of Drogo’s visits and he missed that little rascal. “I’ll bake you cakes.” He says as incentive. Cake baking and cooking in general was very important in finding a mate in the Shire and he hoped it was similar with dwarves. Although Kíli reminded him of his young cousin rather than a mate but he had hope that would change with time.

“We’ll be back,” Fíli promises. “Wild horses couldn’t keep this one away.” He says nudging his brother and their closeness makes him wish that he had had a brother. It would have been nice to have that encouragement in his youth when he was first courting. He had been shaking like a leaf when he had approached Lily Bywater with one of his father’s roses. She was with friends and the moment she turned he had flung the rose at her and ran away to the chorus of screeching laughter. He could have used someone to build him back up as she had broken him down.

“I’ll look forward to it.” He says, ignoring the thoughts of that painful encounter. He climbs from his seat as the brothers climb out of theirs and for a second time, he is pulled into a hug by Fíli and then by Kíli who knocks their foreheads together.

“Until then,” Kíli promises with a smile as if his own head isn’t throbbing from the contact.

“Bye,” he says with a timid wave as the brothers see themselves out. The moment the door closes his
room doesn’t seem so empty anymore and with a cheerful whistle he returns to the kitchen to clean the pots much happier with the situation than he had been before.
“Have you read this?” Thorin asked tossing the scroll onto his table negligently. “Bard’s love of gold and riches grow fiercer by the day.” Dwalin merely raises an eyebrow in response to his rant. “He claims that Girion gave my grandfather the emerald necklace under duress and as a sign of good faith it should be returned to him. Does he not know that I was there when the necklace was given? It has been in our possession for centuries, why does he lay claim to it now? Those condescending words reek of Thranduil’s influence.”

“My Lord!” Gimli speaks up rushing into his study waving a scroll in his right hand. “A raven came…”

“If that is from Bard you can tell him to shove it up his…”

“It’s from your sister, my Lord.” Gimli interrupts him and he feels deflated as his anger dissipates.

“Princess Dís?” He asks as if he had more than one.

“Princess Dís, yes, my Lord.” Gimli replies uncertainly and places the scroll upon his desk and with a deep bow he takes his leave.

“Are you not going to open it?” Dwalin asks as he has stared wordlessly at the parchment for some time. In truth, he does not wish to read his sister’s words because he can’t imagine anything good. She won’t come home, he knows that much and knowing her love for him pales in comparison to the sorrow in her heart disturbs something in the very core of him.

He grabs at the scroll and breaks the Durin seal. “With any luck she misses Kíli keenly and desires him returned to her breast.” He quips as he unrolls the parchment.

“Mahal bless it be true.” He hastily reads the script and frowns at her words. “Well?” Dwalin presses.

“She enquires about the engagement and asks me to reside over their meetings before they are wed.” He drops the parchment. “Where is Balin?”

“Why, does his Royal Highness need his arse wiping?” Dwalin taunts.

He ignores the taunt. “He is far better equipped for this task than I.”

“The Lady asked for you.” Dwalin reminds him. “She trusts your judgement, you should honour her request.” Miles away and his baby sister could still wrap them all around her little finger.

“Fine, I’ll see how they converse at a distance.” He grudgingly agrees. “But where is Balin before I wring Bard’s scrawny neck and decorate his corpse with the necklace of Girion.”

“He has taken the hobbit to Dale.” Unconsciously he nods in response to the answer before realisation strikes.

“Balin accompanies both Bilbo and Kíli?” A chaperone was not requested when he had arranged the visit but now, he can only hope it was a mistake rather than the alternative.

Dwalin’s head lowers and his crossed arms tighten defensively. “No, he goes in Kíli’s stead.”

“What?!” He explodes in temper, standing and slamming his hands upon his desk. Dwalin holds his
hands out defensively as if to calm his murderous rage.

“Kíli was up before the sun and long gone by the time I came to call for him.”

“Kíli never awakens early.”

“This time he did. He went hunting with Fíli.”

“Of course he went with Fíli!” He spits nastily and then pauses to rub over his aching left breast. “They mean to kill me. He knows how important this match is, why does he hate me?”

“He doesn’t hate you, you know what he’s like. He’s just testing the boundaries.”

“Find him! Tell him he will take tea with myself and the hobbit this evening, or else.”

“Or else what?” Dwalin asks curiously.

“Just or else!” He flails his arms unable to come up with a suitable punishment. Dwalin’s eyebrow is still quirked as if in judgement and he is tired of it. “Get out!” He yells. He is not overreacting. In the back of his mind he knew this would happen, the brothers loved too deeply for a third to come and separate them.

He paces restlessly but it does him no good and the rug beneath his feet deserves a reprieve. He can’t stand idly by when there was work to be done. A new tunnel had opened in the west wing beside the emerald cave and he was to oversee the gemstones and visit the forge before finally balancing the books.

He shakes his head and leaves his study. He’d given up on rest the moment he wore the crown, a childhood ambition that was slowly becoming a nightmare. He sometimes wishes in moments like these that he was the second son, a pointless fantasy given Frerin’s passing. Still, it would have been nice to know if any of his suitors were sincere rather than overreaching in which he believed they were. Dís had saved him from a loveless marriage but now given his time restraints, it might have been nice to have someone to talk to at night that doesn’t roll their eyes in judgement.

That train of thought reminds him of Kíli. He has made a good match and his nephew is casting it aside and spitting in his face. His heart will be torn when Fíli weds and he meant only to save him the pain as he felt all too keenly the cold nights alone with your thoughts. Now it is a mercy he wished he had not shown.

It is quiet in the west-wing which he finds troubling and he approaches the new tunnel finding a hatted dwarf standing stationary.

“Well?” He asks gesturing towards the tunnel. The dwarf startles at his gruff voice and possibly by his presence and quickly stands tall rather than leaning on his pickaxe chewing his nails.

“Tin, M’lord.”

“Excellent, Gondor often ask for tin.” For a moment his thoughts are only of profit and when it clears, he is able to think once more. “Why is the tin not being mined?” The west-wing should be a hive of activity as structures for the new tunnel were needed and the emerald tunnel was still turning a profit.

“They’d be in the forge.”

“What use are they in the forge?” He asks and the dwarf shrugs in response. “Send for dwarfs from
the coppers mines. I want this tunnel turning a profit by nightfall.”

“Yes M’lord,” the dwarf answers him, half bowing and half retreating.

He had intended to visit the silver mines next but given the news it sounded as if he were needed in the forge. He strides there when he longs to run. It could be nothing and his smiths were more than capable of correcting a mistake. It still didn’t bode well and as he enters the forge, what little optimism is instantly quashed as the third kiln is stone cold.

“King Thorin!” Bûr, the head ironmonger approaches him with some speed flailing his arms as if to shield the idle furnace.

“Why is the furnace cold?” He asks menacingly, failing to rein in his temper. Bûr cowers at his tone and shrinks into himself, practically disappearing into his amber beard as he stumbles over his words. “Well?” He presses failing to make sense of the mumbled jargon.

“A crack has formed in the base after the gold was dropped in.”

“Damn! Can it be mended?” Bûr averts his eyes answering his question before his words do.

“No. There’s a hairline fracture stretching up to the lip of the furnace.”

“And it’s full of gold?” His question is answered with a nod. “Okay, smelt the gold and send it to minting and then we’ll close tunnel seven and have the workers transferred here to reconstruct the kiln.” A reasonable plan but Bûr shakes his head in the negative.

“We can’t ignite the furnace because the base has become compromised.”

“It’s worth a try.”

“And endanger us all? Our wages are hardly worth dying for.” Bûr says heatedly. He’s struck a nerve but he’s unsurprised, he’s a master at striking nerves. “At least when your grandfather poured gold on the floor it was a genuine accident.” Bûr mutters beneath his breath but he heard him well enough and he is aware of it as his confidence flees as he shrinks into himself once again.

“Say that again.” Bûr shakes his head. “Go on, say it again.” He taunts, invading Bûr personal space and towering over him. “Say it!” He yells.

“Thorin!” Dwalin shouts to him in warning and he realises in his moment of temper he had raised his fist. He wouldn’t strike, it was just a threat and yet…he might have. He drops his fist and steps away from the trembling smith.

“What are you doing here?”

“I went to find the lads since their ponies are back. Thought they might be hiding in the tunnels when I came upon Bofur saying he met you in the west-wing and that I should get here quick. Guess he was right. What’s the problem?” He doesn’t answer, instead he looks at Bûr expectantly.

“Kiln three is out of commission.” Bûr answers.

“It can’t be ignited and it is full of a month’s worth of gold. It will have to be taken apart and the gold re-collected. How long will that take?”

“Two weeks and two weeks more to be rebuilt.” He pinches the bridge of his nose whilst trying to think of an alternative.
“I can’t be without wages for that amount of time. Kiln two is ore, we’ll use that one instead.”

“Forgive me for saying so…” respect at last, funny how a raised fist garners respect. “We cannot fall behind the deadline on the ore or Gondor and Rohan will take their business elsewhere since they send the caravans and there are whispers of attempted mining in the Glittering Caves.”

“Kiln one is expenditure, that can’t be delayed. Do we send word to the Blue Mountains?”

“Their caves are silver not gold and even in these times of peace that much wealth on the road would be taken by bandits and thieves.” Dwalin answers.

“No I call upon the Ironhills for aid?”

“Do you really want to be indebted to Dain?” Dwalin asks, and no he doesn’t. “You’re also not his favourite person right now.” Thanks to Fili’s mindless prank. He’s right, given Dain’s mood he would ask for the moon and the stars as well realising his desperation.

“Send for the Master of the Coin and start immediately on kiln three.” Having their orders both Bûr and Dwalin leave to fulfil their tasks as he is left with his thoughts.

In their absence he paces again until Dwalin returns with Gloin and Balin.

“Did you inform him?” Dwalin nods as Gloin fiddles with his counting frame. “And?”

“By my calculations there should be sufficient coin in the treasury, that is according to a four-week margin. Any delays would see the treasury bankrupt and the staff would go unpaid.”

“There are halls within halls in this mountain. The workers will not go without.” A hoard comes to mind, one he wished to never touch as he was sure a curse laid upon it but maybe it wasn’t a curse but salvation.

“I shall go to wage minting to oversee the numbers and will have full documentation for you by tonight.” He claps Gloin on the back in thanks and finally turns to see Balin quietly watching over him.

“Handled well, lad.” A small part of him is moved by Balin’s words but it does not show on his face. “So, what’s all this about tea with the hobbit?”

“Kili will be there.”

“You make sure he is. I’ll set up tea and cake in your study, be there in one hour.” Balin informs him and takes his leave.

“Make sure Kili is in my study in one hour.” He tells Dwalin and leaves to oversee the silver mines.

It is with trepidation that he enters the silver mines expecting the worst and soon finds it is unwarranted, as it is in the ruby and diamond tunnels and at the jewellery guild. In fact, with his spirits lifted he walks optimistically to his study only for his mood to plummet once again as the hobbit sits at the table and Kili is nowhere to be seen.

“King Thorin,” Bilbo greets, standing up and bowing. He waves it off because it is unnecessary but the hobbit looks uncertain as if he has done something wrong.

They are already off to be bad start so he may as well address the olphant in the room. “Where is Kili?”
“I’m not sure,” Bilbo answers and it is in mercy to the hobbit that he does not rage. “He came to my room earlier.” The hobbit confesses with a blush staining his cheeks as he looks at him. His expression must be misinterpreted as the hobbit stumbles over his words, shaking his head and becoming redder. “No, we weren’t alone, his brother was there.” His face falls at that.

“Fíli,” he snaps and shakes his head.

“He made a very good chaperone.” Bilbo defends him mistaking why he was so vexed.

“I am supposed to be the chaperone.”

“Oh, well you’ve been busy. Sit down and enjoy some tea and you can sit in judgement of me.” It is rare that a stranger would tell him what to do and because of the rarity he does as he is told and sits at the small oak table as Bilbo pours him tea.

Balin has used his mother’s plates, a gift from Thranduil in better times. He’s surprised the spiteful elf hasn’t asked for them back. He takes the tea the hobbit poured him and sips it and instantly pulls a face because of the heat and the taste.

“It’s mint, you don’t like it?” Bilbo asked saddened as if his distaste of tea was hurtful to him in some way.

“I prefer ale.” He answers and sets the cup down beside the tray. He eyes the door as Bilbo pours himself a cup and sits back down and realises with horror that he has nothing to say to the hobbit. He was to observe the interaction between Kíli and Bilbo, not participate.

The door does not come open even as he wills it to. He is out of luck and now rude from being turned away from the hobbit for so long. He turns to face him and notices the hobbit is staring at his face. It’s disconcerting until he realises, he is only concentrating on the cut above his eye. He touches it in response to the stare.

“All is well,” he comforts him. “Though the same cannot be said of your handkerchief, was it very important to you?” It was too intricately woven to be a meaningless rag.

“Not as important as your welfare, my King.” That was strangely touching and he has no response for it.

“Tell me Mr Baggins, have you done much fighting?” He asks changing the subject. At Bilbo’s arched eyebrow he continues. “Axe or sword, what’s your weapon of choice?”

“Oh, I’m more of a lover than a fighter. The only time I use a knife there is a fork involved.” The silence stretches between them. “I should mention I have some skill in conkers, I’ve bruised many a hand in lively moments.” He laughs but the joke is lost on him.

“I am unfamiliar with that weapon, you swing it like a flail?” He asks mimicking the hobbits hand gesture and he does not like the laughter that follows.

“No, it’s...sorry no, it’s not a weapon just a childhood game. You try to break their conker by swinging your conker at it.” It doesn’t sound enjoyable, it sounds downright stupid but hobbits were different creatures entirely.

The room falls silent again and it is dreadfully uncomfortable, like an itch he could not scratch. The hobbit quietly drinks his tea while he tries not to stare desperately at the door. Kíli will be punished severely for this. The thought of his nephew opens a new line of questioning he could pursue.
“How are you getting along with Kili?”

“Fine, yes, well I’ve only seen him twice.” That is news to him, he had arranged many dates for the pair. “He’s very handsome, he looks just like you.” The blush returns as he simply looks at the hobbit trying to guess if the compliment was sincere. His looks are rarely mentioned as his temper often is. “Only,” Bilbo starts, dragging the word out as if unsure of what he is about to say. “He’s rather young, isn’t he?”

“In his actions but not his age.” His reply does not seem to be the one the hobbit was hoping for.

“Maybe it’s just me,” Bilbo says with a sigh but the smile soon returns. “This has been nice,” he says gesturing towards the tea set. It hasn’t been but he is simply being polite. Bilbo stands up from his seat and reaches for the tray. “I’ll help you clear away” he offers, lifting the tray.

“There’s no need,” he replies standing and taking hold of the tray.

“I insist.” Bilbo does as he says and steps closer to hold the tray but missteps and knocks into the table upsetting his abandoned cup and pouring hot tea on his lap. The cry that leaves his mouth is animalistic as he releases the tray and rubs over his thighs as if that would make a spot of different to the scolding burns. “I am so sorry!” Bilbo gasps setting the tray down and covering his mouth.

He looks up from his bent over position and his anger vanishes in the face of those dark soulful orbs that well with tears. “Have I done something to offend you, Master Baggins?” He quips, painting on a smile despite the pain.

“I am so sorry,” Bilbo reiterates and walks around the table to stand beside him. He brings a handkerchief from his pocket, not as fancy as the first one, and moves as if to dry his thigh before thinking better of it and passes it to him.

He coughs in response to the awkward situation and takes the handkerchief, ignoring the colouring of his own cheeks as he dabs his thighs.

“I’m not normally this clumsy.”

“I’m honoured that I make you so flustered.” The words have left his lips before he had chance to think them through and the hobbit’s startled intake of breath proved that they were as inappropriate as they had sounded.

“Ha, erm, yes well….ha.” He keeps his head down like the coward he is as Bilbo stutters. “If that’s everything, I’ll bid you goodnight Thorin. King. King Thorin.” His hands are clasped in prayer as he bows and backs out of his study his face as red as a ruby.

Today had been a bad day.
Thror's Hoard

Three weeks pass by and as the days steadily encroach upon the fourth, Kíli is nowhere to be seen. Well, that was a falsehood, Kíli could be seen, had been seen but he would not take his place at his side. He had thought he had succumbed to his nerves once more as he remembered the shy boy with his hair hiding his face and he couldn’t fault him. Absence makes the heart grow fonder though, and having enough of the same three rooms he had decided to venture from them. He wasn’t a prisoner after all and he had wanted to surprise Kíli. He had left a note on the table should someone come to find him and off he went. He had checked the arena first but it was empty and he was told there would be a showing outside in the equestrian centre.

He hadn’t asked but he assumed Kíli would be there and so he went following the crowd so he didn’t become lost. It appeared to be quite the attraction as the stalls were full and he had to sit between two hefty dwarves who did not even spare him a glance. He didn’t mind so much, no attention was better than negative attention and he was here to surprise Kíli, not bring attention upon himself.

Unfortunately, he was the one that ended up surprised. He had thought Kíli might preside over the showing as one of his duties but that was not so. Kíli was the first to come out on a bay pony with a silver javelin tucked beneath his right arm. The crowd came alive as he trotted into the arena and they stood from their seats clapping and cheering. He applauded too, caught up in the celebration of it all, glad that Kíli was so loved by his people and it seemed he was especially loved by the females. It didn’t concern him as girls were often told tales of princes whereas boys were regaled with tales of princesses.

It became a concern when he noticed Kíli accepted the favours of the ladies and ignored the offered silks by the few men that had tried to gift them. He had sat down with a heavy heart and a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Did Kíli’s avoidance of him stem from the fact that he was not attracted to males? There were still those attracted to one gender rather than both and there was no shame in that but it would be a shame if their sexuality was being overlooked in favour of a contract.

He couldn’t enjoy the show, even as exciting as it was and he took his leave early. He wasn’t feeling sorry for himself but rather for Kíli. He was old now. He had enjoyed his youth. He had come of age and chased partners sometimes winning and sometimes losing fantastically. It was all apart of growing up, but he had grown up while Kíli hadn’t and now he was preventing him from doing what young men tended to do. Maybe his position as prince prevented him from sowing his wild oats as they say in the Shire. Fíli was promised to someone the moment he was born and though he was said to be a hellion, he was not a womaniser. There were many tales about the lads but he hadn’t heard a single one that was sexual in nature, which could be why they were so troublesome.

Either way, it didn’t bode well for his upcoming nuptials but one thing he knew for certain was that they would be wed. Thorin might have to drag Kíli down the aisle by his ear but they would be wed. He felt guilty of course and now, thinking as he does, he will not force Kíli to consummate the marriage but he will happily tell folks they have should they ask. As far as he was concerned, they were both unwilling participants as he didn’t desire a partner that would count down the days of his demise to be free to pursue who he truly wanted.

It was disappointing but he entered into this arrangement with low expectations and an open mind. It was foolish of him to think Kíli would love him at first sight, but deep down he had harboured that dream. Even if his dream did not come true, he had thought something was better than nothing but as the days pass by, he finds himself still alone only his home now is much larger.
His first venture from his rooms hadn’t produced the best results but it hadn’t cowed him either. There was still much to see and he didn’t hold out much hope of being called upon again. He had heard word that there was an issue in the forge that was occupying all of the King’s time so they wouldn’t be having tea again any time soon. His cheeks colour at the memory of their last meeting. Spilling hot tea on the King’s lap was one thing but then attempt to pat him dry…thankfully he caught on to what he was doing and aborted the attempt before he could embarrass himself further. He had expected a verbal flaying, he certainly deserved one and Thorin’s temper was legendary but he held his tongue and even made a joke of it. It threw him and he felt the need to apologise and a useless litany of excuses left his lips and then Thorin said what he did.

