Little Swan Lost
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### Little Swan Lost

by [ISeeFire](http://archiveofourown.org/users/ISeeFire)

**Summary**

Bilba has grown up the unwanted granddaughter of the Thain of the Kingdom of Shire but, as she rarely visits the palace, the relationship holds little meaning to her. Instead she focuses on her second year of college, her ballet career and her slowly burgeoning romance with Bofur, a crew member with her ballet company.

The same day Bilba is set to preform on stage for the first time with her company, the kingdom of Shire is anticipating another event. That very evening will oversee the political, arranged marriage between Thorin Durin, Crown Prince of Erebor, and an unnamed Princess of Shire (so unnamed because Bilba's grandfather is a paranoid bastard).

Bilba doesn't care about any of this, she hasn't been invited and has no interest in other countries, politics or other such machinations.

Just before she's set to preform, however, Bilba suddenly finds herself dragged from the theater and taken to appear before her grandfather at the palace.

There she is informed she WILL be participating in the wedding after all.

As the bride.
Whether she likes it or not.

Notes

This story is adapted from the Arranged Marriage drabbled in my Drabble story ideas fic post.
Bilba Baggins was in the midst of a truly beautiful dream. In it she was principal dancer in a production of "Swan Lake" and was right in the middle of the black swan pas de deux. She’d just finished her variation to thunderous applause and the danseur playing Siegfried, a mysterious man shrouded in shadow, stepped forward to join her for the coda.

They moved together in perfect harmony, their bodies in rhythm with one another and the music. Realizing they’d arrived at her strongest part Bilba took a slow, deep breath and launched into her thirty-two fouettes en tournant.

Her execution was flawless and as she ended and launched into the final part of the dance the audience erupted once more. She threw her arm back, head held high in triumph both for the successful performance and as dictated by the play. Her lungs desperately sucked in oxygen and her legs had the barest tremble to them but she pushed it aside, holding the illusion of effortless grace.

A shriek rippled through the auditorium and Bilba blinked in surprise.

With a sharp click the applause, and the audience, vanished.

A second shriek tore through the air.

Bilba’s eyes snapped open, her body already reacting. Adrenaline surged through her veins and she rolled over, falling out of bed and hitting the ground with a thud. Scrambling to her feet, she snatched the can of mace off her bedside table and bolted for the door. A feeling of cold settled over her as images of her roommate being viciously attacked ran through her mind.

Light streamed through the window in the hallway outside her room allowing her to run full tilt. As she reached the entrance to the living room she tried to swing around the corner, hoping to have the element of surprise, only to have her socks slip on the wooden floor and send her sprawling instead. She hit the ground hard, pain barking up her elbow.

Immediately she rolled, coming up into a crouch on one knee, her arm up and ready to spray whatever attacker had dared threaten her friend Rosie.

Rosie who was currently seated on the couch a few feet away, arms wrapped around a pillow, legs drawn up and her surprised gaze fixed on Bilba.

“What in the world are you doing?”

“You screamed,” Bilba said, getting painfully to her feet. “I thought you were dying!”

Rosie smirked. “And you came rushing to my rescue? How sweet.” Her eyes shifted back to the television and she suddenly shrieked again, her grip tightening on the pillow.

Bilba followed her gaze and saw the news running a story. A series of clips aired in a loop behind the reporter as she spoke, not that Bilba could hear it with the sound so low. She squinted as the clips began to replay, recognizing the Shire International Airport. A large, expensive looking jet sat on the tarmac, the door open and a long, velvet carpet stretching down a staircase and across the pavement to where a limousine waited.

“Look, Look, Look!!” Rosie squealed, her hand frantically waving at the screen, “they’re about to show him again!”
A figure appeared at the top of the ramp and slowly started down. From the distance the camera was at Bilba couldn’t make out much other than it was a man and he was dressed in some kind of uniform. What looked like an impressive array of medals and other things adorned the front catching the light and reflecting.

Bilba’s eyes dropped to the footer at the bottom of the screen. It read, in enormous letters, “Prince Thorin arrives for upcoming wedding to still unknown Princess of Shire.”

Bilba rolled her eyes and tossed the mace on a side table in disgust. “Oh, for the love of—next time I may just not come, did you ever think of that?”

Rosie ignored her, still fixated on the story.

Sometimes, Bilba had to admit, she worried a bit about Rosie’s obsession with royalty.

Speaking of which…as if on cue Rosie’s attention snapped back to her, eyes wide and pleading. “Bilba, do you think—”

“No,” Bilba stated.

“But you’re--”

“Disowned, remember? I barely know them.”

“But the Thain is your grandfather!”

“In name only.”

“And your guardian.”

“Also in name only,” Bilba muttered. Anyone with a brain knew her grandfather only took over custody of her after her parents died as a political move. The great, benevolent Thain graciously forgiving his errant daughter in death and taking on her orphaned daughter as a gesture of goodwill, even allowing her to live in the palace and providing her with the very best life had to offer.

At least until public attention died down. After that he couldn't get her shipped off to a boarding school on the other side of the country fast enough. She was still forced to visit in the summer, to keep up appearances, but over the last few years she'd been able to beg off under the pretext of traveling with the ballet company she’d joined.

Rosie had gone back to staring at her latest obsession again, idly chewing on a nail as she did. Bilba shook her head in bewilderment. Rosie was beautiful, on the shorter side, curvy with black hair that hung to her shoulders and beautiful hazel eyes. She could have any boy she wanted but chose, instead, to obsess about princes she’d never have a chance to meet.

Bilba returned to her room, grumbling about the slowly developing bruise on her elbow. Her alarm sounded just as she walked in and she slapped it off in agitation. Ten more minutes she could have slept in wasted thanks to her lovestruck roommate.

She showered quickly and threw on her jeans, shoes and a loose fitting, dark blue blouse. She ran a brush quickly through her hair before twisting it into a chignon and clipping it in place.

She headed out again, stopping in the kitchen to grab breakfast.

Rosie popped in, doing her best to give her puppy dog eyes.
“You seem to be of the mistaken belief I’m a male and those work on me.” Bilba poured herself a bowl of cereal and splashed in milk before leaning against the counter to eat.

“Come on,” Rosie pleaded, “you can at least tell me who he’s marrying! They’ve been keeping it all hushed up for over six months like it’s some kind of state secret or something!”

More like her grandfather was a paranoid bastard and didn’t want to reveal which of Bilba’s cousins was the future bride for fear of her being targeted by…whoever her grandfather was convinced was threatening him at the moment. Bilba firmly believed he had a calendar with a threat of the month written out for each page.

“Whoever it is I don’t envy them.” That was saying a lot for her, considering the relationship she had with her royal relatives was…less than stellar.

“I guess,” Rosie mused. She leaned forward on the counter, dropping her chin on the cold granite. “Who wants to marry a guy who had to break his engagement to be with you?”

Bilba agreed silently. She still had no idea how her grandfather had managed that. The country of Erebor was much larger than Shire and far richer. They’d never had much contact with one another until six months earlier when, out of the blue, it had been announced the Crown Prince of Erebor would be marrying a Princess of Shire. The news had stunned the world as just two months before THAT Prince Thorin had officially announced his engagement to a childhood sweetheart.

A knock sounded on the door and Bilba put the news out of her mind as warmth rushed through her.

“Oh, lord,” Rosie grumbled, burying her face in her hands, “save me from the sappiness of lovebirds.”

“Don’t be jealous,” Bilba retorted, setting her bowl in the sink, “you’ll find your own someday, once you stop moping over Princes.”

“In that case I’ll never find anyone,” Rosie’s voice was muffled by her hands, “since I never plan to stop.”

Bilba stepped out of the kitchen and darted to the door, pulling it open with a huge grin on her face. A second later she was grabbed around the waist, lifted and spun around. Bilba laughed and threw her arms around Bofur’s neck, kissing him soundly before he set her back on her feet.

“So,” he said with a grin, “how’s my girl? Ready for your big night?”

“I think so,” Bilba answered even as her stomach clenched with nerves. “Hopefully I don’t screw it all up.”

“You’ll do fine,” he reassured. Reaching up he pulled off the floppy, insanely ugly hat he always insisted on wearing everywhere he went, and plopped it on her head. “There, you can wear that for luck.”

Bilba grimaced and tugged it off. “I think I’d be more in line for the bubonic plague than luck if I wore that.”

Bofur scoffed. “Critic. That hat is a classic.”

“That hat is dead,” Bilba retorted, plopping it back on his head. “And should have been given a proper burial ages ago.”
Before he could respond she went back to her room to grab her bookbag. When she returned Rosie was sitting cross legged on the kitchen counter, watching the news for more updates on anything royal. Bofur was still in the doorway and she joined him, turning to wave at Rosie. The other girl waved back absently and Bofur pulled the door closed.

As they headed toward the building’s exit he took her bag and slung it over his shoulder where his already rested. He slid an arm around her waist and she snuggled into his side. “Think we’ll need to stage another intervention?”

Bilba laughed. “She’s eating so it probably won’t be as bad. We’ll see how long this coverage lasts.”

Bofur frowned. “Isn’t the wedding tonight?”

Bilba nodded. “Tragically my invitation seems to have been lost in the mail.

They reached the door and headed out, sunlight hitting Bilba in the eyes and forcing her to blink a moment or two before they adjusted.

Bofur shifted suddenly, grabbing her arms lightly and swinging around until he was in front of her. “Well,” he said agreeably, “I guess it’s a good thing you weren’t invited. You have big plans tonight as it is.”

Bilba grinned back at him, butterflies skittering about in her stomach. By a stroke of luck, at least for her, one of the girls playing a swan in her company’s production of “Swan Lake” had fallen ill and Bilba, as her understudy, had been asked to step in.

She was equal parts nerves and anticipation. She’d danced since she was three but this would be her first time on stage as part of an actual ballet company.

Bofur gave her an amused look. “You grin any harder and your face might just crack.”

Bilba laughed and kissed him before tugging out of his grip and racing toward his car. She heard him behind her and managed to get inside before he arrived, locking the door behind her. He gave her a dry look and held up the keys, shaking them at her.

Bilba grinned and leaned against the seat with a sigh as he strode around the other side to get in.

Her mind went briefly back to her grandfather and the wedding set to take place that night and she felt another pang of sympathy for whichever of her cousins had been caught in the Thain’s latest plot.

She also felt a sense of almost gratitude toward the older man. While his treatment of her had clearly been intended to harm it had, in fact, done more good for her than he would ever know. If he hadn’t done as he had, she’d have never joined her ballet company or met Bofur.

She’d never have been able to go to such a fantastic college as Bag End University, even if it was smaller and less renowned, and wouldn’t have met so many amazing people. Even Rosie, though she often wondered if the girl was her friend only because Bilba happened to be a granddaughter of the Thain, no matter how unwanted.

In any event, her life had turned out to be truly amazing.

The car roared to life and Bofur shot her a triumphant grin as he always did when the hunk of junk deigned to start.
Bilba just shook her head.

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The day rushed by in a blur. Most of Bilba’s classes were shortened in a sort of unofficial holiday in celebration of the upcoming nuptials. The few professors who did insist on full classes mostly spent them talking about Erebor or Prince Thorin and the benefits Shire would gain from the new alliance.

Bilba truly didn’t care and spent most of her day daydreaming, staring out various windows and working through her routine in her mind. The performance that evening would be her moment to shine, to prove to everyone she deserved more roles and, hopefully, one day principal roles. She remembered her dream and shivered at the thought of one day holding the status of principal dancer in a production.

After class she ran out to catch the bus which seemed to move at an insanely slow pace until, finally, it arrived at the theater and she leapt down the stairs and ran inside. Thanks to the stupid wedding she was already later than she should be.

The entrance of the theater was enormous, carpeted in a lush, red and gold pattern thread. The walls were paneled mahogany and the ceiling overhead was gilded in gold leaf and inset lights that gave a soft glow to the room. Just ahead of her were the massive doors that, in only a few hours, would open to permit hundreds of guests eager to see the performance.

At the moment Bofur was waiting in front of them, dressed in the uniform identifying him as a stagehand. He’d been there most of the day already, having skipped his classes to help set up for the show. He opened the door and gave her an exaggerated bow. Bilba returned it and skipped past him, her excitement and nerves warring for dominance.

Inside the carpeting continued, plush enough she could feel it through her shoes. Here, row upon row of polished wood seats filled the room and the balcony overhead, each outfitted with a comfortable red headdress and seat cushion. The room was curved, angled around the stage at the front. The stage itself was huge and very deep, allowing for multiple sets to be set up in layers, a system of pulleys easily lifting one to reveal another behind it. Currently it was buzzing with activity as the crew set it up for the show. Bilba paused for a brief second to take it in, imagining herself on that stage, preforming before a packed house.

She breathed out, trying to calm herself, and then headed on. Steps on one side headed down into the orchestra pit and she took them swiftly, bypassing players rehearsing sheet music, and headed through a door that led to the back of the house.

Here it was pandemonium, dancers and stage crew rushing back and forth as they fought to get ready in time.

Bilba headed to the main dressing room for the dancers. When she entered the others were already there, most of them outfitted in their pure white costumes and headdresses. Several paused when she walked in, giving her confused looks and Bilba felt her face heat. Some good impression she was making, her mind scolded, showing up late opening night.

She scurried to an open mirror, planning to get dressed as quickly as possible. She headed to the
racks to grab her costume and paused, her hand lifting to touch empty space.

What?

She twisted slightly to face the other girls, was this some kind of weird initiation joke?

“Do you know where my costume is?” she asked the room at large.

Silence fell, the girls all staring at her and Bilba felt a clenching begin in her gut.

Finally, a girl she recognized as another of the understudies, Christy or something, stepped forward. She was taller than Bilba, and most of the other girls, and didn’t often get parts as she stuck out so clearly in group dances. Bilba had no idea why she was there at the moment. Had someone else fallen ill?

“Bilba,” the girl started, wringing her hands before her. “They told us you weren’t coming.”

Bilba blinked. It occurred to her suddenly that the girl’s costume was too tight, as though it had been made for someone smaller.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “what?”

“Marty called me,” Christy continued. “He said you couldn’t preform and I had to come take your place.”

“That…” Bilba stammered, “That’s not true. It’s a mistake.” Her stomach was in full cramp mode by then and her hands were clenched in fists at her side. The other girls were looking away from her and she felt her eyes burn in embarrassment. She swallowed hard, past the lump in her throat. “It’s a mistake,” she repeated, her voice a mere whisper. She held her head high and forced herself to stay calm. “I’ll handle it right now.”

She strode forward, keeping her eyes straight ahead. No one made a sound as she exited, but the second she was back in the hall a babble of voices broke out behind her.

Bilba ignored them and continued to move down toward the director’s office. The underground tunnel was large and sparse, made of concrete and currently crowded with crew, racks of costumes, set pieces and equipment. Bilba focused on breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth. She would not cry in front of them, she told herself, she would not.

Bofur walked out from around a corner.

“Bilba.” His voice was barely a hushed whisper. “You’re white as a sheet. What happened?”

She shook her head at him, not trusting herself to speak without breaking down and continued past. She reached Marty’s door and rapped on it, feeling the sharp sting of pain in her knuckles.

“Come in.”

Bilba obeyed and promptly froze at the sight that greeted her.

Marty was seated behind his desk, a plump, short, middle aged man with thinning hair and oversized glasses.

He wasn’t what gave her pause. What did were the two enormous men on either side of him, both in suits and sunglasses, hair slicked back, earpieces sticking out from their ears.
A sense of dread settled over her. “Marty? What’s going on? Why is Christy wearing my costume?”

One of the suits answered. “Your presence is requested at the palace, Miss Baggins. Immediately.”

Ice settled in her veins. Bilba stared at him without comprehension. “I can’t go,” she said with a thick swallow past the rock now lodged in her throat. “It’s a two hour flight by jet to get there. I have a show to preform in.”

Marty sighed, his shoulders drooping. “I’m sorry,” he apologized. “You won’t be preforming tonight.”

“But--” Bilba’s voice cracked and she took a deep breath, bringing it back under control. “But I PRACTICED.”

“I know you have,” Marty assured her. “Believe me, Bilba, I know.” He stood up and rounded the desk, coming over to grab her hands. They were sweaty and clammy and Bilba resisted the urge to jerk hers away from him. “What do you want me to do?” he asked. “It’s the THAIN, Bilba. I can’t very well refuse him now can I?”

Bilba just stared at him.

She looked toward one of the suits. “Can’t I just go tomorrow?” she asked, her voice pleading. “Or even after the show? It’s only a couple of hours.”

“I’m sorry,” the man stated, his voice flat. “Your grandfather wants you immediately.”

“Why? What does he want?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.” The man stepped forward. “You will come with us now. The jet is waiting.”

Bilba’s jaw trembled and, despite her best efforts, tears started to slip of their own accord down her face. “But I practiced.” she whispered.

“I’m so sorry,” Marty replied. He patted her hand awkwardly. “There will be other productions, Bilba. I promise.”

She didn’t respond. He released her hands and stepped back. The two suits stepped up on either side of her and then she was being escorted down the corridor. The people she passed stopped and stared and whispers followed her. Shame and embarrassment burned hot within her and the tears flowed ever more freely. She dug her nails into her palms in an attempt to stop herself from crying but to no avail.

She caught another glimpse of Bofur but shook her head at him as he stepped forward. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to him, she’d break down entirely and then her humiliation would truly be complete.

She was guided out of the corridor, back through the hall and, thankfully, through a back door instead of out front where show goers were no doubt beginning to gather.

A limo was waiting there and she was bundled inside and whisked off to the airport. The entire ride Bilba sat in stunned disbelief, half expecting and half praying she’d wake up and find the entire thing had been a terrible dream.

It was only once she’d been led onto her grandfather’s private jet that reality set in and Bilba finally
allowed herself to break down. As the plane rolled down the runway and lifted smoothly into the air, Bilba huddled in her seat, pressed her face into her hand and sobbed.

The suits, and whoever else was on the plane, had the decency to leave her alone as despair rolled over her. She imagined they would probably not bother her until she’d managed to recover.

They didn’t speak to her the rest of the flight.

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The palace hadn’t changed from the last time she’d seen it, nearly five years ago. Bilba watched it come into view, her eyes dry and puffy from crying, her body exhausted.

Her grandfather had built the new palace, setting it high upon a hill so it would be visible for miles. He’d wanted it as ostentatious as possible and had achieved his wish. It boasted hundreds of rooms, not that many were ever used, multiple swimming pools, an indoor theater capable of holding well over a hundred people and much, much more.

The car wound up the long driveway, past giant bushes cut in the shape of the Thain and his beloved, and much spoiled, children and other relations.

All but her mother that is. Getting disowned for marrying the wrong person meant you didn’t warrant a bush.

The car stopped at the front gates and she listened with halfhearted interest as they were buzzed in. By now she imagined the production was in full swing back home, Christy was probably even then leaping and twirling about the stage wearing Bilba’s costume and dancing her part.

The car continued on, rolling slowly up the curving driveway and coming to a stop at the entrance to the palace. Bilba was out before they were fully stopped, her depression already morphing into anger.

She marched inside and found her grandfather’s steward, a greasy looking weasel of a man named Grima Wormtongue, waiting for her.

“Where is he?” she ordered before he could speak.

Grima looked startled. “In his office,” he started, “but--”

He got no further as she stormed past him. The front foyer of the castle was meant to impress, marble floors, gilt lined walls, expensive art, tapestries and statues everywhere. Bilba saw none of it as she stomped her way to her grandfather’s office.

Once there she shoved the doors open and entered, finding the man who’d ruined six months of dedicated practice seated behind an ornate, walnut desk.

“Why?” she ordered. “What was so bloody important you forced me to miss my production?”

The Thain of Shire, Gerontius Took, gave her a look one might give to a particularly bothersome insect. He was old, nearing eighty, but had lost none of his vigor and his mind was as sharp, and devious, as ever.
“You look terrible,” he stated. “It’s a good thing I decided to keep you away until the last second. He’d probably have run in fright at the first sight of you otherwise.” He stood to his full height of just under six feet and nodded behind her. Bilba had no time to look as the door slammed shut, sealing her in the office with the old goat.

Gerontius moved casually out from behind his desk. If possible he’d grown even larger since she’d seen him last. He was dressed, as always, in the richest and most ostentatious robes and garments he could find. Rings sparkled on several fingers and he wore a crown so enormous and bedecked with jewels Bilba often wondered how he didn’t suffer a broken neck just from the strain of supporting it.

“How well do you remember your history, Bilba?” His voice was oily as ever, a tone to it that somehow always made her skin crawl.

“I don’t see what relevance that has to anything,” Bilba shot but stopped herself from saying more as he held up a hand.

“I wouldn’t expect you to remember much,” he mused. "You do take after your father after all, simple minded as he was.”

Bilba bit her tongue hard enough to draw blood. Rising to his bait would do nothing but give him the pleasure of knowing he’d gotten to her.

Gerontius settled on the corner of his desk. No doubt he probably felt he presented a commanding presence but, to Bilba, he just looked like a lazy, fat peacock.

“Nearly twenty years ago,” Gerontius said calmly, “the Kingdom of Erebor was conquered by the Kingdom of Mordor. The royal family was forced to flee and a dictator, going by the name of Smaug, was placed on the throne in their stead.”

Bilba rolled her eyes. “I already know all that,” she snapped. “What does it have to do with me?”

“I’m getting to that,” her grandfather replied. He looked amused and Bilba mentally kicked herself for letting her emotions rule her. “A great portion of the population of Erebor fled under Smaug’s rule and, with the royal family in exile, there was little they could do to help them. It was at this time that Thror, the King in exile at that time, came to me desperate for help.” The man’s face twisted for a moment, as though remembering and Bilba suppressed a shiver at the glee in his eyes. “He had nothing to offer me at the time, of course, so he promised a repayment at a future date, once Erebor had been reclaimed.”

An event that had happened nearly ten years earlier, Bilba thought. Thror hadn’t lived to see it happen but his son, Thrain, had and now ruled in his father’s stead.

Realization dawned on her suddenly and she looked at her grandfather in horror. “Is that how you forced the alliance and the marriage? You called in the debt?” She had wondered, as had many analysts, why Erebor would ever agree to such a deal. The alliance, as she understood it was for them to send money and Shire to send food. The problem was that Erebor was so much larger than Shire that there was no way for them to ever send enough food to make much difference or to make an alliance worthwhile. Particularly one that, seemingly arbitrarily, forced the Crown Prince to break off an engagement and marry a woman he’d never met.

Her grandfather smiled, a truly wicked look, and Bilba felt her heart sink at the notion she was related to one so incredibly cruel. “Why?” she asked again, though this time for a different reason. “They would have given you a fortune in payment, why ask this?”
She had no doubt it was somehow money related. It was common knowledge Shire was in dire straits financially. Gerontius Took indulged himself and his family with every indulgence, it was only a matter of time before the money started to run out.

“Oh, they did,” he stated, “but I rejected it. It was not nearly enough given the amount of help we provided when Erebor was at its most dire need.”

Somehow she doubted that. “So you demanded an alliance,” she stated flatly, “and a political marriage to seal it. Why?”

Her grandfather nearly preened with pride. “The reason for the alliance should be obvious. I want money, they have it.” He settled back slightly on the desk, "as for the reason for the marriage, that I'll keep to myself for the time being. As far as you need to know it is merely symbol of the alliance, a guarantee of the good will of both our kingdoms.”

Except Erebor was giving up her Crown Prince while Shire was only giving up a random Princess or, more likely, close blood relative to the throne, Bilba thought, hardly a fair trade.

“Not to mention guaranteed hatred of whatever poor girl is forced into such a situation,” Bilba responded. “Who is it?”

He looked at her, smile still firmly in place on his face.

It was a testament to how tired she was that the truth didn’t hit her immediately.

Instead it was a slow trickle. The mystery over who the woman was, grabbing her from her production on the night of the wedding, giving her no time to prepare or consider running, her grandfather’s words when she’d walked in. The very fact he’d be sending whoever he’d chosen into a hostile situation and, therefore, would most likely pick someone he disliked.

Bilba staggered and her back hit the door. “No,” she whispered. “Grandfather, no.”

“Oh, it’s Grandfather, now is it?” Gerontius stated. “You will be married in approximately a half hour’s time. I expect you to look better than you do now.”

Bilba shook her head, her entire body trembling. She continued to sag, gravity seeming to increase its hold on her. “No,” she repeated, “you can’t force me. I’ll say no.”

“Will you? You’d have a hard time refusing your guardian.”

“Only for six more months,” she said in desperation, “I’m almost twenty-one.”

“At which time I shall still be the Thain,” her grandfather said, “and, thus, still in control.”

"I don't care," Bilba insisted. "You can ruin my life. I'll leave, go to another country." Bofur would go with her, she knew he would. It would be difficult but preferable to being used as a pawn in whatever plot her grandfather was concocting.

Idly he reached over his desk and picked up a folder. “You know, just because you’re the bastard of that scum your mother married doesn’t mean I don’t keep an eye on you. Consider it watching the half that’s my blood.” He flipped the folder open and started to page through it. “You have amassed yourself quite a number of friends I see.” He held up a picture and Bilba found herself staring at a shot of Rosie, striding across the courtyard on campus, probably on her way to class. Another picture and there was Petunia, her lab partner in Chemistry, a shy, quiet girl who wanted to be a doctor. He showed another picture and another friend and another and another after that.
Then he held up a new photo and Bilba felt her breath stop in her lungs.

Bofur.

Bofur, his arms wrapped around her, a giant smile on his face as he said...something. She couldn’t even place what day that shot would have been taken.

“Promising career this one had.” Her grandfather turned the picture toward himself, studying it. “Oh, I’m sorry, has. It would be such a shame if anything was to happen to derail it, wouldn’t it. I doubt he’d even be able to find work in another country if it was found out he’d derailed the alliance, angering both Shire and Erebor.”

“You wouldn’t,” Bilba whispered, but he would, oh, she knew he would. He’d made her mother’s life a living hell, made it nearly impossible for her or Bilba’s father to find work. They’d been left in poverty until the day they died, driving a car with bald tires on ice. They’d spun out and right into a lake that wasn’t nearly frozen enough to support the weight of a car.

"Please," she begged. "Please don't do this."

Gerontius set the photo down. "You are a tool," he said, his voice cold. "Did you genuinely believe you would never be used?"

Bilba heard a loud roaring in her ears.

She sat hard on the ground. Her body no longer responded to her commands. She swayed, dizziness overcoming her and, vaguely, felt her body slump to one side.

Bofur, she thought, and her heart clenched at the realization she’d most likely never see him again. That, in all likelihood, her grandfather would announce her marriage in a half’s hour time and Bofur would think she’d betrayed him, that this had been her plan all along.

Rosie as well. She could imagine the hurt her friend would feel thinking Bilba had planned to marry a Prince all along and had deliberately cut her out.

A nearly hysterical laugh bubbled out of her throat.

And, then, Bilba proceeded to faint dead away.

***

If life held any fairness in it Bilba would have remained unconscious and Prince Thorin would have been forced to return to Erebor without her. Thorin could elope with his ex-fiancée, the alliance could be re-negotiated and Bilba could go back to her own life.

She already knew life wasn’t the least bit fair. Her parents death had taught her that much.

She ended up being out less than ten minutes.

When she woke up her grandfather was no longer in the room. Instead a group of people were clustered around her. They immediately dragged her up and proceeded to manhandle her. Before she could try to argue she found herself stripped naked and hustled through a door into her grandfather’s private bathroom. There she was ordered to bathe and, when she didn’t do a good enough job, they
took over and scrubbed her until she was sure her skin would actually come off.

Once that was done she was hauled back out, shoved into undergarments and a corset and pushed into a chair. The primping started after that, makeup and hair and fake eyelashes and nails. Through it all Bilba sat in a numb sort of trance, watching the proceedings as though they were happening to someone else.

She was stood up unexpectedly and handed a pair of sheer nylons to put on. She obeyed dumbly and then dutifully stepped into spiked, gold high heels.

The dress was a sight to behold and, under any other circumstance, Bilba would have been in awe. Now, however, she stood like a mannequin as they strapped her into it. It was long sleeved, going over the backs of her hands and ending in small loops around each middle finger. The bodice was tight against her body and the skirt was comprised of so much fabric it felt like she was wearing bricks. The overlay for it was gold lace, culminating in a train over ten feet long. A veil completed the look, draping over her head and going to her waist. It was so heavy that, when shown a mirror, she couldn’t see her face and, for that, she was grateful. Given the beauty of the dress she had no doubt her grandfather planned to record and broadcast the entire thing. No doubt he would show himself as the loving grandfather doing right by the granddaughter of an unapproved marriage, ensuring she made a good match and was taken care of.

She was guided from the office. Outside one of her cousins, Beatrice, was leaning against the wall. She was closest in age to Bilba, with blond hair and green eyes. She was gorgeous with a fit, athletic body she was now showing off in a sparkling gold sheath dress.

She pushed off the wall and came forward to grab Bilba’s arms. “Lucky you,” she almost purred. “If he weren’t so pissed about having to break up with that little mouse of his I’d have married him myself. He’s hot.”

Bilba gave her a blank look. Beatrice pulled her down the hall and Bilba went with her, wordlessly allowing the other woman to take her to the doors of the grand ballroom.

“Grandfather wanted a big wedding,” Beatrice said, “but Thorin refused. So we’re faking it instead. We’ll let the media use clips, you know? Make it seem like it was this big long thing.”

Bilba didn’t care, wasn’t listening, was barely aware of her surroundings.

Footsteps sounded and then Gerontius was there, taking her arm in his.

He was going to walk her down the aisle, Bilba realized. The thought made her physically ill but she couldn’t do anything without risking the futures of her friends. Of Bofur.

Bofur.

As music began to play and the doors were thrown open she tried to imagine it was him waiting at the end of the long aisle as they began to walk down.

It would have been him, eventually, of that she was sure.

As they entered the room Bilba could see what Beatrice had meant. A few rows of seats had been set up at the front of the room, filled with people. No doubt that would be one of the clips shown over and over with no one ever questioning why no wide shots were ever shown.

At the head of the aisle a large altar had been set up, upon which she would shortly be sacrificed. It was draped in greens and blue, the colors of Shire, and overlaid with blue and silver, the colors of
Erebor. A man she didn’t recognize stood waiting to officiate and, to her surprise, many of her female cousins, dressed in the same dress as Beatrice, stood lined up to one side. As she watched Beatrice joined them near the front, taking the place of Maid of Honor. The other side held a number of men that Bilba vaguely thought she recognized from the security force, including the two who’d dragged her away from her life. She wondered if the clips of them would be photoshopped to make them appear even more different.

They reached the front of the aisle and Bilba was finally forced to look at the man waiting there.

Thorin Durin was tall, much taller than he had appeared descending from the plane. Bilba was sure her heels added several inches to her normal height of 5’3” but he still towered over her, probably easily topping six feet. His shoulders were broad, his face chiseled and sporting a short cropped beard. His hair, dark and with a slight wave, was worn long and currently tied back in a low ponytail. Two braids, she vaguely remembered something culturally significant about them, draped over his shoulders, silver beads capping them. He wore the uniform he’d had on when she’d see him departing the plane, had it just been that morning? The uniform of royalty, marking every inch of him as the Crown Prince he was.

She risked a look at his eyes, and instantly quailed, wishing she hadn’t. They were a blue that couldn’t possibly be found in nature, and stared at her with a blank coldness that she thought might just match what she currently felt inside herself at the moment.

The minister began. The service was short, not at all what she’d imagined or dreamed of when she was younger.

When Thorin spoke, his deep, slightly accented voice offering a curt, “I do” she started in surprise.

A moment later the question was asked of her. Feeling as though bars were closing around her, Bilba focused on Thorin’s shoes, polished to a shine so intense she could see her veiled reflection in them, and offered a quiet “I do.”

The bars clanged shut, the sound so loud in her mind it was a wonder they weren’t audibly heard.

Thorin’s hand took hers and a ring was slid onto the ring finger of her left hand. She didn’t look at it. It felt like a manacle, dragging at her hand.

The minister spoke a few more words and Thorin stepped up to a small table she hadn’t noticed before. He bent, wrote something, then straightened, spun on one heel and marched out, leaving her at the altar. Bilba felt a brief moment of hope. Had he changed his mind? Decided he couldn't go through with it?

Then the minister said something to her, gesturing toward the table and she stepped forward to see a marriage license laying there. Thorin’s signature was scrawled on it, the lines harsh and jagged.

Someone handed her a pen. For several seconds Bilba stared at it until her grandfather cleared his throat loudly next to her. Choking back a sob, Bilba bent and signed her name.

And, just like that, her life as she knew it was over.

Her cousins surrounded her, talking excitedly and lifting her hand to stare at her ring.

All Bilba could do was stare at her signature.

It felt like she'd signed her own death warrant.
Chapter 2

Thorin strode down the hall toward the quarters he’d been assigned. He dragged at the knot of his tie, viciously ripping it off and throwing it to the side as he entered the room. His jacket followed a moment later. Neither item hit the ground in a satisfying manner so, in a flash of pique, he wrenched at the monstrosity on his ring finger. His father had refused to provide one of the family heirloom rings for the charade and Thorin hadn’t been able to bring himself to shop for any.

He’d never had a chance to buy rings for his and Kyra’s wedding. He wouldn’t buy one for a stranger.

In the end the Thain had provided rings. The one currently refusing to come off his finger was massive, mithril with a thick band of diamonds in the center and two more, smaller bands set off to each side. It was garish, ostentatious and nowhere close to a style he’d voluntarily wear.

With a burst of pain the thing finally scraped over his knuckle and he flung it violently, feeling a surge of satisfaction at the sound it made striking the floor. It skidded out of view beneath the bed where it could stay until the end of time for all he cared.

He grabbed a chair and jerked it around to face him. The legs screeched against the marble floor, tilting off balance for a moment before settling.

Thorin collapsed into it, braced his elbows on his knees and put his face into his hands. He ran his fingers back into his hair, digging them into his scalp until sparks of pain rippled through the skin.

He sighed and shut his eyes, the beginnings of a headache throbbing behind his temples.

His phone rang and he jumped, startled. He pushed up from the seat and grabbed it off the bed where he’d left it an hour earlier.

A picture popped up on the screen identifying the caller and his heart stuttered. He slid his thumb across the screen to accept the call and held it up to his ear.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Oak.” Kyra’s voice was soothing, as familiar to him as his own. “Did she still look like her picture?”

Thorin sank down on the edge of the bed. His anger melted away into tired resignation. Kyra hadn’t deserved any of this. “I wouldn’t know. She wore a veil so thick they could have married me to a giraffe for all I know.”

Kyra laughed. “I think even you would have noticed that.”

Thorin felt his own lips twitch though he knew she couldn’t see it. “Perhaps.”

Thorin hadn’t known much about Shire other than that it was small and on the other side of Middle Earth. He’d had no idea his grandfather had ever been there during the exile, much less incurred an honor debt from them. After discovering he’d be required to marry one of its Princesses he’d visited a handful of times hoping to meet or at least talk to the woman. The Thain had refused to identify her, however, citing vague security concerns. When Thorin had finally received her name, less than a week before the wedding, he’d been equal parts relieved it wasn’t any of the truly horrible ones he’d met and startled to discover he hadn’t, in fact, met her at all.
Even then he'd been denied his requests to meet her, the excuse now that she refused to speak to him or see him before the wedding. In the end, Thorin had been forced to resort to the Internet to try and find information on his bride. He'd found plenty of pictures of the Thain and his family. Most of the photos, and attached articles, had involved the various members being caught up in some scandal or another. In Erebor, a country that prided itself on honor, the behavior would have been horrifying but, here, the Thain seemed to find it amusing. From what Thorin had seen the man indulged every whim of his family, particularly his granddaughters, spoiling them rotten in the process.

It gave him little hope on the type of person Princess Bilba was, in spite of the fact she failed to show up much at all online. He'd found only sparse information, the only major article and accompanying picture detailing the death of her parents when she was ten. The girl in the photo had been rail thin with frizzy, choppy hair that looked like she’d cut it herself and thick framed glasses. After that all he had come across were brief snippets of how she refused interviews, had chosen to live as far from her family as possible and never attended gatherings at the palace. There were a handful of other photos but all were taken at a distance and were rarely in focus. Bilba Baggins, as far as he could tell, preferred isolation.

“Well,” Kyra was saying, “hopefully she doesn’t still look fifteen or people will think you’re a cradle robber.”

“It wasn’t exactly my choice,” Thorin growled, “so they can hardly blame me. They can blame the fool Thain.”

“He’s just trying to do what’s best for his country.” Kyra said, ever the diplomat’s daughter.

“On the back of my country,” Thorin said, his anger mounting again. The deal the Thain had demanded was absurd. When they had first received word from him six months earlier showing proof of the debt and demanding repayment, Thorin’s father had offered an obscene amount of money. The sum would have kept Shire flush with more cash than they knew what to do with for generations. The King had expected the matter to be closed and, when the reply came, had genuinely thought it would be a gracious acceptance and expression of gratitude.

The rejection had been startling to say the least. The demand that Erebor form an alliance, one where Shire received significantly more than Erebor, had been shocking.

The mandate that the alliance be cemented with a marriage, as if the Thain had concerns they wouldn’t honor the agreement otherwise, had been downright insulting.

“We’ll figure it out.” Kyra’s voice was optimistic and Thorin closed his eyes in misery. The throbbing in his head tipped over into a full blown headache and he pressed his fingers into his forehead with a grimace.

“Kyra--”

She cut him off. “I know, I know, Durin I and blah, blah, blah.” Her tone grew a bit sharper for an instant. “You didn’t consummate the marriage did you?”

“Of course not!” Thorin nearly shouted, his eyes snapping open in surprise.

“Then the marriage isn’t official,” Kyra said, smug, “so we can figure it out.”

Thorin didn’t answer. Kyra firmly believed their engagement could somehow be salvaged and he had given up trying to convince her otherwise. Privately he admitted her optimism was infectious, no matter how far-fetched he knew it was. Kyra didn’t care about the obstacles in the way, like the fact
that annulling the marriage to the Shire Princess would destroy the alliance and bring dishonor on Erebor. She also didn’t care about the law instituted by Erebor's founder, Durin I, a nutjob as far as Thorin was concerned. It dictated Ereborean royalty could only marry once in their lifetime, period, no loopholes regarding consummation or anything else. The law meant Thorin had been done the second he’d signed the blasted marriage license.

A knock sounded on the door.

“I have to go, Kyra,” Thorin told her, “I’ll call you again tomorrow.”

“Oh,” she responded. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Thorin answered, forcing a note of cheer into his voice. He ended the call and went to answer the door.

Princess Beatrice was standing there; leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the hall in what she probably thought was a seductive manner. It was not the first time he’d had to face her in such a pose during one of his visits but, given the wedding, he’d sincerely hoped it was the last.

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “Can I help you?”

She grinned suggestively at him. “I certainly hope so.” Her eyes traveled down the length of his body and back up again. Thorin felt his skin crawl.

“In case you missed it,” he said, his voice tight, “I’m married.”

She lifted her shoulders in a languid shrug and raised her left hand, flashing a giant diamond on her ring finger. “Join the club.”

Thorin still had one hand on the edge of the door and tightened his grip, trying to not be too obvious about the disgust he currently felt. “I’m married,” he repeated in a low growl, “to your cousin.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes and straightened off the wall. “So what? I’m prettier than she is.”

Thorin didn’t bother to respond. He hadn’t seen Bilba’s face during the wedding but, he would admit, the way her figure filled her dress had been flattering and suggested she’d definitely matured from the old photo he’d found. Thorin had always preferred women with curves and she’d certainly possessed plenty of those. Beatrice, in contrast, had the rail thin look that many models sported, attractive to some but never a look that had caught Thorin’s eyes.

She sashayed forward, lifting her arms as if she wanted to wrap them around his neck. Thorin responded the same way he had every other time he’d had to put up with her. He took one step back and closed the door firmly in her face.

He dragged his luggage out from under the bed and fished through it till he found the pain medication that Dis had loaded him up with before he’d left. She’d insisted he’d need it before everything was done and she was right. He downed two with a glass of water from the bathroom and then collapsed across the bed, draping an arm over his eyes and struggling to relax.

He was doubly grateful he’d refused to allow any of his family to come. The last thing he wanted was any of these people having a negative influence on his young nephews and Dis probably would have ended up with high blood pressure.

Bilba Baggins…now Bilba Durin. He wondered if she was as bad as Beatrice. He prayed she wasn't worse though it was admittedly hard to picture what worse would even look like. She was pretty
enough on the outside, at least from what he’d seen, but he could say the same about Beatrice or any of the others he’d been forced to spend time with over the course of the last six months as plans had been finalized. No doubt any beauty she possessed didn’t extend any deeper than her skin.

Another knock sounded on the door and Thorin snarled in its general direction. It repeated and he finally shoved himself up, anger already threatening to get the better of him.

He stalked to the door and ripped it open, fully expecting to see Beatrice trying to seduce him again.

Instead he found himself facing Dwalin who simply raised both hands, one holding a six pack of Blue Mountain ale, the other a deck of playing cards. “Figured you wouldn’t be getting much sleep tonight.”

“You figured right,” Thorin growled. His head still bothered him but he was too angry to sleep. He snatched the six pack out of the other man’s hand and waved him inside.

His mind went briefly to his new wife but he brushed it aside.

She could find her own entertainment.
Bilba wasn’t entirely aware of things after she signed the marriage license. It felt like a fog settled over her mind. Sound faded to a far off murmur and, though she could see her cousins touching the dress and her ring, she didn’t feel it. It was as though she were standing in another room watching what was going on.

At one point she became vaguely aware of someone holding her arm and leading her.

After that things got hazy.

When the fog finally began to lift and she came back to herself, Bilba found she was sitting on a chair in the room she normally stayed in when forced to visit the palace in the summers.

Her eyes roamed around the small space, taking in the simple bed and writing desk, the cramped bathroom. The room was intended for a servant, which was generally how she was treated when she visited. Every so often her grandfather would invite the media on a tour and, at that time, he would always show an opulent suite of rooms he claimed were hers.

She didn’t even know where those rooms were.

A low heat began to uncoil at the base of her mind. She thought of her mother, disowned not for marrying someone unsuitable but for marrying a Duke’s son when she’d been expected to marry the son of one of the Thain’s cronies. A thank you for the man loaning the Crown an exorbitant amount of money after a particularly lavish spending spree by one of Bilba’s aunts.

The heat flickered and grew hotter.

She thought of her mother’s dowry, created for her by the late Queen and confiscated by the Thain and most likely showered on someone particularly awful like Lobelia out of spite.

Liquid flames began to spread outward, winding along pathways in her brain, slipping through mental rooms where she usually stored things like rationality and common sense.

Bilba thought of the way the Thain had systematically destroyed her parent’s lives, culminating in indirectly causing their deaths.

The way he’d taken guardianship of her as a marketing tool; a way to increase his approval rating. How he’d placed her as far from the palace as he could, only bringing her around once a year to make himself look good. Summers for her in the palace had always been a nightmare. She was treated as little more than a servant, kept in poor quarters, wearing clothing that should have been retired long ago. Balls had been denied her, the Thain refused to let her give interviews and she wasn’t allowed at the palace unless specifically invited. The Thain gave excuses to the press, always painting himself as the long-suffering, doting grandfather and her as the sullen, ungrateful, nearly hermit-like granddaughter.

And now this.

He’d learned from her mother, Bilba realized, to not let on what was happening until it was too late to change.

The fire exploded into an inferno, white hot flames racing through her body, igniting her nerves, lighting her veins and filling her with an incredible heat.
Bilba lunged up from the chair, grabbed it and flung it as hard as possible. It struck the wall and shattered into kindling, the pieces clattering to the ground.

Bilba ripped the veil off, catching several wayward pieces of hair in the process, and destroyed it tearing the lace into small shreds and flinging them away from her.

She stormed over to the desk and wrenched a drawer open, a wicked smile of satisfaction gracing her features. No one had thought to clean out her things before putting her in the room.

She pulled out a large pair of scissors, lifted a wad of the wedding gown and set to work.

She didn’t stop once the dress was in pieces on the ground, moving instead to the comforter on the bed, the mattress and pillow, the thin curtains, and the ratty rug on the ground. She broke the mirror in the small bathroom and carved her name into the headboard and the walls.

That action gave her an idea. Moving to her closet she dressed in an older, worn pair of pants and a t-shirt. Her hair had come undone and she paused long enough to put it up in a ponytail. She didn’t bother with shoes or socks; she’d always preferred to go barefoot anyway.

Holding the scissors she headed to the door only to find it locked. She snorted and returned to her desk, reaching a hand under it and quickly ripping off the lock pick set she kept taped there.

Years of being locked in her room when no one had use for her had been beneficial in one area, it had taught her to be exceptional at getting out of them, especially this one.

The locked clicked open quickly. She retrieved her scissors and headed out into the palace, humming as she did.

Time to go let her family know how she felt about recent events.

***

Thorin was in the midst of losing a ceremonial set of battle axes to Dwalin when he heard a commotion in the hallway.

Footsteps pounded past his doorway, complete with voices shouting orders. In the distance Thorin could hear the sound of a woman shrieking in rage. It sounded like Beatrice.

Dwalin tossed his cards down and got up, one hand moving to the gun on his belt. “Stay here,” he ordered.

Thorin rolled his eyes but obeyed, lounging back in the chair and crossing his arms over his chest. The last time he’d defied Dwalin’s orders the other man had handcuffed him to a chair.

Just as Dwalin reached the door Thorin heard running footsteps again, going the opposite direction. They darted past his door and faded.

Dwalin drew his gun, holding it lightly at his side.

“I don’t think they’ll be thrilled at the sight of you with a gun you’re not supposed to have,” Thorin remarked dryly.
Dwalin muttered something uncharitable under his breath. He barked a repeat of his order to stay put at Thorin and then opened the door a crack, sliding out and shutting it behind him.

As soon as he was gone Thorin casually slid a hand under his jacket and drew the gun he had holstered at the small of his back. He laid it on the table and rested his hand on it lightly.

He wasn’t an idiot after all.

Dwalin was back a few minutes later, his weapon back in its holster. He raised an eyebrow at the one Thorin had on the table. “Weren’t you just griping about my gun?”

Thorin shrugged and put his back. “So what’s going on?”

“It would appear,” Dwalin said, dropping into his seat, “your little wife is having the mother of all tantrums.”

Thorin paused in the middle of picking his cards back up. “Over what?” She hadn’t reacted at all during the wedding. Thorin had wondered at one point if she wasn’t actually bored with the whole thing.

“Beats me,” Dwalin fanned his own cards out and examined them. “Maybe they saddled us with a looney one.”

“I wouldn’t put it past them,” Thorin grumbled. He sighed and rubbed a hand across his forehead. His headache had been getting better. “Wonderful,” he muttered. “My only marriage.”

“Who knows,” Dwalin said cheerfully, “maybe your father will repeal the law. You can wait a couple years, quietly annul on grounds of her being eight kinds of crazy and marry Kyra.”

Thorin’s lips twisted. “And what about the law forbidding my father from changing or introducing any law for personal gain for himself or a family member?”

Dwalin paused in the act of drawing another card. He cursed creatively. “Durin I was a right bastard wasn’t he?”

Thorin didn’t comment. He actually agreed with that law, it was meant to be a check on royalty, stopping them from abusing their power by creating laws that only benefitted them or, worse, were designed as bribes to gain favors.

It was just bad luck that the law specifically screwed him over in this particular instance.

Outside the door more footsteps rushed past and he sighed.

He was beginning to get an impression of what worse than Beatrice was like.

***

Bilba hid behind a statue of some ancestor or another and listened with glee as Beatrice screamed about her ruined wardrobe, and her ruined room, particularly her shoes, jewelry, oh, and bathroom, mustn’t forget that.

They guards had been searching for her for over an hour but Bilba wasn’t concerned that they would
find her. She knew the castle better than they did, having spent hours amusing herself by exploring.

So far she’d visited several of her Aunts’ rooms, the ones who had spent hours berating her mother’s character while she had to stand there silently, as well as most of her obnoxious, spoiled, cousins. There were a handful who weren’t so bad so she’d avoided them, choosing instead to pay extra attention to Aunt Lobelia’s room.

She hadn’t gone to the Thain’s room. Even as angry as she was the man still terrified her, as he always had, and she couldn’t bring herself to further incur his wrath by damaging his belongings.

The guards were moving off and Beatrice’s rage was quieting down, probably as she went to find the Thain and demand new things.

Bilba edged out from behind the statue and headed down the hall, walking lightly on her feet to keep as quiet as possible. She passed a number of servants along the way but they simply smiled at her and kept going. Many of them were her friends and it was from them that she’d learned the ins and outs of the palace.

She ducked into one of the unused guest rooms and slid a hand into the pocket of her jeans, coming out with the cell phone she’d lifted from Beatrice’s room. The thing weighed a ton; it had a gold case covered in pink diamonds.

Beatrice didn’t bother to password protect it as she was too impatient to spend the few seconds to enter it every time she used it.

Bilba squeezed herself onto the window seat in the darkened room, pulling her legs up and wrapping an arm around them. Most of the anger had drained out of her during her reign of destruction and now she just felt tired. She took a deep breath, trying to calm the sudden butterflies in her stomach and dialed.

She put the phone to her ear and squeezed her eyes shut as the ring sounded. The ballet was probably only halfway through so Bofur was doubtlessly still working. She didn’t know when else she’d have a chance to get ahold of him though and he deserved to hear what had happened from her so…

“Hello?”

Bilba’s stomach clenched violently. “Bofur?” Her voice stumbled as she spoke and she dug the fingers of her free hand into her leg.

“Bilba?” Bofur said, relief coloring his voice. “Are you all right? I’ve been trying to find out what happened to you for hours! All anyone would say is a couple of suits dragged you out.”

“The last few hours?” Bilba said, “What about the play?”

“The play?” Bofur said, his tone disbelieving. “I don’t care about the play, Bilba. I care about you. Are you alright?”

Bilba felt her lower lip begin to tremble and her eyes watered. “I--” She started to say only to cut off as her voice broke. “Bofur, I--”

“What is it?” Bofur asked, his voice gentle. “What happened?”

It was like flipping a switch, his concern pushing her over completely from anger to despair. Curling in as tight a ball as possible, Bilba broke down. Through tears and a voice nearly unintelligible from
sobbing she poured out what had happened. As she spoke she used the fingers on her left hand to twist the ring on her finger. She’d barely glanced at it earlier but now fixed her eyes on it as she talked, picturing it like a shackle on her finger. She didn’t know who’d picked it out but it was nothing close to her style, a thick band of mithril with an enormous diamond in the center, smaller diamonds clustered around it. The ring was too heavy for her hand and dragged at her finger.

When she finished speaking there was dead silence on the other end of the phone. Bilba was a mess, her nose running and nearly hiccupping with sobs. Her eyes were dry and scratchy and a headache was forming behind them from the stress and crying.

“Bofur?” She pressed the phone to her head so hard that pain throbbed through her ear. “I’m sorry,” she stammered, “I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t. I was just--”

“Run away with me.”

Bilba’s mind crashed to a stop. “What?”

“Run away with me,” Bofur repeated, his voice tense. “Can you get money or do you need me to wire it?”

“I--” Bilba’s mind reeled, trying to catch up with what he was saying. “Bofur--”

“Get to the airport,” he continued. “Fly to Gondor, it’s the shortest flight but they’re big enough that neither Shire nor Erebor will try to force you out of it. You can go to Arwen, she’ll protect you.”

“But,” Bilba stuttered, “your job. What about--”

“There are other ballet companies,” Bofur cut in. He gave a short laugh. “Though I imagine I won’t be visiting my brother anytime soon, not after I ran off with the Crown Prince’s bride.”

Bofur’s brother worked in a bakery in the capitol city of Erebor, Bilba remembered. Bofur was incredibly proud of him and talked of him constantly. Almost all Bilba knew about Erebor came from him.

“What if they find out he’s related to you?” she asked, barely daring to start to hope. “What if they retaliate against him?”

“They won’t,” Bofur said confidently. “I told you before about their honor system, it’s crazy. He hasn’t done anything to them; they won’t hold his relationship to me against him even if they did find out about it.”

“And what about the alliance?” Bilba asked, struggling to believe such a plan could possibly be feasible. She turned her gaze out the window as she spoke, watching as people scurried back and forth on the grounds below. The palace rarely slept, there was always something going on. The activity would make it both easier and harder to get out of the palace.

A tiny flicker of hope sparked to life, was she actually considering it?

“What about it?” Bofur said. “Prince Thorin held up his end of the bargain, the fact you ran off isn’t his fault. His honor is intact. Erebor’s honor is intact. The alliance is intact.”

Bilba took a deep, shuddering breath. The tiny spurt of flame grew stronger and she clung to it, unwilling to let it go. “Ok,” she whispered. She wiped her face and straightened on the window ledge. “Ok,” she said again, her voice stronger. “Let’s do it.”
“Good girl,” Bofur said his voice happy. “I knew you wouldn’t let that bastard get you down for long. Alright, get to the airport. Do you have money for the ticket?”

“I can get it,” Bilba said, her confidence slowly building.

“Great. I’ll leave immediately. I’ll see you in Gondor, alright?”

“Alright,” Bilba replied.

There was silence on the other end for an instant and then, “I love you Bilba, never forget that.”

Bilba smiled and something inside her relaxed. “I love you too. I’ll see you soon.”

He hung up and she let her hand with the phone drop to the ledge.

She swung her legs off and stood up. She straightened her back and held her head up high. She reached for the eyesore on her finger and twisted it off. She nearly threw it but paused in the middle of drawing her hand back. The ring was probably worth an obscene amount of money and, after all he had done the least the Thain could do was finance her new life in Gondor.

She shoved it in a back pocket and then marched from the room. She'd have to stop by her room to get her shoes but it would only take a moment.

Then she had a plane to catch.
Chapter 4

Getting out of the palace proved less of a challenge than Bilba feared. She had no money of her own with her and the ring would help her get started once she was in Gondor so she stopped by Beatrice’s room to pick up one of her cousin’s many, many credit cards.

Beatrice wouldn’t even notice it was gone.

She almost left the phone but, at the last second, changed her mind and kept it in case she needed to call Bofur. It also occurred to her the number had probably appeared on his phone when she’d called and, if he tried to call back, she didn’t want to risk inflicting her cousin on him.

After that she took the servant’s corridors down to the kitchens. All the servants she passed greeted her warmly. None of them made any attempt to sell her out to the guards searching for her.

Once she arrived at the kitchen she squeezed around massive ovens and stainless steel countertops, sliding past the array of chefs already preparing for breakfast the next day. The smell of fresh bread hit her nostrils and her stomach grumbled; reminding her she hadn’t eaten since lunch.

She ignored it, telling herself she could eat on the plane. Her stomach was so knotted up that nothing she ate would stay down anyway.

The doors appeared in front of her and she picked up her pace, moving almost invisibly as she did. She’d nearly made it when one of the chefs, an elderly woman named Bonnie, stopped her with a grin.

“Lady Bilba,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron before enfolding Bilba in a hug. “I didn’t know you were coming to the wedding!”

Bilba hugged her back, forcing a grin. “It was sort of a last minute thing,” she said dryly. “I didn’t know I was coming either.”

Bonnie drew back and put her hands on Bilba’s shoulders. “I hear you’ve been up to something again. Your grandfather is looking for you.”

Thankfully that wasn’t anything new. Bilba was fairly well known for disappearing frequently on her visits to the palace, sneaking out when the treatment got overwhelming and spending the day at the movies or window shopping.

“You know me,” she quipped. She hugged the woman again. “I have to go but I’ll talk to you later, alright?”

Bonnie nodded. She stepped back, clearing the way to the door. “I can understand the urge, especially with the way that cousin of yours is probably carrying on. Landing someone like the Crown Prince of Erebor probably didn’t help her ego problem.”

Bilba raised an eyebrow, she thought Beatrice had married Prince Thorin? It said something about her family that Bonnie thought it possible in spite of the fact that Beatrice was already married. Most likely she thought Beatrice had simply quietly divorced the timid, but exceptionally rich, Duke she’d married in order to marry the Crown Prince. Bilba could actually have seen that happening had Beatrice wished it. Regardless, it was clear the Thain had kept things under so tight a wrap that no one even in the palace realized what had happened yet. The servants usually knew everything that was going on in the palace, no matter how secret it was supposed to be.
“I would imagine not,” she agreed simply. The last thing she wanted to do was get into the truth. They would find out soon enough.

She waved to the woman and headed out the door, smiling as the night air hit her. Overhead the lights of the palace drowned out any decent view but she could pick out a few stars and a fat full moon shone down from where it had risen just over the castle.

It was a beautiful night.

Bilba headed around the back of the palace, avoiding the massive crowd undoubtedly gathered at the front gates. She moved between bushes and shrubs, keeping herself in shadow as much as possible. The building sat on a massive amount of land that she had often thought was poorly planned and set up for security purposes. Considering how easily she was moving through it at the moment, she wondered how no one had ever managed to sneak in before.

She reached the stone wall that encircled the entire area. It had been put up by her ancestors and was ancient and poorly kept up. Moss covered it and many areas had holes and chunks missing. In addition to that, trees had been planted at intervals and allowed to grow free so that branches now hung over the top edge.

Bilba had always been an avid climber and scaled one of the trees easily, barely feeling the edges of bark biting into her hands or scraping against her legs through her jeans. When she reached the top she carefully transferred from the branches onto the top of the wall itself. She squatted, gripping the edges with her hands and gently lowered her legs over the other side. Her feet found gaps between the stones and she cautiously made her way down. She pushed off from the last few feet, landing in a crouch. She misjudged how far it was by a foot or so and the resulting jar through her legs rattled her but she shook it off and stood up.

She turned and, for the first time, grinned broadly. Shire stretched out before her, no walls, no scheming relatives.

She strode forward, more than ready to be done with the place. She would miss Shire, her friends and ballet company but, as Bofur had said, there were other companies. There were other schools too. Not to mention she looked forward to seeing Arwen again. She hadn't seen the other woman since her marriage to King Aragorn over year ago though they talked often enough online. She had no doubt they would allow her to stay with them until she could get on her feet.

By the time she made it to one of the main roads she was exhausted. There were few people out and about and little traffic on the roads. The crowd at the palace would probably start dispersing soon and Bilba hurried down a side street, her arms wrapped around her torso as little protection against the cold. She wished she'd taken the time to grab a coat before leaving but there was little to be done for it now.

Many of the stores were closed so late but there were a handful still open and, this close to the palace, they were almost universally all high end, high dollar places. As she passed one, Bilba spotted a floor length, warm looking trench coat in the window.

Bilba felt a slow smile spread across her face and she detoured into the store.

She left a short time later, wearing a steel gray version of the coat with white fur trim along the collar, edges of the sleeves and bottom of the coat. It was double breasted and fitted with a belt sporting an intricately worked silver buckle.

It had occurred to her while she was in the store that, once she reached Gondor, she would most
likely simply wait for Bofur to arrive before deciding on a next step. With that in mind she realized she didn’t want to meet him wearing a ratty pair of jeans and a shirt.

Which was why, in addition to the coat, Bilba now sported a brand new pair of dark colored jeans, a russet colored sweater, new belt and a pair of knee high black boots with a short practical heel. The coat swirled around her ankles as she walked and she tried to pretend she was in one of the fashion shoots Beatrice was always doing, strutting down a lit catwalk to the flash of cameras and an adoring crowd.

Not that she was as attractive as Beatrice of course as the other girl was so fond of pointing out. Still, she would do it just to get to wear pretty clothes.

She’d have to remember to thank Beatrice for the new outfit she’d inadvertently paid for later, after she’d arrived safely in Gondor of course.

There was little Bilba could do about her hair but she’d taken it out of the ponytail and fluffed it as much as possible before trying to arrange it somewhat on her shoulders.

As she strolled down the sidewalk she couldn’t help adding a little skip to her step. It felt as though an enormous weight were slowly lifting off her shoulders with every step she took away from the palace.

She ended up hailing a cab to get her to the airport. It was lucky for her that the capitol was such a popular tourist destination for residents of Shire. Cabs could be found on almost every corner.

Once in the cab she sat on the edge of the seat, her fingers drumming anxiously on her knees.

The phone in her pocket rang suddenly and she jerked, her eyes flashing to the driver for an instant as if he could tell she’d stolen the phone from her cousin just by the sound.

She fished it out, fingers brushing for an instant against the ring she’d transferred into her new pants, and pulled it out. She didn’t recognize the caller ID so she ignored it, putting the phone on vibrate and sliding it back in her pocket.

It went off again a few minutes later and again a few minutes after that. Each time Bilba felt her grip tighten on her knees.

They knew she wasn’t in the palace anymore and had guessed she had Beatrice’s phone.

Her good mood drained slowly until, by the time they reached the airport, she was nearly sick with stress and anxiety.

Shire International was large and sprawling, almost approaching the size of the palace. Even so late it was bustling with groups of people rushing here and there in an attempt to get to their plane on time. Through the chain link fence surrounding it Bilba caught sight of the runways and planes taxiing into position. One was in the process of taking off and, as it did, Bilba saw an enormous jet parked at the end of the runway reserved for use by the royal family or visiting dignitaries.

Her gut churned. It was Prince Thorin’s jet, and the sight of it brought everything she was running from, and all she had to lose if she failed, back into sharp relief. She tore her eyes away and focused on the glass doors ahead of her, trying to set her mind to what awaited her, not what lay behind.

Bilba paid the driver with the credit card and then ran inside. She darted between people and dodged luggage, struggling to get to the large sign that directed her to the International Terminal.
A smaller sign under it directed her to the counter to buy a ticket. The woman at the front of the line was just finishing up and there were several behind her, a number of them holding the green folders that contained their passports.

Passports.

Her passport…which was back in her apartment…hours away…in a drawer…where she’d left it after her last vacation trip to Rohan.

It felt like someone punched her in the stomach. Bilba actually staggered, her hand going out to catch at the wall.

A man walking by frowned. “Miss, are you alright?”

Bilba gave him a shaky grin, waving him off. “I’m fine, just a little tired. Thank you.”

She spotted a short, empty bench nearby and managed to make her way to it. Her body felt unnaturally heavy and stiff and she fell on the seat more than sat. Her breath was coming in short, ragged gasps and she felt hot and flushed.

She fished the phone out with a hand that trembled and dialed Bofur’s number.

It rang and then picked up almost immediately.

“Bofur?” Bilba said.

“Princess,” an unfamiliar voice stated in a flat monotone, “we’ve been waiting to hear from you.”

Cold, she felt cold. “Who is this?” Bilba ordered, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice. “Where’s Bofur?”

“Your ‘friend’ has been detained.”


“Conspiracy to kidnap you, Princess. The charges carry an added charge of treason.”

Treason.

Treason was an automatic death sentence.

A wave of dizziness assailed her and Bilba swayed where she sat. Black spots danced across her vision and she shut her eyes a moment until the feeling passed.


“I have no control over that,” the unfamiliar voice said. “You’d have to discuss that with your grandfather, Princess.”

Bilba hung up. She put her hand in her lap, curling the other one around it. A family hurried past her, kids chattering excitedly as the harried parents struggled to keep them together.

A few yards away from them a young couple said their good-byes, their hands clasped together. The woman gazed at him in adoration; the look he returned suggested she was all that existed in his world.
Others passed; men in expensive suits and women in flowing dresses, children skipping with excitement while others cried from exhaustion.

Bilba remembered the crowds outside the palace grounds and wondered how many had come for the wedding.

None of them gave her a second look as they passed; she’d done an excellent job staying, or being kept, out of the limelight. She personally believed many had probably forgotten she even existed.

All that would change as soon as the Thain released the video of the wedding to the media.

She liked to pretend she was normal, that she was just like everyone else.

She wasn’t.

She was Bilba Baggins, Princess of Shire, granddaughter to the conniving and manipulative Thain. Now her playacting like she was anything else had dragged Bofur straight into the crosshairs.

Sweet, innocent, wonderful Bofur who would have lived an amazing life and achieved everything he’d ever dreamed of… if he simply hadn’t met her.

She slid a hand into her pocket and pulled out the ring, holding it in one hand. Her other hand still held Beatrice’s phone, the diamonds winking in the dim light of the airport.

The Thain would have never given Bilba a phone like that.

He never would have forced Beatrice into a marriage.

Bilba didn’t want to be anything like Beatrice but there was one thing she had to admit her cousin possessed that Bilba did not.

A backbone.

Beatrice got what she wanted. She didn’t run at the first opportunity, didn’t back down when the Thain demanded things be done his way.

Bilba had never really felt the urge to demand anything. She’d just wanted to be left alone.

But, now… now the Thain had gone after Bofur.

Something inside her hardened and, in a single quick move, Bilba slid the ring back on her finger.

She stood up, her back rigid and dialed a number. When she spoke her voice was calm and neutral, showing no sign of the light tremble that was running through her body or the way her free hand was clenched into a fist. A few moments later a limo was on its way from the palace to pick her up.

Bilba took one final look at the airport, at the rushing, happy, normal people.

Then she turned and strode out of the airport, leaving them all behind.

She didn’t look back.

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“Doesn’t anyone sleep in this place?”

Dwalin smirked. “You should be happy. We’d still be wandering if you hadn’t found someone to ask for directions.”

Thorin ignored him.

After losing a pair of ceremonial battle axes, two swords and one of his favorite daggers to Dwalin, Thorin had finally called it quits and decided he wanted to eat.

He’d been convinced he remembered where the kitchens were from one of the tours he’d been on, but every corner he turned seemed to lead to another dead end.

Dwalin was no help. Thorin had no doubt the other man had memorized the palace layout already but he took great joy in watching Thorin try to find his own way.

Disloyal bastard.

A number of servants had offered to bring a tray to his rooms but, by that time, it was a matter of personal pride to find the blasted kitchen on his own.

Finally, after a ridiculous amount of time that had Thorin convinced the palace was purposefully laid out in a maze formation, they found one of the two grand staircases that led to the main floor.

According to the last servant he’d talked to there should be a door down there somewhere that led to the kitchens.

Thorin had barely made it halfway down the stairs when the main doors to the palace flew open. Dwalin gripped his arm, his own body moving slightly in front of Thorin’s.

A group of four Shire guards marched in, their green and brown uniforms matching the wood and marbles in the foyer.

The woman they escorted in the midst of them was stunning.

She was small and petite with curves he could see even under the heavy, buttoned up trench coat she wore. Her hair, the color of a brilliant topaz, swung nearly to her waist and possessed a curl that caused it to bounce about her as she walked. She walked with a natural grace and held herself with perfect poise.

“Huh,” Dwalin said, “haven’t seen any like her here.”

Thorin elbowed him in the side. “Don’t let Ori hear you say that.”

Dwalin snorted. “I said here, didn’t I? She ain’t got nothing on my Ori.”

The guards had turned toward them which meant the woman was now walking toward them as well. She moved with her back straight and her head held high.

Her eyes were fixed straight ahead and, as she began to move up the stairs, he was startled to see they were like two amethysts brought to life.

Dwalin moved to the other side of the staircase, giving them room to pass. As they did Thorin saw her eyes flicker briefly to his and away again. Her face held no reaction at all; he could have been a
statue for all she reacted to his presence.

Her eyes went past him and he saw them widen fractionally, making her appear younger. She came
to a stop, barely a step or two below where he was.

Thorin followed her gaze and saw Beatrice storming down the stairs, her face nearly apoplectic with
rage. As she neared she was already lifting a hand and swinging it at the young woman’s face.

Dwalin tensed but Thorin was already acting. His hand shot out to grab Beatrice’s wrist before it
could connect with its target.

Beatrice didn’t acknowledge him. She wrenched her arm free and put her palm out. “Give it back,
now.”

The woman rolled her eyes and reached her hand into a pocket of her coat, coming out with a cell
phone that she handed off to Beatrice.

“Oh, relax,” she said softly, “it’s not as though you couldn’t have had it replaced within a few
hours.”

Beatrice hesitated, as though she hadn’t expected that response. She snatched the phone away finally
but Thorin barely noticed, his attention fixed on the woman.

Her voice. It had been soft and lilting, with the slightest smoky quality to it…and he’d heard it
before. Only once and only for a second but…

“Bilba?”

Her eyes caught on his, the look in them vaguely defiant.

Beatrice stepped forward and grabbed her arm suddenly, dragging her forward.

“Bilba,” she hissed, “you know better than this. You can’t keep running off to go party every night,
you’re married now!”

Bilba, his wîfe, simply looked at Beatrice with that same unreadable expression. “You’re one to
talk,” she said mildly.

Beatrice’s eyes widened and she gaped at the other woman. Bilba shook the arm off and brushed past
her, dismissive. Her eyes went to Thorin’s again for just a brief second and he found himself wishing
he knew exactly what was going through her mind.

Then she was past him, the guards following her, leaving him behind with Dwalin and Beatrice.

Beatrice was clearly not finished as she followed after her, yelling. Thorin heard something about a
destroyed room and a stolen credit card before the entire group vanished around a corner and the
voices faded down the hall.

Thorin looked at Dwalin who was mouthing the words “buckets of crazy” to him while making
motions with his hands.

Thorin scowled. “Shut up.”

He started down the stairs again, though his appetite was gone.

He should have known. Given the treatment already it made perfect sense the Thain would saddle
him with a no doubt vain, shallow, potentially unstable, immature woman with a disturbing lack of honor.

Fury began to mount once more and he found himself grinding his teeth so hard his jaw ached.

He didn’t care what she was allowed to get away with in Shire; things would be different in Erebor.

If she thought otherwise she was in for a shock.
Beatrice stormed off toward her room and Bilba sighed, shoulders relaxing minutely. The other woman’s shrill voice had been giving her a headache and she feared she may have suffered permanent hearing loss.

She expected to be taken to her grandfather’s office but, to her surprise, she was steered in the exact opposite direction.

“What are you doing?” she questioned one of the guards. “I thought my grandfather wanted to see me?”

"The Thain has better things to do than deal with your tantrum," the man replied coldly. "He'll deal with you in the morning."

Of course he would, Bilba thought bitterly. Seeing her at once would imply an importance, or at least significance, he would never dream of bestowing on her. He already had his night planned, parties to celebrate the alliance no doubt. She hadn't been invited and could just imagine the excuses her grandfather would give to explain her absence.

Or Prince Thorin's. She thought back to the glimpse she'd had of him on the stairs before the guards had rushed her past, noting he'd lost his jacket and tie and had his sleeves rolled up to the elbow. Clearly, he hadn't any intention of going anywhere, and certainly hadn't expected to run into her judging by the surprise she'd seen on his face. He'd stopped Beatrice from slapping her, but she had a feeling it had been more instinct than a deliberate desire to protect her. As far as he knew, she represented everything he'd lost. He'd be the last person on the planet she'd expect to ever be on her side.

They rounded a corner and, with a start, she realized where they were headed. Fear slammed into her, erasing the anger in an instant, and a strangled sound escaped her throat. She set her heels but the guards had anticipated it and simply grabbed her arms and dragged her forward.

"Wait," she managed to stammer. "Wait!" She wanted to say more, but the words refused to pass her lips, panic robbing her of anything but her most basic vocabulary skills.

A wooden door was set into the end of the hall and one of the guards reached forward to open it, other hand still clamped around her upper arm in a grip sure to leave a bruise. A darkened staircase was revealed and they shoved her toward it. It was so steep they were forced to go single file and so narrow she could touch the walls on either side by raising her arms just to her waist. She did so, trying to keep her balance at the extreme slant of the steps. They were old and worn, holdovers from a different age. Some had bits missing, while others wobbled threateningly when she put her foot down, the slab broken into separate pieces barely held in place by the steps above and below them.

The walls were comprised of the same cinderblock as the rest of the palace but had never been covered with the expensive stucco her grandfather preferred. They were porous and gritty, the texture rough under her fingers as she ascended. Cheap lights had been set into the wall at some point, barely strong enough to gut the darkness, let alone show her where she was going.

Not that she didn't already know. With every step her heart seemed to plummet lower and the ice in her veins grew colder. The temperature in the stairwell began to fall to match, slowly but soon so low she could see her breath fogging in the dull spots of light along the wall. Her grandfather hadn't bothered to put even basic amenities up here, because comfort was the exact opposite of the point.
They reached the top finally, a small landing set before a thick wooden door with a heavy padlock. Bilba held still as the guard in front of her unlocked it. She didn't plead or beg, or ask for her grandfather. It had never made a bit of difference in the past and certainly wouldn't now.

The door opened with a screech that haunted her nightmares and she tensed, waiting for them to demand her shoes and coat before they sent her in. To her surprise, they didn't, the guard at the door simply indicating for her to go inside.

Bilba gave a short nod that she hoped looked composed, and stepped through the portal to the darkness beyond. The door slammed shut, sound loud in the small space, and she jumped, an involuntary gasp escaping.

Then the guards were leaving and she was alone, in darkness so total it nearly hurt as her eyes strained for light, and a silence so heavy it almost buckled her knees. She clenched her hand in and out of a fist, the pricks of her nails on her palm reminding her that her senses hadn't failed her entirely. She took a slow breath and blinked rapidly at the sting in her eyes.

She was not going to cry.

After a few minutes, she had regained sufficient control to put her hand out and carefully feel for the wall. It didn't take long, the entire room was less than a dozen paces in any direction, round, and completely empty. If asked, she could recount how many stones were in the floor as well as how many were in the walls, at least up to where she'd been able to reach at any given age.

Her fingers brushed against cold brick and she turned around, pressing against it and letting herself lower gently until she was seated. She pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees. There was no point in trying to escape, the place was old but sound and the scars on her fingers were testament to the sturdiness of the door.

She heaved a choked sigh and leaned back until her head hit the wall behind her with a thunk. An old, familiar fear began to uncoil at the base of her spine and she clenched her jaw, lightly knocking her head against the stone as she tried to overcome it. It wasn't the same, she told herself firmly. There was no way they could forget her again, not this time. Her grandfather was an attention hound; all the media stations were probably on standby waiting for interviews once the sun rose. She'd be expected to be there, and to travel to Erebor after. The world couldn't just overlook her this time, her absence would be noticed.

The acrid taste of bile flooded her mouth and she leaned forward to bury her face on her knees, wrapping her arms around them. She wasn't giving in. She knew what this was, her grandfather attempting to mellow her, burn out the streak of defiance she'd suddenly sprouted. He'd done it in the past and it had worked, but it wasn't working this time. Not when he was threatening her friends, and Bofur.

Bofur. Was he locked up like she was? In darkness and silence, all alone without even a sense of time passing to keep him company? She shook her head, trying to clear the image of someone so exuberant and full of life locked away in the dark. Not for long, she vowed. She lifted her head and took another breath, settling herself, before shutting her eyes to focus.

It was going to backfire on her grandfather this time, she decided. The eyes of the country were on her. She'd be expected to do interviews before going to Erebor, to play the part of the blushing bride and excited granddaughter. An idea began to slowly form and Bilba felt the slightest beginnings of a smile starting. Her grandfather may have sacrificed her to his own greed but, in doing so, he'd inadvertently given her the one thing he'd always withheld in the past.
He may have decided to use her in his political game but if he thought she was going to play the dutiful pawn then he had a big surprise coming.

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Thorin was in a poor mood.

He'd been awakened by servants some hours earlier and informed he had a full day worth of press junkets ahead of him. The fact he hadn't been told beforehand had rankled but he'd grit his teeth and obediently gotten up, showered and dressed. He'd already decided on his course of action before arriving in Shire: shut up, get through it and go home.

Breakfast was brought to him but he barely touched it, opting instead to simply go and get it all over with. He hated interviews and the thought of having to spend a day doing nothing but ranked a little lower than having a root canal, without anesthetic, on his list of fun things to do.

He'd been taken by a servant to a large room on the ground floor of the palace. It was as garishly ostentatious as the others he'd seen, filled to bursting with all manner of furniture, plush rugs, and large paintings depicting the various members of the royal family. He didn't see any of Bilba but, going by how much she seemed to disdain the public eye, it wasn't all that much of a surprise.

He hadn't seen any media on his way out but, through a large door on the far side of the room, he could hear the familiar noise of a large crowd of people.

An area had been set up in the center of the room, an enormous rug featuring the seal of Shire. Three seats were set up, two at angles on the corners of the rug and then a chair, that could easily pass for a throne, smack in the middle. An empty space was in front of the setup, with plenty of room for cameras and sound equipment.

He was directed to sit on the seat to the left and obeyed, startling slightly when he sank farther than he'd expected. The chair was far too short for his height, he quickly realized, forcing his legs up higher than was natural and creating an awkward look. It also put him lower than the eyeline of the person who would be sitting in the center chair. Eyes narrowed, Thorin shot an annoyed look at Dwalin who was leaning back against a nearby wall. The other man shrugged and folded his arms across his chest as if to say, just get through it.

Thorin glowered. He had no desire to get through it, and every wish to simply get out. He'd already made plans to fly out later that day. It skirted the boundaries of etiquette but his father had backed him up by insisting Thorin had important duties that would not wait, which was true, and it would be impossible to find anyone else capable of filling in, not quite as true but close enough. He'd hoped that, by leaving so quickly, he could avoid all this nonsense but he'd clearly underestimated the Thain's resourcefulness, or desire for the spotlight.

The door he'd come through opened again and he tensed as Princess Bilba was escorted through. On his finger the ring, that had been a bear to locate and put back on before leaving his room, seemed to almost grow physically heavier. He'd almost managed to forget about the marriage during the brief few hours of sleep he'd gotten, but it'd come roaring back with a vengeance once he'd been awake.

Bilba looked to have slept about as much as he had. Her face was pale and her makeup didn't entirely hide the bags under her eyes. She wore a long sleeved silver gown with a split skirt and dark purple underskirt. The bodice was decorated in diamonds set out in the pattern of the Shire crest, the jewels matching the ones at her throat, ears, and scattered through the elaborate hairstyle that must
have taken an age to create.

She looked every bit as stunning as she had the night before, despite her obvious fatigue. She didn't look at him as she was led to the chair on the far side of the rug and motioned to sit. She wobbled as she did, a hand going out to catch the arm of the chair. As she settled one hand went to her forehead to massage her temple and Thorin grimaced. He hadn't noticed any odor of alcohol about her when he'd seen her on the stairs but all signs now certainly seemed to point to quite the hangover. This whole thing just kept getting better and better. Getting saddled with someone like Beatrice was suddenly beginning to seem preferable to being stuck with what was quickly starting to look like an immature party girl. The small amount of information he'd collected on her had said she attended college, a fact he'd seen as a small positive, but now he wondered if she even bothered to go to class or simply frittered away her country's money the same way he'd seen her grandfather and other relatives do. He shot another look at her but she continued to ignore him, her back straight, hands clasped in her lap and eyes fixed on nothing. She was the definition of a proper princess, if one didn't look too closely, and if she could manage to stop swaying slightly as she was currently doing.

The door opened a third time and the Thain strode in, so heavily decked out in regalia it was a wonder he could stand. Despite his intense dislike of the man and his greed, Thorin couldn't help but be impressed. The king of the Shire was in his eighties but carried himself, and looked, like a man far younger. Thorin suspected surgery had a lot to do with the latter but it was still impressive.

Bilba stood up from her seat and he followed suit, both standing at attention as the king of the Shire settled into his chair in the middle. He gestured for them to sit again and then made an impatient gesture toward one of the servants. The door, behind which all the noise could be heard, was opened and the first reporters were allowed in.

Thorin took a deep breath, shooting one more look toward Dwalin, and then went into Crown Prince mode, with an easy, fake smile plastered firmly to his face.

The Thain wasn't the only one capable of putting on a show.

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Bilba thought it quite possible she might pass out.

It was one thing to defy her grandfather behind his back, or come up with a plan to defy him while locked in a tower overnight with little but her own thoughts to keep her company.

It was another thing entirely to openly defy him to his face, and in public. She could admit to herself that a large portion of her courage came from the fact she would be leaving for Erebor and be out of his reach, and her friends would not. It wasn't an exaggeration to say he terrified her, and he wanted it that way. To the public he was eccentric, and tended to spoil his children and relations, but well respected and thought highly of. He spent obscene amounts of money on his public image to make sure of it.

To his family, he was a bankroll and a granter of wishes, buying their loyalty through lavish gifts and overindulgence.

To Bilba, he'd never bothered with either mask and had never attempted to be anything but what he was, evil. He wanted someone to know his behind the scenes manipulations, his carefully crafted destruction of his enemies, the way he moved people about, using them and discarding them, as if they were of little more value than a pawn on a chessboard. He would stand back and watch as people he'd once considered allies, people who considered him an ally slowly crumbled to dust, all the while lamenting their fate as though he'd had nothing whatsoever to do with it. Then he'd turn
and she'd see the smirk on his face, directly solely at her as if they shared some horrible secret she wanted no part of.

She'd seen what he'd done to her mother for eloping with her father. Bilba, herself, had experienced being locked away for nothing more than being seen at the wrong time or, once, for refusing to cut off her hair and give it to Beatrice when the other girl had decided she'd like to make a wig from it. It had been cut off anyway, and the public informed she'd foolishly tried to give herself a haircut. She'd been fourteen.

Regardless, she knew firsthand the wrath her grandfather could bring to bear for the slightest perceived insult and here she was about to turn on him in a way no one had ever dared. A flush of heat raced through her and a wave of dizziness brought black spots to her eyes. She swayed, barely, on the chair and clenched her hands in her lap.

Bofur, she reminded herself firmly, and Rosie and all her other friends and teachers and people she'd had contact with over the years. She would be leaving for Erebor, past the easy reach of her grandfather, they would not. She couldn't very well ask them all to pack up and move out of the country, which meant the only option available to her was ensuring their safety after she was gone.

And the only way to do that was to defy her grandfather.

In front of them, the crew finished setting up, the slender, blonde reporter smiling brightly as she started speaking to the camera to set up her shot.

Bilba swallowed and tightened her hands in her lap still further until the knuckles were bloodless. She could hear the low murmur of the other reporters out in the hall but this was the one she was interested in, representatives from the biggest network in Shire. They had a massive audience, undoubtedly made even larger by being the first to air. Once they were done and people had gotten their royal fix they would start to trickle away, numbers dwindling as more reporters came in to ask many of the same questions repeatedly.

The reporter turned to face them and Bilba plastered a fake smile on her face, back straight and hands hopefully appearing to be clasped demurely in her lap. Her knuckles were still white and she wished she'd thought to wear gloves.

Her grandfather was talking, answering questions for the reporter whose name Bilba hadn't caught, if it'd even been given. Dimly she was aware of her grandfather talking about the greatness of the alliance and what Shire stood to gain, easily skirting the question of what Erebor would be gaining outside of an unwanted marriage and what amounted to a leeching relative.

The questions turned to Thorin next and, like any properly trained royal, he easily answered every question without giving any real answers at all. Everything was a general this or that, or deliberately vague but coached in such a way that it appeared to have far more substance than it did. Bilba would have expected nothing less from the Heir of a country like Erebor. The kingdom prided itself on its honor and she'd heard that, even in exile, the Durins had behaved so flawlessly like the royals they were that one could easily forget they weren't currently the leaders of anything.

"And what did you think of your bride the first time you met her?" the reporter asked and Bilba stiffened, wondering if Thorin would admit he'd never met her before the ceremony. Technically, he still hadn't met her given they hadn't exchanged so much as a single word to one another.

A small smile graced Thorin's lips and he settled back against the seat, lifting one leg to rest his foot on his knee. "I believe I'd like to keep that private, if you don't mind."
Bilba resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She just bet he would. The reporter flushed, clearly interpreting his words as somehow romantic, and then turned to Bilba. "And what about you, your Highness? What did you think of the Prince when you first saw him?"

"That he was tall," Bilba said, her mind going blank as it fumbled for words. Immediately she felt her face heat at the inane, and rather shallow, words but there was no taking them back. It wasn't as if she had any experience, or training with this sort of thing, she thought in irritation.

"I see." The reporter frowned, seeming to consider something, and Bilba felt her heart drop. It was never a good thing when they paused like that when interviewing Beatrice. "And, I wonder, Princess, what did your boyfriend think of the Prince?"

Bilba gave no reaction through sheer force of will. To be honest, the question shouldn't really have come as that much of a surprise. Her grandfather was manipulative and conniving but he also had the tendency to follow spur of the moment decisions without giving them much thought. The fact she'd already been enrolled in the current term at university, and seeing someone, wasn't exactly a secret and any decent reporter would have found out about it with the bare minimum of checking.

There was silence for a moment and Bilba realized, unsurprisingly, that her grandfather was expecting her to take the fall for this piece of information.

"As you know," she said, keeping her tone carefully modulated, even as her mind worked fast, "my grandfather has always had a strong focus on security and privacy." More like paranoia to the point of irrationality but whatever. "He worried over any possible threats to my safety and insisted I stay enrolled in college as normal to avoid anyone realizing which Princess would be taking part in the alliance." She shifted on the couch, trying subtlety to copy the relaxed stance Thorin was holding without being obvious, and without the crossed leg of course given the dress she was wearing. "Bofur was also part of the--" she hesitated, unable to bring herself to call her relationship with Bofur a lie.

"Subterfuge?" the reporter asked, and Bilba smiled in relief. The other woman frowned. "And you never developed any feelings for this young man? Some of the reports we had were..."

"If it didn't look real then what would be the point?" Bilba asked smoothly. Her smile widened even as her hands tightened to the point of breaking bones. This was exactly the opening she'd been waiting for and she had to take it before it closed, no matter how much it terrified her. "Bofur was a young man who worked for a local theater company." The sharp pain from all that she was losing came again but she forged on, focusing on the reporter and trying to pretend her grandfather wasn't in the room. "He was struggling to fund both his education and acting career and jumped at the job opportunity when it was offered."

The reporter raised an eyebrow and, beside her, Bilba saw her grandfather adjust his position, leaning forward enough to appear in the corner of her vision.

"Oh, yes," she said, forging ahead, in answer to the reporter's unasked question. "In return for his trouble, his entire education was covered." She nearly named an amount but hesitated, worried it'd cause more trouble than help for Bofur, not to mention how insulted he'd be at the very thought of being paid to go out with her. She swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat. "A large donation will also be made to both the university and the theater company I was with."

"That's very generous," the reporter started to say, only to stop as Bilba cut her off.

"It is, isn't it?" She was sure she'd moved past abject terror a few minutes earlier and entered into a state of what she would define as catatonic awareness. The money for Bofur, the university and the
company were all vital as it would ensure the eyes of the media were on them. Bofur would have to be released because the world would want to hear from him. Likewise, it'd be difficult for her grandfather to move against any of her friends or teachers now, after she left, for fear of unwanted questions by the media as to what had happened.

She'd brought everyone and everything he'd threatened into the light, protecting them as best she could in the process.

What she had just done had been necessary.

What she was about to do was born purely from spite.

"As a show of just how generous he is, my grandfather has also informed me that he will be giving me full control of the dowry left to me by my late parents. Originally, I wasn't going to have it until my 21st birthday but my grandfather has graciously decided to grant my access to the one hundred thousand early."

Dead silence. The reporter looked surprised. "I wasn't aware the late Duke and Duchess of Hobbiton had been that well off at the end of their life."