He shakes his head at the memory of it. Thorin hadn’t meant what he had said, he was just being friendly, something he clearly doesn’t do often as he is terrible at it. He understood that, but what startled him and made him leave was his reaction to it. They were meaningless words meant to comfort but Thorin couldn’t know that deep down he still harboured feelings for him from the moment he first saw him at the gate. He had pictured their whole life together in one moment and then the next he is told he has pictured his life with the wrong person. He had tried to forget him and focus on Kíli, but he was inextricably drawn to Thorin, he had entered his orbit and he couldn’t escape from it.

He finishes his note and leaves it on the small table beside the door. Today he would visit Thrór’s Hoard. He couldn’t appreciate the magnificence of it originally as it would be insensitive given what the treasure trove represented but now, left to his own devices he could study the hall at his own leisure.

He walks the same route Balin showed him and is convinced the passageway is secret. In his previous travels he hadn’t taken more than five steps before seeing someone. Now he ventures further than he had before and the halls are empty. The iron doors are closed as they were before and he pulls the right one open and steps through walking out onto the balcony.

The torches are lit but as far as he can see from his vantage point the hall is empty. He releases a low whistle that he could not do in Balin’s presence. It is…breath-taking and he feels overcome with a need to touch it as if he were a tween in a bakery. He throws caution to the wind and runs down the stairs and as he reaches the bottom he looks up and is dwarfed by the towers of gold. There’s so much, too much, one could tip a few piles over and swim in the wealth.

He laughs, he can’t help himself, it’s so ridiculous, if only Lobelia could see him now, she’d be tearing her hair out. He wasn’t unfamiliar with the rumours of his home being filled with gold, in fact when asked he’d wink his eye and tap his nose. It was all lies of course and it was that lie that made Lobelia desire his home all the more and became a double-edged sword that saw him leave the place of his birth. Basic greed that saw him transported from a fake hoard to a real one.

He takes off running, skirting around spilled coins, and losing count of the piles he sees. He feels like a child again when his mother showed him her jewellery box. The only thing of value was a pearl necklace that came with a fantastic story and had subsequently been buried with her. A waste, one might say, but it was hers and he didn’t have any children to pass it on to.

There are large doors at the other side of the hall, a miniature copy of the great gate that stand closed. He carries on running, thinking of the games of hide and seek Thorin must have played here. He slows his pace and comes to a halt shaking his head. Thorin wouldn’t have been allowed to play in here and after receiving a slap to the face he probably never wanted to. For a moment he feels guilty from taking pleasure of being in a room that is such a burden on the King. He can’t imagine how trying it must be to live in fear of becoming something you abhor. A fear so real to him that he had assembled the Small Council as a fail-safe and now lived in constant judgement not only from them.
but from himself too.

He must be terribly lonely.

He shakes his head and tries to think of Kili. Kili would have played in here with Fili, he was sure of that. This room held terrible memories for Thorin and he can’t imagine he would visit that upon his nephews. They might have even played with other friends bringing joy into a room that held such sorrow.

His sombre thoughts have extinguished his enthusiasm and so he steadily walks around the nearest tower and plucks a clear gem from the pile and holds it up. The light catches the rock perfectly and casts beautiful light anomalies onto the walls and across the sea of gold, reflecting magnificently off hidden gems that shine like stars in the night sky.

He places it down negligently in favour of a ruby and watches the blood red jewel cast different shapes and colours. He drops that in favour of an emerald and then the emerald in favour of a diamond. He thought there was just coins and gems but a handle catches his attention and he doesn’t take a moment to think and instead pulls it out. It’s a golden chalice that looks remarkably similar to the cups given out in the summer in the Shire. He was fortunate to win one once, mostly through perseverance and dumb luck but he had one. Had they come from Erebor? They had never said, or perhaps he simply hadn’t asked.

His train of thought is derailed when he sees the reflection of the torch above him flicker. He looks up to see what is causing the draft and sees the tower he was stood by begin to wobble. “Oh no no no no,” he repeats realising by pulling out the chalice he had unstabilized the stack. It seems in favour of tipping towards him and so he pushes his hand out and holds it steady.

It’s a lost cause as the tower continues to tremble. He should let go and run, it was a haphazard stack that was bound to fall eventually. He nods his head and prepares to run when he hears it.

Voices.

One of the double doors stands open.

“…two days at best…” someone says, their voice growing louder as they approach. He practically hugs the pile of gold to stop it from tipping.

“I will not see them go without for two minutes.” Beads of sweat gather on his brow as he hears King Thorin’s voice.

“One pile should suffice.” He knows that voice but can’t place it.

“The decision is yours, laddie.” Balin was here as well. His palms are sweaty and coins spill from where he holds them until the inevitable happens. “Thorin, look out!” In horror he watches the tower tumble and hears the King make a noise as he is suddenly buried by gold.

He can only stand there, clutching the chalice with his mouth agape as Balin and Gloin dig Thorin out of his golden grave. It isn’t too deep and he’s rescued rather quickly and the moment he breaks through the gold his eyes land on him.

“Bilbo.” Just saying his name sends a shiver down his spine and causes his cheeks to colour.

Balin and Gloin both look at him. “This is nice,” he says in regard to the chalice having nothing else to say. It’s quiet save for his rampant heartbeat and then suddenly Thorin laughs, deep and jovially, startling both Balin and Gloin as they almost do themselves an injury to look at him so quickly.
Thorin is overcome with laughter, clutching his stomach and laying back in the gold. It’s been a long time since he has seen anyone laugh like that and he finds it contagious and starts laughing too and before long Gloin is chuckling and Balin is fighting back a smile.

There are tears of mirth in Thorin’s eyes and he struggles to speak too consumed by laughter. It’s honest and beautiful and potentially out of character given Gloin and Balin’s reaction to it. Perhaps he had finally lost his mind, just not in the way he thought he would. How many times can one dwarf be attacked by a hobbit from the kindly west before they lost grip of their sanity?

It takes some time but the king finally calms himself enough to speak. “I guess we shall use this pile then. Will it suffice or shall we have Bilbo push another one over?”

“I didn’t…I wasn’t…it was an accident.” He stutters fearing the look in Thorin’s ice blue eyes. It was unnecessary as the king succumbs to laughter once more. It is so strange seeing him in this way, like he was a different person and he gathers he must be staring in awe because Balin doesn’t look pleased.

“Don’t you need to be somewhere, Bilbo?” Balin asks and no, he doesn’t but even he can hear ‘stay away from the King’ in Balin’s tone.

“Yes…I…yes,” he repeats as he can’t think of a decent excuse. He can’t just leave without word that would be rude but he also doesn’t desire to press his luck with Balin as he was sure that dwarf could read his mind. “Good day,” he utters and scurries off behind the next pile of gold.

He is closer to the door that they entered from but he is unfamiliar with that route and he has no desire to become lost in a mountain of this size. Instead, he walks as fast as possible without running and climbs the steps. He can’t help himself and he looks over the balcony one last time to see all three of them watching his departure. He waves briefly, noticing Balin’s folded arms and tapping foot and makes his escape.

He closes the door behind him and falls back against it and wipes the sweat from his brow. He hears whispers, harsh and guttural and turns to face the door but the sound is coming from down the hall. Curious, he walks up the hall and slowly approaches an alcove where two male dwarves stand talking animatedly with one another. They quiet at his approach before suddenly scurrying off. Their behaviour is suspicious but it could be nothing. They were speaking in Khuzdul and he hadn’t a hope of properly articulating what he had heard. He might have interrupted a secret rendezvous for all he knows. He shrugs and carries on up the hallway but his suspicion has been stirred and the thought of what he might have interrupted continues to haunts him.
The Wager

Sneaking around quietly and moving unseen is nothing new to him. As a child he would regularly sneak past his parents and earn himself an extra half an hour of playtime outside. They never caught him, even on those days he pressed his luck and stayed out for an hour. They probably never thought he was capable of such a thing being the shy and studious type, which was just a polite turn of phrase for unseen and forgotten.

It hurt at first until he realised he could use it to his advantage. An extra half an hour of playtime was one thing but as he grew up becoming sexually curious, he could sneak into the homes of his lovers. He was the most promiscuous hobbit in the Shire and no one was aware of it and some to this day still believed he was pure and wholesome. It was possibly that misguided belief that helped towards him being chosen, but he knows at the heart of it, he was chosen so Lobelia could have Bag End.

He yawns tiredly, unable to recall when he had last slept. Having overheard those two dwarves talking in the secret passage he could not sleep for worrying. That night he had gotten out of bed and returned to the secret passage to the alcove where they had been and waited. They didn’t return but he couldn’t bring himself to leave and so he waited, minutes, hours, days, he could not be sure. In that time, he tried to recall their faces but each time he tried to remember a little more of the memory faded. They were taller than he, with dark hair and beards, the colour of which he had not seen clearly enough to distinguish.

That poor description described half of the inhabitants of Erebor and so he needed more. He tried to recall the words they had used and speak them himself but Khuzdul was a harsh guttural language and his words sounded mocking in his garbled speech. He continued, regardless but each time he tried to recall their words to mimic them, like their faces, the memory faded.

It might have been nothing but the fear that it was something stayed with him and urged him on his quest. He had no evidence and it was unlikely he would find anymore stayed where he was and so he decided to explore the mountain. The idea had been to explore little by little, returning to his room each night and then venturing further. A sound idea, but one tunnel led into another, piquing his curiosity, drawing him further into the labyrinth of mines and tunnels. He’d stumbled upon gold mines, emerald mines, abandoned mines and one or two secret passageways.

It became an obsession as he realised how unsafe Erebor was and the dwarves were too proud and possibly too arrogant to address the situation. The Great Gate stood open twelve hours a day and traders from Dale were encouraged inside to the open market. Dozens of stalls were set up within the market, he had seen it himself, each stall had from two up to five people helping. He would not say security was lax but how could they keep their eye on every single member of the public?

It would be far too easy for a cutthroat to infiltrate Erebor disguised as a trader and disappear into one of the many abandoned tunnels unseen. There he could wait until the Great Gate closed and security doubled down to strike. He could murder the King, or the Princes’, even himself if he were so inclined as not everyone was overly fond of a hobbit in the Royal family. A thief couldn’t do much damage, and each jewel was accounted for, so even if he did escape with his loot it could be traced and he would be found.

He’d have to tell the King. There are far too many tunnels and there was a breeze in one of them, which only spelled trouble. Thieves weren’t their only foe, there were displaced orcs that still roamed freely despite the frequent hunting parties. A cave troll could try its luck at night as a mountain full of gold would be its ideal home. Goblins too were problematic.
The more he thinks of the potential dangers the more worried he becomes. He has to tell somebody, Thorin, Balin, Fíli or even Kíli. Someone who had the ear of the King and could make him see sense. Dwalin was head of the King’s Guard and that position surely entailed security. He needed to speak to Dwalin.

He pauses in his millionth tunnel and looks left and then right and his shoulders slump in defeat as he is reminded of his current circumstance. He was lost. He’d been lost for days potentially weeks, time was difficult to tell in the mountain. They used mirrors to reflect light in the tunnels but this deep down the only light reflected was torchlight so he could not tell the changing of the days.

He hadn’t seen another dwarf for an age and he shakes his head. Folk in search of ghosts were meant to find them not become one themselves. He had been chasing phantoms in the dark and now he had become one. He had tried to follow the reflected torchlight to the source under the assumption that someone must light them but each turn he took seemed to be in the opposite direction, which took him further down the rabbit hole.

He had shouted for help and even sang as the acoustics were fantastic but no one came and he had become hoarse. He continues up- could even be down- the tunnel finding that he couldn’t become any more lost than he already is. He whistles as he walks to while away the time.

He wonders if anyone has noticed he is missing yet? He hadn’t left a note and he hadn’t told a soul where he was going and in the infinite mistakes he had made he had been sure not to be seen. He’s going to die here, that would be an awkward raven sent to the Shire. We killed the last one, can you send a new one? The Thain would as well. He laughs at the thought and then soberes as he hears something.

He plasters himself against the poorly carven rock, hiding in shadows and covers his own mouth when he considers calling out. He is still on a mission to find those deceitful or adulterous, or simply amorous dwarves and he might have found them. He listens closely.

Stomping heavy footballs, one dwarf at a guess. Each step rang with the sound of chainmail and the sound grew louder as the dwarf drew nearer. He could hear the crease of leather and the soft tap of something against it. A broadsword perhaps? The footsteps stop at the opening of the tunnel he is in as if the dwarf is listening out for him. He had been whistling, he remembers but this is no dwarf come to save him or surely he would have called out to him.

To his horror the dwarf turns to walk into the tunnel where he hides. The lighting is poor and he tries to further hide in the shadows despite the jutting rock digging into his back. He places a second hand over his mouth as he begins to panic as the dwarf is mere feet away from where he stands. His heart threatens to burst asunder as the dwarf is right in front of him, eyes ahead. He’s tall for a dwarf with long dark hair hanging down his back. His face is in shadow but he can see his beard is surprisingly short. The dwarf moves on having not seen him and he watches him leave trying to commit him to memory as he failed to do with the two others. His shoulders are broad but his waistline is slim and…he’s seen him before.

“King Thorin?” He asks giving up his position and startling the other dwarf as he turns his head towards the sound and hits his head on a jutting rock. “Oh my, I’m so sorry.” He says covering his mouth as Thorin doubles over clutching his forehead. “Are you okay?” The King straightens and wipes his brow and looks at his fingers in the poor light.

“No blood, this time.” He adds.

“What are you doing down here?”
“Miners have reported strange sounds coming from the abandon mines and they have refused to work on the lower levels.” That certainly explained why he hadn’t seen anyone. He had inadvertently scared them all away.

“You came to investigate the noise yourself?” He asks in disbelief. “Where are your guards? It isn’t safe for you to walk around on your own.”

“And who is going to hurt me, apart from yourself?” Thorin asks amused.

“You must take precaution is all.” He warns as he can’t tell him about the meeting that might or might not have happened. “King Bard walks around Dale with his armoured guards.”

“That’s because King Bard couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag.” He can’t help but snigger in reply.

“A friend of yours?” He teases.

“The best.” Thorin replies with a smile. “So, what brings you down here, Master Baggins, hiding from my nephew?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Only because I hide here myself sometimes.” He laughs at that. Some people didn’t like or understand his sense of humour and he was glad that not only did Thorin understand it he seemed to share it. “I’ll escort you back to your room.” For a moment he thinks the King will hold out his hand but the moment passes as the King walks by him and jerks his head in a mannerism meaning to follow him.

He follows two steps behind, turning right and then straight on up an incline turning right again at the first turning and then a quick left and straight. It’s all terribly confusing and he starts to become suspicious when Thorin’s gait slows and he takes corners hesitantly.

“Are you lost?” He asks.

“It’s my mountain.” Thorin snaps, looking left and right.

“It’s a big mountain.”

“I’m not lost.” He ventures left and goes straight up another incline and then right only to pause again.

“I once got lost in the Shire.”

“I’m not lost.” He turns left only to double back and to go right. “I know where I’m going.” There’s no heat in his snappish replies only humour. He pauses and holds a hand up as if to silence him. He pauses as well and hears the sound of pickaxe on rock. “I told you.” From there his pace quickens much to his annoyance but he hurries along behind him as they come into a densely populated place. The noise is almost deafening as hundreds of dwarves hammer away at the rock while the King smiles, appeased. “Tin,” he says as they both watch over the workers.

An emerald tunnel stands empty beside it confusing him. He knows nothing of mining but he was sure emerald was worth more than tin. He doesn’t question it, as it is not his place and the King was clearly pleased so there must be a valuable market for it.

They move on, past the forge and the arena and higher to the royal sleeping quarters. The hall goes
on for days but his room is the first one on the right.

“Thank you for coming to find me and I do hope you’ll reconsider extra security. The mountain is not secure.”

“I can look after myself.”

“If anything were to happen to you, I wouldn’t forgive myself.” Thorin looks at him then but his expression is undecipherable. “Or to Fíli and Kíli.” He adds as an afterthought and damns himself in the process. “You’re my family and I want to keep you all safe.” Bold words but he could think of no others to get through to the proud dwarf.

“I appreciate the thought but we are safe.”

“A wager then.” Dwarves were notorious for wagers and their inability to refuse one.

“Go on,” Thorin replies, interested.

“If I win you will increase your security and have every single tunnel checked and secured and if you win…” he trails off unsure as to what the King might want.

“You will bake for me.” Thorin offers after he flounders. “One pie or cake of my choosing once a day for a month.” It’s a fair trade but he’s still stumped by it. “My nephews will not stop talking about a cake you baked.” Thorin offers his reason and he nods in understanding.

“Very well, we have a deal.” He holds his hand out to seal the deal.

Thorin reaches for it and then stops. “What exactly are we betting on?”

“Ah,” he pauses a moment to think and then unties the cravat from around his neck. Thorin watches him curiously but makes no attempt to stop him as he ties it around the King’s waist with a single knot. “In twenty-four hours, if this,” he gently tugs on the cravat to prove the integrity of the knot. “Is still around your waist, you win.” Thorin then tests the knot for himself. “You cannot add another knot and I cannot be seen taking it from around your waist. Do we have a deal?” He asks extending his hand once more.

“If I see you, I win?” Thorin clarifies.

“If you catch me attempting to take it, then yes, but you won’t see me and I’ll have proven how unsafe you are.”

“Fighting words, deal.” Thorin then takes his hand, warm in comparison to his own and shakes it. “When do the twenty-four hours begin?”

“From now, but as of right now I am going to catch up on some much-needed sleep. Good night, Thorin.” He opens his bedroom door and steps inside.

“Oh Bilbo,” Thorin says as an afterthought and he turns in the doorway and arches an inquisitive brow. “My mother used to bake the most delicious cranberry pies, I hope yours can compare.” The arrogance, he can’t help but laugh.

“It’s strange, I’m the one going to sleep but you’re the one dreaming, my King.” He inclines his head in mockery of a bow. “Good night.” He practically sings and shuts the door.

“Good morning.” Thorin returns and he stands by the door and listens to him leave. Morning? Well
that made sense with the miners all at work. It doesn’t matter. He staggers over to his bed and drops face down in the centre and is asleep within minutes.
A Place Amongst Us

He turns from the door and walks down the hall to leave the sleeping quarters before pausing and suddenly looking down. The cravat is still around his waist. The hobbit meant to trick him, he was sure of it. His tiredness was a ruse and he meant to catch him unawares while his back was turned. He returns to the hobbit’s door and presses his ear against the wood to hear what the little trickster was up to and his face falls as he listens to his light snores. Not a trickster then.

He takes his leave once more concerned by the hobbit’s fatigue. Reports of strange noises began several days ago, had the hobbit been lost in the abandoned tunnels for the entire time? Why had no one noticed him missing? Kíli especially should have known his fiancé was gone, instead his nephew had lied to him again about spending time with the hobbit. He would have to send a meal up to his room when he awakens as an apology.

He means to have a word with his nephew but his presence was required in the council chambers and he makes his way there, distracted by the cloth around his waist. It’s dirty, which strikes him as odd as the hobbit was usually impeccably dressed. Black fingertips decorate the edge of the cloth where the hobbit had tied it. He tests the integrity of the knot once more and finds it will not come loose with a tug, the hobbit must be close and untie it.