They hadn't been, thanks to her grandfather. Even if her parents had been able to leave her a dowry, small as it would have been, her grandfather would have long ago spent it. The dowry she was claiming, in reality, had been one set up for her mother by her grandmother. Bilba had never met the woman but, from what she'd heard, her grandmother had been nothing like her husband. The marriage had been arranged and she'd made the best of it, including ensuring that her children would be taken care of upon their own marriages. Her wish had been for Belladonna to receive the money no matter what, but the Thain had ignored his dead wife's wishes and kept it. Now Bilba was getting it back, with interest and a good chunk that she had mentally labeled irritation costs. She'd briefly considered asking for a much higher amount but, given her grandfather's near obsession with money, had decided to settle for the smaller amount in what, probably, was a misguided hope it would lessen his ire somewhat.

"My grandfather has also given me a week in which to prepare before leaving for Erebor," she continued, ignoring the reporter's comment. She'd struggled on the amount of time. If she had her way she'd never leave, but she knew that wasn't feasible. She also knew that, after what she'd just done, the longer she stayed the greater the threat her grandfather would move against her, consequences be damned.

The reporter turned away from her, to where Thorin was seated. Bilba kept her eyes fixed on where her hands rested in her lap. She had no idea how he or her grandfather had reacted, didn't much care about the first, and could well imagine the second.

"And what about you, your Highness? Do you plan to stay the week as well?"

"No," Thorin said, his voice as flat and unaffected as ever. "I'm afraid my duties will be taking me back to Erebor at the end of the day in fact. I've been gone too long already."

One less problem she'd have to deal with, Bilba thought with a mild flash of relief. She had enough on her plate already. One week to try and ensure the safety of her friends as much as humanly possible, as well as try to work out with her college what credits she could hopefully transfer over to Erebor. She had no idea what colleges they had or where but she had no intention of giving up her education if she could possibly help it.

Thorin's answer caught the reporter's attention and she went back to questioning him again. As she
did, her voice seemed to fade away to a low murmur in the background. Bilba's world telescoped down to where her hands and she forced herself to take slow, even breaths.

She was startled at how easily the lies had rolled off her tongue but supposed, in hindsight, perhaps it wasn't that odd after all. She'd spent most of her childhood lying after her parents had died. To the media the rare times when she was forced to do interviews and had to insist she was well treated. To the small number of friends she'd had in the various boarding schools. Most of all, to herself that there was some key, some combination of actions that, if she could just find it, would result in her family, and even grandfather, accepting her. That last one she'd come to terms with, for the most part. She knew her grandfather and the rest of her family would never love her, but couldn't help the occasional flickers that tried to convince her that the key existed, she just hadn't found it yet.

The interviews went on. The first reporter left and the second, representing a different station, was dutifully led in. After that came a third one and then a fourth and fifth. The questions blended together and her face started to hurt from forcing it into a facsimile of a smile. Word of what Bilba had said in the first interview leaked out, as such things were prone to do, and she was asked about it in just about every subsequent interview.

She reiterated what she'd said, carefully ignoring her grandfather every time, and added the invitation for the news crews to follow her about during her week if they wished. The more public she was, the safer.

They took a break for lunch finally, the reporters shown out with their equipment. Thorin got up to speak to the intimidating giant of a man who'd been leaning against the wall glowering the whole morning. Servants came in from another room to set up a table and food, buffet style, and Bilba went to get a plate. A large set of ornately styled glass doors on the back wall led to a massive balcony and she headed toward it.

She felt a weight lift off her the second she pushed the doors open and felt the fresh air and the warmth of the sun. She wondered absently what the weather in Erebor was like but put it aside, choosing to ignore her impending departure for the time being. She stepped through, crossing to set her plate on a small table before going to lean on the ledge. The balcony overlooked the vast gardens decorating the front lawn of the palace. In the distance, she could see the front gate and, through it, the remnants of the crowds that must have dominated it the night before.

It was too far to see if Rosie was there. Bilba hoped her friend had gone back to school. The other girl had gone into debt to buy the plane ticket, and skipped class to go, her plane departing sometime after Bilba's first classes. Bilba had been invited to go but she'd refused, citing she spent most of her time staying away from the palace and had no desire to spend money going there. She wished now she'd said yes as it was highly likely her grandfather's goons would have missed her. Maybe she could have escaped then, or thwarted his plans at the very least. She wondered how bad her luck must be that being a conscientious student was what had done her in.

A footstep scraped against the stone behind her and she closed her eyes a moment. Then, steeling herself, she stood and turned to face her grandfather. Neither of them spoke. There was nothing she could say, and really nothing he needed to say. She'd always been little more than a nuisance to him, an afterthought or an unwilling audience to his schemes.

"Why weren't you in the car?" he asked suddenly, tilting his head to one side slightly.

Bilba frowned in confusion. "What?"

"It was a Thursday night," he went on, as if she hadn't spoken. "You always went to the movies on Thursdays, didn't you? A happy little family gathering." His voice was downright glacial, and his
eyes flat, an expression and tone she doubted many others had seen.

Memory crashed in, and her own eyes widened even as her heart jolted in her chest. The reaction was too quick for her to hide and she saw the satisfied smirk on his face as power shifted back in his direction.

"I had a sleepover," Bilba said slowly. "It was her birthday. Mom and Dad said it was okay."

"Pity," the Thain said, and Bilba flinched as if physically struck. She had been hit a handful of times over the years, usually by Beatrice or one of her other cousins, by an aunt once or twice and, rarely, very rarely, by her grandfather. He was usually far too controlled for it, preferring words, and behind the scenes actions he could disavow knowledge of, to hands on violence. "You were supposed to be there."

"Sorry to disappoint," Bilba managed to whisper through a tight throat. A suspicion, long held and even longer ignored, tried to surface but she pushed it back down again. It wasn't something she could live with if true, or do anything about, and acknowledging it wouldn't change a single second of the past.

Her grandfather grunted and then turned to leave, clearly satisfied he'd made his point.

"You'll need to let me see Bofur," Bilba blurted, crossing her arms tightly as the air seemed to grow colder. "I'll need to convince him to play along, and he'll never listen to you." Her grandfather would have to resort to other methods to gain Bofur's compliance and that would lead to a whole host of problems when the news crews came to interview him.

Her grandfather paused and Bilba tensed, every nerve on edge. Then he started walking again and she sagged back against the ledge with a gasp.

Her eyes went to the plate of food she'd left on the table and she grimaced, appetite gone. She'd gotten what she wanted but, in the process, she knew one inescapable truth. She'd taken herself firmly off her grandfather's proverbial chess board and taken up a space squarely on the opposing side.

And, in doing so, she'd made one hell of an enemy.

***

"You know, if you want to get technical about it, that dowry should be going to Erebor."

Thorin snorted in derision. He was leaning against the wall where Dwalin had taken up residence, both of them holding small plates of food from the buffet table. Thorin had little desire to eat but imagined it would probably be his last opportunity before boarding his jet home later that evening.

"There's no dowry," he said, keeping his voice low. "You saw the look on his face. She played him."

"Which raises another question," Dwalin mused. "What does she want with that much money and an extra week? It isn't as if this came as a surprise to her, she's had plenty of time to make arrangements."

"Perhaps she just wants one final party with her friends before leaving," Thorin said in annoyance. He was becoming more and more convinced Erebor had been saddled with an irresponsible and immature girl who hadn't yet realized she'd entered adulthood. "She probably needed pin money."

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Dwalin gave him a look. "A hundred thousand is what she considers pin money?" He frowned. "You know they're going to want to interview her back in Erebor, once she arrives."

"She won't pull the same trick twice," Thorin predicted. Giving up on his appetite, he set his plate down on a nearby table and crossed his arms, turning more fully to the side and bracing a shoulder against the wall. "If she's anything like the Thain then public image is important. Pulling the same stunt multiple times runs the risk of people realizing what's going on. She'll try something else."

"Like what?" Dwalin asked.

Thorin shrugged. "Guess we'll find out."

He could well imagine a number of scenarios, anything from outright tantrums to false simpering and tears. His phone buzzed suddenly in his back pocket and he reached for it with a frown. His sister's picture appeared on the screen with her name blazoned across it. She was smiling in the photo but he doubted her current expression matched it. She'd been trying to call him since the night before and he'd been ignoring her. Aside from Kyra, who he felt deserved an answer no matter what, he'd ignored all calls.

"You don't answer that, your bride won't be the only one throwing a tantrum," Dwalin said dryly.

"I know." Thorin muttered. He swiped the answer button and held it up to his ear, turning away for some semblance of privacy. His eyes fell on an elaborate clock mounted on the wall and he suppressed a sigh at how many hours were still left in the day.

Evening couldn't come soon enough.
Thorin left that evening, as promised.

Bilba wasn't there to see him off. As soon as the interviews were over she was escorted back to the tower. She could just imagine how the news, in both Erebor and Shire, would report her mysterious absence at her newly minted husband's departure.

No doubt her grandfather's intent.

The Thain left her locked away as long as he dared without raising suspicion, which meant she was let out the next morning. Servants rushed her through a bath and into a light sundress that was a poor cut and entirely wrong for her coloring, before dragging her hair into a far too tight chignon and taking her down to meet a car. There was no mention of breakfast and she didn't ask.

A single guard met her in the front hall and, as he escorted her through the doors, Bilba let out a hiss as what felt like a million camera flashes went off in her face. The media was generally kept outside the gate but now they were clustered around the waiting limo.

The entrance to the palace was designed like that of a massive hotel with a large archway and a paved stretch that allowed guests and visiting dignitaries to be let off or picked up at the large, carved wooden doors. The walk to the car was only a few feet but now, with a crush of reporters closing around her and questions bombarding her from every side, it felt like a mile.

"Your Highness! Is it true you didn't see Prince Thorin off because you were at a party?"

"Your Highness! Is it true you slighted the Prince because you feel his previous status as an exile places him below your station?"

The crowd pressed in around her, the limo vanishing behind a crush of bodies, and she tensed. The guard grabbed her arm in a bruising grip that brought a spike of pain through the bruise she had from being grabbed like that the day before, and began to push through the crowd. The constant flashes of light left her with spots in her vision and she stumbled, unable to do much more than let the guard force her in what she hoped was the right direction.

"Your Highness! We have witnesses who claim your relationship with Bofur went well past subterfuge, care to comment?"

The words felt like they were shouted directly in her ear and Bilba flinched as her eardrums buzzed from the sensory overload. The guard let go of her arm to try and bulldoze through the crowd so she pressed her hands over her ears and resisted the urge to shut her eyes as the reporters crushed closer. It was difficult to breathe and she could feel a dozen or more bruises forming under the constant stabbing of camera equipment and bony joints shoving against her arms, sides and legs.

She was half convinced they weren't moving, and that her grandfather planned to have her not so tragically killed by the crowd, when suddenly she caught a glimpse of the limo door through a gap between two reporters. Nearly frantic, she surged forward, ignoring the shouts of pain as she elbowed several people in her panic and stepped on more than one foot, and grappled for the door handle.

She felt a brief moment of fear at the thought it might be locked but, in a stroke of mercy, it moved under her hand and she pulled as hard as she could. It was nearly impossible with all the bodies around her but, throwing politeness to the wind, she managed to force the door open, slide in, and
slam it shut behind her. She slammed her finger on the button to lock the doors and then collapsed against the seat back, gasping for air.

The yelling faded to a dull roar, and the crowd dimmed just a bit behind the tinted glass of the windows. Bilba drew in a shuddering breath and dug her fingers into the leather of the seat as she struggled for control. Her grandfather wasn't trying to kill her, she told herself firmly. Not yet anyway. He wasn't that kind.

The front door slammed and she jumped. Her eyes, which she hadn't realized she'd closed, flew open in time to see the guard slip into the front seat. The car rocked as he got settled and pulled the door shut after him.

"Bet you regret inviting them along now, don't you?"

"Excuse me?" Bilba's voice was shaky and she raised a hand to push back a few locks of hair that had escaped her chignon. As she lowered her hand, she paused and held it just above her lap, watching as it trembled wildly. Her eyes burned and she took a deep breath before curling her fingers into a fist and placing her hand very deliberately on her lap.

She'd spilled enough tears thanks to her grandfather. She'd be damned if she let him get to her now.

"You invited them to join you," the man, who she didn't recognize, explained as he pawed through a key ring to find the one he wanted. "They'll be meeting us at the airport to board the plane back to your university."

He left off the "Your Highness" and his tone was borderline rude but Bilba let it alone. She'd never been treated like a princess before, the title little more than an interesting ancestral note as far as she was concerned throughout her childhood. She'd always just been Bilba Baggins, normal girl.

The car started with a jolt and she watched as reporters peeled away from the car, dashing back to their own to, no doubt, to try and beat her to the airport. Bilba watched them go with resignation. She'd hoped they would be her protection against her grandfather for the week. Instead, he'd taken her what she'd meant to be her guard and turned it against her.

She should have known better.

The ride to the airport was brief. Bilba spent the time getting under control and trying to come up with a new plan. She couldn't deal with the press in her face every step of the way. She'd go insane, if she didn't end up in the hospital from being trampled.

The car slowed and she lifted her head to see the gates of the palace's private runway up ahead. It was at the far end of the airport, in a segregated area off limits to the general public. Usually the place was quiet and empty but all Bilba could see were rows of reporters and their camera crews and vehicles all lined up to try and get the perfect shot or chance for an interview. Bilba wondered if her grandfather had even bothered to vet them but decided he probably had. There'd be too many questions if one of them tried to hurt her and it came out no background checks had been done.

Idly she thought back to the image of Prince Thorin striding off his jet and wondered how he dealt with all the press. Almost immediately, the giant man who followed him everywhere he went entered her mind and she realized that was how. That and a truckload of security, none of which she currently had. From what she could tell it was her, her driver, and the reporters. Presumably there was a crew on board the jet but none of them seemed interested in making an appearance as the car pulled to a smooth stop in front of the stairs leading up into the jet.
Almost, at once, the mass of reporters surged forward, all jockeying to be the first to follow her on the plane and, presumably, land a seat next to her. As they moved, Bilba caught sight of the woman she remembered from the day before, from one of the Shire's biggest news stations, the Shire Daily Press. She'd forgotten the woman's name but remembered the ease with which she'd directed her crew to set up once in the room, as well as the way the crowd of reporters at the door had parted to allow her to pass once she'd left.

Even then, the crowd was giving her a respectful space. The woman was of slightly taller than average height, meaning she would tower over Bilba, with a solid build and short, light brown hair. She was dressed in a neat business skirt and matching jacket and, from what Bilba recalled, spoke with a quiet yet firm voice. In addition to that, she had a presence about her that simply seemed to demand respect.

Sliding over to the side of the car closest to the stairs, Bilba opened it and got out quickly. She darted up into the plane before anyone had reached her and nearly bolted into the cockpit, slamming the door behind her.

"You can't be in here during flight, Your Highness," a voice spoke and she frowned at the short, dark haired man in the pilot's seat.

"I'll be happy to leave, if you'd do something for me first." She pressed against the door, hearing a babble of voices outside it. "There's a reporter out there for the Shire Daily Press. Go find her and bring her in here and I'll leave you to your flying thing."

The man didn't seem amused but Bilba simply set herself against the door, folded her arms across her chest, and glared at him. Finally, he sighed and pushed up from the chair. "Fine, but you'll need to move so I can get past."

Bilba obeyed, the movement awkward in the tight space, but they got it accomplished. He opened the door and squeezed out, muttering about spoiled princesses as the door clicked shut behind him. Bilba backed up until she was standing between the pilot and co-pilot seat, crossed her arms and chewed on her lip while she waited.

A few minutes later the door opened and the woman in question came in. "Your Highness," she said with a respectful duck of her head. "You wanted to see me?"

Bilba smiled back, trying to keep her expression neutral as best she could. She'd never been given the training her relatives had in royal protocol or politics but seemed to remember it was important to not let people know how she really felt, especially when she wanted something from them. For the first time she found herself feeling the slightest bit of sympathy for what Beatrice probably had to go through on a daily basis, but only the slightest bit. "I remember you from yesterday. I apologize. I'm afraid I've forgotten your name. There were a lot of reporters."

"Lila Bolger," the woman replied. "Please feel free to call me, Lila, Your Highness."

That offer could be genuine friendliness, Bilba thought, or a tactic. Having a princess of Shire, and now Erebor, know her on a first name basis would advance anyone's career.

Bilba stifled a mental sigh, wishing desperately she could turn back the clock to a time where she didn't have to question motivations and intent.

"I seem to have bitten off a bit more than I can chew," she said carefully. "I wondered if you might consider staying at my side and controlling the flow of things a bit in exchange for..." she hesitated before shrugging her shoulder helplessly and ending with, "well, staying at my side I suppose. You'd
have first rights to everything during the next week."

The look on the other woman's face turned downright predatory. "I had wondered what you were thinking when the palace announced you'd decided you didn't need security. I would be honored, Your Highness. Do you have any specific duties you'd like me to preform?"

"Just keep them from ganging up on me," Bilba replied, "and we'll see what happens." Giving the woman such a broad description was probably a singularly bad idea but Bilba didn't know what else to do. She'd been raised in boarding schools, not the palace. Reporters had always left her alone and the few interviews she had done when visiting the palace had always been tightly controlled, monitored, and usually dominated, by her grandfather.

"Of course," Lila replied. "Leave it to me, Your Highness."

She slipped out the door and, almost immediately, Bilba heard the noise die down. With a sigh, she sank down in the pilot's chair, only to jump back to her feet as the door opened again to reveal the pilot, the co-pilot trudging behind him.

"Can I have my cockpit back now?"

"Of course," Bilba said. She straightened her shoulders and put her head up as she faced the rest of the plane past the relative safety of the cockpit.

She could do this.

Taking a deep breath, she strode out the door and to her seat.

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Lila was as good as her word.

Bilba was soon sitting next to a window with the woman in question next to her and her crew scattered around them, taking up the seats in front, behind and even on the other side of the aisle. The rest of the press had been arranged throughout the plane in what appeared to be some sort of hierarchy but Bilba couldn't begin to understand what it was.

"Thank you," she said sincerely to Lila. "I was beginning to worry I'd be trampled before the week was out."

The woman gave her a bright smile. "Not used to this, are you, Your Highness?"

A slight warning bell went off and Bilba tried to give what she hoped was a casual smile in return. "Just been a busy few days is all."

"Of course." Lila shifted in her seat and then pulled a recorder out from somewhere. Bilba felt her heart sink just a bit and tensed. She was already exhausted, and hungry, but it was becoming increasingly clear that any chance of relaxing was very far off.

Lila clicked the recorder on and Bilba let herself feel at least a little gratitude at the fact the woman was at least showing her the courtesy of being obvious rather than attempting to secretly record her. "So," she started off, "no one has been able to locate Bofur since the wedding. Why is that?."

For the briefest of seconds, Bilba was tempted to just tell the woman the truth. Everything, just open her mouth and let it all out. The moment passed quickly. Her grandfather didn't just have power after all. He had something even greater, public support. His approval ratings were ridiculous, unnaturally
so, but few bothered to ask why or, rather, few dared. Bilba was convinced it wasn't possible that everyone was taken in by her grandfather, but those who knew weren't stupid enough to cross him. It would have to take an extraordinary circumstance for them to risk everything and she doubted anyone would do it for anyone outside of a family member or exceptionally close friend.

Bilba's only friends in Shire were commoners and she knew full well no one in her family would lift a finger for her, not when it would jeopardize their lifestyles. If she tried to speak out, her grandfather would spin it. Suddenly all the papers would be reporting on the ungrateful, selfish Princess and her attempts to jeopardize a treaty desperately needed. A treaty everyone was currently praising for grandfather for landing, never even realizing it was his own fault. Her grandfather had blamed Shire's financial straits on multiple factors, including the weather, and bad investments by wealthy bankers. Those poor individuals he singled out soon found themselves facing a mountain of evidence, so great it seemed odd no one had seen it before, and decade's worth of prison time. The Thain had gone onto claim the country's massive, subsequent debt was due to him desperately borrowing money in an attempt to save his people, who he took personal responsibility for, from having to suffer due to the mistakes of others. He had started some programs, paraded so-called "success" stories across the stage, and claimed the near constant balls thrown at the palace were to boost morale for the county and confidence in the stability of the monarchy.

In the end, people had applauded her grandfather's effort, as they were applauding his treaty now. Bilba had already seen some of the headlines, detailing his brilliant negotiating skills and tenacity when it came to protecting his people. Erebor, at least so far, was silent. They could set the record straight if they wished but, in doing so, they risked appearing ungrateful for the help the Thain had given them in exile, petulant over being asked to repay an honor debt.

So, her grandfather stayed as he was, a gilded tyrant with a chokehold on the media, popular opinion and the country's resources. Speaking out against him would simply provide him with even more ammunition to use against her, and he had more than enough of that already.

Therefore, much like everyone else who'd ever been in her position, Bilba took the logical, reasonable, and only survivable, course of action.

She lied.

"Well, you see," she started out, voice smooth and practiced from years of pretending everything was all right, "we knew it would be chaotic when the truth came out so it was decided that..."

The lie rolled off her tongue with greater ease than it should have and Bilba felt a burst of nausea at the thought of what her grandfather's actions had forced her to do for the sake of her own survival, and that of the people she cared about.

It was probably a good thing she hadn't eaten after all.

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Bilba watched out the window a couple hours later as the plane spiraled down toward the place she'd considered home for the past several years. Hobbiton was small and considered a backwater, without any of the amenities larger cities had, but she loved it just the same. It was quiet, and peaceful and had plenty of large, wide open spaces where she could spend time by herself simply reading a book.

She spotted the sprawling campus of Bad End University and felt her gut twist at the thought of all the time, and money, she'd spent there. The palace had begrudgingly paid for her boarding schools over the years but, once she'd graduated at eighteen, she'd been on her own. Her grandfather had made a big deal about her "decision" to make a go of it on her own, forsaking the aid he'd so
graciously offered her. At the time, Bilba had been so happy at the thought of being out from under his thumb she hadn't cared that he'd spun things to portray himself as the longsuffering grandfather or her as the ungrateful child spurring the palace's gracious offer of aid.

When summer had rolled around and the typical invite/demand from the palace hadn't arrived she'd been ecstatic. She hadn't heard much from them since then and had foolishly thought she was free. She'd applied to Bag End, managed to get both financial aid and a dorm spot, and started her classes. She'd later managed to get a modest job in the university library, which had then let her answer an ad Rosie had posted looking for a roommate in a small apartment off campus. She'd later ended up taking out a few student loans when financial aid and her job hadn't been enough and, of course, had joined the ballet company.

She'd had a life, in other words.

One she'd felt she was entitled to just as much as any other person in Shire was.

As always, she should have known better. The Thain wasn't one to let go of potential resources. He might have ignored her and allowed her to go her own way for a while but that didn't mean she'd ever ceased to be a viable pawn on his chessboard.

Beside her, Lila was typing away on her laptop, no doubt working on an article pieced together from the seemingly endless series of questions she'd had for most of the ride over. Bilba had done her best to stick to the "official" story whenever she could, while staying as vague as possible about Bofur or Rosie or other aspects. The last thing she wanted to do was lock them into a certain storyline that they might not remember in the future. When the questions had turned to Thorin or Erebor she'd gotten even more vague, which had been easier as there truly wasn't a lot she knew about either subject. She knew the basic history of Erebor of course and the names of the royal family members, but she'd never met or spoken to any of them before. The only royals she did know were Aragorn and Arwen, the king and queen of Gondor. Her mother had been friends with Aragorn's parents from when they'd used to visit Shire and Aragorn, and later Arwen, had kept it up with Bilba. It hadn't made her grandfather happy but there was little he could do against the royals of another, more powerful, kingdom, especially after they'd ascended to the throne. Bilba didn't speak to them all that often but she did count them among her friends. Had she been able to make it to Gondor, she had no doubt they would have protected her from her grandfather's ire.

Regardless, however, Gondor didn't have any particular ties with Erebor so she'd never had any opportunity, or reason, to care about them.

The plane bumped lightly as it touched down on the tarmac and Bilba pulled out of her musings to watch as the landscape rushed past. The jet slowed to a stop a few moments later and she chewed on her lip at the sight of a brand-new mass of reporters gathered around the entrance to the single terminal.

"Help me sneak off and give me a four-hour head start and I'll give you a thirty-minute exclusive," she said without turning around.

"Two hour head start and an hour long exclusive," Lila responded without looking up from her laptop.

Bilba sighed. "Fine."

Lila smiled brightly and slapped the lid of her laptop back down. "Deal. What size are you?"
A mere twenty minutes later, Bilba found herself standing in front of the closed door of what had been her apartment a mere two days earlier.

It was insane to think how much had changed since she'd last walked through it. She was alone. Lila had been true to her word. Somehow, she'd gotten ahold of a baggage handlers uniform and had Bilba change into it. She'd gained the secrecy of the rest of the press on the plane by inciting a sense of rivalry between them and the "backwoods" Hobbiton reporters. Bilba had been led down a set of stairs into the baggage compartment with a hat and sunglasses on, and had joined the arriving crew in offloading the bags and walking into the airport, right past the gaggle of reporters gathered about the door.

Her guard hadn't come with her, thankfully. Bilba had used the debit card with her money loaded on it, given to her personally by her grandfather with far too much ease for her to be comfortable with, and headed out to hail a cab.

And now she was here, the one place she'd wanted desperately to get to, and the one place she was now terrified to be.

She dragged in a shaky breath, and forced herself to knock on the door before clasping her hands anxiously in front of her. She had a key of course, but it didn't feel right to just barge in, not anymore.

She wasn't sure if she wanted Rosie to be home or not. Her friend was obsessed with royals, and had been insanely excited about the wedding. As far as she knew, Bilba had known what was going to happen all along and had deliberately kept it from her.

The door handle moved and Bilba made a strangled sound, and held her breath.

It opened, and, just like that, Bilba was face to face with her friend.

For a few seconds, the two women just stared at one another.

"Hey Rosie," Bilba finally managed to stammer out. "I -- um -- I can explain. I promise. If you'll just give me a chance--"

Her words cut off as Rosie suddenly surged forward, and threw both arms around her. "It's all right," she said, squeezing Bilba as hard as she could. "I already know." She pulled back to frown at her. "You poor thing! Your grandfather is such a jerk!"

She went back in to hug her again and Bilba hesitantly returned the embrace in confusion. "You already know? How?"

Rosie pulled away again and turned to point back into the apartment. "He came over and told me."

Bilba followed the other girl's gaze, and froze, heart jolting in her chest and her breath catching in her throat. "Bofur?"

Inside the apartment, Bofur gave her a tired grin. He was pale, had heavy bags under his eyes, and he wore the same clothing she'd last seen him in but, other than that, looked fine. "Hey Bilba," he said, voice quiet. "Are you all right?"

Bilba studied him, and then Rosie who had moved to stand next to her with an arm protectively wrapped around her waist, and did the only thing that seemed reasonable in that instance.

She burst into tears.
Chapter 7

Bilba threw herself into Bofur's arms, wrapped both of her around his neck and buried her face against his shoulder.

"I'm so glad you're okay," she managed to get out. She took a shuddering breath and squeezed her eyes closed as she struggled to get herself back under control.

A panicked thought suddenly crossed her mind and she jerked back with a gasp, taking his face in her hands and studying him critically. "Are you okay?" She couldn't see anything, but then her grandfather wasn't that stupid. She ran her hands across his shoulders and down his arms, searching for any sign of pain. "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

He gently grabbed her wrists and stopped her. "I'm fine. More important question, are you all right?"

Bilba nodded. She tugged her hands free and threw her arms around him again. "I'm sorry. This is all my fault." As she spoke she drew back enough to dig the handkerchief he always carried from his pocket to wipe her face.

Bofur chuckled as she handed it back, shoving it in his pocket with one hand while keeping the other around her in an embrace. "Not sure how you figure that."

Bilba felt Rosie put a hand comfortingly on her back, and she let go of Bofur to hug the other girl. After, she stood stiffly between them, wringing her hands in anxiety. Seeing Rosie, usually so hyper and excited, somber and quiet drove home even harder just how much things had fundamentally changed. "I know what my grandfather is like. I should have left you alone, both of you."

The fact two other people now knew the kind of man her grandfather was should have been a relief, but all it really did was make her feel ill. Thanks to her, Rosie and Bofur had drawn the Thain's notice, and that was the last thing she'd have wished on anyone.

"You have the right to live your life," Bofur said firmly, loosely grabbing her hands in his. "No one can blame you for that."

He was so very wrong, Bilba thought, but didn't say it. Instead she took a somewhat still shaky breath and forced a smile.

It vanished when Bofur, without thinking, leaned in to try and kiss her. Bilba gave a startled gasp and looked away sharply as images of photographers with telephoto lenses and tabloid magazines filled her mind. It wasn't something she'd ever had to worry about before as the paparazzi had always given her little notice. For not the first time, she wondered how her family dealt with the constant press of always being in the public eye. Specifically, she wondered how Beatrice did it. The other woman wasn't exactly known for being faithful to her husband but, in the public eye, she was only ever spoken of as being kind and charitable.

Bofur looked surprised, and then his head dropped down to where his thumb had absently been running over the ring on her finger. Bilba despised it. It was too big and the poorly cut diamonds, arranged in a garish and unattractive cluster, kept ending up wedged between her fingers or on the underside of her ring finger as the weight dragged the band around. It was the exact opposite of anything she'd have ever willingly chosen and was desperately hoping her grandfather had picked it out as the thought her new, unwanted, husband had such abysmal taste was simply depressing.

"It's not a real marriage," Bofur said, trying to give her what he probably hoped was a reassuring
smile. At her confused look, he continued. "You were coerced. You can just have it annulled, or deny it all together I guess since it didn't really happen in the first place."

Rosie frowned. "What makes you think it's not legal?"

Bofur gave her a confused look. "It's a marriage contract. You can't enter into a binding contract against your will."

Understanding dawned and Bilba gave him a look somewhere between affectionate and resigned. She'd become so used to having Bofur in her life she sometimes forgot he'd only moved to Shire a year and a half earlier. She'd met him on his first day of class, offering him help after seeing him wandering aimlessly about campus searching for the library.

Before that, Bofur had lived in Rohan for most of his life. Erebor had fallen when he'd been just a baby and his family had been among the lucky ones to make it out. Rather than follow the royal family into exile in Moria, a sister kingdom ruled by a secondary branch of the Durin line, they'd instead chosen to make a new life for themselves in Rohan. When Erebor had been retaken, Bofur's brother had eventually returned to set up a bakery in the capitol but his parents, and Bofur, had remained in their new country.

"Shire is an absolute monarchy," Bilba reminded him. It was a fact easily forgotten, or often simply ignored. The Thain rarely issued commands directly, preferring to work behind the scenes to keep his hands clean. In addition, despite her now solved financial woes, the Shire was considered an exceptionally prosperous, peaceful kingdom filled with contented people. Her universities were second to none and attracted talent from all over the world while her cost of living and quality of life index drew still more.

It all looked utterly perfect, on the surface. Under it all, of course, had been her family's slow bankrupting of the kingdom, the true extent of which they had carefully downplayed, and her grandfather's obsession with being a bastard who mercilessly crushed any who dared cross him.

"The marriage is legal," she continued, "because the Thain's word is law and he said it was."

Bofur looked slack jawed. Clearly, he'd been among those who'd forgotten the makeup of Shire's power structure. "That's okay," he finally stammered. "Erebor is different. You can contest it there."

"Thorin could contest it," Bilba corrected, "but it wouldn't do him any good as he agreed to the marriage." He may not have wanted to, but he hadn't been coerced or tricked the way she had. He'd done his duty as Erebor's heir and fulfilled the agreement his grandfather had made. His marriage was legal by Erebor's standards, just as hers was by Shire's.

Bofur sank down on the couch. Rosie sat awkwardly on the arm of a chair nearby and Bilba stayed where she was.

"Erebor would never hold you to something your grandfather forced you into," Bofur said finally, "even if it was somehow legal." He grimaced and Bilba heard him mutter under his breath something along the lines of, "Didn't realize this place was still stuck in the bloody 1700s." He frowned at her. "You could always just ask for a divorce."

"And what happens to the alliance if I call it off?" Bilba asked. Part of her laughed at the fact she was, essentially, playing devil's advocate but the larger part was far more pragmatic about the whole thing.

Erebor had been outright taken advantage of in the alliance. Shire got everything while Erebor
effectively got an anchor around her neck. If Bilba ended the marriage it could well create a loophole through which Erebor could call off the alliance. She might not care about her grandfather or family but she did love Shire and there was no doubt the kingdom was in desperate need of the alliance. She wouldn’t stay for her grandfather, but she would for her kingdom, a fact she was sure her grandfather was already aware of, and had taken it into account when choosing her for the role.

Even if she looked past all that, however, there was the very real concern that, even if she didn’t care about what happened to Shire, she would have cause to worry about her own safety and that of her friends.

"Why weren't you in the car?"

She swallowed past a sudden rock lodged in her throat. She already knew what happened to people who defied her grandfather. It wasn’t that she'd have to fear for her life, not immediately and not her life at least. Her grandfather would make sure she suffered first, that he took away everything she'd ever had or loved, and that would include Rosie and Bofur.

At least she would be going to Erebor where she'd be reasonably safe. It was about the only positive she could find in this whole mess and, even then, it scared her for the simple fact that, once she left, Bofur and Rosie would be alone in Shire and at her grandfather's mercy. Assuming he had any.

A question that had been worrying at her rose and she took a deep breath, bracing herself for what she already knew was the answer. "Do you still have your passport?"

Bofur shook his head. "No, they took it when they arrested me and never gave it back. I figured they'd mail it to me."

"I doubt it," Bilba said, spirits falling and resignation setting. Suspicion and supposition was one thing, having it spelled out as fact was another. "And if you try to get it back I'd imagine you'll find yourself facing a wall of red tape." She sat down on the edge of the coffee table, between Bofur and Rosie. Putting her hands on her lap, she twisted them together, unable to look Rosie in the eye. "I don't imagine you'd have much luck trying to leave either," she admitted quietly.

Her grandfather wouldn't want his hostages running away. If they tried they would face hurdle after hurdle until they simply gave up from frustration or despair. Naturally, none of the trouble would ever track back to her grandfather and he would have no trouble manufacturing any number of unfortunate, yet perfectly understandable, reasons for the constant barriers and delays.

"I'm sorry," she said, again. No matter how often she said it, it'd never feel like it was enough. She'd radically changed both their lives, ensured her grandfather would be constantly monitoring them and all she could offer for it were empty words.

Rosie shrugged. "It's not like I was planning on going anywhere. Your grandfather is an ass, but it doesn't change the fact that Shire is my home."

Bofur's large hands gently took hers. "We'll figure something out. You can still get to Arwen, even without us. Your grandfather isn't stupid enough to take on Gondor."

Bilba shook her head. She could flee to Gondor and effectively go into exile but what purpose would it serve? She'd cause a three-kingdom international incident, destroy the alliance and endanger Rosie and Bofur. Her grandfather would destroy her reputation in revenge, painting her as an ungrateful, selfish, heartless shrew. She doubted she'd be welcome in Erebor or Shire after and, outside of Arwen and Aragorn, the kingdom of Gondor would probably look at her as a leech. She'd end up a virtual shut-in, locked in a proverbial tower the rest of her life.
She was so very *tired* of being locked in towers.

A thought crossed her mind and she grimaced. For all she knew, Erebor already had a literal tower set up and waiting for their unwanted princess, complete with thick bars and locks. Her stomach twisted uncomfortably and she looked down to where the ring sat on her finger like a fat shackle. She'd been trying her best not to think of Erebor at all or, when unavoidable, to at least try and see it in some sort of positive light. It was difficult, however, when she knew how badly her grandfather had treated Erebor and how little they wanted to do with her.

"Hey," Bofur said, ducking down to catch her eyes. "We'll figure something out, all right? You've still got a week."

"Exactly," Rosie said, false cheer in her voice. "It's plenty of time." She clapped her hands together and said, "It's been a rough couple of days for you. We should have some fun."

"I can't," Bilba said, resigned. "I have to talk to my professors, check if any of my units will transfer, pack, and go shopping." She had a small wardrobe but it was all simple clothing, bargain basement jeans and shorts and t-shirts and the like. She'd never been expected to act like a princess so she'd never bothered dressing like one. She was sorely lacking in formal wear and doubted casual wear for the Durin royalty included grass stained jeans or shirts faded from wear and to many trips through the laundry. She also only owned two pairs of shoes, sneakers and sandals, and her jewelry was limited to a few cheap necklaces and pairs of earrings.

"Perfect," Rosie said, clapping her hands. "We can start at the end of the list!" She jumped to her feet and grabbed Bilba by the hands, tugging her up as well. "Come on!"

Bilba shot a nervous look toward Bofur, who gave an easy shrug and stood up. "I actually agree with Rosie. You've put up with enough crap for the last two days. Give yourself a break before dealing with the rest."

Bilba hesitated. "Did I mention I came with a gaggle of reporters who are going to be pounding the door down pretty soon?"

The smile on Rosie's face turned downright wicked. "Even better." She tugged on Bilba's hand, pulling her toward the door. "I think your grandfather should see you having fun!"

Bilba could just imagine the look on his face when he saw her on the news spending the money she'd tricked him into giving her. A slow grin started to creep across her face and she hesitantly linked her arm through Bofur's on her right side and Rosie's on her left. "I think you may have a point."

"Of course I do," Rosie said sagely. "Let's go, there's no time to waste!"

Bilba sent an exasperated look toward Bofur, who gave her an amused one in return. Then she took a deep breath and allowed her friend to drag her out of the apartment.

She *did* need to go shopping, she reassured herself.

It would be nice to have some fun.

Sticking it to her grandfather would be a bonus.

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As it turned out, a week wasn't very long at all.
Lila Bolger's definition of two hours on that first day was quite a bit shorter than the standard
definition and Bilba had barely set foot outside when the three of them had been swarmed by
reporters with flashing cameras. They'd been forced to flee back inside until her driver had bothered
to show up with a rented limo.

Rosie and Bofur had taken up position on either side of her and, together, they'd waded through the
throng to the car. Once there, Lila had shown up out of nowhere and Bilba had invited her in the car
because, ambush or not, the woman was still the closest thing to an ally in the media she had and
alienating her would be idiotic.

Things were a whirlwind after that.

Rosie helped her with all the shopping. It was here that Rosie's expertise paid off as her obsession
with all things royalty extended to their fashion. With her, and a gaggle of reporters in tow, Bilba
loaded up on everything she could possibly need for her new role as Crown Princess of Erebor.
From several gorgeous, jeweled gowns to properly fitting jeans without the holes, torn seams or
stretchiness of her regular ones.

Bofur had commented that Erebor had colder winters than Shire so she'd picked out a few sweaters,
coats and cold weather gear as well as lighter clothing for the other seasons. After that, she'd bought
a few pieces of all-purpose jewelry that could be worn with multiple outfits and in many a different
level of social function. At Rosie's insistence, she also bought several new pairs of shoes and a few
hair accessories. With every purchase, she tried to settle on things that were quality but not
overpriced. She tried to buy things that could be multipurpose and limited herself to only a few
purchases in any one category. She had no need for rows upon rows of dresses or shirts she'd never
wear. Beatrice had entire closets of clothing she'd never touched after purchasing and, as far as Bilba
could see, the only purpose they served was to gather dust.

At each store, she happily showed off her purchases to the reporters and gave the requisite audio
clips they wanted. She stayed vague on questions pertaining to Erebor or her grandfather and family
and tried to focus on her week, purchasing supplies and getting ready. Later, watching the news
reports, she realized that approach made her come off sounding rather shallow and out of touch but
there was little she could do about it. She had nothing good to say about her grandfather or her
family and knew too little about Erebor or Thorin to speak on that topic.

It didn't help that the reporters didn't bother covering her and Bofur at school speaking to her
professors, or at the Administration building getting transcripts to hopefully transfer credits to a
university in Erebor It was boring, she was bluntly informed by Lila, and they had ratings to
consider. They also didn't cover her saying good-bye to her ballet company or her other friends
because she refused to let them. They were private matters that she didn't want splashed all over the
media.

While she handled that, Bofur and Rosie gave interviews or showed the media around. Bilba had
never been so proud of them. Both were poised and gave practiced, calm answers to questions as if
they'd been doing it all their lives. The only thing that broke her heart was listening to Bofur give
credence to the lie that their relationship had never been real. It was necessary, to protect her
grandfather's lie which would, in turn, keep Bofur safe from the Thain's wrath as well as future
hounding by the press, but it caused a deep pain and twisting of her heart every time she heard it.
Judging by the way Bofur's lips would thin and his expression turn grim it was clear he was affected
as well.

Bilba knew, as the week progressed, that she needed to box up her belongings from the apartment,
but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Each time she thought about it she'd end up nauseated and
shaking, a bone deep chill settling inside her.

Simply put, she was scared.

She didn't know anything about Erebor Oh, she knew the names and ages of the royal family from school but that told her nothing about them as people. She couldn't recall much about their culture or landscape past Bofur telling her it was colder and the general knowledge that they supposedly valued honor. So did her grandfather, according to his many speeches.

She had no idea what sort of treatment she would receive, and would be in no position to do anything about it.

"You'll be fine," Bofur assured her. "If they don't treat you right, leave. You've got the money to go anywhere you want."

"Try to get some evidence first, though," Rosie said, worried. "That way they can't blame you for it. No one will fault you for leaving if you can prove they mistreated you."

Bilba had forced a smile and assured them she'd be fine, even as her mind informed her how utterly alone she'd be once she left for Erebor There were no servants going with her, no guards, and certainly no family or friends. It'd just be her, in a country where she'd need a map just to find her way around the palace.

It was clear Rosie and Bofur didn't believe her for a second and so, toward the end of the week, she allowed them to drag her to an amusement park. It was one of the first times she'd been truly out in public since the wedding. Before that she'd stuck to her school, ballet company and higher end boutiques with good security and small buildings that only held a few people at a time.

The amusement park was huge, and filled with people dreaming of befriending royalty. If her grandfather, or any of her relatives, had gone the park would have been closed to the public, but Bilba hadn't thought to ask. She'd been to the park many times before the wedding and attracted little notice, but there was no hiding now.

In the end, it was the park security and, of all people, the press who looked out for her. They had taken a near propriety interest in her and didn't like the public trying to stake a claim. The press formed a tight group around her, refusing to let anyone so much as take a picture that could later be sold to a competitor.

The constant press of people and the unending cacophony of shouting grated on her ears and she could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on. She hadn't realized just how badly she wanted this day until they'd arrived. She had no idea when she'd ever see Rosie or Bofur again, or the Shire for that matter. Also, given the uncertainty of her future, she had no idea when, or if, she'd ever get to go to another amusement park, or have any fun for that matter.

All thanks to her awful grandfather, who'd be getting away with it while she couldn't even have one damn day to enjoy with her friends without the press or the public swarming her. She hadn't been able to speak freely to Rosie or Bofur after that first day. Bofur went home at night and she couldn't speak to Rosie in their apartment for fear it had been bugged in her absence.

Now it was almost over and she wasn't even being allowed to have one final day with her friends.

It irritated her and the further they went, the more the irritation morphed into outright anger.

Eventually, she stopped trying to be cordial. She put her head up, clenched her hands into fists and marched forward, intent on getting to spend a fun day with her friends despite the circumstances. For
the rest of the day, she focused on that, hitting nearly all the rides, walking through the shops and
eating dinner at one of her favorite cafes at the park. Security cleared out the areas as best they could
before Bilba and her friends entered, allowing them to enjoy at least a semblance of peace even if the
masses were always there, just on the fringe. Some wanted to congratulate her on her wedding, or
wanted her to pass on their thanks to her grandfather for saving the Shire. Others were hoping for a
friendship with royalty, in the hopes it would lead them into fame, riches and glory. Several wanted
her to give them phone numbers of various family members, up to and including Beatrice, a few of
her aunts, an uncle, and a few others. At least two of the requests, from teenage girls, were for
Thorin's 16-year-old brother and at least one was for his sister.

Bilba ignored them all, pushing aside the small voice informing her that Rosie had always been just
as obsessed with royalty and celebrities and she'd always humored the other girl. It wasn't until the
end of the day when she started to see parents apologizing to upset children who hadn't gotten to go
on all the rides they'd wanted, and worn out teenagers suffering heat stroke from following her
around trying to get her attention, that the voice got too loud to ignore.

"Should I even ask how this is going to play?" she asked Lila, guilt already gnawing at her.

The woman shrugged. "I don't control the press."

Bofur, walking on her other side, snorted. "Don't worry so much about it," he said, throwing an arm
across her shoulders, his other arm weighed down by the bags full of merchandise Bilba had bought
for herself, him and Rosie. "They'll be telling everyone about the day they went to the park and came
within arm's length of a princess."

Bilba rolled her eyes. She didn't think the prospect had been nearly as exciting for the children but
there wasn't much she could do about it. She should have just left once she saw how much disruption
her presence was causing. Instead she'd let her irritation and anger at her circumstances lead her to
take it out on people who'd had nothing to do with it. She was going to look like a self-centered brat
on the news and she had no one to blame but herself.

Disgust curled in her gut. She'd acted little better than Beatrice, or her grandfather. She always prided
herself on being nothing like her family but it was in moments like these she feared she might not be
as far off as she liked to think.

Rosie wrapped an arm around her waist and squeezed. "Stop looking so serious. You're always so
melodramatic."

Bilba laughed in spite of herself and could see by the look in Rosie's eyes that the other girl was fully
aware of the irony in her statement.

"It could always be worse," Rosie continued and Bilba conceded the point with a slight inclination of
her head.

They'd reached the entrance of the park and Rosie grabbed her arm with both hands, pointing toward
an ice cream park right next to the gate. "Oh, let's grab ice cream before we leave!"

"Okay," Bilba reached into her purse and got her card out. Bofur had offered to pay several times
that day but she'd refused, citing it was her gift to them before she left. She'd also tried to buy things,
mostly food and drinks, for the press but they'd always declined, often with nervous looks at one
another she hadn't understood. Bofur and Rosie hadn't seemed to notice or think anything of it so
she'd put it out of her mind and stopped asking.

She ordered cones and handed her card across to the young man behind the stand. The day had been
warm and her hair and clothing were sticking to her neck and back with a light sheen of sweat. She felt worn out, her feet hurt and she felt grimy and generally gross. The sight of the refreshing ice cream had her nearly salivating with anticipation.

"I'm sorry, but your card has been declined," the cashier said nervously, handing the card back out to her. "Do you happen to have another one?"

Bilba blinked at him in surprise. She'd barely made a dent in the money she'd gotten from her grandfather, even with all she'd bought that day. "Can you try again? There's plenty still on the card."

"Okay." He didn't look convinced but obediently ran the card again, and again after that. He kept his head down, eyes off her and red hair falling into his face. A squawk sounded from the machine, letting anyone close know the card had been declined, and Bilba felt her stomach clench. She'd brought a small clutch with her to the park and was holding it in both hands in front of her like a shield, fingers nearly white with how hard she held it.

A third squawk and a cold sweat broke out on her skin. A fourth as the young man ran it again and she wanted desperately to tell him to stop, humiliation already burned into her marrow, but she couldn't seem to get the words out. She was frozen, the press falling silent as a giant, proverbial spotlight fell upon her and that damned machine.

A fifth squawk. She flinched and her lungs froze in her chest.

An arm appeared beside her, a card held out lightly between two fingers.

"It must have gotten demagnetized," Bofur said smoothly, voice loud enough to carry. "Use this one."

He put a hand lightly on the small of her back as the man ran the card and gave it back. The ice cream was handed over and Bofur turned to give one to Rosie before holding hers out.

The cashier was holding her card out and Bilba woodenly took it. "I need to make a call."

"Not here," Bofur said, his voice low. "Wait for the car."

Bilba gave a shaky nod and didn't resist as Rosie linked a hand through her arm. Bofur did the same on the other side, handing over her cone as he did. Bilba held it stiffly as they walked out to the limo and stood still as Bofur loaded the bags into the trunk. He held the door open and she and Rosie both slid in.

The second Bofur got in and closed the door, Bilba had her phone out and was dialing. The switchboard operator answered and she demanded to speak to her grandfather.

"The Thain is indisposed," the operator said and Bilba clenched her teeth.

"Tell him it's his favorite granddaughter," she said, sarcasm dripping from her voice. "He'll want to talk to me."

Of course he would. He wouldn't be able to resist an opportunity to gloat. In her other hand, the ice cream was beginning to melt, chocolate ice cream running in thick rivulets down the sides to run in cold trails over her fingers.

"Ah, Bilba," her grandfather's voice came over the phone. "Enjoying your day, I trust?"
Bilba held the phone so tight the plastic creaked under her fingers. "What happened to the money?" she demanded.

"Money?" her grandfather asked, his voice so innocent that there was now no doubt in her mind he'd done something. Her mind went to the ease and near glee with which he'd given her the card and she kicked herself for taking it without question.

She should have known better.

She did know better.

"The money," she said through clenched teeth. "My card was declined. What did you do?"

"Oh, that!" he said, voice still jovial as if they were merely speaking about the weather. "I gave you exactly what you asked for, minus of course the costs to repair the damage you did to your aunts' rooms and Beatrice's room. I thought it only proper that you pay to replace all the property you destroyed." His voice took on a confused tone. "You would agree with that, wouldn't you, my dear? After all, you're an adult. Surely you realize that tantrums are beneath you and the only proper course of action would be to pay for what you broke."

Bilba felt lightheaded, and her breathing was coming in short gasps. In her other hand, the cone collapsed under the pressure she was putting on it and the melted ice cream soaking it. A rush of liquid chocolate ran over her arm and dripped down onto the pants and long jacket she was wearing, the same one she'd bought with Beatrice's stolen credit card on that first night.

Her grandfather gave a low chuckle and she pulled the phone away and stabbed the button to end the call. Heat was racing through her and she could feel tears of pure rage gathering in the corners of her eyes.

"Bilba?" Rosie said gently, and she looked up to see her and Bofur staring at her with wide, concerned, eyes. "What is it? What happened?"

Bilba gave a bitter smile and answered, her voice barely a whisper. "It got worse."
Chapter 8

Thorin eyed Dwalin, sliding his feet across the mat to keep his body facing his opponent as the other man slowly circled in.

Dwalin's arm flew out, hand angled like the blade of a knife and aimed directly at Thorin's nose. Thorin blocked the blow and pivoted on the ball of his foot, twisting and sending his opposite leg up in a punishing blow.

He felt Dwalin block it, and then use an arm to lock the leg in place. A second later the man's foot hooked around Thorin's ankle and then he was landing on the mat with a heavy thud. He grunted in annoyance, pulled his legs up, planted his hands on the mat behind his head and pushed back to his feet in one easy move. Dwalin, who'd fallen into an at-ready position, dropped into a crouch and moved back in.

Thorin made a sound that would have been at home coming from an enraged animal, and went on the attack.

The two had already been going at it for a while. Thorin's naked chest was slick with sweat and the sleeveless t-shirt Dwalin wore was drenched. Both were heaving for oxygen and were sore and bruised from blows much harder than standard for simple sparring. Dwalin never held back, while Thorin...

Thorin was simply pissed.

He'd been angry for so long now he sometimes forgot what it felt like to not be angry. Ever since the Thain had made his idiotic demands, and ever since he'd seen the look in Kyra's eyes as he'd broken her heart.

The wedding a week ago, held on a date Shire had demanded, had been the very date he and Kyra had set for their own wedding. All of it had been planned and in place already, reception hall, vendors, the guests had all been invited. It had been a royal wedding, preparations took months and they didn't stop just because the Shire was making absurd demands. No one had truly believed it would turn out the way it did. Thorin hadn't truly believed it up until the moment he'd found himself at an altar facing a complete stranger.

Once he'd arrived in Shire, he'd demanded to see the Thain to personally relay his feelings on Shire forcing the date. Gerontius had gone wide eyed and shocked, insisting he'd had no idea and, indeed, everything had been taken care of, and planned, via proxies. Every letter, meeting, every rejection of every plea to have the marriage on a different day, had been with someone other than the Thain.

Even so, Thorin had no doubt the bastard was lying.

There was simply no way he'd not heard of the problem with the date, not when every news agency in Erebor, and many in Shire, had reported on it. It wasn't feasible that the man could be so blind about what was going on in his own kingdom, or the one he aimed to ally with. The Thain had been exercising his power to make a point, to show he could, or simply because he was a bastard and enjoyed acting the part.

And Thorin was just... so... angry about it all.

Since returning to Erebor, he'd dragged Dwalin to the training rooms every day and fought until he was too tired to move. At first, others had been there, to watch or work out on their own. As time
had progressed, and it had become clear Thorin wasn't just sparring, they'd slowly drifted away.

Now it was just the two of them, doing their best to kick one another's arses. The red mats under their feet were slick from sweat, forcing them both to stop every so often to reapply chalk to their soles to avoid slipping. They were nearing the end of this current match, both near to collapsing, and it was just one of many, many, many such matches over the last week and Thorin's anger hadn't diminished.

If anything, it had intensified.

The room was lined with mirrors and Thorin caught a glimpse of himself in one as they moved, dark bruises lining his body from prior matches and red areas promising new ones. Tendrils of hair were escaping the low ponytail he'd pulled it into, his eyes held a wild look and clear exhaustion lined his face and dragged at his limbs. A

Not exactly the image most people had of the Crown Prince of Erebor.

Some days, the bouts had ended explosively with one or the other getting the upper hand in a sudden attack targeting an opening or weakness brought on by fatigue or sheer laziness. Sometimes it ended when Dwalin decided it had gone on long enough and simply refused to fight anymore.

Today, it ended by mutual, unspoken agreement.

Dwalin threw another punch, stumbling in exhaustion and accidentally overreaching. Thorin grabbed his arm, crouched and used his body weight to throw the other man over his shoulder and onto the mat behind him. Erebor's Chief of Security rolled easily to his feet and, just like that, they both knew the fight was over.

They headed to the nearby bench where Dwalin grabbed a bottle of water while Thorin ran a towel over his face.

"You going to hit the showers?" Thorin asked. He snatched his own bottle of water and guzzled from it, before dumping the rest over his face and shoulders. They were off the mats now and on the wood flooring and he idly dropped a towel down to mop up the water that made it that far.

Dwalin snorted. "Some of us don't have the luxury of getting to our duties any time we want, your Highness." He wrapped the towel around his neck and took another swig of water. "And Ori would have my head if I didn't check in with her before heading off."

Thorin chuckled, imagining the diminutive woman who had one of Erebor's toughest and most intimidating warriors wrapped around her little finger. "Tell her I thank her for the loan of her husband."

That earned him a longsuffering sigh before Dwalin headed out, grumbling under his breath the entire time. Thorin put little stock in it. The two of them had been friends since childhood and while Dwalin might complain and mutter, Thorin knew the other man's friendship and loyalty were unwavering.

He gathered his towel, water and bag and left through the second door in the room. This one led to a bank of showers, all currently empty as no one wanted to be anywhere near him at the moment.

He stripped down, tossed his things onto one of the long benches lining the industrial styled area, and stepped into one of the showers. They were arranged in long banks, a simple wall separating each and no doors. The floors were all tiled and fitted with drains to siphon off the excess water. Large rubber mats ran the full length, lowering the risk of the palace getting sued for providing an unsafe
environment for its employees.

He turned the handle and ice-cold water sputtered out, pattering down on him in barely a drizzle before slowly gaining strength. The temperature felt fantastic on his heated skin and he leaned forward with a sigh, resting a forearm on the wall and dropping his head on it. His other hand he kept absently on the shower handle. The water streaming down his back began to heat, relaxing sore muscles and relieving some of the tension that seemed permanently set into his shoulders.

This whole thing was just such a mess. Nowhere was this fact more on display than in the press and on social media. Erebor had lost its collective mind over Shire's meddling. They had just taken the kingdom back from Smaug, only to now find themselves taken advantage of by a tiny kingdom of little global impact. The palace, and his father in particular, had been heavily criticized both for getting into the contract in the first place and for not somehow, someway, finding a way to get out of it. The fact the deal had been reached by Thror without input or knowledge of anyone else in the family didn't seem to matter.

Thorin had been largely left out of the criticism, as no one believed he'd wanted to break off his engagement to marry a random princess he'd never met.

Kyra had received only pity. She'd always believed in having a public presence and had long been known to accept every invitation she could to charity events, to speak at schools, visit nursing homes, and the like. She'd once spent a day at a local animal shelter cleaning out cages and taking care of animals in an attempt to encourage more people to volunteer. The people of Erebor adored her, as well they should, and had not responded well to seeing her hurt.

Especially not when the woman now in Kyra's rightful space was apparently doing all she could to prove she was nothing more than a typical spoiled princess whose only thought was for her own entertainment and pleasure.

Bilba Baggins. Thorin couldn't bring himself to think of her as Bilba Durin, and doubted he ever would. That last name should have been Kyra's, would have been had circumstances been different. Thorin thought back to seeing the Shire princess on the stairs, cocky and unrepentant at having to be dragged back from partying with her cousin's stolen credit card. That, of course, was after her rampage through the halls of the palace, reportedly destroying whatever she touched in the mother of all temper tantrums, brought on by Eru only knew what.

He didn't know how the press had gotten wind of those events. He certainly hadn't told them but the very next morning the press in Erebor had been reporting on it, news shows had been discussing it and the palace had reported he was being swamped with requests for comment. None of the Shire reporters had mentioned it, oddly enough, and he'd chosen to keep his peace, preferring to simply get through it all, board the plane and return home as soon as possible.

He'd arrived to a crowd of angry protestors, who apparently hadn't truly believed what was going to happen any more than he had, demanding action but unsure of what that action should be. After getting back to the palace he'd thrown himself back into his work, and sparring with Dwalin, ignoring all interview requests and calls for comment.

That didn't mean he hadn't paid attention. Bilba Baggins had spent her last week in Shire not quietly visiting friends or trying to leave a legacy, but in having a good time. She'd shopped, given interviews of little to no substance leading to press speculation about her intelligence, driven people out of an amusement park by showing up unannounced and, apparently, managed to spend a hundred thousand dollars in a single week. The media had likened her to some of the more notorious of Erebor's nobility, and not in a positive light.
Thorin had no idea how she planned to behave once she arrived in Erebor but he did know she wouldn't be spending at the rate she currently was. Shire was already doing its best to leech all the money from Erebor's Treasury, they didn't need a spoiled little princess doing the same. Thorin had already spoken to his father and Balin and they'd decided she would not be given access to an account of her own. If she wanted money she would have to ask for it, and justify its need. He had no idea if she'd throw another of her tantrums, or react the way he'd seen spoiled nobility react in Erebor when denied something they wanted, but he had no intention of putting up with any theatrics. He wasn't the only one in the royal family and the last thing he wanted was her disrupting the peace, or being a negative influence on some of the younger, more impressionable members.

"I think you should just throw her in the dungeon and tell everyone she was kidnapped," an annoyed voice stated from just outside the shower and Thorin felt an amused grin tug at his lips. Speaking of impressionable members of the royal family...

He straightened and tilted his head back into the spray, before looking to his left.

His little brother was leaning against the wall, arms crossed and desperately trying to look as cool and unaffected as possible. At sixteen, Frerin was right in the middle of a growth spurt that no amount of food could keep up with. It had left him tall and gangly, with clothes that never seemed to fit quite right even with a professional tailor on staff. He wore his hair, lighter than Thorin's and without the irritating wave that caused reporters to speculate he permed it, shoulder length and generally tied back in a low ponytail.

"Just which 'she' are we talking about?" he asked, grabbing the soap off the small ledge it sat on.

Frerin gave him a frustrated look. "Don't act like that. You know which one. That woman. You can get rid of her and then you can marry Kyra like you're supposed too."

"No one's getting thrown in the dungeons." The water had heated up to just below scalding, right where he wanted it. It went even further toward relieving the tightness in his shoulders. It wouldn't last, but he would enjoy it while he could.

Frerin scowled. "Do you know what Kyra did while you were off doing that stupid farce of a wedding? She went to the hall you two were supposed to get married in and sat in the front row holding her dress. I heard Dis talking about it."

Thorin sighed, focusing on the wall and grimacing at the way his heart clenched. He didn't comment on Frerin apparently spying again. The kid hung out with Nori far too much. "I did know that," he said quietly. Dis had told him, angry at the injustice, though she'd appeared to feel remorse about it afterward. He knew he'd never have heard it from Kyra. She'd been trying so hard to not add to his distress, as if her pain somehow didn't matter when, as far as he was concerned, it was the only thing that mattered. He knew it was partly that she believed it would still somehow, someway, work out for them. The other part, however, was simply Kyra being Kyra. She never complained, and rarely got angry. Not even when it would be well deserved. Not even when no one would blame her. Like Thorin, she had stayed completely silent on the matter in the media, refusing all interviews and giving a quiet "no comment" to every question.

"Sorry," he heard Frerin mumble. "I didn't mean to be a jerk."

"It's fine." As much as Thorin was Frerin's older brother, Kyra had always been like an older sister. She'd been present at every birthday and holiday, traveled with them on every vacation and seeing her hurt was as bad for Frerin as if someone had hurt him or Dis or any other member of the family.

Thorin shut the water off and stepped out, taking the towel Frerin offered with a nod of thanks.
"So," Frerin hesitated, before pressing on in a rush. "What are you going to do? You're not just going to let this stand, are you? You and Kyra belong together. You know you do."

He sounded so earnest, and so trusting. As if his older brother could fix things simply by virtue of Frerin's faith in him.

Thorin had no answer for him so, instead, he simply dried off and dressed quickly in the jeans and t-shirt he'd come down in. Once he got back to his room, he'd change into something more befitting the numerous appearances and other duties he had on his schedule for that day.

Once he was done he threw everything into his bag, grabbed the handles and tossed it over his shoulder, holding it loosely in place.

"You have to do something," Frerin insisted, pushing off the wall to stand close to him. As Thorin started to move toward the door his brother reached out to grab his arm. "It's not fair!"

Thorin sighed and put a hand at the base of his brother's skull, pulling him close to rest his forehead against the teenager's. "It rarely is," he said gently.

And, with that, he left the room.

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It was some time later that Thorin stood in front of a full-length mirror in his bedroom in dress slacks and shoes and a crisp, white shirt. He pulled a tie around his neck, fitting it under his collar and knotting it quickly. He'd decided against a waistcoat, which had led to a brief search through his desk drawer to locate an appropriate tie clasp. After using it to link his tie to the placket of his shirt, he pulled the jacket on, buttoned it and headed out into the rest of the suite. It included a kitchen for when he felt like cooking, a library, weight room and dining room for when he chose to eat in. His private room opened into a space originally designed to be a public receiving area for meeting with guests and visiting dignitaries. As Thorin rarely ever met with anyone in his rooms, he'd changed it into a living area complete with a massive flat screen television and fully stocked entertainment center.

As he headed toward the large double doors leading out, his eyes flickered toward the closed door on the other side of the room, and the anger started to rise once more. The doors opened into what was intended to be the private bedroom of the Crown Princess of Erebor.

Rooms that, by right, should have belonged to Kyra.

They'd been so close to their own wedding, and her officially moving into the rooms, that he'd already given her permission to design them as she wished. She'd spent hours in there with professional designers, picking out paint, fabrics and furniture. Literally every square inch of that room bore her signature.

Brimming with fresh agitation, he grabbed the handles to the doors leading out and wrenched them open, only to immediately freeze in place.

Kyra was standing in the middle of the hall, waiting for him. As always, the sight of her brought a rush of love and affection, lately tinged with pain and anger. Not anger at her, but at Shire and the Thain and everything that now seemed set against them.

As he pulled the doors closed behind him, Kyra smiled brightly and stepped forward. She was tall, nearly eye level to him, with a medium frame. Her strawberry blonde hair was straight and worn shoulder length and she had green eyes that that were complemented by thin framed glasses. She
wore a tailored, turquoise dress suit with matching pumps and a white blouse under the jacket.

He immediately opened his arms and she ran into them, squeezing him in a tight hug before releasing him and jumping back to hold up a tablet. "I have your schedule for the day."

Thorin raised an eyebrow. "Since when does one of Erebor's finest ambassadors carry around the schedules for pampered royalty?" he asked in amusement.

She rolled her eyes. "You're hardly pampered, and I'm far from one of the finest ambassadors."

"I think I can safely say the entire royal family of Erebor begs to differ," Thorin said dryly. Kyra came from a long line of ambassadors that had willingly followed the family into exile, and kept up their duties while gone. They had worked out treaties with other kingdoms, strengthened alliances and worked out contracts for food and supplies for Erebor's refugees. If Thorin's grandfather had swallowed his damn pride and sent one of them to Shire, instead of doing it himself and trying to keep it secret, Thorin had no doubt they wouldn't be in this mess.

They headed down the hall, Kyra chatting about his schedule as they walked. Her voice was light and cheerful, but Thorin had known her far too long believe a minute of it. She'd lost weight, was pale and black bags under her eyes gave away her sleepless nights. Her hand was gripping the tablet so tight her knuckles were white and the device was shaking slightly in her grip.

Stopping dead in the hall, Thorin gently pried the tablet loose and set it at their feet before taking her hand in both of his to lightly massage it.

Kyra dropped her head. "Sorry," she whispered. "I should be better than this."

"I don't see how," Thorin said. "I've been kicking the crap out of Dwalin every day myself."

She gave a short smile. "Way I've heard it, it's gone the other way a few times."

"Spurious lies," Thorin replied with a straight face.

She looked up and gave him a hesitant smile, that faded instantly when she spotted the monstrosity on his ring finger. The rings they had picked out together had been simple silver bands. Thorin had designed her engagement ring, a ribbon of sterling silver that came together at the top in a filigreed swirl. In the openings of the band he'd set clusters of her favorite stone, sapphires.

She was still wearing it and he had no intention of asking her to remove it, much less return it.

"My father was concerned about a reporter getting a picture of me without it on," he explained. "I've been ordered to wear it." He grimaced. "You know how he is about the royal family's image."

"He's not wrong," Kyra said, forcing a smile and tearing her eyes away from the ring. "Erebor prides itself on its honor."

Noise came from the end of the hall and Kyra tensed and jerked her hand free from his, just as a servant bustled into view. Kyra started walking again and Thorin retrieved the tablet and fell in beside her, struggling against the resentment of no longer being able to so much as touch her without the risk of idle tongues wagging. "Perhaps someone could point that out to Bilba Baggins."

Kyra's brow furrowed as she reached to take the tablet back from him. "I wish there was some way to make the press lighten up on her."

"You're not suggesting we censor the press, are you?" Thorin asked wryly.
Kyra gave him a withering look. "Of course not. Just it would be nice if they stopped talking about her as if she were somehow the second coming of Smaug."

"She's done little to prove them wrong." They reached the end of the hallway and, without thinking about it, Thorin took her hand to help her as they descended the grand staircase. It was massive, and sported an elegant curve. The stairs were white marble, as were all the floors in the palace, with a wide gold and purple brocade runner in the center. The bannister was a mass of silver, gold and bronze worked ribbons, beaten and molded into designs depicting Erebor's victory over Smaug and the reestablishment of the kingdom some six years prior. All three metals had been twisted together for the handrail, which was a bitter note of contention for some, Thorin had been informed, as it apparently made sliding down them next to impossible.

Kyra rolled her eyes. "She's a fairly typical, spoiled noblewoman. It hardly makes her as bad as Smaug."

Thorin shrugged. "Perhaps not, until they compare her to you. Even the best of us look woefully inadequate."

Kyra looked away but not before Thorin saw her face turn bright red. "You're ridiculous," she huffed with affection.

They reached the ground floor and began to walk across the cavernous foyer toward the doors to exit the palace. They were equally enormous, and built from solid, thick iron. The original ones had been oak, carved and inlaid with gold, but after Smaug had destroyed them without trying it had been determined that perhaps security might forego aesthetic in the rebuild, if they ever got the chance.

They reached the front doors and Kyra stopped, disquiet. "You still don't plan to meet her plane when it arrives tomorrow?"

"I have other obligations." His duties hadn't stopped when he'd been forced to go to the Shire. They'd happily piled up in his absence and he'd been desperately trying to get back on track, while fielding new responsibilities as they cropped up, since he'd returned.

"There are going to be protestors." Kyra hadn't released his hand and looked up at him, worry in her eyes.

"It's not as if we plan to throw her out on the tarmac and make her walk to the palace," Thorin responded in exasperation. "Dwalin is handling security and Balin will meet her." He frowned. "Of all the people in Erebor, I wouldn't have thought to see you defending her." The slightest hint of hurt crept into his voice as he spoke and Kyra's expression turned amused as she caught it.

"I'm not telling you to go all Prince Charming on her," she said with a small smile. "I just don't think she deserves to be vilified for being spoiled. Can you imagine the chaos if the press decided to go after every noblewoman, or nobleman for that matter, with a penchant for being silly, selfish, or a spendthrift?"

"I think we all bear responsibility for our actions, and the consequences," Thorin retorted. Kyra gave him a dry look.

"I think a lot of the blame has more to do with the Thain rather than her," Kyra insisted. "They're targeting her because she's going to actually be here, while he gets to sit back in his own kingdom."

Thorin had a feeling they were targeting her for the way she was portraying herself in the press but he kept his peace about it. He pulled the main door, the heavy object balanced so perfectly it slid
open as if it weighed nothing. "You might not think that if you read some of the theories floating about."

"You mean the one where she was in love with you and concocted the whole thing herself to land you?" Kyra asked incredulously. "I'd have expected a little more throwing herself at you if that were the case."

"Then maybe she just wants the title, or wealth." Thorin pulled her hand onto his arm and led her out onto the wide front entrance. It was carved from white stone, large enough to hold dozens comfortably, and held up by two statues carved to look like past kings of renown. Shallow stairs ran all three sides of the platform, leading down to where a limo waited for them. Several other cars were parked in front and behind the limo and Dwalin was leaning against the hood of one, waiting for them.

Past him were the front lawns and gardens of Erebor, featuring an assortment of statues and rock pools. Several of the areas featured enormous geodes pulled from the mines Erebor was known for, cracked open and displayed so that when the sun hit them they were a burst of sparkling light and crystal.

The front gates and fence lay much farther off but, even from where he stood, Thorin could see the long rows of reporters who'd been camped out for what felt like months now. Ignoring them, Thorin led Kyra down and handed her into the limo before sliding in after her and pulling the door closed.

The windows were heavily tinted and a dark partition separated them from the driver, leaving them in their own, small, private booth. The back was fitted with a television, sound system and small area with food and beverages for longer trips.

Kyra settled on the bench next to him, tablet on the seat between them. As the car started, the television across from them snapped on automatically. It was displaying one of the morning talk shows, the graphics at the bottom showing the discussion was about him and Shire, as it had been on every talk show for months now.

"You have to at least admit," one of the hosts, a younger man with light colored hair and glasses, said, leaning forward in his chair, "The Prince has traded up. Princess Bilba is damn hot."

Kyra gave a small gasp beside him and Thorin swore viciously, lunging across the bench to snap the damn thing off.

When he settled back down next to her, Kyra was focused on her hands, which were folded in her lap.

"Kyra," he started to say, only to shut up as she cut him off.

"It's okay," she said softly, focused on her fingers. "It's not like that's the first time I've heard it, or even the sixth." The slightest hint of bitterness crept into her voice before she added, "Anyway, he's not wrong. She is very beautiful." She idly worried at the cuticle of one nail. She had a bad habit of biting her nails and kept them all cut short to try and break the habit. "I heard she's in ballet, so she's probably graceful too." She looked up, and the shine in her eyes and redness to her cheeks made Thorin want to go punch the idiot tv host. "Was she? Graceful?"

Thorin thought back to the only time he'd seen Bilba Baggins aside from at the altar. He had thought she was graceful, at the time, but that didn't mean she held a candle to Kyra.

"I suppose she was," he said, gently, "and she's pretty enough, but a lot of girls are pretty and
graceful. You--" here he took her hands in his, "are beautiful, and graceful, and kind, smart, generous, and humble. There are a thousand girls out there who have the looks, but very few who have the substance. You've got both, and that's a rare thing."

Kyra's entire face went beet red and she looked down, one thumb rubbing lightly over the back of Thorin's hand. "I wish we'd just done what you wanted," she whispered, voice nearly inaudible. "If we'd just eloped back then..." she gave a shaky laugh. "Your father would be so mad, but we'd have been married and no one would have been able to pull us apart."

Thorin didn't answer, because there was truly nothing he *could* say that would in any way make it better. After a second, Kyra's shoulders slumped and she settled back into her seat. Thorin didn't respond to the way she wiped her hand over her eyes, knowing she wouldn't appreciate it, but he did pull a handkerchief out of his pocket and hand it over to quiet thanks.

They sat in silence as the cars pulled out slowly through the front gates. They were swarmed at once by reporters, shouting questions at the car, but soundproofing had been installed that left it little more than a faint, muffled noise.

Thorin settled down, crossed one leg and his arms, dropped his head against the headrest and shut his eyes. He didn't mention to Kyra that he'd asked Ori to search through old records and law to see if there was any way to get out of the marriage, and alliance, without threatening the honor of Erebor. The last thing they needed was to give the other kingdoms cause to not trust in Erebor's ability to keep its promises. They'd only been back in power six years, after having been in exile nearly twenty. He and Kyra had been small children when the kingdom had fallen, and had watched their families fight to keep a good name as they relied on the charity of others.

If he could get himself, and Erebor, out of the mess his grandfather had left them in he would, but it would have to be done delicately. Ori practically lived in the library already and had been in charge of organizing the mess left behind by Smaug who, apparently, hadn't been much of a reader. If anyone could find something, she could, but he wasn't going to mention it to Kyra until he knew for sure. The last thing he wanted was to get her hopes up, only to crush them again.

He opened his eyes and absently watched the scenery pass by outside, feeling his spirits lift at the sight of his people happy and secure as they went about their day. Exile had been hard for everyone, both those who'd gone with his family and those who'd been scattered to the other kingdoms and struggled to start new lives. Seeing them now, with a home to call their own once more, made the struggles and hardships they'd endured worth it. Things weren't perfect, and they were still working on establishing alliances with kingdoms like Gondor, where they had zero inroads with which to approach the matter, but it was far better than it had been before the exile.

The car rounded a corner and he spotted the restaurant he was supposed to meet Dis at for breakfast. She liked doing the occasional public appearance, and by public she meant somewhere vetted, secured and with carefully selected people who'd undergone full background checks beforehand. The place would be effectively shut down for most of the morning but the uptick they would see afterward in customers wanting to be near where royalty had been would more than make up for it.

The outside of the building was already crawling with security and several streets had been blocked off, with ample notice given beforehand so people could find other routes.

The car slid to a smooth stop and Dwalin pulled the door open. Immediately an ocean cooled breeze washed over him and the smell of salt hit his nostrils. Distantly he could hear the clang of ship bells and a light, early morning fog, clung to the ground.

As Thorin got out he felt his shoes crunch on the sand scattered across the parking lot, carried in on
shoes from the nearby beach. It would normally be a few more hours until tourists came out in force
but, with word of their appearance, crowds were already gathered behind barricades waiting for
them. They began to cheer as soon as he got out and he grimaced as the flashes of cameras held by
the press went off.

The crowd began to shriek and scream as they spotted him and he put on what Kyra had always
called his official face as he waved at the crowd and turned back to help Kyra out.

She frowned at him from inside the car. "I should probably just wait here, or go back to the palace."

"Nonsense," Thorin said, bracing one hand on the roof of the car. "We're still friends, and you're still
an ambassador. You have every right to be here."

She looked unconvinced but took his hand and allowed him to help her from the car. As Thorin
straightened and turned, he heard shrieks from the diner entrance and then saw twin blurs rushing at
him.

They slammed into his legs a second later, resolving into his nephews, Fili and Kili. Kili, six and
born around the same time the kingdom had been retaken, threw his arms up and shouted, "Swing
me, uncle Thorin! Swing me!"

Thorin obediently went to one knee and put his arms up, flexing his biceps. Kili shrieked and
wrapped his hands around Thorin's upper arm. He stood, lifting the small boy off his feet and
grinning as Kili kicked his feet above the ground. Thorin began to sway in place, moving his arm so
that the little boy swung back and forth gently. Kili shrieked as if it was the greatest thing in the
world.

Raising an eyebrow at Kili's brother, Thorin asked, "What's wrong, Fili? You don't want to join in?"

The small blonde gave him a withering look. "I'm ten. Swinging is for babies."

"Ah," Thorin said, smiling as, next to him, Kyra did her best to disguise a laugh as a cough "I see."

He spotted Dis in the doorway, waiting for them and carefully put Kili down only so he could
crouch and let the small boy clamber on his back. Using one hand to brace Kili, he held the other out
for Fili, who gave him a suspicious look before carefully taking it as if Thorin were handing him a
jeweled scepter.

Then, with a nod at Dwalin who'd taken up a spot next to him, the lot of them headed inside.

Somewhere, thanks to the time difference, Bilba Baggins was spending her last night in Shire, no
doubt sound asleep and giving him as much thought as she'd done the entire week.

For the moment at least, Thorin decided to do his best to return the favor.
"We got you a going away present."

Bilba blinked in surprise. She and Rosie were sitting on the couch while Bofur sat in an armchair on Bilba's left. It was early, and they had only a few hours left before she had to be at the airport. None of them had been able to sleep.

Instead, she'd invited Bofur to stay, an action sure to cause more rumors in spite of Rosie's presence, and the three of them had watched romantic comedies all night. An odd choice, given the circumstances, but Bilba had always adored them. Bofur called the movies cheesy, predictable and melodramatic, and he was right, but she loved them all the same. When Rosie had started pulling out her favorites he'd given a long-suffering sigh and headed off to the kitchen to make popcorn.

That had been hours ago and, surprisingly, Bilba had almost been able to forget the nightmare that had been her week. They'd laughed, made fun of the sillier moments, critiqued plot points as seriously as if they were watching a biography, and thrown popcorn at the screen at appropriate, and inappropriate, times.

Finally, as dawn began to threaten, Rosie had jumped up and gone into her room, returning a few moments later with a large, wrapped package she'd plopped on Bilba's knees along with her pronouncement.

"You didn't have to do this--" Bilba started, only to have Rosie roll her eyes and cut her off.

"We know, we know," she waved a hand as if shooing the words away, "open it."

Bilba laughed, along with Bofur, at Rosie's antics. "When did you even have time to get me something?"

"Well, now, that's our secret," Bofur said, settling back in the armchair. "You're not the only one capable of being sneaky, you know".

Bilba gave an exaggerated eyeroll. Classmates at Bag End University had always complained of her ability to walk nearly soundlessly and to blend in to her surroundings. Bilba was pretty sure that meant they were calling her a wallflower but, as the description was apt, she couldn't much dispute it.

With a huff, she tore into the wrapping, and frowned as it pulled away to reveal a box with a laptop prominently featured on top. "You know I can't accept this," she said, looking at them wide eyed. "And, besides, I already have a laptop."

Rosie sighed and reached over to tug the box out of Bilba's lap. "What you have, Bilba, dear," she said, settling the box on her own lap and accepting a pocketknife from Bofur to cut through the tape on the flap, "is a paperweight with delusions of grandeur."

She got the box open quickly, Bilba noting it appeared to have been open already and re-taped shut, and pulled the shiny, metal object out. To her delight, a skin had been affixed to the cover, depicting a ballerina in the midst of a performance, ribbon and lace from her costume soaring about her as she twirled.

"Oh," Bilba breathed, leaning forward running her fingers over the image. "This is beautiful."

Bofur snorted. "I told you. We could have gotten her the cover alone and she'd have been thrilled."
"The cover doesn't have amazing features," Rosie said with a smile. She opened the lid and hit the power button. "We already set it up for you."

"Set up what?" Bilba looked between the two of them but both had decided to be mysterious and refused to explain.

Instead, Rosie let out a tiny shriek of happiness and spun the computer around for her to see.

For the second time, Bilba blinked in surprise. Filling the screen was the log in for Ravenhill, the cover screen featuring a black and gold scrolling design with a raven in flight splashed across it. The social media site had been created, ironically enough, by an exile of Erebor, designed initially to give fellow exiles the ability to connect and stay in contact no matter where they were dispersed throughout the world. The site had caught on and soon spread until it was a worldwide platform, as embedded in the fabric of society as any modern convenience or luxury.

"You," Rosie proclaimed proudly, "are now the newest member of Ravenhill and you already have two friends."

"I only have two friends period," Bilba muttered absently. She lifted her eyes from the screen to give them both a wry look. "Hence the reason I don't have Ravenhill." She'd never had any friends at all, in fact, until the two of them. Her Grandfather had moved her around from school to school so often she'd rarely been in one place long enough to move any relationship past acquaintance and, the few times she had, their luck had invariably and "coincidentally" gone bad until people had learned, no matter where they'd gone, to stay far, far away from her.

She'd been excited to finally graduate from school and, she thought, out from under her grandfather's thumb. She'd taken out loans, gotten financial aid and scholarships as needed and, for the very first time, had moved by her own choice to a place of her own choosing. She'd picked the college she wanted, the courses and schedule, the ballet company and had finally started her life the way she wished to live it.

She'd never expected to make friends.

Rosie reached up to where her email and a password were already entered into the log in portion. She hit enter before Bilba saw what her password was and the screen changed to the home screen for her personal account. The background was a light gray with a watermarked raven. The profile picture featured one of her favorite shots of her, Bofur and Rosie, arms thrown over one another's shoulders, laughing at some joke or another.

Bofur flushed and scratched the back of his head self-consciously. "You can change that if you think it'd cause problems, having me in it and all. You can get rid of me all together, in fact, if you think--"

"You're suggesting I have too many friends and should cut them by half?" Bilba asked with a faint smile. "I'm sure it's fine. We made it clear it was a ruse, no matter what the rumors try to claim. Besides, it's not as if I plan to add the press, or anyone else for that matter."

"Like the Prince," Rosie said with a nod. "We checked. He has an account but it's all buttoned up, almost as tight as I made yours." The last she said with a smug look that had Bilba giggling with fondness. As she looked at her two friends, she felt a rush of affection for them both that very nearly set her to tears again.

Both had had their lives upended, every bit as much as hers. They had reporters following them, people accosting them in the hopes of gaining a meeting with her, and their social media accounts had been flooded with requests by people hoping to achieve fame by association. It had been jarring,
and invasive, and she knew full well it wouldn't die down just because she left.

Her vision blurred and suddenly she leaning forward to hug Rosie, and then Bofur.

"Thank you," she whispered, and hoped they knew she meant for far more than the laptop. They could have, probably should have, run the other way once everything had gone to pot but they hadn't. They'd stuck by her side through it all, which was more than she'd ever had from anyone, and certainly more than she'd ever expected.

When she pulled back she wasn't the only one with red eyes. Rosie brushed at hers with a hand before giving a shaky smile. "No one can see your profile picture and there is more than one Bilba Baggins in the world so it's unlikely you'll get hit with a ton of requests, especially when the other Bilba Baggins' out there are probably already getting hit. They won't even notice you popped on."

"Especially when my surname should be Durin," Bilba said. Rosie's eyes grew slightly wide and Bilba hastened to add, "I'm not complaining. I certainly don't feel as if I'm a Durin." She'd never felt like a Baggins either but that was neither here nor there. "This will help throw people off. They'll be looking for Bilba Durin, Crown Princess of Erebor."

"The official one," Bofur added, making air quotes with his fingers.

"True," Bilba agreed.Celebrities had a golden raven next to their name to let people know they were the real person and not someone co-opting the name and likeness for their own purposes.

"Anyway," Rosie tugged the laptop away and set it on the couch. "Enough of that for now. I'll tell you the password so you can change it to something you'll like. Until then, however--" she leaned over to grab a DVD from the giant mound on the table. All were Rosie's movies as Bilba's belongings had already been packed and taken to the airport. Luckily, Rosie shared Bilba's love of cheesy romances and had a massive supply all her own. "What do you want?" Rosie asked, holding up two movies. "Mistaken identity or opposites attract?"

Bofur groaned and dropped his head back against the chair back. "Kill me now."

Bilba giggled and then reached out to snatch one of the DVD cases. "This one, I think. Do we have enough time to watch it?"

Rosie took it back to check the run time and glanced at the clock. "We do, if we get started right now."

"All right, then." Bilba flopped on the couch and then impulsively reached over to grab Bofur's arm and drag him to sit on her side, sandwiching her between her two best, and only, friends. Friends, she repeated to herself firmly as Bofur sat down and her heart jumped in her chest. Her friends, and nothing more. "We best get started then."

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It was over far too soon.

The sun rose, and it was time.

Rosie and Bofur were not going with her to the airport, at Bilba's request. The place would be a madhouse with reporters, well-wishers and people who simply wanted to see it. She'd be busy checking through security, speaking to reporters and doing her very best to pretend she was a blushing bride on her way to her exciting new life. She'd have no chance to speak with Rosie or Bofur and their presence would greatly increase the risk of her breaking down and bawling like a
child on the tarmac. Not exactly the image her grandfather would appreciate and one sure to bring down his ire on her friends as she'd be out of reach.

She stood at the door hugging them until she risked being late, and promised to contact them as soon as she'd arrive. Then the door was closed and she was standing in the hallway, alone. Her fingers clutched the laptop, hugging it to her chest like a shield, as she struggled to get her legs to move.

She tried to swallow past the jagged rock in her throat, and shivered as the temperature seemed to plummet in the narrow hall. Her legs felt leaden and a wave of dizziness washed over her, bringing spots to her eyes.

She didn't want to go.

The hallway to the stairs stretched ahead of her and she had the sudden, irrational thought she was on her way to her own execution rather than the airport.

The urge to knock on the door and tell Rosie and Bofur she'd changed her mind and desperately wanted them to go with her flashed through her and she knew full well they would go if asked. They would go, and their presence would make the media and public scrutiny of them even worse, and would ensure it lasted even longer.

Bilba Baggins very much wanted to be selfish. She wanted to ask her friends to go with her or, better yet, simply not go at all. She wanted to forget about the alliance and her grandfather and the fact that Shire would probably go into financial collapse and ruin without the support of Erebor.

Bilba Baggins wanted to throw it all away in favor of simply staying where she was and doing what she'd been doing and living her life the way she'd wanted, and chosen, for the very first time.

That was what she wanted.

Bilba Durin, Crown Princess of Erebor whether she liked it or not, knew her duty. Letting out a slow breath, she tossed her hair back, lifted her chin high, and through sheer force of will, strode down the hallway.

The Crown Princess of Erebor did not look back.

Bilba Baggins, laptop clutched against her chest like a lifeline, did.

But only for a second.

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It was a whirlwind after that.

Bilba moved in a haze, through a maelstrom of light and sound. Her grandfather was persisting in the notion that she didn't like security so she had little but her driver and Lila to keep the hounds at bay.

As expected, what felt like half the kingdom had come to see her off. Hobbiton was a small place with an equally tiny airport and Bilba felt a flash of guilt for the chaos her departure must be causing for other travelers, as well as the disruption to the normal peace and quiet of the area. She could have left from the capital of course, with its international airport and laid-back attitude to an array of leaders and celebrities coming through, but it would have meant dealing with her family coming out to see her off. The last thing she wanted was the added stress of trying to pretend they were all one, big happy family, and she especially didn't want to deal with her grandfather who, undoubtedly, would have had some last-minute threats to whisper in her ear with a big smile and a false hug as if
he were wishing her all the best.