He shakes his head, as he has already won. He doubts the hobbit means to take it from his waist while he sleeps as even he was not so bold as to enter his bedroom uninvited. He turns his mind away from such thoughts and enters the council chambers.

Three of the fifteen seats are taken and as he turns to close the door he is deafened by laughter. He turns looking at Dwalin doubled over in the second chair laughing and bashing his fist upon the table while Balin seated in the first seat is turned to look upon his brother. Unsure of the reason for his amusement, Balin then turns to look at him and his white eyebrows raise.

“I don’t believe that’s how you wear one of those, laddie.” Balin informs him while Dwalin’s howls of laughter increase in volume.

“Look at you!” Dwalin states, gasping for breath as tears of mirth mist his eyes. “Fashionista!” He glowers as Dwalin succumbs to laughter once more. “Don’t be like that, gives us a twirl.” He ignores him and takes his seat at the head of the table.

“Why are you wearing that?” Balin asks seriously and he already fears he knows too much.

“I found it.” He lies. “If we are all settled,” he eyes Dwalin especially. “I have located the sound of the disturbance so the miners can return to the lower mines.”

“What was it?”

“The hobbit. Gimli,” he addresses the young dwarf seated beside Dwalin. “Could you go into the kitchens and have a meal brought up for Bilbo when he awakens, as lavish as they allow please.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Gimli replies and climbs from his seat and leaves the room with a bow of respect.

“The hobbit was on his own in the abandoned mines?” Dwalin asks sounding almost as annoyed as he felt.

“The noise has been heard for days.” Balin adds incredulously.
“I’m well aware. I was told Kíli was visiting him daily and now I find it to be a lie. If he were to have died down there…” he clenches his fist and stills his tongue before he speaks in anger.

“The terms of the contract must be upheld.” Balin agrees when the room falls silent.

“So, we’re setting a date for the wedding?” Dwalin asks.

“No!” He vehemently refuses. “After what Kíli has done, he’ll be lucky if there even is a wedding.”

“Now Thorin, the contract clearly states…”

“I know what it says, I wrote it.” He snaps.

“Far be it for me to question the almighty King.” Balin sarcastically says with his hands held up in surrender before he crosses his arms over his chest and sits back in his chair looking straight ahead. He has offended one of the few allies he had which was not his intention.

“I will not endanger the treaty but nor will I reward Kíli for his behaviour.”

“So, what’s to be done?” Dwalin asks as Balin is still sore.

“I’m asking you, both of you, not as a King but as a friend. Befriend the hobbit. He has no place amongst us, so you must find him one.”

“And what’s to be done about young Kíli?” Balin enquires.

“Leave him to me, if that’s all?” He asks standing without listening to their response. “Where can Kíli be found?”

“In the arena with F…”

“Fíli? Of course he is.”

“Now Thorin,” Balin starts and stands from his seat. “Do you think it wise to confront your nephew in this temper?”

“Wise? No. Necessary? Yes. He doesn’t respect me. He doesn’t respect Bilbo or the treaty. He is of age now and I cannot abide such behaviour.”

“At least take Dwalin with you so you don’t kill the poor lad. Dís will never forgive you.” It’s true, she wouldn’t and though there are very few things that scare him, his sister’s wrath is one of them.

“Very well,” he concedes. “Balin, have the miners resume work in the lower tunnels and Dwalin, with me.” They leave the council chambers and they turn left taking their leave of Balin who turns right.

He’s incensed to the point of distraction and it is only through luck of seeing the cravat around his waist that he remembers the wager and suddenly turns looking down. His quick movement startles Dwalin as he turns drawing his sword.

“What?”

“Nothing, I thought I saw something. Keep an eye out, will you?” It’s underhanded but he has no intention of losing. Dwalin looks at him warily but nods his acquiesce and sheathes his sword once more.
The terms of the wager come to mind as they continue on to the arena. He might ask for a trifle, although he isn’t entirely sure what it is, but he was told Bilbo would not part with the recipe as he was forced to leave the Shire. He respected that, admired it even, a certain level of petty was deserved. Bilbo hadn’t volunteered to come, he had been chosen which was just a polite way of saying sacrificed and now here he was treated as an afterthought.

There are only two dwarves in the arena and no spectators. He closes the doors to the public and bars them as Dwalin watches and then he walks down the stairs in the viewing gallery to watch the brothers spar with wooden swords.

“Very good.” He announces to get their attention and then he joins them in the arena as Dwalin follows behind him. “How about some competition?” He asks and notices both boys beam in joy in prospect of a challenge. “Fíli, your sword please.” Fíli’s shoulders slump in defeat and he reluctantly passes him his sword and walks over to the side where Dwalin stands. “Ready?” He asks and Kíli nods enthusiastically.

His first swing is tentative, easy to predict and even easier to block. “Good.” He says as it is blocked and swings again, and then once more, each as slow and as predictable as the first. “Did you see the hobbit yesterday?” He asks without accusation, leading his nephew into a false sense of security.

“Yes Uncle,” Kíli replies blocking another predictable blow.

“What did you do?” He asks, discreetly increasing the speed of his attack but keeping his aim predictable.


“Did you now?” He asks failing to hide the anger in his tone.

“Of course, Uncle.” Kíli replies uncertainly and almost fails to block an easy stab.

“Liar!” He gave him ample opportunity to tell him the truth and he failed to do so. He brings his sword down quicker, still predictable but as Kíli blocks- still on the backfoot- he changes hands and jabs him in the stomach. He changes hands again and hits him on the hip and then again on the thigh knowing the taps were bruising in their intensity. “Do you know where the hobbit was?” He snarls menacingly, hitting his nephew twice more.

“No!” Kíli finally answers him truthfully while in retreat of his incessant blows. He follows him, gaining ground and hits him again.

“I’ll tell you,” he disarms his nephew and then shoves him against the wall.

“Uncle!” Fíli cries out but Dwalin holds him back as he lunges forward to intervene.

“He was in the abandoned mines.” He says barring his forearm across his nephews exposed throat. “He could have died down there.” He states applying pressure and staring into his nephews frightened wide eyes. “How dare you lie to me? How dare you treat Bilbo so appallingly. Do you honestly think he wants to marry you? You mean nothing to him, he doesn’t want you and you don’t deserve him.”

“Thorin!” Dwalin warns as Kíli claws desperately at his forearm trying to breathe. He shoves Kíli back, knocking his head against the rock and releases him, letting him fall to the ground, clutching his throat.

“You disgust me.” He hisses and kicks sand on his nephew for good measure.
Fíli approaches cautiously, hands raised to show he is non-threatening as he walks by him to check on his brother as Dwalin approaches. “See to it that these two are put through their paces. I don’t want them to leave the arena until their bones ache and they beg for mercy.”

“Me?” Fíli asks incredulously.

“You enable your brother, don’t deny it.” Fíli drops his head without dispute, as good as agreeing with him.

“Thorin, a word.” Without waiting for an answer, Dwalin takes hold of his arm and pulls him away from hearing distance from his nephews. “You mind telling me what that was about?”

“Endangering Dis’ welfare, that contract is for her benefit.”

“I know that, I want to know why you sounded jealous.”

“Jealous?” He scoffs. “What do I have to be jealous of?” Dwalin looks at him meaningfully and then shakes his head.

“Oh Thorin, tell me you haven’t.”

“Haven’t what?” Dwalin grabs his arm again and takes him further away from the boys and then leans in close to whisper in his ear.

“You’ve fallen for the hobbit.” He laughs out loud and pushes his friend away.

“I have not.” Dwalin folds his arms and tilts his head in disbelief of his words. “I haven’t,” he reiterates with a seriousness he lacked before.

“He’s not yours.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” He won’t dignify that with a response. “Set a date for the wedding.”

“No!”

“Exactly.” That is not the reason why he won’t set a date as Dwalin well knows.

“See that the boys do as I say.” He turns on his heels and leaves. The conversation is over. He has no idea why Dwalin is accusing him of such things when they simply aren’t true. Had he spoken out of turn with Kíli? Absolutely, he was angry and he wanted to hurt him. He didn’t speak falsely, Bilbo did not choose to come here and he was having doubts about the marriage due to his age. He would marry Kíli but Kíli was no prize and he needed to be put in his place. If Dwalin misconstrued his intention, then that was on him. He had acted honourably and in favour of the contract not against.

He looks down at his waist and sees the cravat is still there. The wager was harmless but he is glad that he had told no one considering what he was just accused of. He walks to his study, turning every once in a while, to make sure no sneaky hobbits are behind him and makes it to his study unscathed. He shuts the door and locks it with a smirk. Serves the hobbit right for not setting better rules, there were loopholes and he would exploit every single one of them to win.

He takes a seat at his desk for a moment of calm before he remembers the parchment there. A letter from the Greenwood, an offer for a trade agreement that was unfortunately too good to refuse. He wanted to but he would be judged harshly for it and his detractors would say he acted out of
thoughtless spite and that his pride meant more than his people. Thranduil offered to send his son in his stead due to their bad blood, which spoke of the importance of the trade agreement. He’d be a fool to refuse it as it was only a meeting to talk trade, any tricks and he’d send them on their way.

He turns the parchment over, as he is unwilling to waste a fresh piece and writes ‘agreed’ and signs it before rolling it up and resealing it with wax and the Durin coat of arms. The other parchment on his desk is from Gondor enquiring about prices on their tin and he hasn’t decided what he should charge after their little escapade in the Glittering Caves. If he charges too much, he’ll force their hand and make them look elsewhere and the Iron Hills produce tin by the ton and as their relationship is currently strained, he wouldn’t be surprised if Dain were to undercut him for the contract.

He gets up out of his seat, checks to make sure the cravat is still around his waist and heads to the door. He unlocks it and opens it enough to poke his head out to see if it is clear before he leaves. He’d have to go to the tin mine and then the forge before conferring with Gloin and Bûr on sustainability, costs, prices and profit. Afterwards, he would dine with Balin and Dwalin in the council chamber and discuss plans for the morrow and then return to his study with a reply to Gondor and have the ravens sent at first light.

He’ll sleep when he’s dead, as that was the only time he would be at peace. He stops suddenly and turns around but no one is there. The hobbit has made him paranoid and he would love to know why the hobbit feared for his life. There had never been an attempt on his life, or his father’s or even his grandfathers and he had suffered from dragon sickness. He continues down the tunnel suddenly aware of how alone he was. He always had to be somewhere, he was the King and though he had the King’s Guard they were his elite soldiers, too experienced in the art of war to shadow him. Financially it made no sense. Still, he’d win the wager, put Bilbo’s mind at ease, eat sweets for a month and get on with his day as he has since his coronation.

The sound of the pickaxes is almost deafening as the dwarves from the copper mines are helping in the tin mine. A steady stream of dwarves pushing wheelbarrows both exit and enter the cave. He allows space for them, checks the cravat is still around his waist and talks to the first miner he sees.

“How far along?” He shouts over the noise.

“A league, so far.” He slaps him on the back for a job well done and steps between two dwarves pushing tin to the forge finding safety between them. He keeps checking the cravat regardless, confusing the dwarf behind him who similarly takes to looking down to see what is disturbing him. He appreciates the concern.

He steps out from between them as they reach the forge and they carry on towards the pulley system set-up beside kiln two. He notices Bûr stood with a clipboard and pen and he checks the cravat once more and walks over to him.

“My King,” Bûr greets without lifting his head and continues to scribble on the clipboard.

“How much tin have we produced?” He asks, looking down once more.

“Seven ton ready to send…is everything okay?” Bûr asks lifting his head to find him looking over his shoulder.

“Everything is fine. By day’s end what will the production be?”

“If the mine continues to be fruitful and the steady flow of tin continues as it has, it will be fair to say another ten ton by nightfall. Are you sure you’re okay?” Bûr insists as his focus isn’t entirely on him.
“I’m fine, that’s fine, great news. Is the Master of the Coin here?”

“No, I’ll get a runner to bring him here.”

“Have him meet me in the treasury.” Bûr nods and he takes his leave, taking a moment to visit wage minting and finding the place barren as the day’s work had been done. He then goes into the treasury to await Gloin and count stock as he waits.

The wait is short for Gloin to join him and together they count stock and speak of trade prices and a fair-trade agreement with Gondor. He briefly tells him about the Greenwood’s possibility of trade and requests Gloin’s presence during the meeting as he had a better understanding of such things, which the dwarf agreed and thanked him for.

It is the best he has felt all day and with his stomach rumbling he leaves the forge and makes his way to the council chamber. Balin and Dwalin are already there and the room smells heavenly with steak cooked to perfection.

“Awww,” Dwalin whines as he enters the room. He ignores him and shuts the door. “He’s taken it off.”

“What?” He asks and looks down only to find the cravat missing from around his waist. He looks to the floor thinking it must have fallen and opens the door to look down the hall finding it’s not there either.

“Oh Bilbo you missed a treat there, lad.” He looks back into the room, and sees Bilbo hidden behind Dwalin sat on the third chair toying with the ends of his white cravat that was stained with sooty fingerprints on the very end with a smirk on his face. “Our King was quite taken with your fashion, only he wore your scarf like a belt. It was quite a sight but I’m afraid we ridiculed him and he has taken it off. Do show him how to wear one properly, would you?”

“Of course.” Bilbo agrees and climbs from the chair and approaches him while untying the cravat. “The knot is very important,” he says throwing the cravat over his head and stepping into his personal space. “You never know who is in the shadows willing to take it from you.” He ties the cravat skilfully and carefully around his throat and then runs gentle hands down his chest as he looks him in the eye. “No one can take it from you now, my King.” Bilbo whispers and tilts his head as if waiting for a kiss but then the moment is gone and he returns to his seat as he stares down at the cravat in disbelief. It is the very same one that had been around his waist but when the hobbit had taken it from him, he could not say.

He takes a seat at the head of the table and cuts into his steak as his companions have resumed eating. He was surprised to find Bilbo here, but he had asked Balin and Dwalin to find a place for him and he was pleased to have him close by, even if he had just lost the wager.

“Dwalin, I need you and a team of your choosing to search every tunnel for security breaches and I require two personal guards with me at all times.” Bilbo lifts his head and gifts him an appeased smile.

“Is everything alright?” Balin asks worriedly.

“Just taking precaution.” He answers calmly to put the elder dwarf at ease but it is a lie. Everything is not alright. He touches the cravat around his throat and drops his gaze to the table.

Dwalin’s accusations might not be unfounded after all.
Baking

One hundred and nineteen. One hundred and twenty. He finishes counting and shakes his head. He had amassed a small fortune while in the mines. He eyes the velvet pouch in his hand and then the pile of gold coins. If he takes too many, he would appear a braggart but if he takes too few, he would have to rely on Erebor’s charity.

His decision is interrupted by a familiar drumming on his door. He stares at it dumbfounded, unable to recall the last time he had seen his fiancé. He knocks-drums-again and he drops the pouch and makes his way swiftly to the door.

“One moment!” He calls out and opens the door to find his intended stood there. Normally he is greeted with a blinding smile but the corners of Kíli’s lips are barely upturned and he is holding his ribs as if he were injured. A look at the bruising around his throat proves that he was injured. “What happened to you?” He asks aghast.

“You should see the other guy.” Fíli says, appearing around the corner and then struts into his room without invitation.

“I imagine he is in the infirmary. If that is the damage he has done, I dread to see the state he is in.” Kíli’s sad grimace becomes a timid smile as he steps forward and presses their foreheads together. He’s never quite understood the mannerism but he prefers it to the headbutt he usually gets.

He fusses over him, leading him into his room and sitting him on the chair and he is surprised how well Kíli responded to him. He liked the attention. He shouldn’t be surprised, after all he had seen him practically glowing in the equestrian centre as he was greeted with thunderous applause.

“There’s no cake!” Fíli shouts forlornly from the kitchen after riffling through all of his cabinets.

“I need fresh supplies.” He calls back, looking at the lump on the back of Kíli’s head. Kíli winces as he moves his hair aside which in turn causes him to wince and frown. No one should be allowed to inflict such damage on a prince from the noble line of Durin. He hoped Thorin did not know about this because he imagines the dwarf responsible would be dead by noon. Well, maybe not dead, Thorin wasn’t so terrible, but the culprit would certainly be wishing they were dead.

The skin isn’t broken but the injury is swollen and red. He presses a gentle kiss against his hair near the lump as it is the only remedy he could think of. As he pulls away, Kíli is looking up at him with heavy-lidded eyes that thankfully do not remind him of Thorin. There’s a blissful smile on his lips that was not there before and as he goes to move away, Kíli captures his hand and presses a kiss to the back of it.

“Allow us to escort you to Dale.”

“Did Thorin put you up to this?” He asks, taking his hand back, it certainly reeked of his influence, as it did yesterday when Balin invited him for dinner. The Trickster, thinking he could occupy his time so he could not take the cravat from around his waist. It was almost too easy finding him in the treasury with Gloin, his back to the door, as they talked trade prices. He had stepped behind him, untied the knot and meant to leave until they started talking of an elven host and so he listened as he placed the cravat back around his neck and tied it before leaving.

“I was told about the mines,” Kíli admits. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he soothes. “No harm done.” And if harm were done it would be on his own head by
chasing phantoms in the night. Still, he can’t regret his actions as they were well intended and now, he was slowly starting to feel like a part of the family that he was promised.

“Let’s go then, sooner we leave the sooner we can start making those cakes.” Fili says with enthusiasm and he’s flattered the boys think so highly of his baking. He could have had an amazing bakery but Balin vetoed that idea.

“Are you going to help me bake?” He asks while helping Kili up from the chair. He keeps his arm around his waist as his left legs keeps buckling.

“Do you want us to?” Fili asks walking over to help with his brother.

“Yes,” he answers after a fashion not realising how much he wanted to bake with someone and pass on the knowledge that his mother passed on to him.

“We’d love to bake with you.” Kili says managing to stand on his own. He knows the boys have money but he goes over to his stash of coins and shoves them into his pouch until it is full and stuffs it into his pocket.

“Very well, let’s go.” He calls enthusiastically, not having felt so good in months. He takes off from his room with the boys following behind him but as he turns left to enter the Great Hall, they call his name out in dismay. He turns to see them heading right.

“This way, Bilbo” Kili calls, signalling him over with his hand. He pauses, unsure, as he was quite convinced he was going the right way. He shrugs, they weren’t the ones that were rescued from the abandoned mines, and he follows behind them.

He was right to be concerned as he follows the lads into the stables. “Faster this way,” Fili tells him while mounting a white pony.

“Plus my knee,” Kili adds but mounts his chestnut pony with ease.

“I’ll just walk along, I’ve had my fair share of walking holidays, I’ll be sure to keep uuupp!” His last word is dragged out and high pitched as the lads come up by the side of him and easily lift him and deposit him on a bay pony.

He sits there, unhappily as the boys laugh and leave the stable. “I’m going to die, you do realise?” He complains as they leave the mountain and he lurches forward and shrieks. “It’s too steep, I’d rather die in the mines!”

“Calm down.”

“Tell it to my grave, I hope they send a Sackville-Baggins in my stead, that’ll teach you.”

“Bilbo, this is the trade route, it isn’t steep and you’re not going to die.” Fili calmly informs him, riding by his side.

“Exactly,” Kili adds, coming up on his right. He reaches across to hold his hand and bring the reins down from where he held them up high. “I would never let anything bad happen to my betrothed.”