So she'd chosen Hobbiton and, as expected, her family had regretfully begged off, citing their schedules and overall importance to the country as reasons they couldn't make the two hour trip to watch as she left the country for possibly the last time.

Hobbiton's small police force did their best to keep people outside the fence, but more than a few got through and joined the enormous crowd of reporters clustered around her. Quite a few were female, some of whom appeared to be screaming at her that Thorin was clearly fated to marry them and she needed to deliver their love letters to him and then step aside. As everything had happened in a week, Bilba hadn't really had a chance to start getting the mail most royalties were used to, but she had no doubt it was coming and that a good amount would express similar sentiments. There were always people fascinated by royalty or celebrities, followed by those who did the best they could to meet their favorite stars. All those people were fine, Rosie was one of them. The problem was the small segment of the population that became convinced they had some sort of connection, or even ownership, over a certain celebrity and took it very personally when said star didn't return their affection, or when they gave their affection to someone else.

Somewhat to her surprise, or maybe not when she thought about it more, the journalists surrounding her did not appreciate random people thinking they could get close to her. They closed around her in such tight ranks that Bilba could no longer see anyone past them, much less the few people who'd jumped the fence.

Still, she could hear them, far closer than was comfortable. She wasn't used to being threatened, and had no stomach for confrontation. The screaming had her breathing increasing and her body tenser than it had already been. She could feel herself trembling slightly from nerves and desperately hoped it wasn't enough that it was visible on camera.

Erebor had sent a plane, after the Thain had insisted the royal planes were all in use and he didn't have one to spare, and Bilba had fully expected them to send one of their diplomatic planes and give her a seat amongst returning ambassadors and a press corps that would hound her all the way to Erebor. That would be if she were lucky and Erebor's disgust with her grandfather didn't lead to them simply sending her a plane ticket, to a seat in coach.

She was rather shocked then, to reach the tarmac and see the very same plane Thorin had traveled in. The feeling faded almost immediately, however, as she realized it was merely diplomacy at play, no different than what her grandfather would have done. It was important to look good.

There were two burly looking men standing at the bottom of the stairs and, with a nod to Lila who was already turning away to begin her live shot, Bilba boarded the stairs and began to walk up. She'd worn a sundress and heeled sandals and had put her hair into a high ponytail but none of it was helping against the near stifling heat that had already set in. Shire was a temperate climate but it had its occasional temperature swings and this day was clearly one of them. Already sweat trickled down her back and she could feel the hair at the base of her skull sticking to her neck. She was looking forward to getting into the air conditioned interior and quickened her pace toward the door. She'd barely made it two steps when she heard shouting behind her and looked back to see one of the more vocal fence jumpers, a young, petite woman with ash blonde hair, rushing at the stairs.

"I have to go!" she shouted, trying to shove her way up the stairs. "I'm perfect for Thorin, don't you understand? We have all the same interests, and hobbies!" Her eyes locked onto Bilba's with a malice in them that made her heart jump. "She doesn't deserve him. I'm prettier than her anyway!"

She started forward, as if to move between the two men at the bottom of the stairs, and Bilba stiffened. Personally, she'd be happy to hand the Crown Prince of Erebor over to one of his adoring
fans, though perhaps not this one. She didn't want the marriage any more than he did, but that didn't mean she wished him any sort of harm. Before the woman got close the men closed in on her, pushing her back with ease. Not waiting to see what happened, Bilba spun back and forced herself to walk up the stairs in as dignified a manner as possible. She'd received enough training at least, in schools and ballet, to know better than to slouch or scurry like a frightened mouse.

Behind her, the woman continued to shriek insults but they barely registered. It wasn't anything Bilba hadn't heard before. Her family had made her shortcomings very, very clear to her over the years, particularly in regard to her physical appearance.

Clutching her laptop even tighter, she entered the airplane, nodding at the woman in a uniform waiting at the entrance. Had it been her grandfather, the inside of the plane would have been devoid of anyone other than the pilot but, to her surprise, she spotted a number of people walking about, none of whom appeared to be reporters.

A male flight attendant approached, gave her a bow barely deep enough to be respectful, and turned his back with a curt, "This way, Princess."

Bilba nodded and allowed him to guide her to a forward compartment where several rows of luxurious, padded seats sat empty. It was similar to the small, personal jet her grandfather had, at least according to the pictures she'd seen, but this was an entire plane and she was curious to know what else it held. Several of the seats were placed around low tables and she chose one of these to sit in, sitting next to the window and placing her laptop on the table. There was a seatbelt set into the seat and she clicked it shut over her lap as she heard the door to the plane being closed.

They took off soon after. Gravity pressed her back lightly into the padded seat and Bilba felt her stomach drop as they lifted off.

Bye, she thought with a trace of bitterness, and clenched her jaw as tears threatened. The last thing she wanted was to cry now, in front of strangers. No one had said a word to her since she'd sat down and, as they reached cruising altitude, it became clear no one planned to. That was fine, she preferred it to the alternative. The flight before her was going to be long and she'd much rather spend it ignored than berated.

A quiet sound signified she could take off her seatbelt and she did so, relaxing into the seat for a second. As the adrenaline from the morning began to wear off, fatigue started to set in, reminding her that she'd spent the entire night wide awake. In hindsight, it was probably a good thing. It was morning in the Shire but, thanks to the time difference, it was evening in Erebor. It'd be best if she could find somewhere to lie down and hope she could get started on adjusting her internal clock.

She carefully got up, picked up her laptop, and stepped into the aisle. She briefly considered asking a crewmember for a tour but thought better of it. It was a plane, after all, and she was the highest-ranking person on it. There was no place she wasn't allowed and it'd be impossible to get lost.

She went to the door set in the back of the compartment, past the now sealed door leading outside. Grabbing the handle, she sent a quiet prayer there wasn't a horde of reporters lying in wait, pulled it open, stepped through, and promptly froze in amazement.

There were no reporters. Instead, it was as if she'd stepped off the plane and into someone's house. The room she stood in was a living room, plush white carpeting, sofas and coffee table, and a massive entertainment center. A rug featuring what she guessed was the Durin family crest dominated the floor. The windows had been covered over in paneling, giving the impression she had left the plane all together and entered a high end, luxury home.
She wandered through, finding bathrooms she was sure were larger than her apartment, a fully stocked kitchen and multiple bedrooms with enormous beds piled high with pillows and blankets. Each had a sitting area with a television and a private bathroom. The crest was embossed on the top blanket for each bed and she spotted it in other places as well, on dishes in the kitchens, seat backs around the dining table and monogrammed on towels and dish cloths.

The kitchen was tempting. Bilba hadn't eaten breakfast and had only had popcorn the night before and then the ice cream from the failed amusement park trip. In the end, however, exhaustion won out and she decided to go for the kitchen later. She'd be on the plane plenty long enough to both sleep and eat.

She headed back into the nearest bedroom, almost groaning with relief at the sight of the bed. Unlike the rest of the area, there were windows in here but she ignored them as she set her laptop down on a bedside table and kicked off her sandals. The beige carpet was thick and soft and she gave herself a second to dig her toes into it before climbing onto the bed. Without even bothering to pull the blanket down she flopped on top and let out a sigh, muscles relaxing as she sank into the thick mattress.

She was out in minutes.
Chapter 10

Bilba dragged herself from the depths of sleep like one clawing up the sides of a very deep well. When she finally forced her eyes open she felt groggy, her arms and legs weighed a ton and she was entirely confused about where she was.

A few minutes passed as her body worked its way to full consciousness, and Bilba frowned as she realized she still didn't recognize the curved, cream colored ceiling overhead.

She pushed up carefully onto her elbows, and immediately felt her heart sink as memory crashed in. She had so been hoping it had all been a terrible dream and she'd wake up safely back at home with Rosie obsessively watching news footage of royals and Bofur knocking on the door to take her out for coffee and a walk in the park.

With a sigh, she got up and grimaced. Her hair was lank and sticking to her face on the side she'd been sleeping on and she felt generally grimy and gross. All her belongings were packed in the cargo hold, including the rest of her clothes, so she couldn't change but she decided to at least shower and try to freshen up a bit. The last thing she wanted was to appear on the Erebor news looking like a bedraggled waif.

She glanced at the clock on the nightstand to find she'd slept a full eight hours and still had a few left before they arrived at Erebor. Plenty of time to shower and, hopefully, find something to eat before her stomach decided to stop asking politely and simply begin snacking on her spinal cord.

She wandered into the attached bathroom, and rolled her eyes at the opulence. It was a plane after all, meant to get you from Point A to Point B. Was it really necessary to have a Roman-style, marble and glass walk-in shower and an adjoining spa?

A flash of guilt hit as soon as the uncharitable thought crossed her mind. Wasn't she the one afraid she'd be trapped in Coach, surrounded by reporters for the entire flight? She should be happy they'd sent this plane, public relations stunt or not, and not gone the route her mind had feared.

She closed the door, gratified to see it had a lock as she didn't fancy anyone accidentally, or otherwise, walking in on her, and undressed. She folded her dress carefully and stepped into the shower. It took her a few minutes to figure out how the thing worked but, once she did, she quickly decided she had been missing out in life.

The shower was amazing. It had multiple jets lining the walls, with strong enough pressure that she was sure she wouldn't have to sit under the spray for half an hour in the hopes shampoo would eventually give up and leave on its own; and anti-slip tread whatsit in the floor that served a dual purpose as a foot massager.

She'd intended to take a quick shower but ended up standing under the spray for a good fifteen minutes simply relaxing instead. It was only the eventual thought that she was on a plane and thus had a finite supply of water, particularly the heated variety, that finally got her moving.

The shower was already stocked with soap and shampoo, both of which thankfully had pleasant, neutral scents and washed quickly, before the shower convinced her to just stand still again, for another few hours.

Once done, she regretfully turned the water off, stepped out and grabbed a towel from a stack sitting on shelves near the door. After that it was a hunt through the drawers of the massive vanity until she
found a blow-dryer and, with a cry of joy, a straightener.

It took forever to dry the wet mass on her head, and even longer to straighten it, but it was the best she could do. With everything packed she had no access to her hair products and, without them, it was straightening or risk it frizzing out to several times its size upon drying naturally or by the blow-dryer. It'd be bad enough once she reached the humidity of Erebor, situated as it was right on the water, and the last thing she wanted was to give Beatrice an excuse to send her a mocking email. Her cousin made it a point of pride to always look flawless, and made it a further point to constantly declare what an utter failure Bilba was in the same aspect.

She didn't even see her cousin very often and yet, somehow, someway the woman always seemed to know any time Bilba had a spot on her shirt, mismatched socks or a hair strand out of place. Given her grandfather's current penchant for turning the media against her, Bilba had a feeling if she missed stepped her arrival he and Beatrice would make a meme out of it and send it circulating online.

The Durins, who considered honor and appearance and name so important, would be mortified and certainly lock her in a tower then, if they hadn't decided to already.

The thought of her uncertain future once she arrived in Erebor erased the relaxation she'd gained from sleeping and the shower in an instant. Her gut clenched and, in the mirror she'd been fixing her hair in, Bilba saw the faint smile she'd been wearing slowly fade from her lips. Around her the silence, which she was usually able to ignore through long years of practice, seemed to yawn wide, threatening to swallow her whole in an instant if she let it.

Swallowing against a suddenly dry throat, Bilba dropped her eyes. She unplugged the straightener, set it on the counter with a hard clatter, dressed quickly, and left the room. She retrieved her laptop and headed out into the main living section of the jet.

Once there, she kicked her shoes off on a whim, letting her feet sink into the plush carpet, and set the laptop on a glass topped coffee table bolted to the floor in front of a cream-colored couch running along the wall. It was set before an entertainment center with massive cupboards on either side filled with all manner of DVDs, games and what appeared to be the latest version of every game console currently in existence.

The movies were an eclectic mix, suggesting the tastes of multiple people had gone into choosing them. There was no way to tell which were Thorin's, if any, but she did spot a few she knew, and liked. Choosing one, she loaded it into the player which, thankfully, was simple to figure out. Pretty soon she had the menu screen up, music swelling through the space as it waited for her to hit play.

Instead, Bilba dialed it down until she could barely hear it, sending a nervous glance at the door into the rest of the plane as she did. So far, no one had bothered her and it was her hope that, if she stayed quiet and out of the way, it would continue. Her grandfather had always been eccentric in when and how he would come after her but one way to guarantee such unwanted attention was for her to do something to remind him she existed. She'd learned a long time ago that the best way to deal with him was by staying as quiet and out of the way as possible. If she were very, very lucky that approach would hold true here as well.

She went into the kitchen after that to make herself a sandwich. She could cook, having learned through necessity, but didn't feel up to preparing a full meal. After cleaning up after herself, she dug out a soda from the fridge and returned, gingerly, to the couch. She'd left condiments off the sandwich and had picked a soda that was clear so if anything spilled it wouldn't leave a stain on the couch or the white carpet underneath.

She settled back to watch her movie, pausing only long enough to return to the kitchen and wash the
dishes she'd used and replace them, as well as head back again to make sure she'd left the bedroom and bathroom as spotless as possible.

Eventually, a check of the clock showed they should be nearing Erebor so, with her stomach churning and her body tense, Bilba put the DVD back, shut down the TV and player and headed into the front of the jet. A few crewmembers passed her as she headed up but none of them gave her so much as a second glance.

She settled into a window seat again, placing her laptop on the table in front of her. Directly outside the window, the rising sun had lit the ocean below in a firestorm of color matched only by the sky as it tried desperately to compete. There were no clouds to block her view and she tried to imagine the various sea creatures they were probably flying over, swimming fathoms below where there were no worries over alliances, forced marriages or the possibility of being locked in a tower forever.

A slow sense of panic crept over her at the thought of how close they were. She simultaneously wanted it to never come, and to just be over with, all at the same time. A chill ran over her and the sandwich she'd eaten turned sour in her stomach. Would anyone notice if they did lock her away? In Shire, eventually someone would have noticed. The public at large had held no real animosity toward her, just simple apathy. They might not have noticed her disappearance right away, but she was certain, or at least hopeful, they would have noticed one day.

The press would certainly have noticed, eventually, and would have asked questions. Her grandfather controlled most of the news in Shire, granted, but he didn't control everything. He couldn't hold down every reporter, every small newspaper and station, not without showing his hand. Someone would have started questioning it and if the public had caught wind, it would only have grown.

But that was all back in Shire now. Would the public in Erebor care one way or the other if she were to disappear? Would the press question it?

Leaning forward, she grabbed her laptop and powered it up, fingers shaking as she pulled up her online server and ran a search on her name and Erebor.

She immediately wished she hadn't.

Her eyes went wide and she could feel her body tensing as her eyes ran over articles, filled with awful, hateful things about her. Seeing a few videos, she fished out the headphones Bofur had given her that she'd shoved in a pocket of her dress, and hit play on a roundtable discussion about the personal and political ramifications of the Heir's forced marriage.

It made her sick.

Literally. She could feel nausea bubbling up her throat, the acrid taste of acid in the back of her mouth. A light sweat broke out on her forehead and her body began shaking as the vile words flowed from the headphones.

The people of Erebor hated her.

It was not too strong a word. If anything, it wasn't nearly strong enough. She'd known they wouldn't
be happy, one would have to be an idiot not to know that, but this? This was so much worse than anything she'd ever imagined. She was reviled. Loathed. Detested. Whatever the word, that was the feeling and, possibly, more than that.

They were angry at the old king, Thror, for getting them into this mess, but he was dead and gone past their reach. They were angry at her grandfather for forcing the issue, but he was in Shire, and a king, so also past their reach.

Most of all, however, they were angry on behalf of Kyra. The more Bilba read on the woman, the more she felt her shoulders slump in resignation. She'd never thought to gain the love of the royal family or the public, but had hoped to at least gain their respect. Reading about the woman she was inadvertently, and unwillingly, replacing Bilba could see there was no chance of that ever happening.

Thorin's ex-fiancée was freaking perfect. Not classically beautiful from the pictures, but certainly very pretty and always put together even more flawlessly than Beatrice. Bilba couldn't find a single picture of the woman with so much as a hair out of place. Her clothing was always immaculate; her manners were poised; she always knew the exact right thing to say at any given moment; she attended, and was invited, to every charity benefit and dinner. In addition, she was a diplomat with a number of impressive negotiations and achievements under her belt.

The people loved her, had watched her grow up, and sighed in happiness at the fairy tale romance between her and Thorin Durin. Spotting a thumbnail picture of Thorin and Kyra at a function before her grandfather got involved, Bilba pulled it up and winced at the adoration practically spilling from Thorin as he gazed at the other woman.

Eyes suddenly burning, Bilba slapped the laptop lid closed and shoved it off her lap. She curled up as best she could on the seat and looked out the window, trying to discretely wipe a traitorous tear off as it threatened to boil over from her eye.

She would have no safety net in Erebor.

No apathetic public to eventually wonder where she'd gone, no neutral press or, at least, no small-town reporter or station hoping to make a name by questioning where she'd gone. No Rosie and Bofur to try and raise a stink over her disappearance. Oh, they might try in Shire but she highly doubted her grandfather would let it go that far, and it certainly would make no difference in Erebor.

She was the other woman in Erebor. A homewrecker for all intents and purposes who'd burst onto the scene and destroyed a romance for the ages.

They would probably celebrate her disappearance.

Her breath hitched and she mentally cursed as her eyes filled more than she could handle and a few tears spilled out against her will. Unbuckling her seatbelt, she curled on one hip, drawing her legs up to more fully face the window. The last thing she wanted was for the crew on the plane to see her crying. They'd probably mock her for it, or tell her she deserved it for destroying the Prince of Erebor's fairy tale engagement.

She could always try to tell them her side. About how it had been all her grandfather's doing and she'd had no part in it. How she'd been happy where she was, and had lost her own romance that, while not as long or maybe as deep as Thorin's, had been every bit as real.

She could, but she highly doubted they would listen. She was the outsider, a stranger bursting into a home and demanding help for a papercut while a family member bled out on the floor. She was never going to reach them, not now anyway when they were still at the height of their outrage and
looking for someone to blame. The only thing she'd achieve was angering her grandfather, endangering the alliance and the safety of her friends, and drawing unwanted notice.

Notice.

Behind her, she heard a crewmember walking down the aisle and stiffened, but the person simply moved past and was gone into the back of the plane.

Bilba chewed on her lower lip, and wrapped her arms around her torso as her breathing began to slowly return to normal.

Maybe...maybe if she did the same thing in Erebor that she'd done in Shire? If she just stayed out of their way, disappeared on her own in a sense, didn't cause any problems or fuss...maybe they'd leave her alone? It had usually worked back home where, granted, there hadn't been the hate and vitriol but, still...

If they'd just give her a chance. A chance to prove she didn't want anything. That she had no designs or interest in Thorin Durin, or his throne or power or anything else and she just wanted to be left alone.

She hadn't checked into colleges and dance studios in Erebor's main city out of fear she'd find there weren't any, but maybe...if there were...

Maybe she could get a scholarship or financial aid like she'd done to get into Bag End University, and maybe she could find a small dance studio that would let her join and maybe...maybe...

It was an awful lot of maybes, and they all centered around the Durins giving her a chance to prove she could stay out of their way. For all she knew, they planned to march her straight into the palace, into a tower, slam the door behind her and leave her there to rot.

It's what her family would have done, had done, a few times. They'd only let her out for fear of what the public might say if they ever woke up enough to notice.

There'd be no such concern in Erebor.

Still, if she were given the chance, she didn't plan to squander it. It'd be an opportunity to start over, away from Shire and without the threat of her grandfather looming over her. There wasn't much left he could do to her, and certainly not with her in Erebor and him in Shire. He could still go after Rosie and Bofur or a few of the other people she'd met while at Bag End University but she doubted he would care enough to do so. As long as she kept her mouth shut, whether by her own choice or the Durins, and stayed out of his way he'd have no reason to come after her, or her friends.

In the distance, outside the window, a flicker of light caught her eye and Bilba shifted on the seat, pushing up a bit to try and get a better look. It grew steadily closer until she saw what looked like a long ring of bright, silver buoys bobbing quietly on the water. Each held a long, narrow spike jutting up toward the sky. As they bobbed, she could see flickers around them, prisms of light flashing in the sun like so many multicolored facets.

Arkenstone.

Erebor's most zealously guarded secret, and the reason they'd been able to retake the kingdom. No
one knew who had created it, or even how exactly it worked, so closely did the Durins protect it. There had been nothing about its development during the exile, not so much as a whisper amongst the various spy networks.

The first anyone knew of it was when the Durins and their allies had launched a surprise attack on their stolen kingdom. They'd arrived at night via ship, evading Smaug's forces through subterfuge and still unidentified help from the inside.

The forces had arrived wearing personal shields the likes of which no one had ever seen. Bilba had watched the video from the battlefield six years earlier, as it seemed everyone had. It had been global news, the exiled Durins declaring war against the usurper of their throne and fighting to take it back. For days, the focus of the world had shifted to Erebor, eyes glued to the news feeds. Bilba had been at one of her many private schools and remembered the television wheeled into the room, broadcasting live footage and updates of the battle. It was quite literally history in the making, the war over the soul of Erebor.

It had been no contest in the end, not with those shields. They'd glittered like the prisms she was seeing now, making it easy to tell who was on the Durins' side and who was on Smaug's. Nothing could penetrate them, making the forces of the Thain and his allies near unstoppable. They'd taken back their mountain, and driven the enemy from their homeland. Smaug had been struck down by Thrain and, just like that, the kingdom had been restored to her rightful rulers.

The world had exploded after that, every kingdom demanding the technology for themselves. When Erebor had refused, a global conference had been called, to discuss the threat Erebor now posed to the other kingdoms in possessing such technology. Bilba had found it ironic. When Erebor had fallen, every kingdom had distanced itself, and refused to help retake it, but once Erebor had done the deed themselves suddenly everyone wanted to be involved.

In the end, a compromise of sorts had been reached. Erebor had put the buoys in place, self-shielded to prevent sabotage, and capable of creating a domed shield over the entire kingdom, effectively ensuring she could never again be taken by outside forces. In return, the royal family destroyed all personal shields, as well as any data concerning their creation. They agreed, reported about the dangers of such a device falling into the wrong hands as well as the concern other kingdoms had over Erebor having such a strategic advantage that they did not.

There was no way, of course, to prove Erebor had done as they'd promised and, naturally, the presumption was the creator was still around and could easily make more but it was the best anyone could do. Anything further would give grave insult to Erebor, treating them as if they were some sort of real and present threat, just waiting for the opportunity to invade.

In the end, it came down to Erebor's honor. As long as she held herself above reproach, and behaved in a way that made the royal family appear to be utterly trustworthy, honorable, and in possession of the highest moral values and ethics, then no other kingdom could push the continuing existence of the Arkenstone shield. No one could argue for the name of the creator or insist the technology be shared with the other rulers.

The plane passed over the buoys, winking in the sun beneath her. All had large lights on the tips and Bilba saw the ones directly below blink on suddenly, a brilliant red, undoubtedly triggering a sensor in the kingdom itself to let them know something was on its way.

They were beginning to descend and she lifted her eyes to watch as Erebor itself came into sight.

It was so very different than Shire, she thought as the kingdom rapidly came into view, enlarging from a distant shape to a defined landmass.
Erebor, unlike Shire, was an island or, more accurately, a group of islands. The largest, located on one edge of the group, was where the palace and main city, as well as several others of various sizes, were located. The landmass was enormous, dwarfing all of Shire and big enough that, were you to live far enough inland, it'd be easy to forget you were on an island at all. There were several fresh water lakes and a river system, partly natural and partly manufactured, ensuring water made it to every part of the landmass.

Several of the other islands housed smaller cities or towns, all of them connected by wide roads capable of supporting heavy volumes of traffic. As they drew closer, Bilba caught sight of a small, rocky looking island on the far outskirts of the primary cluster. There was no road connecting it and none of the boats currently bobbing in the water were anywhere near it.

Gundabad, Bilba remembered from her studies. Home of a violent, warrior race known as the Orc. They had long considered themselves the sworn enemies of the Durins, and pretty much everyone else, but Erebor was closest so they started there. They had rejected every overture of peace ever offered and, during the invasion all those years ago, had allied themselves with Smaug. When Erebor had been retaken by the Durins, the Orc had been driven back to their ancestral home where they had, so far, remained quiet. If she recalled correctly, Thrain had tried to make still another overture of peace by extending Arkenstone around Gundabad but they had rejected it, trying to claim Erebor was attempting to somehow cage them rather than protect them. Thrain had moved the buoys in response, locking them out of its security perimeter. Since then, they'd attempted, on occasion, to destroy, steal or sabotage the buoys but couldn't make it past the shields, or the equally shielded chains locking the buoys to the ocean floor and ensuring they stayed in place.

The plane began to bank and a light flashed overhead, telling her to put her seatbelt on. Bilba obeyed, straightening in her seat once more, but kept her eyes locked outside the window.

As they passed low over the city she caught sight of the palace, and gave a quiet gasp of surprise. She'd seen pictures, of course, and even video but could now see none of it did it justice. The palace was built on the top of a tall, solitary hill at the edge of the city, backing onto a part of the coastline. It dwarfed Shire's palace, a thought which brought a burst of amusement at the memory of how proud her grandfather was of the place, covering the entire top the hill in acres and acres of stone, glass and sheer ostentation. The sight of no fewer than six towers brought a jolt of fear and Bilba quickly jerked her eyes away to focus on what seemed like miles of gardens and walking paths. The hill curved at the sides and was sheared flat in the back, forming a cliff down to the water below. As they flew over Bilba caught sight of a very narrow strip of sand, bordered by rock on both sides, and wondered if it was used as a small, private beach for the royal family.

She had no more time to contemplate as it, and the palace, were quickly behind them as the plane made for the airport. Several minutes later, as she felt the slight bump of the wheels on the tarmac, she nearly let out a sound of protest. Her heart was hammering in her chest as they taxied to a stop, her breath freezing in her lungs and she was so tense she worried she might not be able to get up at all.

A large part of her wished very much she could stay on the plane, and perhaps it would behave like an amusement park ride and take her back to where she'd begun. Somewhere behind her came the sound of the door opening and the smell of the ocean hit her, followed closely by a rush of much colder air than she'd been expecting. She'd looked up the temperature in Erebor before she'd left but could see now she'd failed to take into account how the wind passing over the cold waters of the ocean might affect it. The air bit into her bare arms and legs, letting her know just how poor a choice she'd made in wearing a sundress.
She could almost hear the scorn such a poor decision was likely to bring about in the press but was surprised to feel little concern about it. After all the things that had already been said about her, having her fashion choices criticized was rather trivial.

"Your Highness?" the voice sounded annoyed, and was said through gritted teeth as if pulled out by some great effort.

Bilba looked up at the slender woman standing over her, dressed in the same uniform the other crewmembers wore. "Yes?"

The sound of her own voice startled her, and it occurred to her the last time she'd spoken had been in Shire. Once, before she'd met Bofur and Rosie, it had been quite common for her to go days without saying a single word. She'd been used to it then, and now she would get used it to it again.

"If you're ready to disembark?" the woman raised an eyebrow, and her tone was snotty and more than a little sarcastic. Bilba guessed she'd been standing there a few moments without Bilba realizing it.

"All right." Bilba undid her seatbelt and gathered her laptop again, clutching it against her chest like she'd done back in Shire. The woman had already turned her back to walk away, which proved a blessing as it meant Bilba didn't have an audience as she stood, only to have a wave of dizziness wash over her and nearly send her back into the seat again. She braced herself with one hand on the table, grimacing as her legs buckled for an instant before she could lock them into place again.

She could do this. She'd done it before, just recently in fact after her grandfather had locked her in the tower for her little tantrum after the wedding.

She could do this. Even if it was the last sight she'd have of freedom.

Her grandfather would be watching, she told herself firmly, and she had no intention of letting him see her falter.

"Why weren't you in the car?"

The words her grandfather had thrown at her, hinting at something she'd long suspected but been unable to prove. He'd destroyed her parents, in every way imaginable, for no other reason than spite. Because they'd had the audacity to fall in love. Because her mother had the audacity to make her own choices in life.

Anger ignited in her veins, burning away, for the moment at least, the fear and tension. If she were very lucky, perhaps it would see her all the way to the end.

Taking a breath through what felt like a straw, she put steel in her spine, gritted her teeth and lifted her chin. She strode forward, keeping her eyes forward with the intent of looking past the mob of reporters undoubtedly waiting for her at the foot of the stairs. She didn't have Lila or the other territorial Shire reporters here but, hopefully...her mind faltered on what, exactly, about her situation could be considered hopeful. She finally decided to simply ignore it and forced herself out the door of the plane and onto the first step of the waiting stairs.

She expected a mob, screaming voices and the flashes of cameras in her face.

What she got...was nothing.

The bottom of the stairwell was empty, as was the space around it. Overhead she could hear the distant chop of rotor blades and a glance upwards revealed a number of helicopters, all giving the jet
a wide berth and so far up she couldn't make out the writing on them to tell what news agencies they were from.

The tarmac itself was deserted but for a long limousine. A man in a black suit stood on one side of the open back door while a short, elderly man with a thick white beard and hair stood on the other side.

Bilba was so utterly thrown off by it all she simply stood there, mind trying desperately to reorient itself to not having to brace against a crowd of angry reporters dragging bulky equipment with sharp corners. She still had a few bruises from the ones in Shire but most were hidden under her clothes, at chest level where cameramen, holding their cameras at waist level to change location or shot had shoved against her and, on a few occasions, darn near cracked a rib or two.

A breeze wrapped around her, lifting her hair and wrapping her skirt around her legs, and Bilba raised her eyes to see the back gates and fences of the airport. Past it, the ocean spread out in all directions and she sucked in a sharp breath, briefly mesmerized by the sight.

Someone cleared their throat pointedly, and she jerked and saw the elderly man had moved to the bottom of the stairs.

"Your Highness," he said formally, bowing at the waist. "I've been sent to escort you to the palace, if you're ready."

"Of course." Bilba ducked her head, feeling her face heat with embarrassment at having kept the man waiting. If it were her grandfather, he'd have sent someone horrible to collect her, wanting to make sure she understood how truly unwanted she was. She had no idea if the Durins had done the same but wasn't about to take a chance by treating the man in any manner other than absolute formality and as near perfection as she could get. He would report to the Durins on her just as those in the Shire palace, all the way to the cleaning staff, had reported on her to the Thain. She'd never found peace in visiting a palace, and didn't see it starting now.

She moved down the stairs carefully, using one hand on the handrail to keep her balance. Tumbling down the stairs and landing with a splat on the ground would probably cause her to die of embarrassment on the spot.

She highly doubted perfect Kyra would ever have such a thing happen. According to how the papers described her, Bilba imagined the woman probably floated from planes on a beam of pure sunlight, to the sound of a chorus of angels heralding her arrival.

The thought was beneath her, especially considering the woman had to be in tremendous pain over her broken engagement, but Bilba still had too much anger in her to feel shame. She would, she imagined, later, but right then all she could see was the woman being darn near sainted for her suffering by the press and public while they prepared to burn her at the stake.

It was unfair, and she got that. She knew the problem was her grandfather, and her own bumbling inexperience, but it didn't make it any easier to swallow. Right now, she was angry enough, if no longer stupid enough, to go on another destructive tantrum. So, really, if she wanted to engage in a bit of self-pity then she damn well would.

She certainly knew better than to expect pity from anyone else.

The elderly man was speaking, but she hadn't been paying any attention and had no idea what he'd said. He showed her into the back of the limo and climbed in to sit on the bench seat facing her. As he shut the door, Bilba was startled at how completely the sounds of the airport from outside were
shut out. The compartment must be near soundproof. A trill of fear cut through the anger as she
recalled the windows had been tinted as well, making it impossible to be seen from the outside.

Why? The only time her grandfather would resort to an utterly soundproof car with windows this
dark would be if he wished to threaten someone, or have them threatened by someone else. In Shire,
he'd sent her in a limo with enough tinting and soundproofing to make it look to the public like he
cared but, this, this sort of a car would only ever be reserved for one thing and one thing only.

Instilling fear, without worry about being seen by the public or the press.

She'd seen others get into such limos.

Once they'd returned, they had never again spoken a word against her grandfather.

Bilba had been inside one, once and only once. It was just after she'd written an essay on her
grandfather at school, innocently describing how he really was instead of how he liked to portray
himself.

She hadn't known any better.

Her parents had died only two months earlier.

She'd been ten.

When she'd gotten back she'd quietly informed the teacher she'd made it all up, and had silently stood
and listened as her grandfather spoke of her imagination, and acting out due to her grief.

How it was being dealt with and wouldn't happen again.

It hadn't.

The elderly man was talking again but she couldn't hear him over the loud roaring in her ears.
Clutching her laptop so hard the edges dug into her arms, she pressed against the door of the limo as
it pulled away, pressing her forehead against the glass to look outside. Her breathing was shallow,
heart thudding in her ears, and it took everything she had to not show any of it.

Her grandfather did not approve of showing emotion, except fear when in his presence, and that was
like showing weakness to a snake about to strike. Not showing fear was bad too, but at least it earned
her a tiny modicum of respect, of wariness. Showing weakness, however, that was a death sentence.
She would never come back from that.

Just like her grandmother had never come back.

The thought came entirely out of left field, blindsiding her from out of nowhere and her mind
wrenched away from it, so fast it nearly gave her mental whiplash. She bit back a silent curse.

Yavanna, where had that come from, and why now of all times? She gave her head a slight shake, as
if it could somehow physically dislodge the memory from her mind permanently, and focused
outside again.

They were approaching the gates of the airport, and now she saw the reporters, and the crowds past
them. Protesters, hundreds of them, if not thousands, lining both sides of the streets. Many held signs,
most directed at the Thain or Shire in general but some at her. The white-haired man was speaking
again but she didn't hear him, attention focused on the crowds as the car made its way out onto the street. There were barricades lining both sides of the streets, and armed guards standing before them, in full riot gear, facing the crowds head on.

Bilba tensed as they left, expecting the crowds to rush the car, and some tried, only to be shoved back aggressively by the guards.

Her eyes caught on a few of the signs as the car picked up speed, accusing her of all sorts of awful things. Some had a grain of truth to them, as lies often did, such as those accusing her of having been in a real relationship with Bofur, as if that meant anything. They'd both been single and it had ended with her marriage, willing or not.

One sign, in particular, that she spotted just before the car sped up enough to blur all the words accused her of being little more than a harlot, which was simply ridiculous. She'd never been with anyone in that way, Bofur included. They'd kissed of course, but never taken it farther. Both had been focused on their schooling, and Bilba on her ballet and their relationship had just never seemed to lead that way, regardless of how often they'd found themselves alone in one another's company. She and Bofur had been...comfortable, and easygoing, without pressure or expectation and perhaps it had lacked the passion or whatever it was that Rosie insisted relationships should have, and did have according to the movies, but Bilba had been content. She might love romantic movies, but they were just movies. Real life did not always afford passion. Sometimes, it simply provided companionship and there was nothing wrong with that. She'd loved Bofur and been satisfied in how things were between them. After a lifetime of being almost always alone, it had been far more than Bilba had ever expected to have.

The car started to slow and she saw a gate being opened ahead of them. Past it the way was clear of reporters or protestors, the road inclining sharply as it started its way up the hill toward the palace. There were gardens and paths on both sides and Bilba felt a longing to walk them and explore the various plants and flowers. She spotted several hedge mazes, fountains and at least one gazebo she'd love to curl up in with a good book. They also passed a number of statues and large rocks that had been split open to reveal crystal interiors, some already sparking as the sun hit them.

The car slid to a stop in front of the entrance to the palace, featuring two large statues of what she assumed were ancestral kings, and white stone steps leading to a front porch like area that could probably easily fit an entire orchestra if one were so inclined.

The sight of the iron doors, more at home in a dungeon than a palace, brought another sense of disquiet. She was about to find out once and for all what they planned to do with her, and the thought made her want to run in the other direction as fast as possible, all the way to the ocean to swim back home if she had to.

Where her grandfather would promptly lock her up in one of his towers before shipping her right back to Erebor again.

She sighed, wishing, not for the first time, she could have been born as a normal girl in a normal family, and not a pawn on the chessboard of a madman.

A door closed and she jumped and turned to see she was alone in the back seat. The elderly man, she realized, had been speaking most of the way to the palace but she'd been far too nervous, and distracted by what was going on outside, and her own nerves, to pay any attention. It had probably simply been threats of what would happen if she didn't obey, like what her grandfather would have done had positions been reversed and a Princess of Erebor come to Shire. The elderly man hadn't tried to hurt her, however, so she took that as a positive sign. Her grandfather would have slapped her or pinched her or something, just to show he could, but maybe here if she shut up and kept to
herself...

She started to reach for the door handle, only to gasp in surprise as it was pulled open by the limo driver. The elderly man, who she was sure must have introduced himself at some point meaning she couldn't ask his name now without revealing how little she'd heard, waited at the foot of the steps again, this time leading into the palace.

Bilba followed him quietly, through the iron doors and onto the marble floor of the palace itself. From there it was up a grand staircase and then down so many halls and around so many corners she doubted she'd ever find her way back. At first, her stomach was in knots as they went up, but once they reached a certain floor and she saw no signs of further staircases, she started to relax fractionally. If they planned to give her a room of her own it meant she'd have her chance, an opportunity to prove to them she could stay out of their way just as she'd done in Shire with her grandfather. It hadn't done her much good in the end there but that was because she'd been a pawn and he'd called her into play.

Here, she was just Bilba and of no particular use to anyone.

"Ah, here we are," the white-haired man said, leading her through a set of doors and into a room she barely took note of. He stopped in front of another door set in the wall. "I'll leave you to get settled and relax a bit."

Bilba nodded, and then stood awkwardly as the man stared at her, apparently expecting something but she had no idea what. Finally, he gave another bow and excused himself, leaving the room and heading back into the hall.

Bilba grabbed the handle on the door, pushed it open, and promptly felt her jaw drop.

The room beyond was larger than her apartment. In fact, she was certain it was larger than her grandfather's room in the Shire palace. This couldn't be right. They couldn't have meant to put her here. Hoping that being in the wrong room wouldn't be held against her, she stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

Unlike the marble she'd been led across so far, the room was carpeted in a plush beige, up to a pair of marble steps that spanned the back of the room. These led to a marble slab upon which, to her surprise, rested the boxes containing all her belongings. Apparently, this was the room she was meant to be in after all.

Windows lined that wall, giving her a view of the ocean outside while two glass doors in the middle appeared to open onto a balcony. Thick, burgundy curtains framed the doors and windows, and matched the canopy, pillows and blanket on the Queen-sized bed. The furniture was done in a darker wood and an area off to the side featured a burgundy couch facing a large TV and entertainment set. Gold accented the room in various throw pillows and frames around artwork featuring plants, as well as in the vases and other knickknacks about the room. Clearly, someone had been going through a love of burgundy and gold when they had designed this room. It wasn't to her taste, but it was beautiful in its own right.

The attached bathroom looked very much like the one on the plane with the exception that the spa was bigger and set into the floor like a small pool, and she nearly clapped her hands in delight at getting to have a shower like the one from the plane all to herself.

Deciding to examine the room she'd been led through initially, she went back out the door and found herself in a large living area complete with another entertainment center and a full kitchen. She explored it for a few minutes before heading toward a door opposite hers, on the far side of the room.
She pulled it open, and instantly slammed it shut again, heart jolting in her chest.

It had been another bedroom, a man's bedroom from the decor, and one clearly lived in judging from the clothing items and other personal belongings she'd seen strewn about.

Feeling a sudden sense of panic, Bilba turned on one heel and nearly ran back into her room, slamming the door shut behind her and fumbling the lock closed. After, one hand still on the lock and the other on the door, she sagged against it, resting her forehead on the wood and shaking slightly.

Thorin Durin. It had to be Thorin Durin's room. There was no reason to put her in a room adjoining a man's unless that man was the one she'd unwillingly married.

*What* in the world had possessed them to do that? She'd expected a closet at best, and the tower at worst. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought they would put her in the quarters for the wife of the Crown Prince of Erebor.

She barely remembered him from Shire. Everything had been such a blur, all light and sound and chaos. Even during the interviews, when she'd technically spent the day with him in the room, she'd barely looked at or acknowledged him. She had the vague impression of him being tall and she knew from photos he had dark hair and was unfairly attractive but that was about it. Her mind went back to the photo she'd seen online, of him gazing in adoration at Kyra.

Yavanna, but he must *hate* her.

Even more than the people of Erebor did. He had to despise her and now they'd put her in the room he'd expected to one day have Kyra in?

Wait. Almost woodenly, Bilba straightened and walked over to her laptop. Opening the lid, she called up a search engine and typed in a short query.

*What is Kyra Lundair's favorite color?*

The screen blanked for a second, and then happily provided her the answer, courtesy of the woman herself being asked it in an interview.

*Burgundy, followed closely by gold.*

Bilba nearly threw up.

They'd put her in another woman's room. *Kyra's* room, designed and personally decorated by her. Why? To punish her? Make sure she didn't lose sight of how much suffering Shire had caused?

Remind her of her own inadequacy?

The room was beautiful, and every inch what Bilba would have expected the room of a Princess to look. It was nothing like how she'd have done it. She preferred lavender and cream, more rustic looking furniture, and artwork featuring landscapes over portraits of plants and pottery. Her vision would look perfect in a simply country home, but not in a royal palace, in the room of a Princess.

Suddenly unwilling to be in the room for another minute, she pushed up and nearly ran to the balcony doors, shoving them open, and darting outside.

"Oh," she whispered, as her feet hit the marble of the balcony. In front of her stretched a waist high railing comprised of slender balusters and a wide, flat top. Past that lay a stunning view of the ocean.
She caught sight of another balcony on the far side, probably for Thorin Durin's room, but thankfully empty. On the far end of his balcony, and the far side of hers, the rock walls of the cliff rose, craggy and filled here and there with bits of moss and other plant life.

A thought occurred to her and she leaned over the balcony railing, holding on by her hands under the edge and lifting her feet off the ground to get a better view.

Down below was the thin strip of beach she remembered seeing from the plane as they'd soared over. Waves lapped on the shore and she made a mental note to find out the tides and check if they ever came in far enough to cover the sand.

The sand butted up against a rocky slope jutting out from the cliff face and Bilba very nearly shrieked in joy at the sight of stairs leading up from the beach to that slope. She followed them to a flat landing carved out of the rock, where the stairs restarted but branched, one leading up to Thorin's balcony and the other up to hers.

She leaned over farther, spotting where the steps stopped at the base of the corner of her balcony, near the rock of the cliff, and scrambled back to go take a closer look. It only took a few seconds to find the latch in the stone railing that swung out a small section to allow access to the stairs.

There was no railing to them but the slope was gentle enough that she should be able to traverse them without too much difficulty. Kicking her shoes off to provide better purchase, Bilba stepped out and noticed that a number of the steps were cracked or in poor condition. She wondered absently if anyone even remembered they were there. The exile had been long after all and, though she didn't know him, she still somehow couldn't imagine the Prince caring enough about the view of the ocean to come out and look long enough to see the stairs. There were no chairs or tables on his side, suggesting he didn't make much use of it.

The stone was cold under her feet, almost as cold as the air around her, but Bilba barely noticed as she lightly skipped down the steps, arms out slightly from her sides to keep her balance. She reached the landing, and noticed the rest of the stairs down to the beach were in even worse condition than those above. Still, she should be able to make it if she were careful and at least she didn't have to worry about cameras if she were to take a tumble here.

She picked her way carefully until she stood on the beach itself, toes digging into the sand. The area was shaded, the cliff walls blocking out the sun except for, she imagined, a thin slice of the day when it was overhead, but she could see its light on the waves just past where the walls jutted into the ocean.

It was a perfect, isolated little cove. She looked over her shoulder and noted the landing would be hidden from overhead, even from the rooms above hers, unless someone were to lean over and look directly down, and why would anyone bother to do that? She could just picture herself curled up in a chair on that landing with a good book and a pitcher of lemonade, feeling the sea breeze on her skin and listening to the crash of waves on the shore.

Oh, but she could be happy. If they left her alone, if she could prove to them she wouldn't be any trouble.

She could be happy here, if they just let her.

She picked her way back up to that landing and settled on it, feet on the first step beneath, and stared out to sea, sighing as the first sense of peace she'd had in a while settled over her.

It was decided, she thought. She would do her very best to be invisible, as much as she'd ever been
in Shire and maybe, just maybe, the Durins would let her be. They hadn't put her in a tower, which was a blessing she'd never expected and one she knew could be rescinded if she stepped out of line.

She didn't plan to screw up. She would be the quietest, most unnoticed, royal anyone had ever seen. Maybe, if she were good enough, the Durins, and even the public and press, would do the one thing she'd always wished her grandfather would do, forget she'd ever existed.

Maybe then she could make her own choices, start her path over again, find her way in a new place without the constant threat of her grandfather hanging over her head.

Maybe.

Just...maybe.

***

"You're sure?"

Balin nodded, bowing his head respectfully as Thrain spoke. "Yes, your Majesty. I was very clear about the time."

Thrain frowned, settling back in his seat until the wood creaked. Around him, the rest of the royal family sat in silence, empty plates before them and covered dishes waiting to be served lining the center of the long table. "And you waited how long?"

"Several minutes," Balin replied. "And I knocked quite loudly. There was no response."

"It's possible she just fell asleep," Kyra said quietly from where she was sitting on Thorin's left. Directly across from him was the seat she'd used to occupy, now empty with still another place setting. Thorin had not been looking forward to it being occupied. "It was a long flight, and it's a significant time change between Shire and Erebor."

"She slept on the plane," Thorin almost growled. He'd already been given the report by the head stewardess and pilot. The pilot had little to say as he'd been in the cockpit most of the time but the stewardess had reported the Shire Princess had been standoffish and borderline rude, locking herself in the living quarters and not coming out until the plane descended. They had checked on her at one point to find her sound asleep in one of the bedrooms.

"Still," Kyra insisted, "it's a big change."

"I did knock quite loudly," Balin said, the slightest hint of defensiveness in his voice. "And it wasn't so very long after showing her in. I informed her half an hour, if she fell into that deep a sleep in that amount of time--"

"The fact she fell asleep at all suggests she had no intention of coming down," Thorin cut in.

"That isn't fair," Kyra murmured beside him, but Thorin simply shrugged. He wasn't in the mood to be fair. Life certainly hadn't bothered being fair to him, or Kyra, of late.

"She probably expects a personal invitation," Frerin suddenly chimed in. "I was watching the news. One of the crew said they had to personally ask her to get off after the plane landed and then she made Balin go up to the stairs at the door. I was looking outside when they got here, too, and she made--"

"Someone open the door to the car for her?" Kyra asked. "That's called expectation of basic
manners, your Highness." There was the slightest hint of censure in her voice and Frerin's mouth snapped shut, cheeks reddening in embarrassment at the rebuke.

"Still," Dis broke in, gesturing for one of the servants lining the wall to come forward and begin serving. "We can't wait forever." Her eyes flickered to Fili and Kili, sitting one either side of her and nearly salivating as they stared at the covered dishes.

"Fair enough." Thrain waved a hand at Balin to dismiss him. Generally, he and his brother, Dwalin were invited to later meals as they were related to the royal family, but breakfast was always reserved for the immediate family. "If she fell asleep then she can join us for the next meal. If not--"

"Then I have no intention of issuing her any personal invitations," Thorin said shortly, reaching for his napkin and pulling the heavy cloth through the ceramic ring around its middle. "She's an adult. She can figure things out for herself."

Balin gave a short nod and left while the rest of them dug into the food. As they did, Thorin frowned at Kyra. "I still don't understand why you insist on defending her," he said quietly, keeping his voice low enough that only she could hear him.

She shrugged, eyes on her plate. "It's not me being as altruistic as you might think." He saw her frown, and a flash of what looked like mild guilt flashed in her eyes. "I figured if I befriended her she wouldn't mind so much if I wanted to stay around you all." She nodded toward the table at large. "I'm not family, after all. I shouldn't even be here, especially not--"

Thorin reached over to grip her leg for a moment in reassurance. "You've always been family, and you always will be. You have every right to be here."

She gave him a weak smile, a sheen of moisture in her eyes, before she got control of herself and focused on her food again.

Thorin turned to his own plate and tried very hard not to think about the unwanted guest currently staying in rooms that should have been, and were as far as he was concerned, Kyra's.

"Did you happen to catch the name of the crewmember on that interview?" he asked Frerin, hoping to change the subject and get his mind onto other topics.

"No," Frerin said, eyebrows drawn together as he tried to remember, "but I'm sure it'd be easy enough to find out. Why?"

"Because he's going to fire him," Dis said shortly, handing a full plate to Kili and grabbing another to put together for Fili.

Thorin gave a short nod. He didn't care who the royal had been on the plane, or what had been said in the interview.

Erebor did not employ people who prattled about the private lives of the royal family to the press. Period.
"I think we'll have to pause there," Rosie's voice, slightly tinny and very exhausted, came through
the speakers of the laptop.

Bilba covered a flinch of guilt as she reached to hit pause on the movie and then stopped her screen
from sharing to Rosie's computer. The small box that held her friend's image maximized to fill the
screen and Bilba felt a second spike of guilt at how tired the other girl looked. It was almost noon for
Bilba, which meant it was around midnight for Rosie, on a night when she had an early class the
next morning.

Bilba pushed up from where she'd been leaning against the headboard of her bed and leaned a little
closer to the screen. "Sorry, I should have stopped it earlier."

Rosie shrugged. "It's fine. I could have always said something." She scowled. "At this rate, it's going
to take us forever to get through one movie."

"At least we know we'll have something to do," Bilba said with a forced laugh.

Rosie frowned in suspicion. "Speaking of something to do, how goes your brilliant plan?"

Bilba's smile faded. Her eyes drifted over her room, several times the size of the near closet she'd
been forced to stay in while visiting the palace in Shire, or the tower she'd been forced into on
occasion. She'd never had so much space and, given her experience with staring into nothing for
hours at a time without going insane, had been perfectly convinced she'd never run out of ways to
pass the time.

How very wrong she'd been.

Her eyes tracked across the rumpled bedding, extra pillows thrown on the floor with piles of clothes
tossed haphazardly about. A pile of cardboard boxes was stacked precariously in a corner, leftover
from unpacking. A gauzy white curtain lay on top, a victim of her attempting, and failing, to practice
her dancing on the raised platform that led to her balcony doors.

Through the open door into her prized bathroom she could see towels laid out to dry alongside the
clothing she'd washed in the sink, after sneaking out after dark to pilfer soap and toiletries from other
rooms in the palace. Luckily, for her, Erebor kept even its empty rooms fully stocked which made
finding what she needed simpler. It was about the only thing in her life that was simple at the
moment.

She'd never dreamed it would be this way. She'd thought of the worst-case scenario, and thought
she'd ended up in the best case scenario.

Instead, she'd ended up in purgatory.

She'd spent the first few days after her arrival almost exclusively on her little beach, brainstorming
her plans and running them by Rosie. It wasn't easy. Rosie had a full schedule with work and school
and avoiding the media, and then there was the whole-time zone difference, but they made it work as
best they could.

Rosie had not been in favor of her plan, but had begrudgingly helped her work out the finer points
when she'd realized how committed Bilba was. It had been a week by then, and Bilba had been
convinced she'd never been so bored, even in Shire.
How naive she'd been.

Her plan would have worked gloriously in Shire, had worked in the past. She was a master of sneaking out of her room there, moving about the palace unseen and returning with others none the wiser. After her forced wedding, she'd made it to all of her aunts' rooms and Beatrice's rooms without being caught and had then gotten out of the palace itself and all the way to the airport. She'd have escaped entirely if it hadn't been for her grandfather effectively kidnapping Bofur.

She didn't have that concern here. She also didn't plan anything so dramatic as fleeing the country. Bofur and Rosie weren't here but they were still under her grandfather's control, and the alliance was still important.

So she'd be staying here, but it was all right because she had a plan.

Her first step had been to convince the Ereborean royals to leave her alone. That was easy enough as they didn't appear to want anything to do with her. Granted, she'd spent most of her time on her beach and, therefore, could have missed any number of knocks at her door but given the fact that the staff hadn't even bothered to come in, she highly doubted there had been any.

It worked out even better than in Shire where her family would often seek her out for no other reason than to torment her. Here, she didn't have to worry about any sort of connection that might cause them to look for her, for good or ill. She was a stranger, another random person living in the palace. The royal family had full schedules and did not have the time or inclination to personally look in on every person currently staying in the palace.

A plus for her, and one so easily achieved it had given her what turned out to be overly high expectations of the future success of the other phases of her plan.

She'd soon discovered just how very wrong she'd been.

The second part of her plan had involved getting to and from the kitchens without being noticed, and retrieving enough food to stockpile in her room so she didn't have to go every day but not so much as to be missed. This part had been a little harder and, really, that should have been a tipoff but she'd still been riding high on not being in Shire and having phase one go well. She'd noticed it was harder, but hadn't paid it much mind outside the initial thought that whoever ran Erebor's security was a paranoid bastard.

As good as they were, however, it didn't mean they were perfect and, of course, there was no planning against a Princess who'd spent her life learning how to avoid security. Evading guards, and poorly placed cameras, was second nature to her. Of course, the cameras in Erebor's palace were far from poorly placed but whoever had set them had made two critical errors, fixed motion sensors and dimming the lights in the corridors once the castle bedded down. Once she learned the boundaries of the motion sensors and where the darkest shadows lay, it was child's play to avoid them.

The guards had taken longer, so long in fact she'd almost, almost broken down and simply asked for someone to bring her food. She'd stuck it out, however, unwilling to risk the chance that reminding people of her existence would ultimately hurt more than help. She'd also firmly believed that no matter how good the rotations were, and they were scary good, human nature was human nature and that nature trended toward the familiar, toward patterns. Once she'd finally found them in the guard rotations it was relatively easy to find her way to the kitchens and back, and it had only gotten easier as time had passed.

So, so much time.
Her stomach sank and Bilba looked away sharply as tears stung the corner of her eyes.

"Bilba?" Rosie asked gently from the computer. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Bilba's voice wavered as she spoke, giving her away, and she gritted her teeth in annoyance.

Rosie sighed. "You don't have to keep doing this. Just take a chance and go talk to someone. Maybe your husband for instance." The last part she said low and mumbled but Bilba caught it and resisted rolling her eyes.

Rosie had been pushing for her to give the Durins a chance from the start. Bilba knew her friend just wanted her to be happy and not languishing in self-imposed exile, but she couldn't stop the resentment and often outright irritation whenever the other girl brought it up.

For one thing, Rosie had nothing to lose by it. Bilba could end up being all right, or she could end up being thrown in a tower for not keeping herself out of sight and out of mind. It was a fifty/fifty chance and not one she was willing to risk.

At least not anymore. On that first day, after she'd outlined her plan to Rosie, the other girl had made quite the convincing argument for Bilba at least greeting Thorin when she heard him enter the common part of their suite. They were bound to run into one another, living so close and sharing most of the apartment as they did, and Rosie had hoped the two of them might at least be friends.

Bilba had let the other girl talk her into it and had made sure, when evening arrived, she was dressed to impress. Too nervous to go and knock on his bedroom door, she'd sat quietly on her bed with her door closed and waited to hear someone in the common area.

She'd finally heard a door and, taking a deep breath, had gotten to her feet and forced herself to her bedroom door. She'd grasped the doorknob, taken a second to take another deep breath and smooth down her dress against the butterflies racing in her stomach, and had started to turn the knob.

Only to immediately freeze at the sound of voices from the other side.

One male.

And one female.

She could only assume it was Kyra, particularly when she heard the same woman's voice twice more that same week, and the following week and the one after. From what she could tell, the woman wasn't staying the night, in spite of having to enter and leave through Thorin's private chambers, but the fact she was there at all was insulting, and wildly unfair. Bilba had broken things off with Bofur and the two of them had gone a step further by coming to the mutual decision to only communicate via email. It added another layer to the distance between them, in addition to the physical distance. Chatting by video, or even instant message, creating a risk of them discussing things better left unsaid, and forming an emotional bond that wouldn't do either of them any good. Bilba didn't like the thought of Bofur eventually moving on and meeting someone else, but she liked the idea of him wasting his life pining after her even less.

She hadn't told Rosie about what happened, and let the other girl think she was unwilling to try. Telling Rosie would serve no purpose aside from making her angry. Instead, when it became clear that Thorin and Kyra would be hanging out in the common room several times a week, Bilba had dedicated those evenings to trying to work out the last, and most important, part of her plan.

Sneaking out of the palace.
She'd done searches online and found that Erebor's capital city did indeed have a very good university. It ran on a cycle similar to Shire's, meaning it was too late to enroll for the current term, but she'd been confident she could get all her paperwork filed and everything ironed out in time to start the new term in the fall.

To her even greater joy, however, her searches had revealed Erebor's capital was also in possession of a dance studio. It was several times larger than the tiny one she'd belonged too in Hobbiton but there had been a page talking about auditions and she was hopeful they might at least give her a chance. She didn't expect to join and instantly be a star, or even be in a show. She simply loved dancing and would be happy with anything they let her do.

She had no idea how she would be received, given the public's current extreme dislike of her, and had considered trying to hide her identity but none of it would matter at all unless she could find a way to sneak out of the palace and go visit.

She'd assumed she could do it. She'd done it in Shire and she'd found her way around the security inside the Erebor palace so how much harder could it be outside?

Hard, as it turned out.

She'd been trying for a month.

A full month, and she was no closer to finding a way out than she'd been when she started. The security outside the walls of the palace was insane. Guards everywhere she looked, cameras, motion detectors and a wall without a single nearby shrub or tree for cover and not so much as a chip in the brick to provide a hand or foothold.

There was no way to get out without finding a ladder, dragging it through the front window she usually clambered out of, hauling it across the lawn and down to the wall and even then she doubted she'd be able to reach the top to get over, much less get down safely on the other side.

"I'll figure out something," she said noncommittedly to Rosie, who frowned.

"Bilba--"

"It's fine," Bilba said, cutting her off. She managed a more genuine smile this time. "It really is, Rosie. I haven't given up yet. I'm going to figure it out."

Rosie didn't look convinced but she didn't argue when Bilba bid her farewell and signed off. Once the screen was dark, Bilba let the smile fall off her face. Her shoulders slumped and she looked around her room in resignation.

In a way, she'd ended up in a tower after all.

One of her own making.

She got listlessly to her feet and headed out to her balcony. The day was overcast and a brisk wind blew loose hair off her shoulders. She'd dressed warmly this time, jeans and a chunky sweater and sturdy boots so it didn't cut near as much as the first time she'd stepped out. She'd thought, at one
point, she could never get tired of this view or being out here.

Turned out any view could get old if it was the only thing you ever saw, and feared it would be the only thing you ever would see.

She pushed open the little gate at the edge of her balcony and headed down the stairs, bypassing the ledge she usually sat on and continuing down to the beach itself. The stairs ended just a foot or two above the sand and she paused to remove her shoes and socks before jumping down to sink her feet in the fine grains.

The rush of the water racing on shore was loud, broken only by the cries of unseen gulls. Slowly, Bilba felt the tension start to drain from her shoulders as she watched the water bubble in and then slowly drain back out again. She’d spent quite a few days searching for shells and splashing in the water and walked forward again now, until the water rushed over her feet. The cold had her gasping and her toes curling into the wet sand.

When the tide was in it covered the tiny beach all the way to the base of the stairs but only to about calf deep and she’d sat several times on that last step and splashed her legs in the water while she read a book. When the tide was out, as it was now, it almost doubled the size of the beach, uncovering sand all the way to the tip of the rock wall, though the waves crashing into it dissuaded her from trying to find out way around it.

She wandered out slowly, until her feet sank in the wet sand and water pooled around her ankles. Far out to sea, she could see the distant outline of a ship sailing merrily along and felt a stab of jealousy at its ability to go where it wanted, when it wanted.

She sighed and shut her eyes, listening to the sound of the waves and tried to imagine she was a mermaid who could simply dive into the water and go wherever she wanted without concern to alliances or idiot princes or any other worries.

Something rubbed against her ankles and she jumped, biting back a shriek as her eyes flew open. A meow, that almost sound apologetic, sounded from her ankles and she looked down to see a small, tortoiseshell cat standing at her feet, tail in the air and head lifted to look up at her.

"Oh, hey, you," Bilba knelt and rubbed the small cat on the head. The small animal purred and then happily allowed Bilba to pick her up where she curled in her arms, tiny motor rumbling. "I was wondering where you were."

The cat had shown up toward the end of her first week there, curled up in a ball on the ledge where the stairs converged. She was clearly well taken care of, and very friendly, and Bilba had utterly no idea where she came from, where she went, or how she got there in the first place. She couldn't be scaling the rock walls, and there was no way down except from Bilba's room, or Thorin's but she wasn't coming from there. Her paws and belly were sometimes damp when Bilba saw her but not to the point where she thought the cat was swimming in. Bilba had tried watching her but she'd made the mistake of petting and feeding the small cat, which meant she had no desire to leave when Bilba was present and, no matter how much she tried to pay attention, Bilba never seemed to see her arrive. She'd stopped trying after a while, simply happy to have a little companion to spend time with.

Turning around, she started to head back toward the dryer part of the beach, only to stop as the cat's ears perked and her head came up.

"What is it?" Bilba asked. She knew cats had crazy good hearing, but couldn't guess what the small animal might be listening too.
Without warning, the cat suddenly shifted and began wiggling to be put down. Bilba obeyed and watched in surprise as the cat bounded back into the wet sand.

She approached the wall...and suddenly wasn't there anymore.

Bilba blinked, and then blinked again thinking perhaps her eyes were deceiving her. The scene stayed the same, however, stone wall and no cat.

Hesitantly, Bilba followed the small pawprints in the wet sand, out to where the rock bulged in one spot before tapering off toward where the stone ended. Water squeezed out from under her toes as she walked and filled the small prints, partially erasing them.

So focused was she on the prints that she very nearly ran into the wall, only pulling up with a gasp at the last second, head jerking up to find stone inches from her face.

Except...there wasn't stone.

It was shadowed, and the rock folded in a strange way, creating an almost optical illusion that, from a distance, she knew looked like solid rock. It was only now as she stood within inches, and felt a cool breeze coming from it, that she realized it wasn't.

A cool breeze...which meant it had to be coming from somewhere.

Along with her little cat friend.

A surge of energy ran through her and her heart was suddenly racing in her chest. Hesitantly, she reached a trembling hand up toward the slit in the rock. As she did she tried to temper her emotions, telling herself firmly that just because a breeze and a cat fit through didn't mean she could.

Her hand vanished into the darkness and she carefully slid a foot forward, then the other and then repeated the process. A moment later she was standing fully inside the space, edges of the rock rising on both sides of her and over her head. She let out a slow breath, trying to calm the way her stomach was twisting inside her, but it didn't help. She strained, attempting to see in the dark but either the tunnel was very long, or it twisted and turned, preventing her from seeing the other side.

She started to take another step, only to freeze as her subconscious demanded her attention by presenting her with very clear images of all sorts of awful, creepy crawly things that might be currently living just inside the darkness.

Chewing on her lower lip, Bilba spun around and practically ran back to her room. Her stomach grumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten lunch yet, but she ignored it as she searched frantically for her phone. She had no service in Erebor so hadn't bothered much with it, but she now desperately wanted the flashlight app the phone came with.

She dropped to her knees in front of her desk, dragged one of the bottom drawers open, and gave a short shriek of happiness at the sight of the phone tossed in a corner. She turned it on, and let out a sigh of relief to see it was still almost fully charged. Jumping up, she flew back to the cleft in the rock, barely pausing long enough to find a loose rock on the way down.

Creepy crawlies beware.

Once back she turned on the flashlight app and shined it into the darkness, revealing a narrow passage with a thin layer of water on the bottom. She had a vague knowledge of when the tides came in and out but made a mental note to check for sure as she had a feeling she didn't want to be caught inside when a tide was coming in, or trapped on the wrong side waiting for the water to go back
Clenching her hand at her side and straightening her back, she strode forward into the passage. The going was very narrow and there were a few areas where she had to turn sideways and suck in her gut, squeezing her way carefully past the rocks. At one point, she experienced a burst of panic at the thought she was going to get stuck and die in that place, only to gasp in relief as she gave a final jerk and slid free. It was possibly the only time in her life she was happy to be so small, as only someone her size, or perhaps a child, would be able to fit.

Finally, she rounded a corner, and almost burst into tears at the sight of fractured bits of sunlight shining through what turned out to be thick ivy covering the far end of the passage. Turning the flashlight off, she carefully knelt, grimacing as water seeped into her jeans. Shoving the phone into her pocket, she leaned forward on her hands and peered through the breaks in the ivy.

She found herself looking at a beach, but not the one she'd seen every day for the past month. The rush of the ocean was every bit as loud but, over it, she heard the faint sound of people laughing and talking. A flash of color drew her attention and she caught sight of several people in brightly colored swimsuits running into the surf laughing and shouting.

Bilba pushed up and sagged on her heels, drinking it in like a person dying of thirst might stare at an oasis filled with water.

She couldn't go out right then. She knew that. She had deliberately avoided the news but knew she'd been plastered on it so much that there was little chance she wouldn't be recognized. The memory of the protestors lining the road as she'd been driven to the palace surfaced and she shuddered at the thought of being among them without the benefit of a car, and guards lining the way to keep them back.

An idea began to percolate in her mind and a slow smile began to cross her face. Then she was scrambling up and making her way back toward her tiny beach and her room.

She couldn't go out yet, but she was certainly going out.

Her brilliant plan was back in action.

***

The rest of the day went agonizingly slow, and she finally ended up sneaking into the common room to snatch a video game to play. She'd broken down and searched the large space during the first two weeks of her stay, after noticing Thorin was rarely ever there during daylight hours. She'd found a massive library of movies and games that, as far as she could tell, Thorin never touched. She doubted he'd miss one.

Time passed much quicker after she immersed herself in the game and, before she knew it, evening was falling. By that time, she'd braided her hair and pinned it up under a straw hat and added massive glasses Rosie had bought her once as a joke. They had no lenses but Bilba doubted anyone would look close enough to notice. To this she added her oldest set of jeans, shoes and an oversized shirt she may or may not have stolen from Bofur. The size hid her frame, while the age and overall sloppiness of the outfit would never call to mind the refined Princess of Shire image she'd tried to put out before arriving.

People saw what they wanted. She'd almost failed to recognize Rosie once when the other girl had spontaneously decided to cut and dye her hair, and a new pair of glasses on an acquaintance in a class had utterly changed how she looked. In Shire, Bilba had always made sure to wear her hair down.
down, dressed at least nicely if not fancy and carried herself with all the refinement and polish of a Princess. There was none of that in her clothing or attitude now and she was confident no one would ever look at her and think she was the princess, especially after a month of not having seen her.

She heard Thorin and his overly giggly oh-so-perfect girlfriend in the other room and rolled her eyes with a grimace. She gathered her phone, some money Rosie and Bofur had foisted on her before she'd left, and her trusty rock, and headed toward the balcony.

Thorin and Kyra were welcome to each other.

She was going exploring.

***

And here he'd thought his night would be boring.

Gareth casually closed the lid of his laptop and stood from the wildly uncomfortable chair, stretching his arms over his head and listening to the sound of his back politely popping his vertebrae into place.

"Change your mind?" The dark-haired woman at the next table, who'd developed a poorly concealed crush and now showed up every evening when he did, gave him a nervous smile.

"Writer's block," Gareth replied smoothly. He slid his laptop in his bag and pulled the strap over a shoulder, other hand reaching for his coffee. "Figured perhaps a change of scenery might spark something."

"Want any company?" she asked with a slightly awkward laugh.

"Afraid it wouldn't be much fun. I'm going to be staring at a computer screen the whole time," Gareth replied easily. "Sorry."

He tipped an imaginary hat toward her and then wound his way through the tables filled with guests just starting their evenings. Outside, the streets held a good number of people, a mix of those who wanted a brief break before returning to work the next day, and those who held no job at all and didn't care about how late they were out.

The figure that had drawn his attention as she'd passed outside the window of the coffee shop was about a half block ahead of him, walking slowly and stopping to look in almost every store window.

Fishing a phone out of his pocket, Gareth dialed and held the device to one ear.

"Priority?" a no-nonsense voice asked.

"One."

"Transferring." She didn't ask for any further information. It was expected that if you called in with a priority one then you damn well better have a priority one.

"What?"

Gareth never understood how his boss, given how busy he knew the man was, always had the ability to instantly answer his phone no matter the time of day or night, but he'd long since stopped questioning it. "Someone owes you a paycheck."

A low chuckle came through the phone. "He's never going to live this down."
Gareth snorted. The captain was already eating proverbial crow over the motion sensors debacle. The debate between him and the Spymaster over whether roving motion detectors were necessary inside the palace had been legendary, with the captain finally winning out in favor of stationary ones. He'd insisted that, combined with his guards and the cameras, there was no way to beat his system.

The spymaster had taken great joy in showing him proof of how soundly a simple young woman, who supposedly had no training in evasion, had moved without anyone being the wiser.

Well, almost anyone.

Six guards had lost their jobs over that, and the motion sensors had been quietly replaced, not that anyone would know from looking.

Not that it mattered if "anyone" knew or not.

It only mattered that she not know.

After all, she wasn't supposed to have any training.

On the opposite side of the street he noticed two men, lounging against the wall of a nightclub, suddenly straighten and begin slowly moving along the sidewalks. The way they kept shooting looks at the woman showed an unusual level of interest, but he couldn't tell if there was any connection between them or if the two were simply a pair of thugs.

"Any idea where she's going?" came the voice over the phone, pulling his attention back.

"None." The girl was an enigma. On the one hand, she'd evaded the captain's security, and was clearly well trained in evasion. On the other hand, her disguise was basic and could only hope to fool an untrained eye, and she didn't appear to be watching her surroundings. She'd stopped several times to look in a shop window but he saw no sign that she was using the glass to survey the area. She'd also shown no hint of being aware of his presence or that of the two across the street.

Which meant she was either very good, or very innocent. Shire was considered rural by just about every other kingdom, and he knew she'd come from the most rural part of that kingdom. It stood to reason she might not understand how a city like Erebor's capital worked, or what dangers it posed. Or, it could be she was so well trained she simply didn't fear those dangers. It was impossible to tell from looking at her, or from what little evidence she'd given them to work with so far. The file on her suggested no training in her background, but her mere presence on the street in front of him showed that wasn't true, and that raised the question of what else the file left out?

She turned a corner and he noted she was heading slowly out of the center of town and toward areas where a young woman did not want to travel alone, and certainly not at night. He'd been wandering slowly behind her, pretending to be engrossed in his phone call but if they left the populated areas he'd have to fall back on a far more fun way to keep her in sight without giving himself away.

"You need backup?"

"Yeah." His eyes went back toward the two on the other side of the street. She still showed no signs of seeing them which meant she was either the greatest actress in the world or she wasn't associated with them. "May have to take care of a few things."

"Try to stay out of sight if possible. She gets spooked and we won't find out where she's going."

"Understood." Spotting a couple of familiar faces in the crowd, he hung up and crossed the street, absently throwing his coffee in the trash as he did. Behind him, his colleagues took up his prior
position of tailing the princess, giving all the appearance of a giggling young couple totally engrossed in one another.

Gareth headed down a side alley, handing off his satchel to another man already waiting for him. There were agents placed all over the city and when one called for backup it rarely took more than a minute or two to arrive. Some might call it excessive but, then, he doubted those people had ever watched their kingdom fall into the hands of a psychotic bastard.

"You want me to handle it?" the man asked. He nodded at the dress shirt and slacks Gareth usually wore when playing his struggling writer guise. "You aren't dressed for it."

Gareth shrugged, heading toward the wall and jumping easily to grab the lowest rung of the fire escape. "I've got a little sister."

He pulled himself up by his arms until he could set his feet and made it to the rooftop in record time. From there it was a simple matter of pulling ahead of the two men and dropping into an alleyway they would soon be passing by.

As he crossed the rooftops, making sure to stay low and out of sight, he saw the young princess stop on the other side of the street, attention caught by something in the window. Crouching down, Gareth pulled a small set of binoculars from a pocket and held them to his eyes, zooming in on the window.

It was a television set airing the news. There was a shot of the princess on the screen with a headline that was...less than flattering. After staring at it for a few seconds the young woman resumed her trek, her head down now and her arms wrapped around herself.

Gareth's jaw tightened and he felt a surge of sympathy for the young woman. He wasn't the only one who felt the media was going overboard in their vitriol toward the princess and fanning the anger the public felt toward injustice dealt to the prince. There was very little the royal family could do without being accused of censorship so they'd simply refused to comment, and also began shunning interview requests from the more overzealous stations.

Gareth wasn't paid to have an opinion and, to be perfectly honest, truly didn't. He didn't personally know the royal family or this girl but had no doubt a lot of what he heard was heavily slanted one way or another. He did know four of his colleagues had been fired for making disparaging comments about the girl, one of whom he'd reported himself. The captain and the spymaster valued integrity in their people, even over skill. Gareth could still remember the start of his training, as both men had stood at the front of the room.

"Your skills with weapons or hand to hand combat don't impress me," the captain had stated bluntly. "I can teach you how to kill. I can't teach you character, loyalty, or basic decency. I expect all those qualities, and more, in every man and woman in this room. You can't produce, get out now."

Gareth had passed every test they'd thrown at him, and had been proud to accept the transfer to espionage when the captain had informed him that's where he'd be put to best use. He'd joined to serve his king, and so he would, and that included every member of the king’s family without judgment.

He started moving again, and soon reached the edge of the building overlooking a narrow alley. He was ahead of the two following the princess now and he quickly leapt over the side and headed down the fire escape. As his feet hit the concrete he wasn't at all surprised to find the spymaster leaning against the wall on the other side of the alley. Somewhere, there was a breach and if that didn't warrant the man's personal attention Gareth didn't know what did.
"All right." His boss straightened and turned toward the opening. "Try to make it silent and quick, and keep them alive if possible. We have no idea what they may be responsible for." He gave a hard grin. "If they resist, however...."

Gareth smiled back and fell in behind his boss and mentor as they waited for the two men to pass the entrance of the alley. Gareth curled his fingers toward his wrist to tug on a slender strip tied there, little more than a bracelet to anyone who noticed, and a dagger dropped from his shirt sleeve. He closed his hand around the hilt as it fell past, and pressed against the wall on one side of the alley while the spymaster took up position across from him.

The princess walked past on the far side of the street, so small a stiff wind could probably knock her over, and Gareth felt a burst of anger at the two bastards who looked at her and only saw a target.

He really hoped they resisted.
Bilba was beginning to wish she'd put a little more thought into her decision to sneak out. Rosie was always complaining about Bilba somehow managing to be naive and impulsive all at once. Bilba had always denied it, but was starting to privately concede the other girl might have a teeny weeny, slight point.

For one thing, her decision to go out at night, by herself probably hadn't been the best choice ever. This late, it was mostly the nightclub or bar scene and while most people who were out were simply happy and enjoying themselves, there were also those who had clearly been having too much of a good time. A handful of bars had people loitering around the doorways, a few of whom tried to entice her to go inside.

Bilba had no intention of doing any such thing. She rarely drank as it was, and she certainly wasn't going to do it alone in a bar. At home, she'd gone to a club a few times but only with Bofur and Rosie in tow. Nothing had ever happened, but that didn't mean nothing ever would and she'd rather be safe than sorry.

So, that meant no bars or nightclubs. She thought about going to see where the university or dance studio was, or even the bakery Bofur's brother owned, but there wouldn't be much point with them all closed. Also, when she'd asked someone for directions they'd pointed down a darkened, isolated street leading out from the city center and, yeah, she might be naive but she wasn't stupid. Usually.

This left her with few options, especially with the small amount of money she'd brought. She could go into a grocery store, boring, or sit in a coffee shop and watch the world pass by, unappealing given how long she'd done just that in her room in the palace, or she could find her way back to said room and...do some more sitting, she guessed.

At least if she went that route she'd have no trouble finding it. The palace, and the cliff upon which it sat, was visible no matter where she was. Hooray for small victories and all that.

She was just deciding to turn around and head back, only a little disheartened that her outing hadn't been as grand as she'd hoped, when she rounded a corner and stopped short at the sight of a large complex with an equally big parking lot about half filled with cars. The front of the building had a large marquee framed in bright, flashing lights, and titles while, below, a short line of people snaked out from a window where a young woman in a blue uniform sat next to a cash register.

A movie theater, and one that was clearly still open and didn't appear to be preparing to close in the next five minutes.

Bilba clasped her hands together and resisted the urge to jump up and down with glee. She loved movies. Loved, loved, loved them. And, not only that, but there had been a new disaster movie coming out that she'd been planning for months to see with Rosie but hadn't been able to because her grandfather was an asshole and forced her to marry a stranger and then proceeded to ship her off to Erebor where, on a sidenote, it was freaking freezing.

Seriously, in Shire the weather was temperate with it dropping off a little in the evenings and staying fairly consistent throughout the night.

Erebor, she was quickly finding, was nothing like Shire. It was already cool thanks to the nearness of the ocean but she'd dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and jeans and, after stepping out and finding it chilly but not cold, had assumed she was okay.
Wrong.

It just kept getting colder. She'd left her coat back in her room, worrying it'd jog someone's memory as she'd worn it several times when appearing on the news, but now regretted not risking it. She wasn't going to freeze to death or anything, but it was certainly uncomfortable and if she was going to suffer for having snuck out then she darn well should have something to show for it.

Like getting to see a movie she'd really, really, really been looking forward to seeing.

She checked the street and then crossed quickly, hopping up lightly onto the sidewalk and cutting through the parking lot. Once she made it to the line she studied the marquee and was excited to see the movie she wanted had a showing starting in fifteen minutes. It was a small thing overall but, finally, something was going her way.

She got her ticket, grateful Bofur and Rosie had been thoughtful enough to give her Erebor money and not Shire coin, and was startled when the cashier asked her what seat she wanted.

"It's playing in our newest theater," the woman explained. "The screen is huge and it's in really high definition. You get to pick a specific seat instead of just finding one after you go in."

"Oh," Bilba considered with a frown. "I've never been in one like that. What would you recommend?"

The woman indicated a seat in the center of the theater, and Bilba purchased a ticket, only flinching a little at the price. The woman assured her it'd be worth it and Bilba nodded. She really wanted to see the movie and it wasn't like she was going to be coming every single day or anything.

She headed in, almost groaning in relief at the rush of warm air that wrapped around her as she passed through the double glass doors. It was beautiful inside, the room laid out like what she'd expect from a high-end theater that did plays or operas or something. The lobby was cavernous and carpeted in a plush burgundy carpet. The walls were split into sections by large, decorative pillars with each section painted to showcase an iconic movie, actor or actress. On her left was a tiled area with tables where someone could wait for friends or for a later movie showing while, on her right, were the bathrooms.

Directly in front of her were the classic long, glass cases filled with all manner of candy and other snack options. A bright board overhead had a changing, digital display of various combos one could get and Bilba felt herself drawn forward at the sight of a hotdog and nacho combination.

Movies were simply not the same without nachos and hotdogs.

She got in the nearest line and bounced up and down lightly on her heels as she waited for it to move.

"Excited, are you?" a voice asked next to her.

Bilba turned her head and saw a spindly man in the line next to hers. He was short, though still taller than her, with thinning hair and a strange elongated face with almost unnaturally huge eyes.

Something about him, perhaps the way he was staring at her or the bulky trench coat he was wearing, creeped her out. "Yeah," she said quickly and then focused forward again, trying to stay still.

"What movie are you going to see?" the man asked, not getting the hint. He shuffled closer to her and she tensed.
"One I've been waiting for," she said non-committedly. The last thing she wanted was for him to show up in her theater and harass her.

She got up to the counter and placed her order, resting her hands on the surface and absently tapping her fingers on the glass. The spindly man crowded up next to her, as if they were together, and Bilba felt her shoulders hunch up as she tensed further. Clearly, her luck was still as bad as it'd ever been. The previous burst of good luck had just been lulling her into a false sense of security.

The weight on her ring finger, that she'd nearly gotten used to and almost forgotten, caught her attention and she lifted her hand to show it off. "Sorry. I'm married."

The creep was not deterred, actually scooting closer, if possible, until he was nearly in physical contact with her. "Where is he?"

Canoodling with his ex-fiancée, Bilba thought in annoyance. The cashier brought over her food and the guy had the audacity to reach for one of her nachos. Bilba firmly grabbed the food and pulled it to one side, blocking it off with her purse as she reached in for her wallet.

"I've got it," the man said holding his credit card out, but Bilba shook her head.

"That's not necessary," she said firmly as she pulled a bill out.

"Well you don't have to be such a witch about it," the man said, turning angry at the flip of a switch. "I said I'd pay for it, and I will. Uppity sluts, all think they're better than me." The last was said under his breath but Bilba still caught it, and had a feeling that had been the intent. Setting her jaw, she held the bill out toward the cashier, desperately hoping the guy would just get the hint and leave her alone.

His hand reached out toward her wrist, as if he planned to grab her arm and physically pull her hand back. On the other side of the counter, the cashier was turning to say something to another worker and Bilba dearly hoped she was calling for security, and that it would arrive sooner rather than later.

A large presence was suddenly between her and the other man, physically forcing him to step back without laying a finger on him, and a hand she was pretty sure was larger than her head was closed around the guy's wrist like an iron manacle.

"She said no," a deep voice said calmly. "Now why don't you take the hint, go enjoy your movie, and let the lady enjoy hers?"

Bilba blinked as she found herself staring up at an absolute mountain of a man. He was even bigger than that security guy Thorin had been dragging around, or Thorin himself who she vaguely remembered as being pretty large all on his own.

Must be something in the water.

This guy looked to be about ten years or so older than her, with short cropped dark blond hair. He was built like a tank, his shoulders straining his shirt. She couldn't even see the spindly man on the other side, but he jerked his hand free like he'd been burned.

Bilba wasn't sure she didn't want to jerk back as well because the guy was certainly intimidating without even trying.

A slender arm slid around her back and a female voice said, "Come on, dear. Why don't we go over here and let my darling husband do what he does best?"
The voice was very soothing and Bilba responded without thinking about it, paying quickly and then gathering up her food and allowing the arm to pull her away from the counter. It was only when she was several feet away that she thought to look at the owner of the voice.

The woman was taller than her, as most were, with an athletic build, coal black hair and icy blue eyes. She was gorgeous, on a level that would automatically make any woman near her feel frumpy in comparison, and dressed impeccably in jeans, a blouse and heels that showed off her legs in a way they'd never done for Bilba. The woman looked ageless but carried herself with a confidence and self-assurance that suggested she might be at least a little older than she looked.

Bilba hesitated, glancing back at the counter. The spindly man had vanished all together and the guy who'd helped her was speaking to the cashier.

"He'll be over in a minute," the woman said with a smile. "Gareth is convinced going to the movies without popcorn is a crime." She heaved a long-suffering sigh, and Bilba couldn't help a short laugh, relaxing just a bit. The woman grinned as if they were sharing a joke and held out a hand. "I'm Cerys."

"Bil -- osie!" Bilba blurted, feeling a flush of fear as she almost gave away her name, coupled with shame at lying to someone who'd been so nice. "Rosie," she repeated. "Sorry, I was a bit discombobulated there for a second."

"Understandable," Cerys said. "It's late, and you had to deal with that idiot over there." She raised an eyebrow, and changed the subject. "What movie are you seeing?"

"Oh," Bilba fumbled her food in one hand as she retrieved her ticket. Cerys glanced at it and then said, "Well, what do you know?" She pulled her own ticket out and said, "Ta-dah! So are we!"

Relief surged through Bilba at the thought she wouldn't have to be in the theater alone, even if the seat number on the woman's ticket wasn't close to hers. She'd been half afraid the creepy guy would be even more likely to follow her now that he was pissed off.

The big guy, Gareth, arrived holding a huge bucket of popcorn and a look of happiness on his face. Bilba started to thank him but he waved it off with a hand. "No need. My mother didn't raise me to require thanks for acting like a gentleman."

"She's seeing the same movie we are," Cerys said to him, sliding an arm affectionately around his waist. She turned back to Bilba. "Would you like to sit with us?"

"Oh." Bilba was surprised at just how much she already liked these two. She bit her lip, and gestured to her ticket. "I would, but the seats are numbered."

"That's no problem," Gareth said. "This late, the room will be half empty. There wouldn't have to be in the theater alone, even if the seat number on the woman's ticket wasn't close to hers. She'd been half afraid the creepy guy would be even more likely to follow her now that he was pissed off.

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"That's no problem," Gareth said. "This late, the room will be half empty. There wouldn't be a problem finding three seats together." He gave Cerys a stern look before adding, "Only if you want, though. I know my wife can be a little...shall we say forceful when she comes up with an idea she likes." He dropped his free arm across her shoulders as he said this, and his voice took on a tone of outright pride.

Cerys rolled her eyes. "Says the man who once nearly burned the house down insisting he could rewire a faulty outlet all by himself." She changed her voice to a mocking impression of Gareth. "Hiring a repairman would be waste of time. I can do this in an hour!"

"Nearly burn the house down one time," Gareth muttered, "and you never live it down."
Bilba gave a half snort, half giggle, her spirits lifting. Then the reason they had been down in the first place reasserted itself and she leaned a little past them, still worried she’d see the creepy guy somewhere, glaring at her.

"Don't worry," Cerys said, gently touching her hand to get her attention. "We'll make sure no one bothers you, even if you don't sit with us."

Bilba relaxed and then smiled, suddenly shy. She really wasn't used to people taking much notice of her, or at least not for a prolonged period. Most lost interest pretty quickly and moved on.

"I would like to sit with you, if that's okay," she said, her voice nearly a whisper. In her mind, she could almost hear Rosie cheering her on. The other girl always insisted that at least a portion of Bilba's isolation was self-imposed, a result of her own insecurities and lack of self-esteem courtesy of her family. Bilba wasn't entirely sure she believed it but had taken the words to heart anyway and been trying to be a little more open to people approaching.

Just not creepy, aggressive jerks. She didn't think Rosie would complain about her decision to avoid those sorts of people.

"Great." Gareth handed off the popcorn to his wife. "You ladies go get seats, all right? I'll be right in."

He stepped away a few feet, pulling a cell phone from his pocket. Cerys threw an arm around Bilba again, steering her toward the theater rooms. "He has to call the babysitter and check in before the movie starts," she said in a conspiratorial whisper. "He's worse than I am."

They stopped at a low table on their way and Bilba loaded up on condiments for her hotdog while Cerys added salt and butter to her popcorn. Then they headed into the showroom where Bilba's steps slowed at the sight of the huge space, and tiered rows of what looked like plush armchairs set before a screen so big that the ads currently being displayed gave her an odd sense of disorientation as they walked in.

"First time here?" Cerys asked once she started walking again and Bilba nodded.

"Where I come from, theaters are much smaller."  

"Pity," Cerys said. They'd rounded the front of the seats and, as they'd said, most of the room was empty. "Where is this place so I can avoid it in the future?"