He finds comfort in his touch and pats the back of his hand. “About that, can we talk in private?” Fili’s head turns at that, having failed to hide his eavesdropping.

“I’ll ride ahead,” he offers with a wink and does as he says riding just beyond hearing distance but still safe in their presence. Fili takes hold of his pony’s-Myrtle’s- reins and he clutches the horn of
the saddle, tripping over his words wondering where to start.

“I..er… I saw you, some time ago, in the equestrian centre?” He offers as Kíli keenly follows his words and then nods with a boastful grin.

“Were you very impressed?” He asks, fishing for compliments and throwing him for a moment.

“Ah, yes, very.” He lies, the truth was he had sat through the performance with a heavy heart and a guilty conscience. “It’s just…” he pauses, floundering. “You were gifted many favours…” he pauses hoping Kíli would follow his train of thought but he does not. “You only accepted the favours from the women?” He offers.

“Of course.” Kíli says shamelessly and his heart sinks further than it did that day. “It would be disrespectful if I accepted a token of affection from a male while I’m engaged to one.”

“So, you’re not averse to having a male partner?” He asks hopefully.

“Not when they are as pretty as you.” He says with a wink and he feels a blush stain his cheeks.

“Let’s go a little faster, okay? We want to reach Dale before nightfall.” He nods and let’s Kíli control both ponies so they catch up with Fíli who smiles knowingly and gifts them both with cheeky winks.

There’s a wooden beam just outside the city gates where they are able to tie their ponies and to his great embarrassment, he needed help for the dismount. Both brothers come to his aid, one touching him with a familiarity that he was uncomfortable with and he suspected which one it was. It is a relief to be on the ground once again and they enter through the city gates and into the hustle and bustle of city life.

“Is there anything you boys need?” He asks, listening to the sales people shouting their prices and watching them waving their wares to gain attention.

“Cake.” Fíli answers and he laughs.

“Flour, eggs, sugar, salt, butter, milk and then fillings.” He lists realising he need only visit one stall. The one he frequented before is near the Town Square and as it is the only one he is aware of, he goes there with the boys following beside him. To his surprise they don’t garner much attention as he thought they would, but then he remembered they didn’t seem too bothered by their King either on his last visit.

It’s a small blessing and one he jinxes as a man with shoulder-length brunet hair wearing a burgundy leather surcoat stops before them, looking at each of them in turn before his hazel eyes settle on Fíli.

“Prince Fíli, it is an honour to have you in my city and may I say you look exceedingly ravishing today.” It’s a chore to keep his expression passive in face of such shameless flirting and he turns to share a look with Kíli only to see his attention is elsewhere.

“Thank you, Bard. I trust that you are well?” Bard? He’d heard that name before. King Bard, of course.

“All the better for seeing you.” It’s beginning to hurt keeping his face neutral and he wonders if they do realise he is standing right there. Bard is handsome with skin bronzed by the sun’s kiss. His facial hair is minimal and tidy, a moustache graces his top lip and there’s a patch of hair on his chin. His lips are full and pink and curved into a grin but it is his eyes that are the most attractive. Dark and alive, they practically sparkle with lust and Fíli…is completely unaware.

How? How can he not see that raw sex appeal? He could see it, but he was unmoved by it, Bard was
very handsome but he was no Thorin- Kíli- he was no Kíli. “Are you here for very long? You can take refreshment and rest at my palace.” Rest? They travelled from the mountain by pony, he’s not even trying to be subtle.

“A generous offer but we’ve come for supplies and no more, perhaps another time?” He shakes his head, Fíli is too innocent for this world.

“I look forward to it, my door is always open.” With a wink the King departs and once he is far enough away he laughs.

“His bedroom door.” It feels good saying it out loud because keeping it inside was killing him.

“Subtly isn’t his forte.”

“What do you mean?” Fíli asks with a blank expression and he soberes.

“Maybe it is,” he shrugs. Kíli has walked away, something has caught his eye but he is unsure as to what it is and so he can talk freely to Fíli. “King Bard is attracted to you. Is that why your uncle dislikes him and shouldn’t he be with guards? I heard he couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag.” Fíli laughs but he is unsure of which part he said that tickled him.

“You sound like uncle. Bard is just friendly and he is one of the most skilled fighters I’ve ever met.”

“Who are we talking about?” Kíli asks, walking back over to them.

“King Bard.”

“He has a place of honour in the Games every year and he places high. He’s an amazing archer, far better than me.”

“I don’t believe that is true, none can be better than you.” Kíli smiles broadly at the compliment.

“I am very good at dagger throwing,” Fíli speaks up, a touch of jealousy in his voice.

“The best in the land,” he agrees and the brothers wear matching smiles. “So, what is the dispute with King Bard and Thorin?”

“It’s over a necklace and his close relationship with Thranduil, who he also hates because of a necklace.”

“Your uncle likes necklaces?” He asks, suddenly regretting burying his mother’s pearls.

“That, or he hates men and elves and is looking for any excuse.” Fíli answers with a shrug. He files the information away for another day.

“Let us go and get those ingredients.” The grocer is finishing up with a customer and his smile widens upon seeing him rather than the princes. “You lads pick whatever filling you want,” he offers and steps up to the stall as the boys muse over the offerings. “A sack of flour, a dozen eggs, one litre of milk, butter, a cup of sugar and salt and a bag of cranberries please.” He pays for his ingredients when they are handed over and waits for the Kíli to purchase apples while Fíli buys lemons.

The boys carry his bags for him as they make their way back to the ponies but Kíli handling the eggs has him worried. They help him mount and it is a much easier ride back to the mountain now that he does not fear death with every step the pony takes.

The ponies are taken care of by stable hands so they are able to collect their supplies and return to his
room and head straight into the kitchen. “Right, if you’re going to help me, you’ll need clean hands.” The boys mutter and whine but walk over to the sink. “Scrub beneath your nails too, they are absolutely filthy.” More whining, but they do as he says as he collects the appropriate equipment and places it on the counter.

“We’re done,” the boys chirp merrily.

“Let me see,” he inspects their hands and finds that they are indeed clean and sets them tasks. “Kíli, I need you to break two eggs in that bowl and Fíli, I would like you to peel the apples and then cut them, while I make the crust.” For a moment all seems to be well as he mixes the dough until he turns finding Kíli with his fingers in the yoke. “What are you doing?” He asks aghast, while Kíli continues on, regardless.

“Dropped a piece of the shell.” He says, continuing jabbing his fingers into the mixture.

“No no no no, stop it.” He reprimands, pulling Kíli’s hand away. “Look,” he says picking up one half of a split eggshell and dips it in the mix to collect the piece of shell.

“That’s amazing.” He isn’t sure about that but he appreciates the look of awe on his face.

“So what cake are you making, Bilbo?” Fíli asks.

“Not a cake, I’m making a cranberry pie.”

“Grandmother used to make those,” Kíli says with enthusiasm.

“Did she?” He asks coyly, already knowing she did.

“We’ll have to make uncle Thorin one.” Fíli says.

“Yes!” Kíli agrees. “A lemon cake too.” He nods along as the brothers banter back and forth.

“Well, if you insist.” He agrees failing to mention that was his original plan. Best not to tell them, it was easier to let them believe it was their idea. It made sense for it to be their idea, a loving gesture from devoted nephews rather than a thoughtful gift from a hobbit that should know better.
Two guards stand posted outside of his bedroom door as he shovels cranberry pie into his mouth. He had only come for one slice but one led to two and the next thing he knew the whole pie had been demolished. Fíli and Kíli had gifted it to him as an apology but he knew who was truly behind the gesture. He had lost the wager but had somehow still won, it was good to be the King.

He had left his door open as privacy is now a thing of the past with his shadow guards and he is able to see Dwalin marching towards his rooms. His cheeks protrude as his mouth is full and he smiles at the spectacle he must make but Dwalin does not share his humour as his thick dark eyebrows are furrowed and his thin lips are bloodless by being pressed tightly together. The smile is immediately wiped from his own face and he swallows and knocks the crumbs from his beard.

“There’s been an attempted breach.” Dwalin informs him with an angry snarl.

“In?”

“Out.”

“Show me.” He orders with a growl of his own. A breach from within the mountain made little sense. He follows Dwalin, and his shadow guard follow after him, unnerving him for a moment until he remembers them. Bilbo had tried to warn him but he had been too blind, too arrogant to see. An attack upon the mountain was attack upon himself and he truly believed none would dare. The last attack was centuries ago and the assailant now lay at the bottom of Long Lake with a black arrow through its chest sleeping with the fishes.

They venture low into the mines, past the miners on the lower levels and further into the abandoned tunnels. He can sense they are nearing the breach as a gust of wind blows his hair back and he eyes Dwalin with mixed feelings. He’s angry, no doubt about that, but he’s worried too. They head north to the back of the mountain and come upon the escape route.

He doesn’t know what offends him more, their audacity or their shoddy work. It’s a hasty tiny bolthole at least a mile long. Far too small to steal anything substantial and every jewel in the mountain was accounted for and could easily be traced even on the black market, so theft would be pointless.

“This doesn’t make any sense.” He says pacing, angry and perplexed. “A dwarf did this!” He snarls bitterly pointing at the bolthole. He had suspected many people of many things but he would never suspect his own kin. Perhaps that was his own folly. “Why, Dwalin? What is the meaning of this?”

Dwalin tilts his head and rubs his brown beard in contemplation. “They needed to escape unseen.” Dwalin muses and he nods. “A dwarf did this, a dwarf under the employ or had been under the employ of Erebor. One with knowledge of the abandon mines, perhaps even once worked them when they bore fruit?”

He nods again, it was a sensible deduction. “But why?” He persists. “Why do they need an escape if they can infiltrate the mountain so easily?” Dwarves do not suspect dwarves. “What could they possibly take?”

“Can you think of nothing?” Dwalin asks with a meaningful look and he scoffs at his suggestion. “The Arkenstone has been lost for centuries, if they have found it then they are welcome to it.” He spits nastily. His grandfather was besotted with that tacky rock while he was not, he’d take a tin mine
over the Arkenstone any day of the week. The Arkenstone was lost days before his grandfather died but he had a sneaking suspicion that the old dwarf had somehow taken it with him. He would check his tomb if the thought of skeletal fingers striking his cheek didn’t put the fear of Mahal into him. Some nights when the thought enters his mind he awakes, dripping with sweat and the phantom touch of bony fingers against his face. He shivers from the memory and Dwalin eyes him curiously.

“How do you suppose the hobbit knew about this?” Dwalin asks, raising his scarred eyebrow.

“You suspect him?” He asks incredulously while Dwalin shrugs noncommitally. “This has taken months, it could have possibly begun before I ever sent for him. He found it because he was lost.”

“I can’t imagine them liking that.” His heart freezes in his chest.

“What do you mean by that?”

“This tunnel has taken months, I agree with you, a day more and they would have breached the mountain. They must have heard Bilbo and scarpered and now he’s warned you. Let’s hope they don’t look for retribution.”

“No,” he shakes his head slowly but not in denial but in fear. “No!” He takes off running, trusting Dwalin will seal the breach.

“Set the date!” Dwalin yells but he ignores him. Bilbo is in danger because of him. He can hear his guards chasing after him but he doesn’t care, he pays them well and so they should keep up and expect the unexpected.

Granted, having the King run through his kingdom as if chased by wargs before his people isn’t the most calming of images and his fear becomes theirs. He should have thought but when it comes to Bilbo he can’t think. The hobbit has managed to occupy a large space in his mind, far larger than he is willing to admit. He occupies his every waking thought, that he fears he will go mad if he doesn’t see that cherubic smile, or those honey curls.

He had always feared madness, but this was a madness of a different kind. He’s driven himself insane for his longing to taste the lips he has promised to his nephew. He couldn’t do that to Kíli, as annoying and troublesome as he is, he couldn’t break his heart. He was willing to die for his nephews; his own broken heart was of no consequence.

He storms into the hobbit’s quarters without knocking and finds the bed empty and made. “Master Baggins?” He bellows and hears a metal tray clatter to the floor. He partially closes the door and heads into the kitchen to find Bilbo doubled over picking up the tray.

“King Thorin,” he says bowing his head awkwardly given his current angle.

“Come with me.”

“I just…”

“Now!” He orders and Bilbo leaves the tray on the floor and follows quietly behind him. He should apologise since he isn’t mad at him, he’s scared for him. He’s scared. He hasn’t been scared in years.

He doesn’t know where he is going, he can’t think with Bilbo in close proximity, wringing his hands nervously and shuffling dutifully behind him. Thankfully some parts of his body do work as he finds himself in the royal armoury lifting a small coat of mail wrought for some young elf-prince long ago.

It’s perfect, as if it were made for the hobbit.
He turns with the vest in his hands. “You’re going to need this. Put it on.” Fear continues to motivate his speech as he commands the hobbit, when in truth he is making a grand gesture, gifting the hobbit with armour worth more than the Shire.

Aside from a questioning look and a brief twitch of his lips, Bilbo complies with his orders, taking off his burgundy coat and his green waistcoat leaving him in a crisp white shirt, cravat and braces. “This vest is made of silver steel,” he tells him holding it up by the shoulders. “Mithril, it was called by my forebears.” Bilbo then climbs into the vest as he holds it. “No blade can pierce it.” He continues, and once his arms are through, he releases the vest and walks around him, admiring the armour against his sun-kissed skin and the white gems that decorate the collar. A work of art for a work of art.

Bilbo looks at him and then down at the armour and back once more. “I look absurd,” he says with a laugh. “I can’t accept this.” He doubts he knows its true value, and it is for the sake of vanity that he refuses it.

“It is a gift; a token of our friendship and you must never take it off.”

“Surely it will rust if I wear it in the bathtub.” Bilbo jests.

“Promise me you will not take it off,” he reiterates with a touch of desperation in his voice. “If anything were to happen to you, I wouldn’t forgive myself.” Bilbo’s jaw slackens from that admission as if he had never had his own words parroted back to him. “You’re my family and I want to keep you safe.” Bilbo looks into his eyes and he’s overcome with the need to kiss his lips, touch his hair or hold his hands. He’s consumed by him and he longs to devour him in return.

“Very well, I promise, Uncle.” Uncle. Said in jest but it was as if he was doused in freezing cold water and he’d never feel warm again. It brings him back to the present and grounds him. Bilbo is not his. He steps back and then takes two more steps back until he is beside his guards.

“Take Master Baggins back to his rooms and protect him with your life. You, with me.” He orders and takes his leave without goodbye. An ache swells within his breast and radiates throughout his chest. He needed a drink.
Dorwinion Wine

Uncle? What had he been thinking? But...he would be his uncle in law once he married Kíli and he had said they were family but he shouldn't have said it. It felt wrong saying it. It sounded wrong and Thorin’s reaction...he was a fool for saying it.

Then the King sent him to his room and he hadn’t felt more like a disobedient child in his entire life. That’s not to say it was a punishment, something had happened, perhaps the King saw past his own egotism and realised how unsafe the mountain was. Whatever it was he was given beautiful armour and sent away with a guard, so he was treated less of a disobedient child and more like hoarded treasure. He snorts derisively, in his dreams perhaps, Thorin saw him as no more than a suitable babysitter and possible terrorist given his track record for injuring him.

That was yesterday and the look in the King’s eyes still haunts him. It was as if he had slapped him in the face by using that one misguided word and things were going so well between them. He was still surprised that Thorin had not only listened to him but had repeated his words back to him. It was nice since no one else paid him that much attention and he went and ruined it.

He’d have to make it up to him, giving him a cake was a given but he now had armour, a little ostentatious for his taste but he wasn’t about to say anything. He had nothing to match that gift and he had already decided on the cakes long ago since the King had asked for them in a lost wager and he was alarming thin for a King.

He hadn’t visited the dwarven market in Erebor since Balin showed him around but he did prefer to shop in Dale as he was free of the mountain and in the open air. Balin’s words still haunted him, he’d live in the mountain, he’d die in the mountain and he’d be buried in the mountain, it was a stifling thought. Also, there was the possibility of dwarves gossiping and if he were to buy something and they were to see the King with it the rumour mill would catch fire.

That should tell him how much of a bad idea it was, as even the guard who escorted him to his room eyed the armour with a smirk and winked when he had left. It was a bad idea, he was still going to do it, just away from the mountain and hopefully away from prying eyes.

He grabs his coin purse from the table and opens his door to leave only to be met with Fíli and Kíli stood at his door. They pause, stunned while Kíli’s hand is up ready to knock and then they gather their wits and bow as one.

“Would you like to accompany us?” Kíli asks and he tries desperately to school his features so he does not look annoyed. Ever since the mine incident he never got a moments peace but he supposes that is his own fault for almost getting himself killed.

“Where to?”

“We’re going to race the war rams up Ravenhill.” Kíli replied with enthusiasm while it only sounded stupidly dangerous to him.

“While I do love spending time with you, I will have to politely decline.” He tries to close the door but Kíli shoves it back open.

“Why, are you doing something else?”

“What’s better than racing war rams?” Fíli asks.
“I need to visit Dale again.”

“Okay,” Kíli answers, defeatedly. “We’ll accompany you.”

“There really is no need. You have fun racing your rams and be careful.”

“No, I’d rather spend the day with you.” He was going to close the door again but he can’t with that sweet admission.

“Okay,” he accepts as he should spend time with his fiancé and his brother. Fíli’s presence doesn’t bother him and he made a good chaperone, though that was not why he was there. Kíli needed him and that was a good enough reason for having him there, the fact that he enjoyed the Crown Prince’s company was just an added bonus.

They leave his room and he does not protest when they turn left towards the stables. He quite liked the pony he was given previously as she was of a mellow disposition and with luck, he is gifted the very same pony. He still needed help with the mount and the boys behaved themselves this time and helped him up with minimal touching. The boys then mount their ponies- the same ones as before-and they then ride down the mountain in the single line and stop at the gates of Dale where he is again aided in the dismount and they tether their ponies.

Fíli walks ahead of them into the city without a word which he finds strange until he feels the brush of fingertips against the fingers of his left hand. He turns his head to eye Kíli curiously and finds his head is down with his chestnut hair obscuring his face. He takes the next step and holds Kíli’s right hand and Kíli lifts his head in surprise and awards him with a blinding smile. He truly was beautiful. He returns the smile, less blinding and more heartfelt and they walk into the city hand in hand.

Fíli hadn’t gotten very far and he can’t contain a breath of laughter as he has already been accosted by King Bard. The King is wearing a burgundy leather surcoat and burgundy leather trousers and black riding boots and he leans against the wall just before a seller, right shoulder pressed against the brick and legs extended so he was at Fíli’s height.

Fíli remains oblivious to the predatory gleam in the King’s eyes as he holds one of his throwing daggers and talks animatedly about it. He walks over, tugging Fíli along, afraid how they must look. A young dwarf with an old hobbit, he must look like a cradle snatcher, or his father in a different reality.

“It’s about balance…” he hears Fíli say and gathers he most probably misconstrued a compliment and saw it as an opportunity to brag about his skill.

“Perhaps you could show me sometime?” He tries his best not to roll his eyes and then he finds himself, or rather his clasped hand the focus of Bard’s interest. “And who might this be?” He ignores asking him directly so that he may speak to Fíli once more.

“This is my soon to be brother-in-law, Bilbo Baggins.”

“Indeed?” Bard asks with an arched brow and raises to his full height. “The rumours are true then Bilbo Baggins, welcome to my city and may I pass on my congratulations Prince Kíli.” Kíli gently inclines his head in acceptance as Bard’s eyes return to him once more. “An honour it must be to marry into the Royal line of Durin, if only more of us could be so blessed.” His eyes stray to Fíli once more but the Crown Prince is studying the hilt of his dagger. He offers the King a sympathetic smile which he accepts with a tight-lipped smile and a nod of his head. He’d been caught, he realises but to be fair, he was never trying to hide his feelings. A fool’s dream though, Fíli was promised to someone else, and dwarven contracts were binding. He should know. He had the same foolish
dream.

“I can’t help but notice your number is odd and three can be a crowd. Would you accompany me, Prince Fíli, so that your brother and his fiancé may get better acquainted?” Bard actually holds his arm out and to his surprise Fíli accepts the offering and takes hold of the King’s elbow. “I will see him returned at twelve at the gate.” It is with a slack jaw that he watches the pair depart.

“He does know Bard fancies him, doesn’t he?”

“What?” Kíli splutters beside him in shock. “He does not.”

“You dwarves are blind.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“I didn’t mean…I forgot about…I meant…sorry.” Dwarves were short-sighted, it was common knowledge so his turn of phrase was in very poor taste.

“Buy me something and make it up to me.” Kíli says with a laugh, unoffended and bubbly and so very very young.

“Let’s have a look, shall we?” He offers and Kíli is more than happy to go around the stalls with him now he thinks there is a present in it for him. He’s not even sure what he is looking for but he’ll know what it is when he finds it.

Kíli appears to be attracted to the weapons though he whispers to him that dwarven quality is far superior. Even so, he takes a liking to a small dagger with a scorpion tail hilt but his dwarven pride will not allow him to buy it. He sends him off on an errand, to purchase an apple and as their hands release and Kíli happily goes on his quest, he returns to the seller and buys the scorpion hilt blade and a throwing axe for Fíli. Try as he might, there was no suitable gift for a King on that stall and so he moves on.

He’s at a jewellery stall when Kíli returns with his stunning smile producing an apple- red- he asked for green, but it was an apple so he takes it with thanks. Kíli then rifles through a bowl of beads when something catches his eye. He edges closer but does not look directly at it should he alert the seller or Kíli that he was interested. It’s a necklace made out of sharp yellowed teeth strung together on a cheap silver chain. They are too big to fit in an orcs mouth so they belonged to some kind of beast.

He wants it. It would look stunning around Thorin’s throat. He’d look dangerous and wild and strong. It is already decided that he will have it but Kíli is too near.

“Kíli is there somewhere else you need to be?” He asks as the beads have become boring and Kíli shakes his head in the negative until dawning realisation shines in his eyes.

“Oh, you mean to buy me something. I’ll go back to the smiths and see about that dagger.” Kíli takes his leave, brushing by him as he goes and when he turns back the seller with the auburn hair is smiling knowingly.

“Young love, what have you found for your handsome prince?” He tries desperately to keep his smile from waning and points to the necklace. “Warg tooth, I made it myself. I came upon its rotting corpse just beyond the mountain. Your young prince will look very dashing with it on.” She collects the necklace from the display and places it into a purple velvet pouch and passes it over once he has paid her. “You have a blessed day.”
“Thank you, and you, too.” He’s not five paces away when his hand is taken again and Kíli is by his side looking sullen. “What’s wrong?” He asks when Kíli heaves a sigh bringing attention to his downtrodden demeanour.

“The dagger is gone.” He says sadly and he tries to hide his smile.

“I thought you didn’t like it?” Fíli shrugs.

“It grew on me.” He heaves another sigh. “Where next?”

“I just have to pick up some more supplies and then it should be time to meet Fíli by the gate.” Kíli nods and he buys the ingredients for a sticky ginger cake and returns to the city gates where Fíli stands alone and unmolested.

“Fíli!” Kíli shouts as if it has been years rather than an hour. “I saw this beautiful dagger but it was sold before I could buy it.” He complains to his brother while he takes the dagger from his bag and places it inside his coat pocket.

“A little help?” He shouts trying to mount Myrtle. The brothers help him with minimal fuss and then mount their own ponies.

“So, what did you and King Bard do?” He asks with a wink and Fíli actually blushes.

“We went to the tavern and he…he…he kissed me, alright?”

“Where?” Kíli asks far too keenly.

“Just my cheek, pervert.” Fíli retorts while flushed a beautiful red.

“Your uncle is going to murder him you do realise.” He says as the voice of reason.

“What uncle doesn’t know can’t hurt him,” Kíli sing-songs.

“Yeah,” Fíli agrees. “Best not tell him.”

“Did you kiss him back?” Kíli asks after a lull in the conversation.

“No, I just drank my drink and said it was time to go. I don’t know what his response was because I ran.”

“We should go back,” Kíli advises.

“No we should not. Bard is playing with fire and he got burnt.” Just as he was but he hadn’t received his scolding yet.

“Explain this dagger to me.” Fíli says, changing the subject.

“Oh, you should have seen it, cheap steel but sharp and the hilt was covered by black leather and curved like the tail of a scorpion with a gold-plated stinger.” Kíli sighs wistfully as he rides up beside him and removes the dagger from his pocket and uncovers it.

“It looked like this,” he says holding it out to a happily stunned Kíli. “I told you I’d buy you something.” Kíli takes it from him still in awe.

“Bilbo you…” he doesn’t finish instead he leans across and captures his lips in a closed-mouth kiss. He doesn’t try to deepen it and as soon as it had begun it was over and Kíli was marvelling at his
new dagger. “Uncle, look what Bilbo bought me!” Kíli suddenly yelled waving the dagger and his heart froze in his chest. He looked around but he could not see the King. “That’s odd, he probably didn’t see us.”

“Where…where was he?” He asks eyes averted, trying for indifference.

“Up on the ramparts.” He looks up but can only see the armoured guards. He tries to calm himself with the fact that even if the King were stood there, there was a strong possibility that he had not seen them given his sight…but there was nothing wrong with a dwarf’s hearing.

His heart sinks and the jovial mood has died a premature death as they return to the stables and he is helped down by Fíli as Kíli is still marvelling over the blade.

“Thank you Fíli,” he says and collects the throwing axe from his bag. “This is for you.” Blue eyes alight in joy and then Kíli comes over to compare gifts.

“Can we use them now?” Fíli asks with enthusiasm as if he were a tween given too much sugar.

“Of course you can.”

“Race you to the arena!” and just like that he became a distant memory as the boys ran off. He didn’t mind it, and so he collected his things and returned to his room and started to prepare the sticky ginger cake.

He made use of the bath while the cake was in the oven and put on a fresh set on clothes and secured the warg tooth necklace in his waistcoat pocket. He started to have second thoughts, so he left the cake to cool and put his own dinner on, a simple cod with a squeeze of lemon and sat down on his own and ate it while the loneliness slowly ate away at him.

Resolute, he collected the cake and left his room and walked to the King’s study as he was not so bold as to approach his rooms. Those were private and he’d trespassed into the King’s private space enough.

The door is ajar when he knocks on it and he can see Thorin seated by the roaring fire, cheeks warmed by the heat, as he cradles a chalice in his right hand.

“Come in Master Baggins.” Despite the darkness of the hallway and the poor light of the study, Thorin was still able to see him which did not bode well. He enters the study, cake first, to put to bed any questions as to why he might be there and his heart sinks as he notices Dwalin occupying the second armchair by the fire. He had wanted to sit there.

“Sticky ginger cake,” he says placing the cake down on the King’s desk.

“Come take a seat and join us.” He ignores the fact that Thorin just patted his thigh when he said that, and collects the chair by the desk and seats himself closer to Dwalin than Thorin. “Some wine?” Thorin asks lifting a pitcher and spilling the wine as he did so. It’s suspicious behaviour and he takes a closer look at the King noticing that he is slumped in the chair and his cheeks are rosy not from the fire but from the drink. The King of Erebor was drunk.

He doesn’t know if it is a common occurrence as he is never in the King’s study at night but Dwalin appears to be shaking his head in dismay. He should leave.

“Yes please,” he answers, grimacing as Thorin attempts to pour him a cup and spills more on the tray than in the chalice. He passes it to him regardless and he takes it with thanks and returns to his seat. “So, what were you talking about?” He asks as conversation has dried up in his presence.
“King Bard,” Thorin spits petulantly.

“Oh, I met him today, I thought he was charming.”

“Did you?” Thorin snaps bitterly while glowering at him over the rim of his chalice and he decides there and then that he will never compliment Bard again in the King’s presence.

“There’s nothing wrong with Bard.” Dwalin snaps grumpily, clearly reaching the end of his tether.

“Except that he is a thief and a liar. The necklace of Girion is mine.” So, he does like necklaces, he pats his pocket to make sure the warg-tooth necklace is still there.

“Why not return it in good faith and put an end to this hostility? Is it truly worth this aggravation?” He asks, thinking about Bard’s desired relationship with Fíli.

“Yes.” Thorin answers immediately, resolute, unreasonable. In normal circumstances he would appreciate that conviction.

“There’s no talking to him,” Dwalin says to him. “That necklace wasn’t even given to you.” He snaps at Thorin but a strange look crosses the King’s face.

“Oh, but it was.” His whole demeanour has changed as he becomes secretive.

“It was given to your grandfather.” Thorin nods.

“As a courting gift, for me.” He smirks as Dwalin splutters in shock.

“Why would the King court you? You weren’t even of age when he died.”

“That didn’t stop him, it didn’t stop me either.” Dwalin’s cheeks have reddened so he assumes what he thought the King implied was accurate. “I wonder what the charming Bard would think if I told him I was almost his granddaddy.” He fears for Dwalin’s health as he continues, spluttering, tripping over his words while he stares wordlessly into the fire.

“That’s enough now, stop drinking. You’re going to regret this in the morning.”

“Like you regretted sleeping with Ori?” Dwalin’s fists clench and his jaw tightens to seal words he would rather not utter. “Hey Bilbo,” Thorin calls to him and he can feel the nails digging into his skin, dragging him in. “Do you want to know how Dwalin got married?”

Any answer he gives will be the wrong one. “I…er…I…”

“He wanted a one-night stand,” Thorin continues, wanting to tell his story regardless of his answer. “But Ori’s brother found out and kicked the shit out of him.” There’s laughter in his voice when he’s saying it and then he dissolves into laughter, sniggering into his cup and he can’t help it, he’s always found Thorin’s laughter infectious and soon he’s laughing too.

He looks at Dwalin and quickly stops laughing as the dwarf looks irate and he can hardly believe someone bested him in combat. “Dori made him marry Ori!” The laughter in Thorin’s voice kills him and he starts laughing again while looking in Dwalin’s direction.

“I don’t have to sit here and listen to this.” Dwalin states and stands from the chair. He glares at Thorin, but he remains unapologetic sniggering into the chalice while he continues to stare into the fire with a hand over his mouth to hide his smile. Dwalin leaves then, without goodbye, which meant he was mad at him too.
It's quiet, save for the crackling of the fire and he gets up and sits in the vacant armchair with a victorious smirk on his face. He turns his head finding Thorin watching him, had his gaze always been so predatory? He’s not normally one for heavy eye contact but there’s something about Thorin that he can’t look away from.

“What about you, Master Baggins?” The question throws him, but he asked with the same keen interest Kíli had when asking Fíli about Bard.

“Well, I’m no one’s granddad.” Thorin laughs at that. “I have had more than my fair share of romances, walking unseen has its advantages.”

“So, you’re a heartbreaker?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I would.” There seems to be tension between them that wasn’t there a moment ago and he doesn’t like it and he decides to change the subject but there is only one thing he can think of.

“So, this necklace, it is yours, I agree with you, it was a gift so why not gift it back?”

“Would you be so keen to take that dagger back from Kíli?” Thorin returns revealing that he was indeed stood on the ramparts.

“No.”

“Exactly, nor would I ever ask for that mithril shirt back. It was a gift and you are beholden to no one to see it returned. It is yours, as the necklace of Girion is mine.” The argument is lost and he refuses to flog a dead horse. It sounded as if the necklace of Girion meant a lot to Thorin so Bard was wrong in asking for its return.

“In Dale today…I…well…I bought you a gift, in thanks for the armour.” Thorin’s eyes widen and he sets down the chalice and he sits up with enthusiasm. So that was where Kíli got it from. He takes the pouch from his pocket and instead of passing it over he takes the necklace out and holds it up. “Warg-tooth, I was told and I just thought…” he trailed off, Thorin didn’t need to know what he thought.

For a dwarf that ruled over a mountain that was home to the greatest jewels in Middle Earth, he appeared to be far too amazed by a warg-tooth necklace. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the simple thought of a gift. Whatever his reasons he liked it and that was all that mattered.

“Would you like to put it on?” He suggests, ignoring the fact that he is babying him as he babies Kíli. Thorin does not give him a worded answer just a single nod of his head and so he unclasps the chain and stands up. Thorin parts his legs further so he could step in between them and reach for him and he realises what a terrible mistake he is making.

It is a stupid, foolish, terrible mistake but he wants the dream. He reaches for the King’s neck and sees a dawning realisation in the King’s eyes as he suddenly shies away from his touch, awakening from a dream he had not even had. He passes him the necklace instead and removes himself from his personal space.

Stepping between the King’s legs was one thing but reaching for his neck with his history, of course the King would shy away from his touch, it was self-preservation. “I should go,” he says weakly. “I want to be wide awake for the Elven host.” He lies easily as there was some truth in it.

“How do you know about that?”
“I was there when you told Gloin, I was retrieving something of mine at the time.”

“You snuck into the treasury?” Thorin asks in disbelief.

“I told you your mountain was unsafe. I’ll see you in the morning, good night Thorin.”

“It was,” Thorin mumbles underneath his breath and he ignores it as it could mean anything. He takes his leave then, cursing himself for his stupidity, chasing unrealistic dreams. Thorin wasn’t his, and his longing that he was is slowly crushing him. It is with a very heavy heart that he returns to his room.
Thorin had once mocked King Thranduil for his dependency on Dorwinion wine. He could not understand how an elf as powerful as he was could succumb to such a mind-numbing poison. He had thought him weak, but now he has an inkling of the King’s suffering. Thranduil had lost his wife in the Great War, his heart was shattered and it was only his love for his son that kept him from fading. Yet he had faded in every sense but physically, he became withdrawn and every relationship became strained. He trusted less and he cared lesser. There was no love left in his heart but how could there be when the vessel that harboured such feelings was broken beyond repair.

Dorwinion wine became his solace and after last night he could understand the allure the beverage had for the King because the wine offers the sweetest escape. Vivid impossible dreams, that once you awaken from them you long to fall under the spell again. He imagines Thranduil dreams of his wife, while he dreamt of honey curls and blissful smiles, walking hand in hand around the city of Dale. Fili was married and Darina was pregnant while Kili was in the Blue Mountains with his mother. No one paid them any attention and every now and then, Bilbo would drop his hand only to return with a gift, showing him that he loves him when he isn’t expressing his love in words.

No one is hurt, and that is why Dorwinion wine is the sweetest of poisons. Dorwinion wine offers the impossible. Dorwinion wine makes you desperate.

He drops the Shire contract onto his desk and pinches the bridge of his nose to stave off a headache, not the wine’s doing but his own thought process. He had found a loophole in the contract, he could free Bilbo of his obligation but in so doing he would then null and void the original contract. Something he did not wish to do. He could amend it, write his own name instead of Kili’s since he never officially gave his blessing and send a copy to the Shire for the Thain to sign. The Thain would sign, but would Bilbo? Without being coerced, would he even want to? He might have misconstrued Bilbo’s actions. No one has ever tried as hard as Bilbo to be his friend, what if that was all it was? What of Kili? He saw that kiss, his nephew was experiencing love for the first time, who was he to get between that?

He glares at the cake on his table unsure when it had been delivered, he was too far into his cup last night to remember much of anything. He remembered the kiss though; one doesn’t forget when a knife is plunged into your heart. He was a fool. Despite knowing better, he lifts the contract up once more and only the knocking on his door makes him quickly roll it and hide it in his draw.

“Come in.” The door opens and Gloin enters with his son, Gimli.

“The Elven host approach.”

“Then let us go meet them.” By rights, he should be seated on his throne and have the Elven host pay homage to him there but his throne is deep within the mountain and he does not trust the elves well enough to allow them to travel so far. As far as he knows this mission is the sum of Thranduil’s delusions and he means to spy on him.

They set off and reach the Great Gate by the time the Elven Host cross the bridge. The host is a company of five silver armoured elves-male- he assumes, four brunets and one blond stood in between them.

Gimli steps forward to do the introductions. “Presenting Legolas Greenleaf, Prince of the Gr…” He hadn’t been looking at Gimli, instead his eyes were forward as Legolas emerged from his company and his introduction was cut mid-sentence.
There’s an awkward pause and he looks at Gimli out of the corner of his eye and sees the young
dwarf’s mouth agape as he stares at Prince Legolas. He tries to mouth ‘Greenwood’ to remind him
but the dwarf has taken leave of his senses even as his father elbows him in the ribs.

“Prince Legolas,” he announces in welcome and steps forward, relieved that the small council was
not present.

“King Thorin, you are shorter and wider since last time we met.” A silence falls over those gathered
and a few of the elf’s eyes widen at such a statement while Gloin clears his throat. He’s feisty and
dangerous when riled.

“Wider not shorter. Is that a bald patch?” Legolas touches his long blond hair and narrows his blue
eyes before a smile spreads across his pale lips.

“I’ve missed you.” He holds out his arm and he grasps his forearm in a bond of brotherhood much to
the surprise of their present company. Despite his issues with King Thranduil, he and Legolas were
old friends.

“I have rooms available if you and your company require rest.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Well, I do not wish to bore your company with our negotiations. My King’s Guard are running
drills in the arena, Gimli will happily show them the way there if they so wish to put my guards
through their paces and teach them a thing or two.” Flattery leads to foolery and he dearly hopes his
guards put them on their asses just for their smug looks alone.

Legolas turns towards his company without question and they nod as one. “Very well,” he agrees
turning back to him.

“Gimli!” He calls as the dwarf appears distant.

“Yes, right away my Lord.” Gimli says coming to life once more and leading the company away,
though he keeps casting looks towards them over his shoulder.

“Do you really mean to trade with me or is this some ruse by your father?” He asks plainly.

“This isn’t about necklaces or white gems. Word has reached us about your silver mines and we’d
like to trade. Wouldn’t you like a new bow for Kíli, he’s your favourite, isn’t he?”

“I’m leaning more towards Fíli these days.” He jests, he doesn’t have favourites and if he did, it
wouldn’t be Kíli. “Come into my study and we’ll talk in detail. This is Gloin my Master of Coin and
he’ll be joining us.” He says as an afterthought as Gimli failed on delivering the proper introductions.
Legolas inclines his head in welcome and Gloin returns the gesture before they enter the mountain
and enter his study.

It is a single trade agreement; an exchange rather than a sale and he loses interest quickly. Thankfully
he had the foresight to invite Gloin as he had a better understanding of current market value and he
agrees to the trade. Normally he would ask for more, but this agreement could potentially lead to an
open trade, which would be beneficial to both kingdoms. It was the right move for the Greenwood in
the very least, they had shut themselves off for too long that even their home had become sick and
named Mirkwood and Kíli really did like those bows.

“Will you feast with us tonight?” He asks.
“Thank you but no, I have to return, my father…” he says no more, he does not have to. How strange it must me to be someone’s reason to live, it must be daunting, such a burden.