"Shire," Bilba said absently, and then tensed, worried she might trigger them to recognize her or, possibly, simply start thinking of the whole alliance debacle. She really did like these people. The last thing she wanted was to hear them discuss how awful they thought the Princess of Shire was.

Cerys, however, simply nodded. "I've heard that place is pretty rural." She pointed toward the row where Bilba's seat was. "See? It's completely empty. We can sit there and if the seats get sold and people come in, we'll simply move."

She led the way up and happily settled into one of the seats. Bilba sat next to her and was surprised a few minutes later when Gareth dropped into the seat next to her instead of Cerys. He leaned over to report to his wife what the babysitter had said and then retrieved his popcorn, but not before Cerys grabbed a large handful and piled it on her lap as if she wasn't wearing high end, designer jeans.

The movie started soon after and Bilba shortly found herself having the one thing she hadn’t expected to ever experience again after leaving Shire and her friends.
The movie was just as amazing as she'd expected and, before she knew it, the credits were rolling. The handful of other people in the theater filed out but Cerys and Gareth seemed content to watch the end credits and listen to the music so Bilba settled in and did the same.

When the last credit rolled, they headed out, pausing to throw away their now empty food containers. As they headed into the lobby, Bilba felt a jolt at the sight of the lights over the concession turned out and the lights in the lobby itself dimmed.

"Ours was the last showing," Cerys explained, seeing her reaction. "The doors are already locked so you can go out but no one else can come in."

"Oh," Bilba glanced at the clock on her phone and her eyes widened at just how late it was. "Wow, I didn't even think of what time it would be when we got out."

"Where'd you park?" Cerys asked as they headed toward the exits. "We'll walk you to your car."

"Oh," Bilba repeated. "I -- uh--" She hesitated and then blurted, "I took the bus." She desperately hoped a bus station was nearby, to make it believable.

She knew immediately she'd said the wrong thing as Cerys' eyes went wide. "Oh, sweetie, the last bus is long gone. They won't start running again for hours."

"No problem," Gareth said. "We can give you a ride."

"That's not necessary," Bilba said quickly. "I can just walk."

"It's the middle of the night," Cerys said, worried. "What kind of people would we be to let you walk alone through the city in the dark?"

She had a point. Chewing on her lower lip, an idea came to her. It made her slightly nauseous, and ashamed of herself, but there was little else she could do. Even if she could reveal her true identity without fear of them instantly hating her, there was simply no way she could allow them to follow her and see the way she'd gotten out of the palace. The crack in the rock led straight to the beach below her room, and that of Thorin Durin. She might not have an incredibly high opinion of the man but it didn't mean she wanted to see him hurt. Letting people find out about the passage, even nice people she liked, simply wasn't a good idea.

"All right," she said. "I need to go to the bathroom first, though. I'll be right back." She worried that Cerys would insist on going with her but, instead, the two agreed and promised to wait for her.

Bilba headed back to the large bathrooms she'd seen earlier before the movies started. They were set in kind of an alcove almost, the walls coming out in a half circle that one had to walk around. The signs pointing to the bathrooms was on the back wall but the doors to the rooms themselves were hidden behind the half wall.

Not entirely sure her plan would even work, Bilba pushed into the room, and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of a window at the end of the aisle. She headed past the row of empty stalls and the black, granite sinks. She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror and flinched as a rush of guilt washed over her.

Cerys and Gareth would think she was crazy after this, and a jerk. They had been nothing but kind to
and she was repaying them by ditching them like a weirdo and leaving them waiting on her.

Perhaps Rosie was right after all about part of her isolation being her own fault. Who needed her grandfather when she did it to herself?

The window was latched, but she was able to get it open and quickly pushed the window open. Unlike in her beloved RomComs, where a heroine escaping a bad date always had to fall out a tiny window onto the ground in an awkward, yet hilarious, tumble, the window was plenty large enough, and the drop short enough to allow her to get out fairly easily.

This did not speak well of the theater's security.

She carefully closed the window, feeling yet another surge of guilt at having no way to latch it behind her.

It had gotten colder while she'd been inside, and the parking lot was almost completely empty and dark, lit only by the occasional pool of light from light poles.

Bilba was not looking forward to the walk back to the palace. Clearly Rosie and Bofur were not far off when they claimed she tended to act impulsively. She made a mental note to work on that, but not right then.

Right then she needed all her mental acuity to focus on the important things in life.

Like picturing her bathroom with its hot water and her cushy bed with mounds of blankets that she could sink into like she was snuggled inside a cave made of clouds.

She loved her bed, and bathroom.

***

Gareth stood in calf deep, ice cold water, jaw clenched so tight he could feel a muscle spasming in protest. He'd waited a few minutes as ordered, and then said screw it to secrecy, flicked on his flashlight and trained it on a section of the cliff. It was liberally covered with vines, ivy, and other greenery, covering it so completely that only someone who knew it was there would ever see the gaps between the vines that suggested an opening past them.

A small portion of the vines had been nudged out of the way and then carefully moved back in place, the only hint it had happened a few broken stalks and areas where leaves had probably once hung, only to be torn off and washed out to the ocean.

A swell broke against his legs, rising up to near thigh high. The water bubbled past him a good several yards and he felt his heart jerk in his chest. If possible, he clenched his jaw even tighter, until it was very possible he might end up cracking a few teeth before the night was over.

Finally, he caught sight of movement from behind the vines and something inside him eased slightly as Cerys appeared, carefully sliding out from behind the vines and ivy. She was drenched almost head to foot and stumbled as she made it out, a swell catching her off guard just as she made it past the last of the ivy.

Gareth caught her around the waist. He lifted her clear off her feet and proceeded to march through the water until they'd reached the sand where he finally put her down again. She shook her head but didn't comment. She was breathing hard and looked exhausted, a testament to how strong the water inside the passage must have been. He made a mental note to check for injuries later. Cerys understood the importance of reporting serious injuries but tended to be stubbornly silently when it
came to bruises and abrasions.

"Well?" he asked as she caught her breath.

She shook her head. "There's no way you'd ever make it. I barely made it past the twist at the halfway point."

"But it goes all the way through?" Gareth was not in a good mood. Part was residual fear, while the rest was annoyance over the fact that apparently there was an unguarded passageway leading to the Crown Prince's bedroom and somehow it had gone unnoticed.

"It does." Her eyes darkened. "It fills up when the tide comes in. I was knocked around getting through and back. She must have had it even worse."

"Are you sure she made it?" Gareth asked in concern. He wasn't exactly thrilled with the realization that the newest member of the Erebor royal family was apparently insanely reckless, but the thought of her being swept out to sea made him sick.

Cerys nodded. "I checked with the boss. She's in her quarters."

"That she is," a new voice said and both turned as the spymaster himself strolled toward them. He nodded toward the cliff. "That it?"

"It is," Cerys answered. "We should close it off."

"Not yet," came the casual response. "I still want to know what she was up to."

Cerys shrugged. "Perhaps she just wanted a night on the town."

The spymaster raised an eyebrow. "Without much money, and when most everything was already closed?"

Cerys pointed toward the vines. "She went through that with the tide coming in. She's reckless and doesn't think things through before she does them. I'm not surprised."

"Don't be so quick to judge, one way or the other." The spymaster looked amused. "We'll put a twenty-four-hour watch on the passage, on both sides. No one will come or go without our knowing it."

"And the Princess?" Gareth asked, because he knew Cerys wanted to but wouldn't. "At best, we'll need to find out what she's doing. At worst, her personality is going to require constant monitoring to make sure she doesn't get herself killed."

"Also true," the spymaster agreed. "I've been waiting to assign her team. I wanted to see the sort of person she was first." He gave them both an assessing look. "Now that I have, I'd think she'd need people who are mature enough to steer her on the right path, strong willed enough to insist on it, and capable of protecting her from herself."

Gareth had a sinking feeling at the look on the other man's face. Cerys, however, simply smiled and wrapped an arm around his waist. She was shivering and Gareth mentally kicked himself before pulling his jacket off and draping it around her.

"Oh, don't look like that," Cerys said, pulling the coat close around her. "Weren't you the one wishing for some action not too long ago?"
"Action, yes," Gareth said. "Keeping reckless Princesses from getting killed is another thing all together." Especially if the girl turned out to have ulterior motives. Cerys clearly liked her, and Gareth would hate to see her disappointed if the Shire Princess turned out to be something more than she appeared to be.

Shadows appeared in the moonlight, and the spymaster turned to meet them, waving at the two of them as he did. "Get home before you die of hypothermia. I'll let you know when your first shift is."

"I hope you realize we can't monitor her all the time," Gareth commented dryly. "She's going to need a bigger team." Most of the royal family had teams of teams of six that operated in eight-hour shifts.

"All in good time," came the response. "I'm starting with you two. We'll take care of the rest later." With that he was gone to meet their replacements, the two of them clearly dismissed.

Cerys wrapped both arms around him as best she could, and yawned. "Come on, let's go home. I'm sure the babysitter is waiting to regale us with stories of all the antics your little doppelganger has gotten up to."

Gareth snorted. "Please, she gets all that from you."

Cerys laughed and they started toward the boardwalk and where Cerys had left her shoes. He wasn't entirely thrilled at their new assignment but Cerys was right in that he'd been complaining of boredom lately.

His mind went back to the diminutive Princess and he shook his head in resignation. He had a feeling the last thing he'd be was bored when it came to trying to keep her safe.

Now, if only she could prove to be who she seemed to be, and nothing else.

Cerys wouldn't be the only one disappointed if it turned out otherwise.
Chapter 13

Kyra Lundair had always thought of her life as a fairy tale.

Granted, it hadn't started that way, not exactly anyway. Every fairy tale seemed to have some tragedy in it before the eventual happy ending.

Hers had simply had a little more than most.

If she concentrated, she could still smell the acrid stench of smoke as Smaug's forces marched through the corridors of the palace, could almost hear the echoing screams of the wounded and dying as she walked those same halls now. She'd been too young to fully understand what was going on as her father dragged her to safety, but she'd known enough to be afraid.

If she thought hard enough she could remember the smell of her mother's perfume, and almost recall the sound of her laugh. She'd always been grateful that her last memory of her mother was a happy one, being tucked into bed after a bedtime story and a kiss goodnight. Her father had never spoken about her mother's final moments, but the haunted look in his eyes had never gone away.

Nor had the anchor of guilt Kyra carried over being the cause of her parents’ delay in escaping. She'd been playing tag in one of the lower halls, running along with the twin children of a lesser nobleman.

They'd been her best friends.

Their images were easy enough to recall, forever locked in a single point in time, happy and carefree and utterly unaware of the horror that lay ahead.

Neither had made it out that day.

After that had been the dark days of the exile, as they'd struggled to escape their home and make it to safety. Hunger, a total unknown to her in better days, had become her constant companion, along with cold and fear. There had been days spent hiding in the hold of dank boats, or cowering in dark alleys and cold basements. Even after arriving in Moria, home until the kingdom had been reclaimed, things had been hard. Moria was smaller, and ill equipped to handle the sudden influx of people. Rather than the suite of rooms they'd held at the palace, she and her father had been relegated to a small, drafty place in the lower levels. Kyra had slept on a narrow cot in the corner of the kitchen, near the stove which was the only place that gave off any heat.

It had been difficult, in more ways than one. She'd lost her home, her mother, her friends and, in many ways, her father. He'd been the highest ranked surviving diplomat to make it out of Erebor and his services had been in high demand. It had been a long time before enough organization had been put in place to resume her education and she wasn't allowed outside the gates without an escort so there had been little for her to do aside from aimlessly wander the halls of Moria.

It had been during one of these rambling trips that she'd run into Thorin, doing his utmost to kick a hole in a wall. As the wall was solid rock, he hadn't been getting very far. She could still remember the angry red marks on his face, angry tears gathered in the corners of his eyes, hands clutched in fists so tight that the developing bruises on his knuckles stood out in sharp relief.

Her father ran in the highest social circles so she'd met him before, and they had even played together, along with Dis. It wasn't until that day, however, when she ran into him just after he'd fought a few Moria children who'd dared disparage his father that their true friendship started. They'd
come together out of loneliness at first as the adults struggled to keep them all alive, and later had
grown closer from familiarity. Most of the nobility simply removed themselves, along with their children, to other estates or family outside of Erebor. It was only those who had no choice, or those desperately needed who went to Moria. She and Thorin had ended up being some of the only Ereborian children left and they, along with Dis, had developed the sort of friendship that, in a different time and place, might never have happened.

Kyra couldn't put her finger on when she went from seeing Thorin as a friend to seeing him as something far more. She thought it might have happened right about the time her father had started seeing someone. Kyra, just entering her teen years and missing her mother more than ever, had not approved. She'd approved even less when the two had married, and when her stepsister and stepbrother had come along over the course of the next two years. Her own idiocy had driven a rift between her and her father that had never healed and, with his death, never would.

She'd made no attempts to bond with any of her new family and, instead, had treated the Durins as if they were her family instead. Perhaps the feelings had started then, perhaps a little earlier or later. It just seemed to evolve naturally, until holding hands with him or kissing was as natural as hide and go seek or tag had once been.

Eventually, Erebor had been retaken. Kyra had been given rooms in the royal wing along with a spacious office a few doors down from the one Thorin worked in. It was then that the idea of being in a fairy tale had really started to take hold. After all, hadn't she lived the basic plot of one? She hadn't started in as poor a place as many fairy tale heroines but she'd certainly been driven out of her home and gone through many a trial and tribulation. In the end, however, she would be rewarded as all the princesses in tales were, by winning her prince and living happily ever after.

That was the way it was supposed to go.

She was the princess.

Her life was a fairy tale.

She would get her prince.

She would live happily ever after.

Except it hadn't gone that way at all.

Because, apparently, she'd made an assumption that she shouldn't have.

The assumption that her life was a fairy tale, and she was the heroine of it.

A knock on her door caught her attention, and Kyra opened her eyes to stare in resignation at the ceiling overhead. She'd been attempting to wade through the massive pile of paperwork on her desk and the seemingly endless pages of emails on her computer when her head had begun to pound with the promise of a spectacular headache. She'd leaned back in her chair in the hopes that resting for a few moments might help, but the dull throbbing in her temples proved her hopes were in vain.

Big surprise.

"Come in," she called, not even bothering to hide the fatigue in her voice.
Immediately the door opened and her personal steward, Dardren, strode in. He'd been with her since before the exile, starting out as one of her father's servants but quickly rising to the position of head butler. In Moria, he'd chosen to stay of his own free will, serving from loyalty to both her family and the crown. As there was little need for servants at that time her father had trained him in other areas to allow him to still feel useful.

After her father's death, Kyra had employed him as her steward and had kept him in the role when they'd all returned. During his time with her, he'd watched her grow up and she, in turn, had seen him fall in love with a young palace maid, Hadra; who, on her own, had risen to become the head housekeeper of the palace. Together they'd raised a large family and were currently the proud grandparents of a large group of grandchildren. As their hair had whitened and their bodies become stiffer and less willing to obey, both had been encouraged to retire, safe in the knowledge that they would be well cared for, but both had flatly refused. They saw the royal family, and Kyra, as their own and planned to serve as long as they were able.

"My apologies, my Lady," Dardren said, hands clutching a large stack of paper. "I'm afraid I have more to add to your workload."

"Of course you do," Kyra said with a sigh. In the past, the grind hadn't been quite as hard to deal with. Thorin was just down the hall and they were forever popping in and out of one another's offices. If things were the way they had been, he'd have already come in long ago. He'd have noticed her fatigue, dragged her over to the couch and given her a very thorough massage that would have left every muscle in her body entirely relaxed.

The memory brought a rush of affection mixed with pain and she grimaced. It was best not to think about Thorin at all, or the fact that the day before should have been their one-month wedding anniversary. A, by now, familiar plain flared inside her and she grimaced.

Damn it all.

Dardren set the stack down on a relatively empty patch of her desk and Kyra shot a look at the clock. Two more hours until she'd be meeting Thorin for lunch and could have a break.

Dardren excused himself while she idly pulled the first sheet of paper off the stack and scanned it. It was an invitation to attend the opening of a new animal shelter. It would be the largest in the city, state of the art and had taken years' worth of fundraising and public support to get it done. Attending it would be good for public relations.

It was also something that, traditionally, would be left to a member of the royal family. A wife perhaps, but not the Queen as her duties didn't allow for many, if any, extracurricular activities.

It would be perfect for the wife of one of the princes, and since only one prince was married...

Irritation flared through her and she clenched her jaw in agitation. She'd carried her own duties, and the duties that would classically belong to the heir's wife, for years now without complaint or second thought. Now, however, she felt split. Part of her was possessive over what she felt were her duties and her responsibilities.

The other part of her deeply resented a woman who'd taken everything from her, but happily left her all the work and responsibility.

Kyra was trying, she truly was, not to resent the Shire princess. She didn't believe the rumors that claimed the other woman had demanded the marriage out of a selfish desire to land Thorin for herself. The girl had shown zero interest in Thorin since her arrival, hadn't so much as seen him or
said a single word to him. The first few times Kyra had gone over to watch a movie she'd half worried the woman would burst from her room and demand to know why Kyra was there, but the door had always stayed shut and the room beyond almost strangely silent. The woman might as well not be married for all the concern she showed.

So, no, she didn't believe the marriage was the other girl's doing or design. And if it wasn't her fault, and she was simply another casualty of the Thain's machinations as Kyra suspected, then she had no reason to hate or blame her for what had happened.

No, she blamed the Thain.

Him, and him alone, and so Kyra didn't resent the Shire princess for that, or at least she tried very hard not to.

But the rest...

She'd seen the news coverage just as everyone else had, and had heard the reports of the woman burning through a nearly obscene amount of money in barely a week. She'd heard other rumors as well, and seen the intelligence reports. The girl was known to keep to herself, reportedly as a result of her poor attitude and belief in her own superiority as a member of the royal family. Her academic record listed an almost ridiculous number of schools, with each one insisting she'd been removed or transferred mere steps ahead of being expelled for bad behavior. Each school interviewed was vague on exactly what it was she'd done, but when a family was as obsessed with public image as the Thain was that stood to reason.

In all, the reports seemed to suggest Erebor had been saddled with the black sheep of the Shire royal family and, given what Thorin had reported about Beatrice and some of the other members of the family he'd met, that was saying a lot.

Still, through it all, Kyra had hope the other girl might settle down upon arriving at Erebor, especially if they made it clear they intended to treat her well. She'd been set up in what should have been Kyra's quarters, a fact which still caused her a burst of almost soul crushing injustice, and Kyra had assigned Dardren and his wife to choose a personal steward and maid for the girl.

She'd been hopeful that at least the Shire princess might prove to be a decent person. She'd expected immature and possibly spoiled but neither of those qualities necessarily meant the girl was a bad person and she had held out hope. It wouldn't ease the pain any, but it might at least have made it palatable. Instead, the girl had arrived and promptly locked herself in her room, refused all attempts to speak to her, had summarily rejected Dardren's steward and any attempts at a schedule, and Hadra reported the young maid she'd assigned had been driven to tears and banished from the girl's room.

Over the last month, Kyra had felt her feelings of forced amiability slowly lessening into outright bitterness, and anger. She tried to rationalize it all away, she really did. The girl was being eviscerated by the media, even now, and public opinion, and naturally wouldn't want to make any public appearances or agree to interviews. She also, if Kyra was right about her being little more than another pawn in her grandfather's schemes, was probably none too happy about having been wrenched away from her life and forced to move to a land of strangers.

But still, even giving her the benefit of the doubt, it didn't explain everything, and certainly didn't explain the reports on her character while living in the Shire. Kyra felt more like she was putting on blinders and ignoring the fangs and venom of a snake, insisting all the while it was a princess.

A false hope she'd desperately tried to squash time and time again rose up as she found herself trying to think of something, some way to fix all this. Some way to put it all back the way it was, the way it
was supposed to be. A way to send the Shire princess back home, where she'd be happier anyway, and restore her engagement.

The problem was it couldn't be anything on Erebor's side. Their honor was too important, especially as they continued to try and prove themselves to the other kingdoms. How could they ever hope to establish lasting treaties and relationships if they proved they couldn't be trusted to keep the ones they had?

This was doubly true when it came to Gondor. Shire, for reasons beyond her understanding, had a strong alliance with the much larger nation, one that Erebor had yet to attain. Try as she might, Kyra hadn't been able to make any inroads, lacking the sort of resources or contacts that could get her in and smooth her way to an audience with King Elessar. She highly doubted breaking an alliance with their close allies would help in that regard. It would more likely destroy any chance they ever had, if not outright create an antagonistic relationship and that was the last thing they needed. Thror had been an isolationist, and when the fall had come it had left them out in the cold with little to no help, and had paved the way for the disastrous alliance with the Shire. Thrain was determined to not let that happen again, which meant they needed allies and in order to get them it was imperative they portray themselves as trustworthy.

And so, Erebor could not be seen breaking the alliance, be it by fact or by subterfuge.

She tossed the paper down and watched as it swept several other pages off the stack and onto the floor. Grumbling to herself, Kyra slid out of her chair and dropped down to gather them up.

Someone cleared their throat at her open door and she looked up in surprise.

"Thorin." Pure happiness surged through her, washing away the fatigue and even managing to lessen her headache, or at least it made it feel that way.

"When are you going to make the change to digital like the rest of us?" Pushing off the doorframe he'd been casually leaning against, he came and dropped down next to her to help her gather up the pages.

Kyra rolled her eyes. "I think we've beaten that joke to death, don't you?" Her father had been incredibly paranoid of all things electronic, and had passed the same beliefs onto his daughter. Kyra preferred to do her work via good, old fashioned paper as much as possible. Thorin had been teasing her about it for years.

"Nope." He stood, putting the stack back on the desk and then reached his hand down to help her up.

Kyra tried to ignore the way her heart jolted in her chest when his hand touched hers. "What's up?" she asked, turning away to nervously shuffle the stack of paperwork. She never used to be nervous around Thorin but now it felt like she was back in school again trying to act natural around her crush.

So ridiculous.

"My father has requested our presence," Thorin said, rocking absently back on his heels with his hands clasped behind his back.

Kyra blinked in surprise. "Why?"

Thorin shrugged. "No idea."

"Fair enough," Kyra mumbled, forcing herself to stop fiddling with the papers. "I suppose if you did
know it'd negate the need to go see him, wouldn't it?"

"Definitely be less a waste of time," Thorin muttered. He held his arm out and she wrapped her hand around his bicep without comment. The relationship between Thorin and his father had been decidedly strained since the marriage, yet another casualty that could be laid at the feet of the Thain.

They walked down the corridor together, chatting about nothing in particular. Whatever nervousness she'd felt dissipated until the two of them were interacting the same as they ever had. It was at times like these that she found herself most able to pretend the last month had never happened. That she and Thorin were still engaged, the wedding still ahead of them and her life was still the fairy tale she'd always believed it to be.

A number of servants greeted them, and Kyra nodded at them in return. One or two, mainly the younger maids, gave her oddly knowing smiles, while another gave her an outright wink and she frowned in confusion, unsure what it was they thought they knew.

The Thain's office was on the same floor as the offices for Dwalin and Nori, the captain of palace security and the spymaster and, as they reached the top of the staircase leading to the floor, Kyra was surprised to see Gareth heading toward them.

Gareth and his wife were the absolute best Nori had and were very rarely seen in the palace. They lived somewhere in the city, under a guise of a typical husband and wife, raising their small daughter and working mundane, normal jobs. It gave them freedom to go places others could not, and hear things not spoken of in the presence of palace personnel. It also meant they were deliberately kept far away from the palace, in order to keep their covers in place.

"Gareth," Thorin said casually. "What brings you here?"

The larger man stopped and gave a formal bow. "Purely business, your Highness." He rose and nodded at them both. "Please excuse my rudeness, but I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a time crunch."

Thorin gave a nod of dismissal and the man was gone, moving down the stairs with a silent tread that wouldn't have seemed possible in a man of his size. Kyra imagined Thorin would be inquiring later to find out why the man had been there. Gareth in the palace, and on business no less, couldn't mean anything good.

They continued and soon found themselves before the king's office. The guards standing on either side of the door announced them and they were quickly shown in. The room beyond was enormous, easily several times the size of Kyra's entire suite of rooms. Bookcases, running from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, lined two walls while the one behind the desk held large glass doors that opened onto a balcony overlooking an inner courtyard.

Thrain was seated behind an oak desk that was probably bigger than her bed. It was immaculate, everything perfectly in its place. A mat was on the center, embossed with the royal seal, and holding a laptop that currently had the lid closed. The king was sitting perfectly still, hands folded on the desk and gaze blank.

Kyra felt an uneasy feeling settle in her stomach.

"Father," Thorin said, voice flat. "We've come as summoned."

"I expected better of you," Thrain said flatly, cutting right to the point and completely ignoring any and all pleasantries. "Both of you." His eyes bore into hers, and Kyra mentally shrank under his gaze. "You in particular," Thrain said, focusing on his son, "are aware of how important honor is to
our people, not to mention the rest of the world. We are far too new, and unproven, to risk scandal."

"I am aware of that," Thorin said stiffly, "and I take offense to the notion that I've done anything to bring dishonor to the Durin family name." His voice had gone cold, and he was so formal he may as well have been speaking to a stranger.

"Really?" Thrain asked, voice mocking. "Then the rumors I hear of you and Kyra openly carrying on an affair are false? And you have not had a woman who is not your wife in your quarters on a nightly basis?"

When he said *a woman*, he looked directly at Kyra as if she were an outsider and she felt herself flush in both embarrassment and hurt. Thrain had been like a father to her after hers had died, and seeing him looking at her with such a cold gaze was cutting.

"I cannot help what people with nothing better to do choose to say or believe," Thorin said, anger coloring his tone. "I can assure you that Kyra's visits to my room--"

"Her visits to your *room*?" Thrain exploded, pushing up to a standing position and bracing his hands on the desk. "Durin's beard, boy, do you hear yourself? You are the *Crown Prince* of Erebor, not some commoner skulking in a back alley! You are to be *above* reproach, not lowering yourself to the base common denominator and blaming others for believing that you are doing exactly what you *appear* to be doing!"

A flush of shame and outright mortification rushed through Kyra. She'd understood on some level that being in Thorin's rooms, especially when she had to go through his bedroom to get to the main suite, was wildly inappropriate. She'd convinced herself that they were just friends, however, and not doing anything wrong and....

The memory of the night before passed through her mind, when Thorin, not paying attention, had instinctively leaned over at one point to kiss her like he'd done a million times in the past only for both of them to freeze and pull away at the last second.

Oh, Aule, she thought, face heating. A mix of humiliation and anger flowed through her like liquid fire. Humiliation because she prided herself on her integrity and now people actually believed she was not only having an affair, but wasn't even bothering to be discreet.

And anger because she shouldn't *have* to be discreet about anything, or feel shame or embarrassment because the entire world had been turned on its damned head and she shouldn't have to deal with anyone accusing her of having an affair with her *own fiancé*.

Thorin and Thrain were now openly yelling at one another, voices rising with every passing second. They were completely oblivious to her, as they always were when fighting.

Kyra could feel the bridge of her nose beginning to burn and her vision was going blurry so she carefully released Thorin's arm and stepped back, behind him. She then turned and quietly walked out, shutting the door behind her and deliberately ignoring both guards. As soon as she had, she wrapped her arms around herself and hurried quickly down the hall, eyes fixed on her feet.

Voices, and footsteps, caught her attention and she made a strangled sound of frustration. Could *nothing* go her way? She ducked quickly behind a large potted plant standing against the wall and held still as Dwalin and Nori strode past, conversing quietly. The guards said something to them, to which Nori gave a dry sounding response. Dwalin then opened the door, and the sound of angry voices came from within. Neither man seemed the least bit concerned as they both entered and quietly shut the door behind them.
As soon as they were gone, Kyra stepped out, nodding a quiet thanks at the soldiers who'd seen her duck behind the armor. She made her way quickly back to her office, quietly wiping at her eyes when she thought she wouldn't be caught, and avoiding the gaze of anyone she passed.

She nearly screamed in frustration when she walked in her door to see Dardren had returned and was standing near her desk.

"My Lady?" he asked in concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said stiffly. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to be alone."

Dardren hesitated. "If you need someone to talk too--"

"I said I'd like to be alone!" Kyra said sharply. "Please leave."

Dardren nodded stiffly and obeyed, closing the door behind him. Guilt assailed her at how rude she'd been but she was in no frame of mind to go apologize. Instead she slumped in her chair behind her desk, propped her elbows on the table and dropped her head into her hands.

She shut her eyes and focused on taking deep breaths. She'd never been much of a crier and certainly wasn't going to start now. A few traitorous tears slipped out but she stubbornly wiped them away and clenched her teeth until the desire to break down entirely subsided.

When she was sure she was relatively in control, she forced herself to straighten and pulled her laptop closer, planning to answer a few emails. As her eyes scanned the list she noticed several were from her stepsiblings and her stepmother. They'd been reaching out since news of the alliance had come out, offering their condolences and sympathy.

Kyra neither needed nor wanted any pity, and certainly not from them. The pain in her temples reasserted itself, adding to the dry, scratchy feeling she now had in her eyes. Thrain's words ran through her mind again and she felt her face heat. She'd worked so hard on ensuring her reputation was sterling. She was an ambassador, the face of Erebor to neighboring kingdoms. To think anyone would believe she was having an affair, and that she was being so openly blatant about it, as if she assumed the fact she had the nation's sympathy would cover any negative impact...

Even if that were true, and she could have done it with impunity, she wouldn't have. She wouldn't have because she'd never escape the anger or resentment that she knew would build in her at the thought that she was being seen as Thorin's mistress when she should have been seen as his wife.

She groaned and ran her hands through hair, flinching in pain as her fingers caught on knots and pulled several strands painfully.

Why couldn't the Shire princess go have an affair? If she truly was just another pawn of the Thain she could use it to get sent home, which was probably what she wanted anyway. Her reputation wouldn't suffer as, according to the intelligence reports, she didn't have much of one to begin with. Meanwhile, Kyra could reinstate her engagement while keeping Erebor's honor completely intact. The only wrinkle would be in ensuring the alliance was unaffected but, given it'd be Shire who technically had violated the terms...

Kyra went completely still as the idea turned over and over in her head.

It...actually wasn't a bad idea.

Granted, it wasn't perfect. Thorin would still be unable to remarry because Durin I was a bastard and gave no allowances for infidelity but, still. It was only in Erebor that that law held true. She and
Thorin could marry in any of the other kingdoms. Given the way the populace was reacting to her and Thorin's forced separation she doubted anyone would begrudge the two of them marrying outside the kingdom.

There was also the fact she couldn't exactly go to the Shire princess and tell her about her plan. The other woman seemed like the sort who might refuse purely out of spite, or because she simply didn't trust Thorin's ex-fiancé.

Kyra couldn't exactly blame her for that one. If there positions were reversed she'd probably feel the same way.

Kyra chewed on her lower lip, and leaned forward to pull up a list of Erebor's nobility, and their families. She'd always made a point of keeping up on current affairs with all of them, never knowing when she might run into someone at a party and need to make conversation. Any number of them had young, eligible sons, some of whom had tried to flirt with her in the past. If she could figure some way to get the Shire princess out of her room and arrange for her to run into an agreeable young man...

Guilt flashed through her at the thought of saddling any of the nobility with a girl who was apparently the black sheep of a disreputable family, but she knew many wouldn't care in light of her rank and status.

A few pictures came up and she rejected several of them immediately. She didn't want the other woman hurt and, as with any of the upper classes, some were noble in bloodline only.

She continued to chew on her lip as she ran the particulars of the idea over in her mind. It was still in its infancy and would need the kinks worked out... but it could work.

For the first time in a long time a thread of hope began to burn faintly within her and a small smile danced across her face.

It could work.

She could get her fairy tale, and her prince, back.

It could work.

It could.

It had to.
"You are acting like a child!" Thrain roared, face red with rage.

He was leaning forward over his desk, hands braced on its surface and Thorin unconsciously mirrored both his position, and his anger, on the other side.

"I am acting," he growled, voice low and dangerous, "like a man who had his life destroyed, on a whim."

His father rolled his eyes. "Oh, come off it," he ordered, sinking back into his seat. "You want to hear about having your life ruined? Talk to your grandfather, or the rest of Erebor's citizens who were present for her fall."

Thorin decided not to point out that he'd been one of those present for Erebor's fall. He'd been young, but he'd been there. The smell of smoke was still enough to take him right back, to screams echoing through corridors, the roar of wargs running down victims, the sharp, metallic scent of blood.

A brief tinge of shame flashed through him at the memory, but he stubbornly hung onto his anger. It was justified. He had a right to be angry. He'd been through enough as a child, had spent his younger years fighting to retake the kingdom while his peers had attended school and found their place in life. His place had been ordained the second he'd been born, and again after the mountain had fallen. He deserved one thing, one damn thing in return.

He'd given enough.

"Believe me," he growled, "if grandfather were still here I'd have plenty to say to him."

As he spoke, he crossed his arms over his chest, and straightened his back. It caused him to loom over his father as he sat on the far side of the desk but, somehow, the other man didn't lose so much of an ounce of authority. It was abundantly clear who was in charge, and it certainly wasn't Thorin. Irritating.

"I can see I indulged you too much as a child," Thrain said coldly. "You're acting like a spoiled brat denied a toy."

A muscle jumped in Thorin's jaw as he ground his teeth so hard it was a wonder they didn't snap. "If by 'toy' you mean the love of my life, then fine," he ground out through gritted teeth.

Thrain actually rolled his eyes. "You can't lose someone you insist on spending every second with."

"You know what I mean," Thorin broke in. "I love her--"

"Apparently not enough to guard her reputation," Thrain leaned back in his chair, wood creaking under his weight, and curled his hands over the armrests.

Thorin ground his teeth, barely resisting the urge to launch into a tirade of all he'd been through as a child and adult. He wouldn't be saying anything his father didn't already know and it'd just prolong the argument. He was aware that Dwalin and Nori had come in at some point, and were casually watching the fight. They had long since lost their fear of Thrain, or Thorin for that matter. They knew their own worth, and so did the royal family. They weren't going to be fired unless they did
something truly egregious, and they were far too loyal for that. Both had distinguished themselves in
the fight to reclaim Erebor, and their love for the kingdom was unquestioned.

Thorin had no doubt his father was deliberately humiliating him. It was annoying, and irritatingly
effective. Thorin knew he came out looking the worst in the argument, in spite of how he personally
believed about the matter, and was forced to curb his tongue in a way his father wasn't. If he
persisted, it'd just give his father room to throw out more barbs and embarrass him further. He
clenched his fists at his side, and glared at his father who merely raised a mocking eyebrow in return.

After a few moments of tense silence, Dwalin took the cue and stepped forward, holding up a file
folder. He was like Kyra in that way, trusting in paper more than electronic files. Paper files couldn't
be hacked by someone on the other side of the planet, as he liked to point out.

"Latest report on the girl," he said casually, handing the folder over to Thrain.

Thorin frowned. "Girl? What are you talking about?"

Thrain gave him a melodramatic look of surprise. "What? Are you finally interested in acting like a
prince again? Or is it just because your sparring partner is here and you've nothing better to do with
your time?"

Thorin managed not to respond, somehow, but it was a close thing. Instead he deliberately grabbed a
chair, dragged it out, and dropped into it with a heavy thud.

Dwalin and Nori both ignored him because, while they might not be afraid of Thorin, it didn't mean
they were stupid enough to deliberately bait him. Better to let his father handle that.

Dwalin handed the folder over. He then started talking, giving his report, and Thorin found his eyes
slowly widening as the other man detailed what his unwanted wife had apparently been up too. He'd
assumed the girl had been sulking in her room, expecting the rest of them to come and beg her to
come out.

Apparently not.

"She's sneaking around the palace?" he said blankly. "Why?"

"Trust you to focus on that and not the fact she found a way out of the bloody palace," Dwalin
muttered.

"Far as we can tell," Nori said calmly. "She goes back and forth to the kitchen."

"And when she left entirely?" Thrain asked. "She simply went to the movies?"

"It's possible she knew we were there," Dwalin said. "And abandoned her real plans."

"Or," Nori cut in, looking oddly cheerful, "it's possible she just wanted to go see a movie."

"Then why not just leave through the front?" Thorin asked in confusion.

"Maybe she watches the news," Thrain growled, "and didn't want a crowd of protestors surrounding
her."

"You can't blame the people for being angry," Thorin muttered. He certainly was angry after all.

"No," Thrain agreed, "but I can blame you for doing nothing to mitigate it."
Thorin raised an eyebrow. "What do you expect me to do?" There was little the palace could do without seeming to be censoring the media.

"You're married to her whether you like it or not," Thrain said shortly. "You could have accepted some of the interview requests, gone with her and made it clear you supported her."

A loophole, Thorin thought. His father was deeply upset over the way the media had been attacking the Shire princess, as well as how whipped up the public had become by the constant attacks. He felt it portrayed Erebor in a very poor light, and he wasn't wrong. They'd been focused on showing themselves to be honorable and above reproach, worthy of alliances with other kingdoms. They may have had sympathy over the Thain's actions, but it was quickly cooling in the face of unending criticisms and attacks aimed toward the girl.

Privately, Thorin was confused by it. The media, and public, generally had rather short attention spans and he'd have expected them to have moved on long before now. They might still hold a general dislike or disgust when they saw the Shire girl, might be borderline rude or cold and may pose unfair questions but, for the most part, would move onto whatever the latest scandal happened to be unfolding. The fact they were clinging so stringently to this, and with such a steady anger, was...odd to say the least.

"I'm not sure I'd be able to hold my composure," he said, flatly. Unlike the rest of Erebor, it was personal to him, and his anger had held steady because it reignited every time he saw Kyra.

"And that's why I say you're still a child," Thrain retorted shortly. He turned toward Nori.

"Find out what's going on. If she was meeting someone, I want to know who, and why."

"You think she's a spy?" Thorin asked in surprise. A spark of... something, ignited inside him and he straightened in the chair. "That would explain the Thain's insistence on the marriage. He was trying to get her inside the palace."

"Be a bit on the nose," Nori said dryly from where he was standing near Thorin's right shoulder, arms crossed. "Particularly with our history."

Thrain gave Thorin a look that was part knowing and part disappointed. "All the more reason to get to know her, wouldn't you think? You can find out for yourself."

"Unless her intention is assassination," Thorin countered.

Thrain heaved a sigh and settled back in his seat. "If the girl were going to kill you in your sleep she'd have done it already."

"That'd be embarrassing," Dwalin rumbled from just behind Thorin. "You're at least twice her size."

Thorin ignored the slight. Instead, deciding he'd put up with enough abuse for the day, he pushed to his feet with a non-committal, "I'll consider it," toward his father. He gave a general nod toward the other three men and turned toward the door.

He'd just reached it when his father spoke up behind him. "You could have renounced your title you know."

One hand resting on the doorknob, Thorin half turned with a frown. "What?"

His father leaned back in his chair, resting his arms on the armrests and clasping his hands together. Dwalin and Nori bracketed the desk, also half turned to look back at him.
"Renounced your title," Thorin said, voice calm. "Maybe, when you decide to stop being such a stubborn ass, you might ask yourself - why didn't you?"

Thorin's hand tightened on the doorknob until it threatened to snap off. "I'm not going to dignify that with a response."

"More likely you don't have one," Thrain responded. With that he gestured toward Dwalin and Nori, who both immediately turned to face him again.

The dismissal couldn't have been clearer and, with a growl of anger, Thorin stalked out, intent on tracking down Kyra and ensuring she was all right. His father's words ran through his mind again and he rejected them with annoyance, pushing them to a deep place inside his mind.

The sense of disquiet that the words caused to settle over him was far harder to dispatch.

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"What were you thinking? You could have been murdered!"

Bilba rolled her eyes and settled back into the mass of pillows gathered behind her. She was curled up on her bed with her laptop on her lap, talking to Rosie back in the Shire.

"I wasn't going to get murdered going to the movies," she said. "It was fine."

Rosie did not look convinced. "And what if no one had been there to help you with the creep at the theater? What if he'd been waiting for you when you left? What then?"

Bilba hid a flinch. Perhaps she should have held back a few details about her trip out of the palace. She hadn't mentioned exactly how she'd gotten out, on the off chance someone, somehow was listening in. "I was fine," she repeated. "I just wanted to get out for a while."

"At night," Rosie said flatly, "in a large city when the only experience you've ever had has been in small towns that could probably fit inside Erebor's palace."

"I was fine," Bilba defended. "I was thinking of going again, but earlier so I could check out the university and dance studio."

Rosie's eyes narrowed. "How are you going to apply for school?"

"I'll get a job," Bilba said immediately, thinking of the bakery Bofur's brother worked at. Surely he'd have a job for her once she told him who she was. Assuming he wasn't on freaking Kyra's side like everyone else seemed to be, but she was willing to bet he wasn't. "I can probably get loans as well."

"And what name will you put on them?" Rosie asked. She was lying on her stomach on her bed, arms wrapped around a pillow bunched under her face. The laptop was in front of her and the angle made it so Bilba saw mostly pillow and then a slice of Rosie's head over the top of it. "You're sneaking out of the palace. Even if you give them your real name, they won't believe you."

And they'd probably reject her on principle even if they did, Bilba thought in irritation. "I don't know yet," she said. "I've got plenty of time to think of something."

Rosie frowned at her for a second, and then sighed and buried her face in the pillow. "All right," she said, voice muffled. She lifted her head again and frowned at him. "You wanna watch a movie?"

"Sure," Bilba said, accepting the peace offering for what it was.
Rosie headed off to find one, while Bilba took the opportunity to go to the bathroom so she wouldn't have to, hopefully, during the movie.

As she walked back out into the main part of her bedroom, she jumped at the loud slam of a door from out in the main living area of the suite. A few minutes later she heard rattling and banging from the kitchen area, not like someone actually destroying anything, but like someone in a foul mood taking it out on the dishes.

Bilba went back and clambered on her bed, settling in. Rosie came back a few minutes later, brandishing the movie in one hand and a bowl of popcorn in the other. "You don't have any snacks?"

"Not sure I should," Bilba said with hesitation. She had scrounged up a few bags of popcorn the last time she'd been to the kitchens and snuck out to the kitchen part of the suite to pop it for movies when she was sure Thorin wasn't around. "Sounds like Thorin's out there, and in a bit of a bad mood."

Rosie scoffed. "See, now that's just crossing the line. All the other garbage is bad enough, but now they're denying you popcorn for the movie? It's too far, I say, just too far."

Bilba giggled. "I guess I could go down to the kitchen real quick." She chewed on her lip absently as she spoke. She usually waited until late in the evening to make her trips, and it was far from that, but it was late enough that most people should be where they were supposed to be for the day, right?

Aside from Thorin, she amended, as she heard another loud bang that sounded suspiciously like the microwave door. A few seconds later she heard a second slam that sounded like his door closing. Most likely he'd made something to eat and planned to fume privately.

"You should," Rosie said sagely. "If you don't, I'll feel too bad to eat any myself and that won't do." She gave Bilba a pointed look. "Half of movie watching is the snacks. If we don't have snacks, it's a guarantee we'll have 50% less fun."

Bilba laughed outright. "Fine. I'll call you back soon."

Shaking her head, she ended the call and then headed toward the door. Putting one hand on the doorknob, she pressed the side of her head against it, listening. There was no sound from outside and, given how angry Thorin had sounded, she doubted he could manage to stay quiet out there.

Taking a deep breath, and screwing up her courage, she opened the door and peeked out, breath exhaling in relief at the sight of the empty room. Before she could talk herself out of it, or Thorin could come back out, she hurried out and to the door leading into the hall. She left her bedroom door, and the main door, both open a tiny crack to allow her to dart back quicker if needed, and started down the hall toward the kitchen.