“Gloin will draw up the contract, would you like to join your elves in the arena?” Legolas is a skilled warrior, and would certainly put up a fight.

“The mountain has changed much since I was last here, could I be so bold and ask for a tour?”

“Gimli!” He shouts knowing the younger dwarf was standing sentry at his door. The door opens proving his suspicion correct as the dwarf enters and bows low. “Could you show our guest around Erebor for an hour?” Gimli nods and then pauses mid-nod as Legolas stands from his seat. He becomes slack-jawed once more when Legolas stands beside him with a patient smile. “Today Gimli!” A blush stains his cheeks as he rushes out of the study forgetting his charge but Legolas is unbothered and strides after him. “What has gotten into him?” He mutters to Gloin who shrugs in response.

He gives up his seat for Gloin and collects parchment for the agreement. He then leaves his study to have the five chests of silver delivered to the Great Gate, as Legolas had journeyed with his half of the trade leaving it in King Bard’s palace.

He’s walking back to his study when he notices Bilbo acting suspiciously, ducked behind a wall. “Mr Baggins?” He calls out and the hobbit turns to him wild-eyed and brings a finger to his lips, shushing him. No one shushes him. He marches over to him to tell him as much but as he opens his mouth Bilbo grabs a hold of his arm and pulls him down behind the wall, hushing him again. He stares at him in confused silence and as Bilbo peeks over the wall he copies. There’s nothing to see other than Gimli walking along the walkway pointing at something while Legolas nods politely. “Wrought iron,” Gimli announcements and he shakes his head. It was just a coat of arms; it did not require such a detailed description. “The metal is almost pure but contains some slag in the form of filaments.” Poor Legolas, he’ll be hearing about this later, no doubt his friend will think he has done this purposefully.

Bilbo turns to him to share a smile but he does not garner the same joy as Bilbo does from watching them. They look over the wall again and Gimli has stopped talking and fidgets nervously with his back towards the elf. Bilbo knocks his arm excitedly, trying to bring his attention to something but what it is he had no idea.

Gimli clears his throat and turns, face as red as his hair as he forces his head up to look into Legolas’ blue eyes. “I like your hair.” His own jaw slackens as Legolas’ eyes widen. To say that, to an elf, he stands up only to be dragged down once more and a hand is placed over his mouth.

“Stop it,” Bilbo admonishes and removes his hand.

“He is under age!” He hisses beneath his breath.

“You’re one to talk.” He pales at the implication.

“What do you mean by that?” Bilbo looks puzzled but then his face relaxes.

“Drank yourself silly last night, didn’t you? I know about you and King Girion. That was the real reason why Thrór slapped you, wasn’t it?” Bilbo was in his study last night? He had told him about King Girion? What else had he said?

“Never let the truth come between a good story.” He confesses as his grandfather did indeed smack him for sleeping with King Girion. He kept the necklace too.
Bilbo peeks over the wall again and so does he. Gimli has lost his courage and is staring at the stone beneath his feet while Legolas looks at him thoughtfully. “I like your axe.” Gimli lifts his head in surprise and tentatively holds out his hand which is immediately taken as he rushes along the walkway with Legolas.

He stands, irate. “I’m telling Gloin.” There will be blood, whose remains to be seen.

“Don’t you dare.” Bilbo warns, standing as well.

“I dare.” It’s his name after all.

“Why would you come between true love?” Bilbo asks sadly and he has to wonder if he knows how low that blow was.

“You think it’s true love?”

“You saw them.” He had but he hadn’t seen that. “It was that moment when you look at someone and you see your whole lives together in that one moment and suddenly your life has meaning and you know you were put on this earth for them.” His words are heartfelt and he says them with conviction.

He leans against the wall, trying for nonchalant. “Have you felt that way?” Bilbo was already leaning against the wall when he joined him and he simply turns his head to look at him and nods.

“I think I have,” he confesses with a small smile.

“With Kíli?” He presses and Bilbo looks sad once more.

“Early days yet.” He says pushing away from the wall and wiping his hands.

“I’m still telling Gloin,” he informs him.

“Fine then, I’ll go to Dale and tell Bard you slept with his daddy!”

“Granddaddy,” he corrects and then pales. “Don’t you dare.”

“I dare.” Bilbo bolts then and he gives chase. He’s quicker but Bilbo is wily, and manages to evade his grasping hands. By the time they run into the hallway they are both slowed by laughter and he seizes his opportunity and grabs Bilbo around the waist and pulls him back against him and laughs against his shoulder. His ears are elf-like, he’d never noticed that before.

“What are you two doing?” A voice he wished not to hear asks from behind them and they separate and turn to eye Kíli.

“I was just saying about Bard,” Bilbo teases him with a grin.

“What about Bard?”

“He has nice hair.” Bilbo says and Kíli looks stumped. “And Thorin…” Bilbo goes on and his eyes widen thinking he means to tell. “Thinks so too.”

“You think Bard has nice hair?” Kíli asks him sincerely and he simply nods convinced Kíli will see through the ruse as he looks contemplative. “Yes, I suppose he does have nice hair.” Kíli agrees and Bilbo hides his smile behind his hand while he releases his breath. His nephew was a simpleton, thank Mahal. “Would you like to go to the market with me, Bilbo?” Kíli asks and holds out his hand.
His heart plummets as Bilbo takes it and gifts his nephew a smile that should be reserved for him. Kíli is entirely undeserving of him, what is a second son compared to a King? “See you later, Uncle.” Kíli says while Bilbo waves goodbye, his smile still present while his own was long gone. Why did he have to hold him in his arms? Why did he learn the feel of him and the smell of him to never know the taste of him?

He wants him, but he cannot and will not enforce his will. Bilbo is a prize to be won and so he will win him, fairly. The contract will be amended, the terms the same and Kíli…Kíli is young and will love again. It is a selfish act and cruel to his nephew but loves makes monsters of us all. Truth was, he had seen their whole lives together in a moment and he was put on this earth for Bilbo as Bilbo was put on this earth for him.
Bilbo eyes the dozen yellow roses in his hand. Over the weeks he and Thorin had gotten into a gift giving routine that he had unknowingly started by delivering a cranberry pie. The pie had been met with mithril armour, which was met with cakes and a necklace and they had been met with the most beautiful rose. It was a gem, not a real rose, beautiful and eternal and he was told the ruby shaped petals were tinged with mithril. The flowers he now holds pale in comparison, the King’s gifts always triumphed over his own but Thorin did not seem to care as he was moved by the gesture rather than the trinket.

He looks at the roses again. Flowers had a language of their own and a yellow rose signifies friendship. He shakes his head, as he was now lying to himself in the language of flowers. The roses should be red for his longing and desire and his love for a King that should have been his prince. The King might not know what yellow roses mean but he was sure he would understand a red rose and he could not jeopardise their friendship for the impossible. They were friends, and so he wasn’t entirely lying.

He knocks on the door to the King’s chambers. They took tea there now, discussing the events between each visit and his developing relationship with Kíli that seemed to be mentioned less and less as they got to know each other. He looked forward to these meetings as he has always preferred the King’s company, they were the same age, physically, and they were learning that they liked the same things. The longer he spent in Kíli’s company he realised just how young he was and he felt like an old lecher, preying on children in the hopes to recapture his youth.

The door opens and Thorin stands before him in a blue high-collared surcoat with very little exposure around the neck but enough to see that he isn’t wearing the warg-tooth necklace. He hasn’t worn it since it was given so it was possible that he did not like it. Still, he seemed glad to receive it but then he was blindly drunk at the time.

Thorin smiles kindly when he sees him and as his eyes lower to the bouquet of roses in his hand his smile widens. He breathes a sigh of relief. He did like flowers. He wasn’t sure, with him being a dwarf and all. Gifting flowers was common in the Shire but Erebor had no florists and Dale only had the one.

“For you,” he says handing them over. Thorin takes them with a smile while looking utterly lost, clearly, he had never received flowers before. “Do you want to put them in water?” He suggests and Thorin nods and steps back opening his door wider.

“Come in, Master Baggins.” His rooms are a reflection of his own, kitchen, shared livingroom and bedroom and just beyond that the bathroom. Thorin walks into the kitchen and he follows him only to linger by the kitchen door as Thorin uses an empty pitcher that was drying and fills it with water and places the roses inside. He walks into the livingroom and places the flowers in the centre of the mantelpiece above the open fire and steps back marvelling at his work.

The roses are in stark contrast to the flat grey rock and the notched mounted weaponry that were in a macabre homage to fallen soldiers. Thorin seemed pleased though and that was all that mattered. “Take a seat.” They always sit either side of a square oak table set up in front of the fire and so he takes his usual seat. The tea and biscuits are set up on the tray but Thorin does not partake instead he has a goblet and a pitcher of wine. He doesn’t like it but he is in no position to tell the King what he can and cannot do. He doesn’t drink as much as he did that night but he would prefer him not to drink at all.
“Has Gimli returned as a novice to the King’s Guard?” He asks pouring a cup of tea. Thorin hadn’t told Gloin, he never had the chance as Legolas left the mountain being chased by an irate Gloin who had found them in a compromising position. Legolas was laughing as he ran and his legs were far longer that Gloin had no hope to catch him even if he tried and he certainly tried.

“Unfortunately, no. His father keeps a close eye on him especially since he tried to flee the kingdom.”

“It’s so sad, they belong together.”

“If it is meant to be then it will be.” That was rather profound for one of their talks and he laughs, remembering something.

“Kíli claims we are washer women who gossip about people’s hair.”

Thorin looks at him with a serious expression. “Aren’t we?” He laughs then and Thorin joins in moments later.

“I’m not one to talk about anyone’s hair considering my own.” He says self-depreciatively while picking up and dropping a honey blond curl.

“I like it. It’s cute. You’re cute.” Thorin then drowns the rest of his words in Dorwinion wine as he laughs nervously.

“You have to say that you’re my U…” he coughs to cover the foul word. “Friend,” he amends hoping he was quick enough to disguise the slip of words.

“Do you have any plans for tomorrow?”

“Yes, I’ll be watching Kíli practising his archery.”

“You’re welcome to watch me practise.” Thorin offers quietly, eyes averted.

“Archery?” He enquires.

“Well, no.” Thorin admits. “I do have some skill with a bow, I was the one to teach Kíli. I was referring to sword fighting in the arena. You may watch me…or I could teach you?”

“Me with a sword near you, do you trust me?” He jests thinking of their history.

“With my life, of course the swords would be wooden and I’ll be sure to pad my shins.” Thorin teases and he laughs.

“Did you just imply that I am short? Just because you’re tall for your race, you anomaly.” Thorin laughs at that. “I’ll be honoured,” he says solemnly and Thorin smiles. “To kick your arse.”

“Fighting words, Master Baggins, the day after tomorrow then?”

“It’s a date.” Thorin looks at him but does not correct him. He appreciates it, even if it was forward of him, playing with words despite the impossibility of them.

Once he finishes his tea and the pot is empty, he collects the pipeweed from his pocket and places it onto the table. “Old Toby, as promised.” One of the things they found they had in common was smoking. He’d used to smoke regularly in Bag End but now he only smokes during these meetings and had taken to leaving his pipe in Thorin’s room.
Thorin reaches over and places a pouch before him. “Sweet Galenas.” Thorin stands up and collects both of their pipes and returns to his seat and passes him his pipe. It wasn’t just the smoking that he liked but the blowing of smoke rings, which he found Thorin was most excellent at.

He fills his pipe with Sweet Galenas with the hope that the rumours of the smoke sailing ships were true. It is with genuine joy that he finds out that the rumours were indeed true, and as he blows them, Thorin blows rings for them to sail through. He’s so charmed by it; he smokes the whole pouch and frowns when he realises he has no more reasons to stay.

He looks around but the fire is dying, the pipeweed has been smoked, the biscuits were eaten and the tea had been drank. He shouldn’t be leaving, he should be retiring to bed with Thorin and not to make love, though granted that would be nice, but to just share the same space, breathe the same air. Be one, as he was sure their souls were.

“It’s late,” he says reluctantly and Thorin’s smile falters or was that simple wishful thinking? It was, of course, Thorin was the King of Erebor and if he desired him for himself then he need only void the contract he himself had written. He won’t do it and that is why tales of soul mates were for children.

“I could walk you to your door?” Thorin offers as he stands up and he laughs.

“It is seven rooms away from yours, and then who would walk you back?” Thorin stands and nods in understanding.

“I’ll bid you a good night then.” They both step forward, Thorin with his arms out, he, with his arm extended, they shift, awkwardly dancing around each other, but their motives conflict and they both step back laughing nervously.

“Good night Thorin.” It was stupid of him to look longingly towards the King’s bed, especially when Thorin followed his gaze and turned to look at him sharply. He covers his mouth to fake a yawn and cover his intention and Thorin softly shakes his head with a rueful expression.

He leaves then, before he does something stupid. The King doesn’t desire him, that horrified look when he caught him gazing at his bed said as much. It is with a heavy tread that he returns to his room, he closes his door and bangs his head against it immediately regretting his actions. He rubs at his forehead and goes into the bathroom and washes and changes into his nightshirt and goes to sleep with the images of a love he can never have fresh in his mind.

He awakens to brown eyes peering into his own and he jerks back hearing someone grumble from the movement behind him.

“Hi Bilbo,” Kíli greets enthusiastically, laying on the bed with him, thankfully fully clothed above the covers not beneath them.

He sits up and rubs the sleep from his eyes, and remembers he hadn’t locked his door last night. “Kíli, what are you doing here?” He whispers harshly, not wishing to be found out.

“It’s okay, Fíli is here too.” He looks to his right and sure enough the crown prince is also laid on the covers beside him, also fully clothed.

“How long have you two been here?”

“Hmm…” Kíli hums thoughtfully. “Not sure, Fíli?”
“About an hour.”

“An hour?” He asks aghast. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You looked peaceful and we didn’t want to disturb you.” He’s surprised he looked peaceful after the back to back nightmares he had had. “Are you ready to come to practise with us now?”

“Give me ten minutes,” he grumbles still groggy from sleep. The boys climb off the bed and enter the kitchen in search of cake, while he collects his clothes and walks into the bathroom remembering to both close and lock the door.

He washes and dresses as quickly as he can and returns to the bedroom/living area and the boys leave the kitchen to meet him and Kili takes his hand, sure of his welcome. “Where are we going?”

“Behind the mountain. There’s a small clearing before the woods.” Fili answers.

“Horses?” He enquires.

“We can walk it.” Kili says and he nods and yawns again. They could walk it but he feels dead on his feet. His sleep wasn’t restful at all. He doesn’t complain though, even when Kili resorts to pulling him along so he will keep up.

It is a simple clearing behind the mountain with a wooden rack of weaponry and seven square sandbags with circles drawn on them. Three other dwarves are present, one by the rack to distribute the weapons, while another trains with throwing knives, piquing Fili’s interest. The third is some distance away, his back to a tree fletching arrows. He takes his leave of Kili and approaches the dwarf by the tree and asks him to teach him how to fletch arrows, making himself useful.

The sun’s out, warming his skin as he sits down on the grass and wriggles his toes in the soft greenery. He could almost believe he was back in the Shire. He sighs wistfully and returns to fletching arrows while keeping an eye on the boys. They are competitive braggarts, but harmless and when Kili hits the centre circle with his arrow he applauds startling the young prince. He recovers well, and turns towards him bowing low making him laugh.

Fili then takes his turn and he hears him clear his throat loudly, as he was looking down at the arrow in his hand. He lifts his head and sees the axe he had bought for Fili embedded in the centre circle. He drops the arrow and applauds and Fili smiles brightly and bows low in recognition of the praise before squabbling with his brother once more. He watches them with a smile, amused by their antics but he begins to worry that his feelings for Kili are not as they should be. He loves him, he loves both brothers, as a father would love a son…as an uncle would love a nephew.

“Cheers for the help.” He’s awoken from his thoughts by the dwarf beside him collecting the finished arrows. He never caught his name.

“You’re welcome,” he says to his retreating back and earns a thumbs up as the dwarf walks over to the weaponry rack. He stays seated and then lies back on the grass and looks up at the cloudy blue sky and thinks of home.

He must have fallen asleep under the warm sun as he finds Kili pressed against him while everyone else had gone.

“What were you dreaming of?” Kili asks sincerely.

“Home,” he answers simply.
“Do you miss it?”

“Yeah,” he nods. “Yeah I do.”

“What’s the Shire like?”

“Green,” he answers with a laugh. “Very green, rolling hills, flowering gardens and busy streets. Everyone knows your name and your business, it’s like one huge family.” Kíli props his head up with his arm and looks down on him with sympathy.

“I can see why you would miss it.” The touch of Kíli’s lips against his own is a surprise and his shock is misconstrued as acceptance as Kíli deepens the kiss. It lacks finesse and there’s too much tongue as he kisses like someone who has been told how to kiss and had not experienced a kiss. He isn’t stirred in the least, not only is it terribly awkward it just feels wrong.

He turns his head, breaking the kiss and is surprised to see Kíli smiling and touching his own lips. It was his first real kiss then, beyond the simple pressing together of lips and the fact that it had happened outweighed how it had ended. It eases his guilt but does not banish it.

He stares at the sky once more and Kíli lays beside him, so close his brown hair spills onto his shoulder. Kíli is the second son, his mother resides in the Blue Mountains, were they to marry he could potentially return to the Shire. He need only ask Thorin to ask the Thain to evict Lobelia and her brood and it would be done. The Thain would do anything to protect the contract, even if it meant endure the wrath of his cousin.

It was all so simple, but nothing ever truly is. He didn’t want to marry Kíli, he wanted to marry Thorin but Thorin was the King and if they were to marry he would never see the Shire again. He would live in Erebor. He would die in Erebor and he would be buried in Erebor.

He thinks of blue eyes and infectious laughter. He remembers the King sat on a pile of gold he had pushed on him laughing hysterically. For him, for that moment, he would happily give up his dreams of the Shire.
Thorin stood in the centre of the arena and eyed the sheathed sword in his hand. Sting, his brother had named it, after the clumsy fool dropped it and as he grabbed the falling blade it cut the tips of his fingers and he claimed the wounds stung. His brother passed long ago but he still missed him every single day. He hadn’t taken Sting on what was to be his final battle, he claimed he had outgrown it, and the sword he chose to carry is now mounted on his wall, notched and stained with the blood of his foes.

He hears the opening and closing of the door and turns around with a smile to find no one there. He shrugs assuming someone had come in, saw him and departed and he returns to studying the blade. The hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and he suddenly feels uncomfortable as though he was being watched. He looks around and sure enough he finds hazel eyes looking down on him from the front row.

“Master Baggins what are you doing up there?”

“Watching you train.”

“As nice as that is, I am supposed to be training you.”

“I’ve thought about it and I’d rather just watch you.”

“Master Baggins…” he says testily.

“It’s fine, you carry on and I promise not to applaud and distract you.”

“Join me,” he insists, voice deeper and booming.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Bilbo says pitifully knowing he has already lost.

“Now!” He says in the same voice he uses on his nephews when they’ve been especially unruly. It works and soon Bilbo is rushing down the stairs to meet him on the sand, but he immediately baulks upon seeing the sword in his hand.

“Oh no,” he says shaking his head and waving his hands. “No, you said no weapons.”

“We won’t be fighting with this.” He promises and unsheathes the sword. It’s an elvish sword, the blade just shy of a metre long, the hilt made of mahogany with spiral detail made of silver. “This is a gift,” he says and tries to keep his hands from shaking. “For you.” He passes the blade over before he could change his mind. The mithril armour was a gift not given lightly but this, his brother’s sword, he may as well have given the hobbit a piece of his heart.

“Wow, it’s…” Bilbo goes quiet, lost for words. He holds the hilt in his right hand and lays the blade against his left palm studying it. “It is beautiful, thank you.”

“It was made by the Elven-smiths of old in Gondolin and given to my brother on his name-day.” Bilbo’s face falls at that admission.

“This is your brother’s sword?” He nods. “Thorin, I can’t accept this.”

“It is rude to decline a gift.” He reminds him knowing the hobbit cared about his manners and reputation.
“Very well, I shall do my best to honour it.” He laughs at that.

“The blade has no history to honour.” Bilbo looks at him meaningfully.

“It belonged to your brother, there is no greater history to honour.” Tears sting his eyes and he suddenly turns away, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.” He waves off his apology not trusting his voice. Bilbo had an unnatural ability to see right through him and address him as Thorin the dwarf rather than Thorin the King of Erebor. His words were always honest and heartfelt and his empathy was astounding. He would honour a blade of a dwarf he never knew simply because he held him in high esteem.

“So…” he clears his throat and knocks the tears from his eyes. “Training, yes.” He takes Sting from Bilbo and sheathes the blade and takes it over to the side, resting it against the wall while he collects the two wooden sparring swords.

He walks back over to the hobbit and offers him a sword which he takes reluctantly. “The first and most important thing is balance.”

“How many fights have you been in when your enemy allows you to ready yourself?”

“None, but I’ve never been in a fight and to be perfectly honest, I don’t want to be.”

“Good. One should not seek war but must be prepared for it. Now get your balance, you lead on your left leg, hips towards me if you’re so concerned with footing.” Bilbo hesitantly moves into position. “Legs further apart, distribute your weight evenly. Think of it as a dance, gliding one step into the next.”

“You’re having me on.” He walks over to him and places his left foot behind Bilbo’s right foot and pushes against Bilbo’s forehead and watches the hobbit tumble to the sand.

“Balance.” He reiterates and allows the hobbit to get to his feet and regain his footing. “Now I’m going to swing at you and I want you to predict my movement and block me.” Bilbo jumps back alarmed as he raises his sword.

“Oh no no no, you haven’t even taught me how to properly hold a sword or block and now your swinging at me already? I hate to say this Thorin but you’re not a very good teacher.”

“War waits for no one. Watch me.” He’s obvious and slow with his swing, realistically he should be stabbing but that will come later. For now, he swings slowly towards Bilbo’s left flank and moments before he can connect Bilbo raises his sword to block. “You’ll break your wrist if you hold your sword like that.” He informs him, as Bilbo holds the sword in his right hand but had turned the blade hilt up, twisting his wrist to block his blow.

He drops his own sword to take hold and guide Bilbo’s hands. “Hilt down, balance your weapon as you balance your body. Now watch me, look into my eyes, watch my body, predict my next move.” He picks up his sword once more and takes the most obvious swing he could think of. He mirrors his first swing, aiming for Bilbo’s right flank, his movements the same as before but no block comes and he hits his flank while Bilbo looks mildly surprised. “I told you to watch me.”

“I did.” Bilbo protests.

“Watch me to predict my actions not watch me kill you. Congratulations Master Baggins, you’re dead.” Bilbo could be right, maybe he was a terrible teacher, he should have asked Dwalin but he’s
been sour with him for weeks. “Okay, come at me and I’ll show you what I mean.” He had thought the hobbit would simply aim for his stomach in a stabbing motion and he is simply ill prepared for the furious waving of the sword side to side. He covers his mouth and turns away.

“Did you just snort?” He can’t hold it back any longer as tears sting his eyes again for a different reason. He nods laughing loudly while doubled over clutching his stomach. When he dares to look up at the hobbit Bilbo looks displeased and is stomping his foot on the sand but his face soon alights in joy and he joins him in laughter.

“What were you even fighting, a wasp?” He falls down onto the sand to recover his breath and as he wipes tears from his eyes, he feels a tapping against his chest above his heart.

“You’re dead.” Bilbo says proudly.

“I wasn’t ready.”

“War waits for no one.” Bilbo parrots back to him and in return he kicks out at his left leg given that his posture is awful. He knew the hobbit would fall but he failed to realise the hobbit would topple onto him forcing him to sprawl onto his back in the sand with the hobbit on top of him. It wasn’t deliberate, though if he’s honest with himself it entirely was.

“Balance,” he says with self-satisfaction realising Bilbo is making no move to climb off him. He notices that Bilbo’s cheeks are flushed red and he feels his own skin heat up from their close proximity. It is with great relief that Bilbo moves himself so he is perched on his stomach and away from the growing desire between his thighs.

He can’t decipher the look on Bilbo’s face as he moves his hands to his thighs and gently rubs circles with his thumbs on his fleshy inner thighs. It is bold and he can’t help but wonder how much he is taking advantage and how much Bilbo is letting him.

Bilbo’s own hands were on his chest, fingers splayed for balance. He feels them twitch before they move up his chest towards his neck. He’s too lost in sensation that his thought process is delayed and when he feels fingers opening up the collar of his surcoat he comes back to himself and grabs Bilbo’s wrists.

“No,” he gasps panicked, but it is too late.

“What is that?” Bilbo asks and easily frees his wrists from his loose grasp and bares his throat and chest. “Is that my cravat?” He doesn’t answer and simply turns his head to the side. The hobbit will think he is a desperate love-sick fool and won’t want to be near him now. “This knot,” Bilbo continues, lifting the dirty material. “I tied this knot. Thorin, have you been wearing it all this time?” He’s been found out, lies nor truth could save him.

“Yes,” he says turning back to the hobbit expecting to find disgust on his face not a pleasant flattered smile.

“Is this why you flinched from me and have not worn that warg-tooth necklace I gave you?”

“It was you who gave me that warg-tooth necklace?” He asks finally solving the mystery of it. He had awoken with it in his bed and no one made mention of it, so he had simply put it inside his bedside draw.

“You do not remember?” Bilbo asks surprised. “Ah, you were well within your cup that night, quite frankly you were at the bottom of it. I should have said, but I thought you knew.” Bilbo becomes quiet once more, lost in thought and he has to wonder if he is aware that he is rubbing his exposed
chest.

Living up to his name, he moves his hands back to the hobbit’s thighs no more than an inch higher than before and squeezes. The hobbit’s hips arch forward and he is torn between watching his eyes and gazing between his thighs. They’ve gone too far and yet not far enough, cautiously he moves his right hand up.

“Thorin!” Dwalin shouts and he immediately drops his hands and tilts his head back, watching Dwalin enter the arena. He stops short, finding them on the sand together and clears his throat.

“There’s been another attempted breach.”

“What?” He asks in both confusion and outrage.

“I’ll show you. Master hobbit, if you could remove yourself from the King.”

“What? Oh,” Bilbo says blushing furiously and climbs from him, and lends a hand to help pull him up.

“Can you see yourself to your rooms or shall I call a guard?” Bilbo refuses to look at him and so he gently takes hold of his chin and tilts his head towards him. “Answer me.”

Bilbo wants to hide his face; he can tell and instead he watches him as he nervously wets his lips leaving him desperate for a taste. “I’m fine Thorin, you go do your kingly duties.” He’s hesitant about leaving him on his own, he’s seen him fight and quite frankly he can’t fight. “Go,” Bilbo tells him with a slight push and reluctantly he leaves his side.

Dwalin eyes him knowingly as he buttons up his surcoat and ignores him and keeps his eyes trained on Bilbo until he can no longer see him. He follows Dwalin down to the lower levels where the elders work. The pay is less but the labour is less taxing on the spine and time is not an issue, which is acceptable for those unwilling to retire.

“They’re getting desperate.” Dwalin informs him and reveals the new attempt. Their first attempt in the abandoned mines had taken months but this hacked monstrosity had taken only one and they had nearly breached the mountain.

“What do they want?” He asks angrily. This attempt had been too daring and too desperate and desperate dwarves were dangerous.

“A way out.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know.” Dwalin answers. “But from this rush job, we’ll soon find out.” He nods, time will tell but something tells him he had dismissed his shadows guards too early.
He held the plated banana bread in his hands and looked around the kitchen for a flat surface and empty space and found none. He baked when he was nervous and now his kitchen resembled a bakery with pies, cakes, buns and pastries. Remembering there was a small table in the living area before the fire, he enters the room and sets it down beside a scabbarded Sting.

He feels the sudden urge to bake again but he was out of ingredients and so he paced instead. King Thorin confused him. His feelings for the King confused him, even Thorin’s response to his feelings towards him confused him. He thought they were going to kiss, Thorin had gently cupped his chin, tilted his head, looked deep within his eyes and he was sure his desire found its match. He wet his lips and nothing. He got sent to his room again. Not dismissively or through any fault of his own, the King had his best interest at heart. It still made no sense.

Thorin had not known he had given him the necklace so then why had he gifted him the rose? He thought they were exchanging gifts but if the necklace was not known then Thorin was just giving him gifts. They were friends, soon to be family and for that reason an uncle should not be giving his nephew’s fiancé extravagant gifts. Kíli had only given him a brace of rabbits and that was only out of guilt for avoiding him.

His door opens allowing him to put to bed his ridiculous thoughts. Gift giving could be a dwarven tradition and he is looking too far into a simple act of generosity. Although the rumours of Thorin’s generosity were few and far between.

“Hi Bilbo,” Kíli shouts from the doorway incapable of being quiet. He walks in with his brother trailing behind him and looks around. “Is there going to be a party?” He asks with a wide grin, and he truly is stunning with his boyish good looks and that was the problem, they were boyish, while he was attracted to men.

“A party? Nobody told us.” Fíli says while spinning a dagger in his hand and looking around his room.

“There’s no party, I was just passing the time.” He says following Kíli into the kitchen.

“So, I can eat all these?” He asks with enthusiasm and he nods.

“Of course.” Kíli then looks over the cakes, paying close attention to those with a cream filling. “Not that I don’t love your company, but what brings you two here?”

“We’re going to race the war rams up Ravenhill, will you join us?” Kíli asks while scooping out the centre of a cream bun with his index finger.

“No thank you, I think I’d rather go to the market.” Kíli’s face falls at that and he genuinely seems displeased with him.

“I always do what you want to do.” He snaps and there is the childish temper he had always feared. It is regretful that it is justified. Kíli has been giving with his time, submitting to his whim and that is not how a marriage works, they must be equal.

“Very well, I will watch and watch only.” He says firmly, making himself clear. Kíli prefers an audience to company and he seems content with his acquiescence. Kíli’s attention returns to the food while Fíli is quiet in the next room, suspiciously so.
He takes his leave of his fiancé and enters his living area. Fíli is by the table, his back to him and he thinks he has found the banana bread until he turns holding Sting within both hands. “Put that down!” he admonishes, startling the lad. Fíli quickly sheathes the blade and places it upon the table.

“I’m sorry,” he says, contrite. “It’s just, I know that blade.”

“Do you?” He asks nervously and Fíli nods.

“It belonged to Uncle Frerin. Thorin used to show it to us but never allowed us to touch it.” He can almost hear Fíli thinking and he can only pray that he does not question him. He turns towards him, parts his lips as if to speak but his words die on his tongue and Fíli then shakes his head as if to dispel his thoughts. “Shall we go then?”

“Come on, Kíli,” he shouts and the brunet walks out wiping cream from his lips. He doesn’t reach for his hand and he’s grateful for it as he’s annoyed with him as Kíli is annoyed with him. He deserves Kíli’s ire but Kíli does not deserve his. He’s projecting his anger with his situation onto Kíli and it is unfair but he can’t help the way that he feels.

The war rams are kept next door to the stables east of the mountain and backs on to the equestrian centre. The stalls are empty as they arrive and so they make their way outside to the paddock and find several rams saddled with armoured faceplates. Two of the shaggy beasts carry riders and he is surprised to see King Thorin and Dwalin eyeing his company with intrigue.

“What’s this then?” Dwalin asks appearing vexed by their appearance in the paddock.

“Great minds think alike.” Kíli answers piquing Thorin’s interest as he rides towards him.

“Will you be joining us Master Baggins?” Thorin asks gazing down upon him but his eyes are drawn to his neck and the warg-tooth necklace that adorns it. It suits him as he knew it would.

“Yes.” He answers at the same time Kíli answers in the negative.

“I thought you…” Kíli starts and he glares at him sharply, silencing him. He had said no because he thought it was stupid and dangerous and his feelings have not changed but Thorin is worth dying for.

“Very well,” Thorin says with a smile as he has earned his approval by his bravery. It’s stupidity really, his love has clouded his judgement, but he was willing to die a thousand deaths for one of those smiles.

To his credit he is able to mount the ram himself aware that he was under the watchful eye of Thorin the entire time. He’d appreciate the concern if it were that but he isn’t entirely sure it is. Something has changed between them and it is no longer his imagination. Thorin’s gaze lingers longer, his eyes shine brighter and he’s happy to note, he smiles more. That was one thing he hoped to change about him when he thought the King was his prince.

Riding a ram is far worse than riding a pony he learns quickly and the route they take makes his stomach drop. He knew it was dangerous but just how dangerous eluded him. Despite everything he swallows down his nerves and follows behind King Thorin as a close second in the race as he refuses to appear lesser in his eyes. He wants the King’s respect, he longs for it, as he never truly had his blessing. Balin told him he had but Thorin had never confirmed it and it weighed heavy upon him.

He had been rushed to Erebor to marry Kíli as soon as possible and in that first week he was told how his wedding would be and then nothing. It was almost as if they had forgotten why he was even there and he was sure Thorin had something to do with it. In those early days he felt like he was just
putting up with him because he had to but otherwise, he was deemed out of his element and a burden.

Now they were friends, he may even dare to say close friends and still a date had not been set. He was still unworthy. The path ahead gives way to jutting rocks and he lowers himself down holding the reins and the beast’s shaggy coat as he spurs the ram faster, overtaking Thorin in the final moments of the race and reaches the peak of Ravenhill before the others.

He feels elated as he hears the others cheering from a distance, his own blood roaring in his ears drowning them out as his adrenaline spiked. He’s panting heavily as his bravery triggered his panic but it is the most alive he has ever felt and he wants to do it all over again. He climbs off the ram and his body practically vibrates with excess energy and he watches Thorin watching him with a look of surprise on his face. He hadn’t been bested, or does not get bested often and he seems more surprised by who bested him rather than that he was beaten.

Thorin climbs down off his ram and that smile that melts his heart has returned and it calls him and he approaches. Thorin begins to approach as well for a well-deserved victory hug and he moves faster. He has earned it and it is his but mere metres apart he is accosted and thrown off track as Kíli leaps at him. He looks longingly towards Thorin and he simply shrugs. Kíli was his fiancé after all. He endures the hug from his fiancé keeping his head back to prevent a kiss.

“And you said you didn’t want to race,” Kíli says enthused, stepping back with his arms still around him.

“Our hobbit is full of surprises.” Thorin says appreciatively while keeping a respectful distance. Fíli approaches and slaps him on the back in congratulations while Dwalin seems impartial. He had a sneaking suspicion that that dwarf did not like him. He was never outwardly aggressive only indifferent.

“Come see where we used to play, Master Baggins.” Fíli says giddy with excitement.

“Yes!” Kíli agrees dropping his arms to the side. They both appear hyperactive and he assumes it was from the exhilarating ride which he still felt the effects from.

He turns to see what they are pointing at and sees a dilapidated building that was once a watchtower or possibly a castle. Not much of it was left save for a corner that could be the watchtower itself or a turret. It was made from burnt brick or had endured a fire and the coal darkness at the very top what he believed was the remnants of the roof is a flock of ravens. Possibly how the place earned its name Ravenhill.

“Come on!” Fíli calls out and the boys take off running leaving him behind. He laughs as he watches them run in the snow and pause to throw snowballs at each other and he starts to run wanting to participate. The boys race ahead and he runs faster thinking the ground was all snow-covered rock only to learn he was greatly mistaken.

His feet slip from beneath him as he steps onto ice of what appeared to be a frozen river that he had not seen because of the dusting of snow. He tries to grip the surface with his toes but his feet continue to skid beneath him. He throws his arms out to the side, waving them to keep upright, grasping thin air to save himself from the inevitable.

The boys are out of view when he loses his battle with gravity. He falls backward, flailing his arms, grasping for anything and his hand touches a leather clad thigh too late to do anything other than bring the other person down with him. They both hit the ice with a thud and he lays there cold and momentarily dazed. He lifts his head when he is able to see who his victim was and is unsurprised to
find he had dragged Thorin down. He laughs because of his nerves but the King makes no sound. He shouldn’t but he shakes his thigh but the King remains still.

“Thorin?” He asks shakily, hoping he was playing a cruel prank. He would laugh if he were and he desperately wished to laugh. He sits up noticing he had cracked the ice beneath him and his trousers were wet. He looks to see if Thorin had broken the ice and sees the snow tinged red beneath his head. “No!” He immediately crawls up his body laying half on top of him as he gently lifts his head. “Not again, please not again.” He whispers withdrawing his left hand and finding his fingertips stained with blood.

A painful groan and then blue eyes flutter open. “I thought we got over this.” Thorin jests and then winces.

“Stay still,” he orders and rubs his eyes as his vision was misted by tears. He gently cradles his head with his right arm and uses his left hand to gently part his hair to see the cut. “You’re okay, it’s not too deep.” He says with relief, as his blood absorbed into the snow made it look worse. He lays his head back down, away from the rock jutting through the ice that injured him and mindlessly strokes his cheek. “Are you okay?”

Thorin places his hand over his caressing one and gently nods. “What are you two doing?” Fíli asks startling them both.

“Why are you wrestling?” Kíli asks and it is a chore not to roll his eyes. Kíli is far too innocent.

“He’s a sore loser,” he says the first thing that comes to mind, while dropping his hand from Thorin’s cheek and hoping the boys did not see. Kíli offered him an excuse and he will take it as he was unsure how else he could explain laying on top of the King. “Beat you again,” he says considering the King was pinned beneath him. He moves to his right to climb off him but remembers the pool of water from the broken ice and changes direction just as Thorin turns and he accidently kneels him in the groin. “Oh no I’m so sorry,” he says climbing off him and covering his mouth.

The boys both wince in sympathy as Thorin rolls to his left and curls in on himself. He hears a thud and sees that Dwalin has fallen down in the snow and is clutching his stomach while laughing hysterically at the King’s misfortune. He’s never seen him laugh before and he finds that he laughs as he looks, fierce and bold and he can’t help but think this was a release for him after Thorin shamed him so thoroughly in his presence.

He pushes himself away from the King, sliding on his backside on the ice so he can do no more damage. His trousers are sodden and he sneezes feeling chilled to the bone.

“We should go back before the hobbit catches his death.” Dwalin suggests taking him by surprise.

“No,” Thorin gasps uncurling from a foetal position. “I can’t sit astride a ram right now.” He says in apology looking towards him, as if he were in the wrong. “The boys wanted to show you something, go with them.” He nods and climbs up immediately slipping again. Fíli and Kíli rush to his aid, grabbing an arm each and helping him across the ice.

Once he is safely across the boys let him go and he looks over his shoulder to see if Thorin is okay and sees Dwalin helping him up. “Put ice on it,” Dwalin suggests while Thorin shakes his head in the negative. Dwalin retaliates with a handful of snow and attempts to shove it down his trousers which Thorin thwarts and an impromptu snowball fight breaks out. He smiles softly at their antics, pleased to see that not only Thorin was healthy but he was happy.

He turns back around to find Fíli watching him curiously and then looking towards Thorin and then
back to him. Fíli is not as slow as his brother but when it comes to the matters of the heart, he was clueless given that King Bard was madly in love with him and he had no idea. Even so, he has seen something and is trying to comprehend what it was.

“Come on!” Kíli yells out impatiently and Fíli’s assessment of him ends as he joins his brother and he follows somewhat sedately behind them. “We used to play here as children.” Kíli informs him, repeating what Fíli had said earlier as if he is struggling to make conversation with him. Realising he is floundering he rushes off up a stone spiral staircase while Fíli is lost in the shadows before him.

More of the building had survived than he had thought. Three levels were accessible and the entire east wall remained. He stays where he is as the floor is covered in bird excrement and he feels eyes upon him. He turns but finds no one there and instead looks up finding hundreds of beady eyes watching him.

“Are you okay Master Baggins?” Kíli asks from the first floor leaning against a new wooden railing that seemed to be placed for safety as the ground was crumbing away.

“I feel as if they are judging me.” Kíli laughs.

“If Roäc is up there, they are most definitely judging you.”

“You named a raven?”

“Not me personally, his parents named him obviously.”

“What has Roäc been saying now?” Fíli asks, emerging from the shadows beside him.

“Saying? You can talk to the birds?”

“Yeah, didn’t you know?” He shakes his head.

“Uncle has two ravens on his crown, did you not think to ask?” He notes aggravation in Kíli’s tone but ignores it. No, he hadn’t thought to ask because he thought he was staring at his gorgeous husband. He wants to say that to his face but he won’t and before he could give any reply he feels something on his shoulder and looks to see bird excrement.

“That is considered lucky.” Fíli says to lighten his mood.

“How could this be considered lucky?” He asks, half annoyed and half interested in a dwarven superstition.

Fíli shrugs in response. “Just is.” A poor answer to a mindless superstition. He sneezes again and his teeth begin to chatter from the cold. “We’ll head back, you’re not dressed for this temperature.” It’s true as he originally had no intention of climbing the mountain and he only had a thin and wet burgundy coat to stave off the chill.

Kíli comes down the stairs to meet them and once again makes no move to take his hand. He can’t fault him as he is only responding to the negative energy he is putting out. He might not even realise why he is behaving in such a way as he seems to wear a look of confusion and he hates himself for doing this to him. Yet he would hate himself more if he didn’t. False hope was a hangman’s noose.

They leave the collapsed building and return to the others by the rams. Thorin is standing tall seemingly recovered and they all mount without word. There is an unbroken path on the other side of the mountain and he grumbles to himself as they had taken a dangerous route for no reason. There’s enough room to ride beside Thorin but he chooses not to as he tends to be a danger to him.
and if he’s honest he’s feeling sorry for himself. He’s cold and wet and his mind is at war with his heart and being in the presence of both Thorin and Kíli is tearing him apart.

He's beginning to think his mood has affected them all as the ride down the mountain is a sombre one. Perhaps he is overthinking since the King is injured, wet and cold and Dwalin must be cold from dropping down in the snow. He turns his mind to better things, a nice warm bath, a change of clothes, food and feels much better.

There are dwarves waiting in the paddock and as they dismount, they begin to unsaddle the rams. It leaves him in the field feeling like a spare part unsure of what to say or do. Fíli and Kíli have already left which he finds unsurprising as he is often treated as an afterthought. Dwalin is barking orders at someone leaving him alone to watch Thorin climb gingerly off his ram. He’s still hurting and he feels terrible for being responsible for his pain. He wants to go over and comfort him but at the same time he knows he’s a hazard to his health.

“Do not look so concerned Master Baggins, I am well.” Thorin announces from a distance having caught him staring. He’s a terrible liar.

“You don’t have to lie. Not to me.” It is a bold thing to say but he has faith in his relationship with Thorin to be able to say such things.

“What good will it do to speak of such things? Will you carry me upon your back?”

“If I must.” He answers Thorin’s sarcasm with honesty, catching the King off guard and making him laugh.

“I’d like to see that.”

“Very well.” He agrees and approaches much to Thorin’s surprise and he waves his hands as if to stop him.

“No, you’ll drop me.” He’s laughing as he says it. “Take my arm and help me to my room since I’m so frail.” He takes his arm unsure if it were a jest or not.

“You can lean on me. It’s okay not to be okay.” He says as they leave the paddock and enter the stable.

“Wise words Master Baggins but not when you are the King. I cannot be seen to be lesser in my people’s eyes. There are some who would see it as an opportunity to unseat me from my throne.”

“That sounds terrible. You must feel so alone, heavy the head that wears the crown, I suppose.”

“Exactly.”

“For what it’s worth you’d never appear lesser in my eyes.” He can’t decipher the look he receives for that admission but he is happy to notice that Thorin applies a little of his weight against him as he was refraining before.

“Then, for what it’s worth, yours is the only opinion that matters.” He doesn’t believe that is true but he appreciates the sentiment however false it may be.

They walk the rest of the journey in silence and stand awkwardly by the door to Thorin’s bedroom. There is some unspoken thing between them that if he were to say it aloud it would damn them both. He is already damned but he refuses to damn Thorin as well. He deserves better. He deserves the world and he can’t give that to him. He could only love him, unconditionally, but Thorin will not
make a move.

A full body shiver and a sneeze give him an excuse to leave and he bids Thorin a good evening and returns to his room. He peels off his sodden clothes and drops them into the hamper, setting the mithril shirt by the sink while he runs himself a hot bath. As the water is running, he chooses an outfit longing to put his night shirt on but knowing it was too early to do so. He settles for underwear, trousers, shirt and braces and returns to the bathroom and sets the clothes down beside the sink and turns the water off.

The moment he is fully submerged into the water he sneezes five times successively which he hopes is therapeutic rather than damaging. After that he is able to tilt his head back and clear his mind and before long, he is lulled to sleep by the heat of the water.

He awakens disorientated in lukewarm water and he quickly climbs out before he undoes all the good the warm bath had done. His skin has pruned, he notices as he dries himself and dresses in the clothes he had prepared. He still feels under the weather and so he enters the bedroom and collects a robe from his wardrobe and puts it on over his outfit. Next, he goes into the kitchen and puts the kettle on and quietly despairs as there is no space to set his cup down. He doubts he could eat all the cakes before they go stale so he considers donating them to the kitchens or the underprivileged but who they might be remains to be seen. They live in a mountain that is more gold than rock, there are no underprivileged. Perhaps in Dale in the outer city.

It is a dangerous balancing act but he manages to pour himself a cup of tea without incident and sits at his table eying the sponge cake in front of him. He can’t be bothered to cook or venture to the kitchens and so he devours the cake, glad for the space and finishes his tea feeling much better.

He pours himself a second cup of tea and walks into the living area and sets his cup down on the table while he peruses the bookshelf. He’s examining the brown leather spine of one of the books when there is a knock at his door. A drum really, similar to Kíli’s knock but with a different rhythm.

Intrigued, he goes over to the door and opens it finding the Crown Prince fidgeting. “Prince Fíli,” he says in welcome and looks over his shoulder. “Is your brother not with you?”

“Oh, no.” He shakes his head as if he has given the wrong answer. “Did I leave my dagger here?”

“I haven’t seen it but you are welcome to look.” He says and opens the door further, permitting the prince entrance.

“Thank you, Bilbo. It was a gift from my mother.” He’s over-sharing but he appreciates it as it means he is comfortable in his presence. Fíli walks over to the table where Sting still rests and for a moment, he thinks he has been taken for a fool until Fíli turns with his dagger in hand. He must have set it down when he had picked up Sting earlier in the day. “Thank Mahal,” he says in relief and sheathes his dagger inside his fur coat. His eyes drift to the banana bread and to disguise his longing he turns his attention towards the fire and does a double take. “Did Kíli give you that?” He asks in surprise.

He follows his gaze to the beautiful gem Rose Thorin had given to him that now had pride of place on his mantel piece in a thin glass vase. “No, King Thorin gave that to me. He made it himself.” He says proudly uncertain of the look on Fíli’s face. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“I’d say,” Fíli agrees, watching him out of the corner of his eye. “I would say it is the most beautiful thing in the mountain.” Odd choice of words but he nods along with them anyway. “Have you set a date for your wedding yet?” Fíli asks.

“Am I supposed to set the date?” He asks aghast. That made sense why proceedings grounded to a
halt if it were left to him to decide and no one had told him.

“Well, not you.” He breathes a sigh of relief. “Thorin should, awfully suspicious that he hasn’t.”

“Suspicious in what way?” He pries assuming Fíli means for him to.

Fíli eyes him sceptically. “Maybe you should ask Thorin. I’ll see myself out.” Fíli leaves then, having stirred up chaos in his mind. Thorin was delaying his wedding? It was on Thorin’s order that he be brought to Erebor immediately.

He paces anxiously. It does him no good, he will find no peace, he must talk with the King. He takes off his robe and deems his attire somewhat appropriate, they claimed to be family now so his outfit should not cause offence. He leaves his room and quickly makes his way seven doors up to Thorin’s room and knocks on the door to no reply.

He knocks louder. “Come in,” Thorin announces from behind the door and so he opens the door cautiously and pokes his head inside. The room is poorly lit by a candelabra beside the bed and a roaring open fire. There Thorin sits in a chair before the flames, the floor before him littered with empty pitchers. He enters the room annoyed and shuts the door behind him. He had a head injury and he was drinking himself into oblivion.

“Master Baggins,” Thorin greets with a dopey grin and it’s all he can do not to smack that stupid look off his face. He thinks about turning and retreating and have it out with him tomorrow but there is still some awareness to him and if he were to ask his question, Thorin does not have the capability to lie.

“Why has a date not been set for my wedding?” He asks plainly and the dopey grin turns melancholic.

“You desire to be married then?” Thorin asks staring at the floor.

“It’s why I came here.” He answers with a shrug.

“Very well, I’ll set a date.” Thorin says with a sigh, as if he doesn’t want to, he could only hope.

“Don’t.”

“What?” Thorin asks, looking up at him in disbelief.

“I don’t want to marry Kíli.” Thorin does not respond. “I want to marry the Kíli that met me at the gate.”

“That wasn’t Kíli.” Thorin says and he looks at him meaningfully. He doesn’t seem to be following and so he steps forward and kisses him but his lips remain still beneath his own.

He pulls back with their lips mere inches apart. “Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me to stop.” He kisses him again with the same response, dry parted lips against unmoving ones. He’d made a mistake, but he had spoken his truth to no avail and at least now he could sleep better knowing that he had tried. He’d honour the contract, nothing had to change, the heart could mend or at least hurt less in time.

It happens so suddenly he’s knock off his feet as Thorin pulls him onto his lap, his left hand fisted in his hair, angling his head as he returns his kiss while his right hand shamelessly squeezes his posterior. It’s like a dam had burst and he’s swept up in the current as his own hands wind around Thorin’s neck and his fingers drift through hair thick with congealed blood. It strikes him then that his attire is the same, he hadn’t changed his clothes, just drank and sat in front of a fire. He wants to
yell at him but his mouth is preoccupied as the King devours him a kiss at a time, stealing his breath and his heart as well.

He shifts on his lap, arching his hips forward desperate for friction against his engorged cock. Propriety be damned, he wants him. His groan of pleasure is swallowed by Thorin’s hungry mouth as he feels the King’s interest rising up to meet his own. They’ve played this game for too long that even a kiss, as filthy and passionate as it is, has left them desperate.

The King stands, easily holding him in his arms as if he were weightless. Their lips do not part once and his legs wind around his hips as he walks them over to the bed. There he’s dropped unceremoniously onto the bed and Thorin follows him down, capturing his lips in a dominant kiss while pinning him to the mattress with his weight. He’s drunk, he remembers as the King settles between his open thighs and ruts against him.

He’s not thinking clearly, neither of them are. He needs distance as he feels dizzy from the rush of endorphins and drunk from Thorin’s lips. He pushes at his chest only for his wrists to be caught and pinned above his head while Thorin moves his ravenous mouth to his neck. He can feel his skin bruise beneath his touch and he moans wantonly, winding his legs around his body once more and thrusting his hips up against him.

“Take your clothes off,” he whispers breathlessly into Thorin’s ear.

The kiss ends abruptly as Thorin stares down at him, blue eyes dilated and wet red lips twisted into a wolfish grin. He steals one last biting kiss from his lips and climbs from the bed, freeing him so he can sit up on the side of the bed and watch.

He makes quick work of the leather coat and whether from enthusiasm or drunkenness Thorin briefly struggles with the red shirt. Once that is tossed to the floor, he crooks his finger summoning Thorin to him and shamelessly parts his legs. When he is close enough, he reaches out with his right hand, slipping his fingers just under the waistband of his leather trousers and pulls the King into the space between his thighs. He looks up at him then, marvelling at the God that towered above him and then looked down to feast his eyes upon the divine flesh. His porcelain skin was inked. There was a geometric vambrace decorating his left arm and further up there were several centimetre-thick black lines coiled around his biceps. The tattoo upon his right side was more elaborate, thin tendrils of ink swept across his right flank becoming an image of a great black warg with a parted jaw that fanned out across his back. Where the teeth should be several scars were in their stead, puncture marks from a long-ago bite.

He rakes his hand down the King’s chest, gently scratching his skin as he moves his hand further down through the coarse black hair and down the ridges of his chiselled abdominals to the button of his trousers. He brings his left hand up to help unbutton the trousers and he lowers the zip before tugging the material down to mid-thigh.

Thorin’s penis is hard, the foreskin has retracted and a pearl of jism decorates the head of his cock. He wets his lips and rests his hands on Thorin’s hips before pausing in a moment of clarity. There is no coming back from this, no apology would suffice and no reasoning how or why would be appropriate. Kíli might be hurt and though he had considered that, had Thorin, given the state he is in?

A low whine and then Thorin arches his hips forward painting his lips with his precum and he is lost, opening his mouth from his insistence. Hands reach up to glide through his tousled hair and to then cradle his head as Thorin pushes into his mouth, once, twice, and then he pulls away before shoving him flat onto the bed. He’s too far gone and he doesn’t want his mouth, he’d be lying to himself if he had wanted it to end there. They both have an unfilled need, an emptiness that needed to be filled
caused by months, at least for himself, of longing.

He shoves his braces down his arms as Thorin kicks off his boots and then bends down to rid himself of his trousers. When Thorin rights himself, his eyes widen and he wets his lips encouraging a blush to stain his cheeks as he has shed his shirt and revealed the mithril vest. Initially he felt silly wearing it but now each time he puts it on he will be reminded of Thorin’s lascivious smile.

His trousers and underwear are yanked off without a thought to the bindings and then Thorin is on top of him, tracing the white gems on the collar of his vest. He’d once helped him put it on, it was only poetic that he helped him out of it, discarding it onto the bed. Thorin looks down upon him then and once he has his undivided attention, he brings his right hand up to his mouth and presses two fingers inside. He writhes wantonly on the bed trapped between Thorin’s thick creamy velvet thighs, envious of the fingers in his mouth.

It is a slow torture watching them leave his lips and travelling lower. Thorin shifts to the left of him and brings his hand between his legs, teasingly circling the rim before pressing a finger inside him. It’s a slow burn suddenly made worse by the intrusion of a second finger. He groans in discomfort and when Thorin removes his fingers and settles between his thighs he pushes at his chest. There’s no sense left in him; the drink had seen to that.

“Oil.” He tells him sternly to break through the fog. He reluctantly does as he bids and he takes the opportunity to crawl to the centre of the bed where Thorin joins him, passing him the oil. He’s not lucid enough to prepare him and so he prepares himself, slowly opening himself up to Thorin’s hungry eyes as he rubs oil along his hardened shaft.

Sufficiently prepared he lies on his back and invitingly opens his legs and not a moment later Thorin is between them piercing his body with his engorged cock. His lips part in a silent scream and then Thorin’s tongue is in his mouth kissing him possessively, taking every bit of him and leaving nothing for anyone else. He doesn’t feel like himself, the flames of passion have corrupted his heart and in the maelstrom of emotion he had blindly led Thorin into the inferno and now they burned together.

For the moment he can’t bring himself to care. Drugged from Thorin’s kiss, his heart is full and selfish with its desire. He returns his kiss with equal hunger and feels the warg-tooth necklace press against his skin. When he had purchased it, he had never entertained this scenario, feeling the cold drag of it against his enflamed skin while Thorin thrust inside his body. He had imagined that though, from the moment they first met, this has always been an inevitability.

His left hand cradles the back of Thorin’s neck and with a ghost of a touch he sweeps his fingertips across the cut from earlier and opens his eyes to see that his fingertips were free from blood. Despite what they were doing he still worried about him but now that he knows that all is well, he is free to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh.

His right-hand cups Thorin’s shoulder and then moves down his back. A thin sheen of sweat coats Thorin’s body, capturing the firelight making his skin shine golden in the flicking flames. He is like fire burning atop of him with his blazing kiss and the scorching heat between his thighs. He’s drowning in his passionate flames and there he surrenders to him cloaked in his warmth.

He traces over the warped skin of the matching teeth marks on his back and feels his muscles move beneath his shimmering skin like an exotic dance. His sounds of pleasure are swallowed by Thorin as he consumes him extracting the very breath from his lungs. His chest feels tight and he is light-headed but if he were to pass this night, he would deem his death a good one.

Something is struck within him and it is like fire has been added in his veins burning through his blood and setting alight to his heart. Thorin breaks the kiss and he spies blood on his lips, though
whose it was he could not be sure. It adds to his allure of a ravenous beast intent on ravishing him as he grins self-satisfied and aims for that place within him again and again while feasting on his neck.

He's a wanton mess beneath him, over-stimulated and desperate for release. Thorin is close but he wants him closer and he drags him down and holds him tight as his cock that is trapped between their bellies coats them both with his ejaculate. His grip becomes punishing as he refuses to release Thorin and his possessiveness only fuels Thorin’s desire as his rhythm falters and his thrusts become disjointed, short and sharp.

He moans into his ear and lets him hear every sound of pleasure he tears from his throat. “I love you.” Thorin moves his head from his neck, easily breaking his grip as he stares down at him with an adorable confused tilt of his head. He isn’t following but that’s okay, he guides his head down and brings him into a kiss where he expresses his feelings instead.

Thorin breaks the kiss and presses his forehead against his own as Kíli was wont to do. He banishes the thought and stares into the King’s blue eyes as they are nose to nose, lips to lips sharing the same breath as Thorin spills inside him. They share biting kisses that are more teeth than tongue as Thorin rides out his orgasm, gently rocking against him as the fire in the blood has simmered.

Fearing the night had ended and with the day sense may return he runs his hands all over Thorin’s body, committing every scar and tattoo to memory. He glides his hands over his ribs and Thorin shivers, tickled by his touch. He smiles and does it again and moans as Thorin writhes while still inside him.

Thorin pulls out then and collapses beside him and he mercilessly attacks his ribs once more hearing the King laugh breathlessly as he squirms away from his touch. He stops torturing him and simply lays on his side watching him while stroking his fingers through his hair. He loves him. He had loved him from the moment he first saw him. Thorin gazes back at him with that heart-melting smile and though he had never said it, he thinks he might love him in return.

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