Her trip proved uneventful, for which she was grateful. Her skills at moving about undetected had improved and the few times she did hear voices she was able to hide behind plants or decorative statues. Mentally, she acknowledged she was behaving ridiculously, but it was better safe than sorry, or locked in a tower somewhere.

The kitchens weren't empty, never were during the day, but they were so busy and filled with smoke from the ovens that no one took much notice of her. She had her hair up in a tight bun and was wearing some of her old clothes from home, so it was possible those who did see her simply assumed she was someone's assistant. It helped that she strode in as if she owned the place. Bofur had always told her that one could get away with a lot simply by behaving as if they belonged there, and knew
what they were doing. Apparently, he was right.

Finally, bowl of popcorn in hand and swell of triumph in her heart, Bilba started back toward her room.

As she reached her floor, her heart jolted, and she felt a quick surge of panic at the sound of voices coming from just down the hall. She froze, only to relax minutely a second later at the realization the voices she was hearing were coming from children.

"Don't be pathetic," she chided herself under her breath. "You can walk past a couple of children."

She put her head up and tried to affect a posture of authority, even as her body began to shake with nerves. If these kids were up here they were probably related to the royal family in some way, and very likely could have had their feelings toward her affected by whatever it was they'd heard their parent's saying. She didn't much fancy being insulted by kids, not to mention they could report to their parents that they'd seen her and...

Bilba shook her head, tsking at herself as she did. She was being paranoid. They were kids. All she had to do was walk past them.

"Okay." She tightened her grip on her popcorn bowl, tossed her hair back, and strode forward.

The kids didn't give her so much as a second glance.

There were two of them, a small dark-haired child who looked to be about six or so and an older, fair haired boy of about nine or ten, who was following him with an exasperated look.

The younger one was on his hands and knees, peering under a bench set against the wall. "Shelly?" He frowned, and then crawled forward to look under another bench. He had a tangle of leather leads in his hand that she assumed was some sort of strange leash or harness. "Shelly!"

The other boy sighed. "Don't crawl, Kili. You'll ruin your clothes."

Kili ignored him, clambering to his feet to go and look behind a statue. "Shelly! Where are you?"

As Bilba passed, keeping her eyes ahead, the small boy suddenly whirled and asked, "Have you seen Shelly?"

Bilba gasped in surprise, and froze for a moment, eyes going wide before she blurted, "No."

Kili sighed, shoulders slumping. "Okay."

He turned away, and Bilba felt a stab of guilt run through her. "Sorry."

"It's fine," the other boy said. "Shelly gets away all the time. We'll find her."

"Oh," Bilba stammered. "Okay."

She started to ask them to describe Shelly, but the two boys had already moved on, still looking under every bench and behind every plant and statue.

Bilba shrugged after a second and continued on her way. The door to the suite was still cracked open and she peered in, ensuring it was still empty, before heading in and going toward her own room.

By the time she reached it, she was feeling quite accomplished, right up until the moment she pushed open her door and came face to face with the a spider of the size of a large dog crouching dead
center in the middle of her bed like some sort of obscene decorative pillow.
Bilba stared at the spider for several long minutes. Then, she carefully set her bowl of popcorn on a nearby table, turned on her heel, and calmly and quietly walked back out of the suite.

It only took a few minutes to find the children again. The smaller one, Kili as she recalled, was on his hands and knees looking behind a potted plant while the older child leaned against the opposite wall, watching him.

Bilba approached the older one, who looked up at her inquisitively.

"Shelly wouldn't happen to be a spider, would she?" she asked, impressed at her ability to keep her voice casual and level.

She thought she spoke quietly but apparently wasn't quiet enough as the dark-haired boy jerked out from behind the plant with an excited, "You found her?"

"Maybe," Bilba said slowly. Kili had been looking behind a plant that was far too small for the spider in her room to have hidden behind. "Either that or there's a second giant spider lurking about."

"Could be," the blond replied, pushing to a standing position. "Rock spiders are pretty common around here."

"I didn't need to know that," Bilba said simply. "Maybe I should get someone else, in case it's not her?"

That was a lie. She wasn't going to get anyone else. She'd just...start sleeping on the balcony or something, or the beach. Probably the beach, the balcony would be much too close to the spider.

"It's probably her." The older boy turned to Kili. "Come on."

Kili instantly fell in line alongside the older boy, the strange jumble of leashes, or whatever they were, still clutched in his hands. "You won't tell Amad, will you?" he asked, gazing up at her expectantly. "I'm not supposed to let Shelly out unless Fili is watching me, but he was too busy watching cartoons."

At this, he gave the older boy a dirty look, but Fili simply rolled his eyes in response. "Don't look at me like that. I told you five minutes, it's your own fault for being impatient."

Bilba frowned at them. "Wait, you two are brothers?"

The two swiveled to look at her with twin expressions of confusion. "Yeah," Fili said. "Why?"

"No reason," Bilba said, equally confused. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "All right, you can come see if it's your spider, I guess."

For a few seconds they all simply stared at one another awkwardly before she finally turned on her heel and headed back to her rooms. Fili and Kili walked alongside her happily and she wondered at the fact that they were so quick to trust.

Rosie complained about her going out into the city but that was because she didn't realize Bilba had only ever been in danger when she was inside a palace. The city, even a large one, was a playground in comparison.
They reached the suite and she went to grab the doorknob only to freeze as Kili piped up with, "Isn't this Uncle Thorin's room?"

Uncle Thorin?

Uncle Thorin?

Bilba's stomach clenched and a cold sweat broke out on her skin. She'd been hoping, really, really hoping these kids weren't related to the royal family but, instead, were maybe some random nobility or distant relation. She knew Thorin's sister had kids but hadn't really paid much mind to it, far more concerned with the bigger issues currently facing her.

Why, oh why, did they have to be his freaking nephews?

"This is Thorin's living room," she corrected inanely. "He lives on one side and I live on the other."

Fili tilted his head, studying her. "Are you the lady from the Shire?"

"That's me," Bilba whispered. Her hand tightened on the doorknob until her knuckles creaked and a wave of lightheadedness raced through her. Kids, she knew full well, could be so terribly cruel and, as pathetic as it sounded, she really didn't want to hear what awful things they had to say to her, courtesy of whatever it was their parents must be saying.

"Watir says you have horns and eat children," Kili said simply. "Do you?"

"What?" Bilba said in surprise. "What?" hadn't been on the list of things she'd expected to hear. "Of course not!"

"See?" Fili scoffed. "I told you so. Watir just a big, fat liar."

Kili frowned, looking quite put out. "Stupid Watir."

Bilba waited, but neither appeared as if they had anything else to say. That was...odd. Given how the press was portraying her, she'd half expected them to be the ones to insist she had horns, and then promptly run off screaming down the hall.

Wouldn't that look fantastic to their parents?

She could see it now.

Amad, the crazy Shire princess tried to eat us.

She'd be lucky if all she got was locked in a tower then.

With a barely concealed sigh, she pushed the door open, hoping to get the boys in and out again as fast as possible. If she were lucky, which she very rarely was, the entire incident would be so short it wouldn't warrant more than a blip on their memories of the day and they wouldn't mention it to their parents.

Kili chatted happily about nothing as they walked across the main room and Bilba couldn't help but shoot a nervous glance over her shoulder toward Thorin's room. Hopefully, he'd left at some point or, at the least, was so caught up in his bad mood that he would fail to notice, or care, about a small child chattering in the next room.

They arrived at her door and she instinctively put a hand on Fili's shoulder, stopping him from marching right in. She cringed immediately, expecting him to react poorly to a stranger touching him
but, to her surprise, he obediently stopped and allowed her to push the door open.

"Shelly!" Kili immediately shrieked and rushed inside before she could even think about trying to stop him. He managed to knock against the desk near the door as he did and the popcorn bowl, already precariously perched on the edge thanks to her inattention when she'd first seen the spider, proceeded to tilt over and fall. The bowl hit the floor with a loud clunk and proceeded to spray popcorn everywhere, before spinning loudly to a stop.

Bilba barely registered it as she watched Kili leap onto the bed beside a spider twice his size, if not more.

"It's fine," Fili said, giving her a sidelong look, arms crossed as he followed his brother inside. "She doesn't have fangs and her stinger has been removed."

"Not comforting," Bilba whispered. She crossed her own arms, from nerves rather than the self-confidence Fili was exhibiting, and chewed on her lower lip as Fili joined Kili in corralling the large creature. It seemed placid enough, merely skittering about on her bed as they worked to do whatever it was they were doing with the leash things Kili had.

Without warning, the spider launched itself off the bed, landing on the floor at its foot with a loud thunk. This brought it much too close to her for comfort and Bilba instantly jerked back a step, to put distance between her and it.

She started to take another step, only to come to a dead stop as her back slammed into something unyielding behind her. She frowned and turned, wondering what she'd hit. There wasn't a wall behind ---

Her body froze, and her brain went on full tilt as she found herself looking up, and up at Thorin bloody Durin.

Her arms, still crossed, went rigid and her fingers dug into her biceps until pain lanced through her nerves. Her heart squeezed so tight she was sure she was having a heart attack, and a rush of cold ran through her as if someone had dumped a bucket of water over her head. Her breath locked in her lungs, and her eyes went so wide she was slightly worried they might actually pop out of their sockets.

This was the guy her grandfather had married her too??

THIS was the guy????

Sure, she thought hysterically, she'd seen him briefly at the wedding, but she'd been a bit preoccupied with nearly passing out and hadn't exactly been paying attention. She barely remembered seeing him on the stairs later and, for the interviews, he'd been seated away from her for most of it and she'd been doing her best to ignore him entirely. Her clearest memory from then was of his hulking bodyguard sitting against the wall. She hadn't particularly noticed Thorin at all.

That had clearly been a mistake.
She'd seen a few pictures, so she knew what he looked like, and she'd heard him with Kyra enough to know he had a baritone but clearly, clearly, she should have paid a little more attention so as to be prepared for literally running into him one day.

He was built like a freaking mountain. Like, he was legitimately huge. Facing him as she was now, her nose came to right about his breastbone, and his shoulders were broad enough she was fairly certain two of her could stand behind him and not be noticed.

And none of that even took into account the fact that he was freaking, drop-dead gorgeous. She'd assumed it was all just editing and a really good stylist. He was a Crown Prince after all, how hard would it be to fix him up for broadcasts and photoshop him in photos to look his best?

Not hard at all, as it turned out, because they didn't.

It was just him, and, wow, that did absolutely nothing positive for her self-esteem.

"Ugh, Bilba, your voice is so obnoxious. I don't know how you stand listening to it all day."

"Poor child, inherited your father's looks, did you? Pity. Your mother was so pretty."

"Stand up straight, girl. You're mousey enough without adding in bad posture."

Bilba clenched her jaw and she turned away from Thorin, back tense.

Guys like him did not go for girls like her. They went for pretty, perfect girls with charisma and winning personalities. Perfect girls like...like...well, like Kyra.

Exactly like Kyra.

Dear, Yavanna, no wonder he and the rest of Erebor hated her. She'd literally upset the natural order of the universe.

"What's going on?" his voice rumbled behind her and she stiffened even further. He didn't sound particularly angry but, then, his nephews were present, and he could just be covering it for their sake. She uncrossed her arms and folded her hands together at her waist, using the move to surreptitiously dig one fingernail into the web of skin between the first and second finger on her other hand. The pain was sharp, and successfully drove back the burning sensation in the bridge of her nose. She'd learned the trick years ago, after her parents had died and she'd started having to endure constant berating by her grandfather and other family members.

Crying had only ever made it worse.

"Shelly got out," Kili said from inside the room. He'd gotten the straps in his hands around the spider in some configuration she couldn't figure out, and was now attempting to pull himself onto the creature's back. "It was Fili's fault."

Fili gave him an outraged look. "It was not."

He was in the process of helping Kili up and whatever else he might have said was cut off with a grunt as Kili accidentally kicked him in the face.

Once Kili was on, he gathered up some of the straps and, with a start, Bilba realized the spider was now wearing a harness and a variant of a bridle, reins going off it to be clutched in Kili's hands.
Fili clambered up behind him, putting his arms around the smaller boy to hold onto him and then, with a slight movement, they urged the spider toward the door. Bilba moved to the side, managing to avoid Thorin and the spider. It came waddling out, boys happily perched on its back, and Bilba made a mental note to burn her bedding, and possibly the bed itself, after it had left.

"Your mother will be discussing this with you later," Thorin said as they went past. "You know the rules. You only get to keep Shelly if she's controlled. We don't need her terrorizing the staff."

Kili's shoulders slumped and he heaved a melodramatic sigh. "Yes, Uncle."

They headed out the door into the hall, Fili pulling it closed behind him, and then it was just her and Thorin, alone.

Just what she never wanted.

A heavy silence fell over the suite. Bilba stayed where she was, pressed against the wall with her arms once again crossed and her eyes focused on her feet. Thorin stood a few feet away, from her angle all she could see were his legs. If she were lucky, he'd just leave, and they could both go on ignoring one another as they'd been doing.

Thorin took a deep breath, and her heart sunk. Figures she wouldn't be that lucky.

"I assume you'll be cleaning that up," he said shortly, indicating the popcorn, before turning and heading back toward his room.

Bilba blinked, once, and then again.

Don't do it, she mentally told herself.

Don't.

"Of course," her lips said, almost as if on their own, "we wouldn't want it to be dirty when your mistress comes calling, would we?"

Thorin stopped in his tracks, and Bilba wished desperately she could sink right through the floor and disappear. This, this was what always got her in trouble. Her tantrum after the marriage, running off without a plan to try and join Bofur, thinking she'd outwitted her grandfather with the dowry. Her refusal to just stay down and it never worked out well for her, not even once. All it got her was a ride in the limo or a stay in the tower, or the hatred of an entire kingdom and royal family. It never worked out well for her and yet, for some inane, stupid reason, she couldn't seem to help herself.

"What was that?" Thorin asked. He turned to face her once again and Bilba felt a jolt of fear race through her, partially dousing the anger his initial comment had caused. His voice was lower than it had been, and Bilba felt a red flag start waving frantically at the back of her mind.

This flag, and the jolt of fear unfortunately, were not enough to dampen the rising wave of anger enough to get her to shut her mouth.

It never was, and therein lay her biggest fault. It was just so unfair.

She couldn't stand it.

"You heard me the first time," she said shortly.

Something in his eyes flashed and he advanced a few steps. Bilba slid along the wall until she'd
reached her doorway and stood in it, facing him.

"Kyra is my fiancée," he said, voice nearly a growl.

Bilba rolled her eyes so hard she nearly gave herself a concussion. A cornered animal, Bofur had once said. The more her back was against a proverbial wall the harder she lashed out, no matter how bad, or outright stupid, such an action might be. "Oh, is that what they call it over here? I'm sorry, your 'fiancée'." She used air quotes as she said it. She hated it when people used air quotes and, judging by the light flashing in Thorin's eyes, so did he.

"She wouldn't be in this situation at all if it weren't for your grandfather," Thorin bit out. His hands, at his sides, were clenched in fists and there was a vein visibly throbbing by his left temple.

It was not an attractive look, or a particularly frightening one. He was nowhere near the level of pure rage her grandfather, or some of his people, could reach.

"At least my grandfather was only with one woman at a time," Bilba spat back. "I guess Erebor really is just that different of a place. In Shire, you can have a fiancée or a wife, not both."

"You have no right to judge me," Thorin practically bellowed, voice rising. "What I have given up--"

Something inside Bilba snapped, and that was never a good thing. It was that very thing that had sent her of rampaging through the palace and look where that had gotten her?

"What?" she shouted back at him. "What have you given up? Your kingdom?" she made a show of looking around dramatically. "Nope, still here. Your friends? Your family?" That last one was actually a plus for her, but she was so angry she wasn't going to skimp on the accusations she threw at him. "Tell me, Asshole? What have you given up? You can't even look me in the eye and tell me you've given up your fiancée! You have literally given up nothing!" She took a step forward of her own, a small one to be sure, but still it was there, and raised a finger to point at him. "So, don't you think you're going to stand there and talk to me about loss, when you haven't given up one, single, goddamn thing!"

It came all came out in a rush, and it wasn't all necessarily aimed at him. The rage in her voice, enough to bring a flush to her face and tears of pure anger to her eyes, went much, much deeper than the last month. It was just the tip of a very old, deeply buried, rage hidden under layers upon layers of fear and despair. The fact Thorin had somehow managed to get under her fear and piss her off the way he had, was impressive.

It was also terrifying.

As with every other time in her life when she'd lost control Bilba had about five seconds of satisfaction and relief, before reality came crashing back in like a bucket of ice cold water dumped on her head.

In this case, reality being that she'd just screamed at Thorin Durin and, if she were lucky, the only thing she'd get would be the tower.

She'd argued with her grandfather before. Debated, pleaded, outright begged, bargained and even defied him a few times.

She'd only screamed at him once.
Thorin had gone silent while she'd ranted, and now was staring at her with a look she couldn't begin to read. His hands were still clenched at his sides and his body was straight, but the vein was no longer throbbing in his forehead.

She wasn't sure if that were a good thing or a bad thing. One of her aunts had the habit of going silent when angry, and the quieter she got the more trouble you were in.

Suddenly, Thorin took a step forward. In an instant, her mind erased him, and it was suddenly her grandfather striding toward her, face twisted in rage and hand raised to backhand her back into submission.

Bilba let out a strangled sound and leapt into her room, slamming the door behind her. She barely managed to fumble the lock closed before the knob started to turn, and the door began to rattle.

He said something, her grandfather or Thorin or whoever it was on the other side of the door, but she couldn't hear what it was over the sound of her own blood roaring in her ears.

Yavanna, if there was one thing worse than being openly defiant, it was not standing and facing her punishment afterward.

He was going to kill her.

She fell to her knees at her bedside, flinching at the sharp pain as her kneecaps impacted the floor with a heavy thud. She reached under the frame and dragged out the baggy, oversized jeans, shirt, hat and sunglasses she'd stashed the night before, scrambled to her feet so fast she nearly fell, and ran out the balcony doors.

Her breath was harsh in her own ears as she took the rocky steps to the beach two at a time. Once there she changed under an outcropping, fingers shaking so bad it was all she could do to get the shirt buttoned and her hair braided and hidden under the hat. Her mind’s terrified conviction that he was coming after her made her fingers thick and unwieldy, and she let out an inarticulate whimper as they refused to move as fast as she wanted.

The second it was done she was running again, straight to the passageway hidden in the rocks.

She didn't remember Rosie was waiting for her to call back until she was nearly halfway up the beach on the other side.

She didn't stop running until long after that.
Thorin leaned back in his chair, leather and wood protesting as he forced it to the limits of its factory specs. Most furniture wasn't made for people his size. He'd had companies offer to build him a custom one, but he'd refused. His family had never been one to accept special treatment, and he wouldn't be the first to break the tradition.

He propped one foot on his opposite knee and braced his elbow on the armrest, absently squeezing a stress ball as he stared out the window. He had a drawer filled with the things, and the cleaning crew was forever complaining about their vacuums clogging on the nearly invisible gel bits that invariably ended up littering the floor after he broke one.

His office was on the side of the palace that faced the ocean, as were most of the offices and royal suites. Probably not the best decision, security wise, but when presented with such a view it was difficult to expect anyone to agree to take a room that didn't showcase it.

And it was a stunning view, one he probably didn't appreciate near often enough. There was a storm brewing now, a far-off bank of dark clouds boiling on the horizon. Beneath it, though too far off to see, he could imagine the water churning, biting winds driving massive waves while thunder rolled, and lightning cracked overhead in a miasma of violence and turmoil.

Before it all, the sky was a brilliant blue with a bright sun, calm water and seagulls lazily drifting on gentle currents, completely blind to the tempest slowly advancing upon them.

The symbolism was a bit too on the nose and, with a grumble of annoyance, he twisted around in his chair to face his desk. The stack of paperwork he needed to get to taunted him, as did his complete and utter lack of desire to actually do any of it.

The argument with his father ran through his head and he scowled. He had a right to be angry, damnit. His entire life had been turned upside down. His and Kyra's both. He'd --

"You haven't given up one single, goddamn thing!"

His hand clenched viciously on the stress ball. She was wrong. Kyra might still be in his life, but she'd been lost to him all the same. He could never kiss her again, or hold her, and the future they'd once dreamed of together, the family...was gone, lost like so much smoke in the wind.

He didn't realize how tightly he'd been gripping the stress ball and, without warning, it unceremoniously popped, tiny gel pods cascading across his desk and down onto his lap and the floor.

He cursed, pushing back and standing up to brush off his pants and desk top. He shoved his chair in, hard enough to make his entire desk rattle, and started to head toward the door, intending to head down to one of the sparring rooms. Maybe he'd see if Dwalin was free, or even if Gareth was still around and able to spare a few moments.

His hand closed around the doorknob --

"Are you finally interested in acting like a prince again? Or is it just because your sparring partner is here and you've nothing better to do with your time?"

He froze.
Fantastic. The last thing he wanted to do was prove his father right. He forced himself to turn around and face the desk again, and the paperwork waiting for him. He started to take a step forward, only to stop again as the memory of the fight with his father reminded him that Kyra had been there and he’d planned to go see her to make sure she was all right. He’d just been distracted trying to calm himself down first and then by --

"I guess Erebor really is just that different of a place. In Shire, you can have a fiancée or a wife, not both."

A flush of anger washed over him, but it was heavily tinged with an equal burst of shame.

She wasn't wrong.

He'd seen the looks from the staff, and heard more than one of the rumors. Some of the smaller news outlets had even done roundtables on whether the Crown Prince of Erebor was not just cheating on his wife, but openly flaunting it.

He'd ignored it, because he knew the truth, and it wasn't as if anyone should care...but that wasn't exactly a rational decision now that he thought about it, was it? A stubborn one to be sure, a purposefully obtuse one...but nowhere near the best one. He knew people believed what they wanted, and he'd certainly given them enough to fuel their imaginations.

The shame intensified, breaking through the thick wall of anger that had been hanging over him for what felt like forever. Erebor prided itself on her honor. It was the shield they put forth to inspire and hold the loyalty of their people, and to try and garner the loyalty of other kingdoms.

He'd let Erebor down.

He'd let her down but, worse than that, he'd let Kyra down. Having her in his quarters was simply idiotic. He'd damaged not just her reputation in the palace, but potentially amongst other kingdoms as well. She was an ambassador for Mahal's sake. Her reputation, and honor, was of vital importance if she wanted other governments to trust her word and listen to her when she was sent to negotiate with them. A rumor that she was openly carrying on an extramarital affair, no matter the circumstances, could destroy her career, something she'd worked a lifetime to build.

He'd told himself his anger was mostly for her and the pain she'd suffered, and then he'd gone and not given her any thought at all when it came to protecting her reputation.

"You are acting like a child!" his father's voice roared in his head, and he grimaced.

Damn it all.

He ran a hand back through his hair, residual anger draining away as his attitude over the past few months presented itself to him in sharp relief. He did have a right to be angry, but he didn't have a right to act like a prat about it, and he certainly didn't have the right to drag Kyra down into the mire with him.

His mind went to his small nephews, and he shook his head in irritation. What was he thinking? Vili had gone missing when Fili was barely young enough to remember him, and Kili hadn't even been born. His father was too busy to spend much time with them, and Frerin was more of a big brother than an uncle.
That left him to fulfill the role of a father figure, and he didn't have the right to screw it up the way he'd been doing. What did they think of the way he'd been acting?

He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Thinking of them brought the Shire Princess to mind, specifically the expression in her eyes right before she'd run into her room.

Fear.

It was not what he'd expected. Anger, certainly; possibly disdain or haughtiness. Any of those, and a thousand more, but fear?

He'd given her no reason to fear him.

Not to mention that, in spite of the fear, she'd still come at him. He could admit the comment about the popcorn had been out of line. He'd been angry, and had lashed out when he shouldn't have. It had been petty, and beneath him. Her reaction, though, combined with her expression...it was a contradiction, and not at all what he would have predicted.

He'd have expected her to react like the snob the press painted her as, and that she appeared to be from what he'd seen of her, in person and on the news.

She hadn't.

He might buy her lashing out if she were the spy Nori worried she might be. Playing a role to try and keep suspicion off or...something...

Maybe.

Nothing explained the fear.

Thorin would freely admit he wasn't perfect, but he was not a man that had ever caused a woman to look at him with fear in her eyes.

She had, and he didn't like it.

He'd tried to talk to her after, but she'd refused to open the door, and he couldn't say he blamed her. Even if he believed all the media reports, even had she been as haughty and spoiled as he'd expected, it still wouldn't have been an excuse for his own actions.

He shouldn't have had Kyra in his rooms, and he shouldn't have mouthed off to the Shire girl like some sort of petulant teenager. He thought back to the first real memory he had of her at the wedding, where she'd been little more than a shrouded statue.

After that had been the news that she was rampaging through the palace, throwing what was apparently the tantrum to end all tantrums. His second memory had been of her marching up the stairs after reportedly heading out to party.

He'd used her bad behavior, and his own anger, to justify behaving poorly himself, and what did that say about him?

Nothing good.
He sighed. Honestly, he should have spoken to her before then, or at least made the effort. She'd refused every invitation to meals, and had rejected her schedule, so it was unlikely he'd have gotten a favorable response but at least he'd have been able to say he tried.

Coming to a decision, Thorin strode to the door and headed out into the hall. He didn't bother going back to his quarters. He doubted the girl would answer her door if he knocked again but, fortunately, he didn't need to go to the source to get answers to his questions.

One of the perks of royalty.

He had a spymaster.

---

"No."

Thorin blinked in surprise. "Excuse me?"

On the other side of the desk, Nori raised an eyebrow. "Does such an answer really need clarification, your Highness?"

Thorin's eyes narrowed and, for not the first time or probably the last, he resisted the urge to throttle the other man.

Nori, for his part, seemed entirely nonplussed. He was leaning back in his chair, elbows propped on the armrests and fingers steepled in a way that made him look like he was plotting something.

He probably was.

"Do you have a file on her?" Thorin tried again, hoping to prick the man's pride just a bit. It was manipulative, but if it got him what he wanted....

It didn't.

Nori's eyebrow went high enough that Thorin was fairly certain it defied a law of physics somewhere, not to mention it was simply insulting, and looked amused. "I don't make a habit of handing out private information I've gathered on members of the royal family."

Thorin frowned, and almost asked what he was talking about before remembering that, yes, technically the girl actually was a member of the royal family now. "You didn't mind mentioning she's sneaking about and might be a spy."


"She's my wife," Thorin tried.

The look Nori gave him was so pointed that even Thorin had to concede the attempt was pitiful. "With all due respect, your Highness, I don't think it's quite fair to acknowledge her only when it suits your fancy."
Thorin felt his proverbial hackles rise, but simply gritted his teeth and ignored it. His father kept people like Nori and Dwalin around for a reason. Able to speak their mind without fear of reprisal, it ensured the royal family stayed humble. In addition, they served as a course correction when necessary, able to use their sharp tongues to get through to bullheaded, wayward royals when even their own family members might be too nervous to speak.

Thorin didn't like what Nori was saying, but that didn't mean he didn't have a point.

"Fine," he growled through a clenched jaw. "What would you suggest I do then?"

Nori shrugged. "You could try talking to her."

"I thought you wanted me to stay away from her," Thorin challenged wryly, "on account of her potentially being a spy."

"You've been warned," Nori said simply. "I'm sure you can handle yourself."

Thorin's eyes narrowed. "It is just me or is this a rather abrupt tonal shift?"

"Is it?" Nori pushed to his feet and idly walked over to his bookcase, stuffed full of tomes, half of which boasted titles Thorin couldn't even pronounce, and he knew all ten languages of Middle Earth. Next to the bookcases were tall file cabinets stuffed full with his notes and private files, because apparently everyone in Erebor was paranoid and didn't trust electronics.

For the important things anyway. Most of them had Ravenhill accounts on the advice of Balin who felt it would make them seem more approachable and known to their subjects. Frerin was the only one who insisted on running his own account, flooding it with photos and videos and posts. He had a near obscene number of followers, many of them dreaming of winning themselves a prince.

Nori gave him an amused look and opened one of the file cabinets, reaching in almost without looking and withdrawing a file folder.

"Tell you what, your Highness," he said, waving the folder in one hand. "I'll let you have her file on one condition."

Thorin raised an eyebrow, suspiciously. "What is it?"

Nori grinned brilliantly. "Tell me her name."

Thorin blinked, and then frowned. "Don't be an idiot, Nori. I know her damn name."

"Great." Nori leaned back against the bookcase next to the file cabinet and crossed his arms, absently tapping the folder against his side. "It shouldn't be a problem for you then."

Thorin gave him a disgusted look. He opened his mouth to answer, only to freeze as his mind flatly refused to produce the girl's name. He shifted in his chair, irritated. For Mahal's sake, they'd just been discussing her in his father's office not more than an hour ago. Surely, her name must have been mentioned then.

Nori was still watching him, and Thorin felt a flush of embarrassment that quickly morphed into annoyance. "Why should it even matter?" he growled, defensive. "You expect me to know the name of every person in the palace?"

Nori studied him, a knowing look in his eyes. "Still not quite there yet, are you?" he murmured, cryptically.
"What's that supposed to mean?" Thorin demanded.

Nori merely gave him another knowing look before turning to replace the file, slamming the drawer hard enough to give it what he probably thought was an appropriately dramatic feel.

A light knock sounded on the door, and Nori got the excited look he always did when he was about to interrogate someone.

Thorin frowned at him in confusion, and got up to open the door. On the other side, he was startled to see the palace's head housekeeper and head butler.

"Your Highness!" Dardren explained in surprise, and immediately attempted to bow, his wife next to him.

"No," Thorin said immediately, putting his hands out. "Please, don't.

Both Dardren and his wife were much too old to be able to comfortably bow or courtesy any longer, and were generally allowed to get away with simply inclining their heads. Clearly the surprise of seeing him had startled them enough to send them back into old habits.

As they struggled to comply, Thorin looked over his shoulder to glare at Nori, who shrugged and looked entirely unrepentant. "Come in, you two," he said cheerfully.

Hadrā gave Thorin a nervous look before quietly shuffling past him into the office.

"Nori," Thorin warned through gritted teeth.

Nori rolled his eyes and came over to usher him out the door. "Relax," he muttered under his breath. "I'm not a monster." He managed to get Thorin into the hallway, and put one hand on the door frame and the other on the door. "On the other hand," he added, "if you don't want to end up in my office, I suggest not pissing me off."

He gave Thorin a bright, slightly edged grin, and shut the door firmly, leaving Thorin in the hallway.

Thorin hesitated, but then shook his head and turned to head down the hall. He either trusted Nori or he didn't. Nori had never been known to target someone maliciously, so if he wanted to talk to the couple there was a reason for it. It might seem unlikely but, then again, so had the thought of them being driven into exile by Smaug. They needed someone to look for the unexpected, and that someone had always been Nori.

Pulling his mind away from it, Thorin tried to focus on the rest of his day. It was approaching lunch but, aware he hadn't gotten any work done yet, he decided to have it sent to his office.

He made it back to his office, and stood in the doorway with a frown. The room was relatively large, paneled in dark wood, mahogany and leather. Kyra had designed it and, while it was beautiful and gave an impression of strength and maturity to visitors, it could also be a bit on the dark side and somewhat claustrophobic.

He hesitated, an idea slowly taking shape as he studied the stack of paperwork on his desk. His mind went back to that locked door, and Nori's insistence that he talk to the Shire girl. The fact Nori had managed to catch him out on now knowing her name was obnoxious, and not something he planned to allow to happen again.

She was currently locked in her room, but there was only one way for her to get from there into the rest of the palace, and that was through the suite.
She'd have to come out eventually, right? After all, everyone had to eat.

Decision made, he grabbed the phone receiver from its cradle where it sat on the corner of his desk and called down to reroute his lunch to his rooms.

He gathered up the huge stack of paperwork and started to head in that direction, only for his footsteps to slow as he saw Kyra heading toward him from her own office.

"Kyra," he said, as she reached him. "Are you all right? I know my father was a bit intense."

She laughed. "No worries, I've dealt with far worse than him. I just figured it was best to get out of the way until things cooled down."

"Fair enough," he agreed.

"Are you ready for lunch?" Kyra asked, clasping her hands in front of her. "I was kind of waiting for you to come get me, but I got a little impatient."

"Oh, right." Fantastic. Thorin mentally kicked himself. Having lunch with her was part of his daily routine for Mahal's sake. He got thrown off his game just a little and it threw his entire day off? Pathetic.

He opened his mouth to tell her he'd already sent for a meal, and that he could have it rerouted to his office again, only to pause as he saw a maid walking by. The young woman, who he didn't recognize, gave them both a knowing look before putting her head down and hurrying past.

Damn it.

"I'm actually planning to have a working lunch in my rooms today," he said, nodding to the stack of paper in his arms.

"Oh," Kyra said. "That's fine. I can grab my own work and join you."

Thorin hesitated. "Maybe another time. You know how easily I get distracted. I'm already behind what with my father and then everything with the boys and the Shire Princess."

Kyra looked startled. "Bilba? When were you talking to her? And the boys? You mean Fili and Kili?"

Bilba, Thorin thought, pleased. That was her name. He knew that.

A few other servants walked by, and Thorin scowled. This was not the sort of conversation he wanted to be having in the middle of the hallway. "It was just a misunderstanding. I was hoping she'd come out at some point, so I could clear it up."

"That's why you want to eat in your suite?" Kyra asked, crossing her arms. "Because you want to talk to her?"

"I should at some point," Thorin said, trying to force a grin. "She lives here now. It might be nice if we could at least be civil to one another."

And if he could find out who in the name of Mahal she even was. So far, to believe everything he'd seen and read, she was a spoiled spy who trekked into the middle of downtown alone at night and stood toe to toe with him, only then immediately run away in fear seconds later.

She was a paradox in about five different ways, and he very much wanted to know why.
"Oh." Kyra had a strange tone in her voice, not one he'd really heard from her before, and he frowned in concern.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Of course." Her eyes flickered to a passing security guard and her lips thinned in annoyance. "You know what? It's fine. I just remembered something I wanted to get done. I'll probably just do a working lunch too." She smiled up at him. "So, I'll see you this evening then?"

"For dinner." Thorin agreed. He knew he needed to say more, make it clear that there would be no more meetings in his room, for her sake more than his own, but it was a conversation that could so easily be misinterpreted and result in hurt feelings, and it just simply wasn't something to be discussed in the middle of the bloody hall.

Something in Kyra's eyes cooled, and Thorin had a sudden feeling she'd picked up on what he was saying, and he'd managed to muck it up without even trying. "Kyra--"

"It's fine." She stepped back. "I really need to get going, calls to make and all. I'll talk to you this evening, at dinner."

She was gone before he could say anything else, leaving him standing in the hall with his paperwork in his arms. He cursed under his breath and almost, almost went after her, only to realize how bad it would look to be chasing after another woman who just so happened to be the same one he'd been inviting into his quarters every evening.

He sighed. It had been so much easier before all this mess with the Thain.

Deciding he'd talk to her later as she'd asked, he resumed his trek to his rooms. By the time he'd arrived, the stewards had already come and gone, setting up a full spread on the dining room table near the back of the rooms. It stood on a raised platform that was backed by the balcony doors and a wall of glass, giving a spectacular view out over the ocean.

Thorin settled his work down, anchoring it with a book he snatched from his room, and then threw open the balcony doors to let the outside air in. The storm on the horizon was closer, but not yet near enough to dramatically alter the temperature so he figured he had some time before he'd have to close the doors.

He adored watching storms from the safety of his rooms, and this one looked like it would be an intense one once it finally came onshore.

A burst of excitement filled him at the thought and he sat down to work and eat with a renewed gusto.

On the far side of the room, the door to Bilba's room remained firmly closed but he didn't let it bother him. She'd have to come out eventually and then, perhaps, he'd finally get his answers.

Until then, however, he was going to get his work done and enjoy watching the storm come in.
Bilba went to Bombur's Bakery.

Not immediately. It took time for the fear to fade and, once it did, it left her feeling numb and drained. She ended up sitting on an ornate, concrete bench she found in a cobblestone square. There was a fountain in the center of it, built from marble and featuring multiple levels and streams of water in alternating patterns.

Bilba wasn't sure how long she sat and mindlessly stared at it, at least long enough to memorize the patterns. It was also long enough for the temperature to drop and a chill wind to kick up, cutting through her clothes and threatening to rip her hat from her head. Erebor had been, at best, cool every day since she'd arrived but she was hopeful it was seasonal and warmer temperatures might lay somewhere in the future.

Eventually, she found the will to push herself to her feet, arms crossed, and start walking. She had to ask for directions, multiple times before she found someone who knew the bakery. Luckily for her, it seemed the exile had resulted in a multilingual population and she had no problem finding people who spoke Common.

The down side was she received many startled looks that suggested her disguise wasn't nearly as good as she'd hoped. No one said anything, however, and she hoped the lack of security, or any other palace trappings was enough to convince people she was little more than an unfortunate lookalike.

Bombur's Bakery was further inland, and deeper inside the city. As she got farther from the waterfront she was gratified to find the temperature increased a little. The constant sound of the waves faded as well and, if she concentrated hard enough, she could almost lie to herself and pretend she was back in Shire.

Not that Shire had a city anywhere near this big, or this crowded, but she could still pretend a little. Back home in Shire, in her school where her only worries were midterms, ballet rehearsals and the distant worry that her grandfather might suddenly decide to order her back to the palace for a visit.

No concerns about being ripped apart by the media in a firestorm that never seemed to abate, no fears about reminding anyone she existed and, most definitely, no worries about letting her mouth run amok and pissing off the freaking mountain she'd been married to.

Good job on that one, Bilba.

She rounded a corner, and relaxed as she spotted the bakery. It was about halfway down the street, a dark blue, wooden storefront sandwiched between much larger, multi-level stores on either side. A marquee across the top proudly proclaimed "Bombur's Bakery" in giant, stylized, silver letters. Two, large bay windows featured baked goods of all kinds displayed on plates and set on tiered levels draped in silk cloth.

A long line of people wound out the door, and partway down the street, suggesting Bofur's constant bragging about how great a baker his brother was hadn't been exaggerated.

Bilba carefully got in line and waited her turn. If there was one thing she was good at, it was patience, and the ability to deal with long stretches of nothingness. As the line slowly moved, she idly watched people on the street as they hurried about their business.
She'd always enjoyed people watching. Back in Shire, she'd sometimes sit in a park or at a coffee shop and simply watch the world pass by. Here, with more people, it was even more fun. There was a man in a suit rushing past who she imagined was late to an important meeting because he'd paused to help his daughter tie her shoes. A young woman on a phone she pretended was planning a lunch with her mother, and a couple was window shopping for what she envisioned were clothes they planned to wear on their honeymoon.

A shadow passed over her and she glanced up to see a few, fat clouds drifting lazily across the face of the sun. They were gray, and she hoped it didn't mean rain was on the way. There were only a handful, however, and it was the coast after all, clouds and such came in all the time from there, right? That vaguely seemed correct, not that she could put a finger on where she'd acquired the information.

The line reached the door finally, and she stepped across the threshold. A rush of warm air washed over her, and she sighed in relief at the contrast from the increasingly chilly temperatures that seemed to be chasing her from the water outside. The inside of the bakery was small but felt homey rather than claustrophobic. The floor was tiled in black and white squares, with round, delicate looking tables draped with white tablecloths. The counter, a classic glass fronted bakery display case, split the room in half, featuring all the delicious items from the window plus more. Employees in dark uniforms moved in an intricate, almost choreographed dance at four different registers as they took orders and payments before passing bags and boxes of baked good to waiting guests.

From behind the case, part of the wall had been cut out to reveal the kitchen, where people in hairnets and aprons pulled desserts from the oven and knelt over tables decorating with piping bags filled with colorful icing. The smells emanating from there, and filling the room, were amazing and Bilba's stomach grumbled as it reminded her she hadn't had lunch, or even her popcorn, before rushing out of the palace. Tragically, she had no money, so she'd have to console herself with the smell and sights and simply imagine it tasted as good as it looked.

She reached the front and was called to a register by a young woman with platinum blonde hair tied back in a high ponytail.

"Hi," she said happily, as Bilba approached. "Welcome to Bombur's Bakery! What can I get for you?"

Bilba hesitated. "Actually, I was hoping to speak to Bombur, if I could? I'm a --" she stumbled briefly, before managing, "friend of his brother, Bofur."

She tensed as she spoke. She really hadn't thought this through, again. There was no reason to believe anyone even knew Bombur had a brother, much less his name, and the fact Bilba knew it didn't necessarily mean anything. She could just be some random person who'd come across the information online and was hoping to take advantage of it to get some free food.

The woman gave her a bright smile. "One second."

She spun and walked through a double set of doors leading into the kitchen. Behind her, Bilba blinked in surprise, the knots in her stomach unknotting a little. That had gone...far better than she'd expected.

The doors opened, and a very large man with red hair and a bright smile came walking out. He had on chef’s whites and was in the process of dusting flour off his hands as he came to a small, swinging door set near the wall. His eyes settled on her and positively lit up, before his mouth opened, lips already forming her name.
Eyes wide, Bilba shook her head frantically. She saw understanding dawn, and his lips snapped shut, though his smile didn't fade. He came out from behind the counter and Bilba found her hand literally engulfed in his as he gave her a firm, but gentle, handshake.

"My dear," he said jovially. "You are as beautiful as the pictures Bofur sent. I've been hoping you would come to visit."

Before she could say anything, he put a hand on her shoulder and ushered her behind the counter and into the kitchens, cheerfully talking about Bofur, and all the wonderful things he'd said about her on the way.

The knowledge that Bofur had apparently been so enthusiastic about her brought a wave of sadness. Bombur didn't seem to notice, and Bilba had no doubt he was simply trying to compliment her, and brag about his brother at the same time, so she didn't hold it against him. She'd been doing well handling the forced break up with Bofur, and the inability to speak with him any longer, mostly by doing her best not to think about it, but anyone with sense would have realized going to see his brother would dredge it all up again.

Not that she'd ever been mistaken for someone with a lot of sense, at least not according to her grandfather and the rest of her family.

Bombur opened a door into a small, tidy office, and gestured her toward a comfortable looking chair in front of a well-worn desk covered with a mix of paperwork, cooking utensils, and at least three cookbooks with Bombur's name and face splashed across the cover. A thick manuscript sat next to them, with the title "101 Desserts to (not) Diet For." The rest of the room was given to mismatched bookcases filled with even more books and reference guides, as well as several shelves given to what looked like a litany of baking and cooking related awards. It was messy, but homely at the same time. It felt...lived in, not like Bombur was trying to show off or present some sort of mask or persona. He was just...himself. What you saw was what you got.

"Sit, sit." Bombur gestured at the chair before pulling the door almost closed and going to sit behind the desk.

Bilba obeyed, before hesitantly starting, "I don't know what Bofur has told you--"

"Oh, everything, everything," Bombur interrupted, flapping his hand absently. "It's just terrible, the whole thing. Just terrible, my dear." He folded his hands on the desk and gave her a concerned look. "How are you doing?"

Bilba blinked and was horrified to find her eyes welling up. Rosie asked her all the time how she was, but this was the first time anyone in Erebor had asked, or even bothered talking to her at all aside from the brief interaction she'd had with Cerys and Gareth at the movie theater.

The interaction with his royal arsehole didn't count.

Bombur jumped to his feet and got a tissue for her, before coming around the desk and sitting in a second chair next to hers. He scooted his chair around to face hers and gently took her free hand in both of his. "No one has harmed you, have they?"

"No." Bilba gave a watery laugh. She squeezed his hand and took a deep breath. "Sorry. I must seem a mess."

"Not at all, my dear," he said gently, patting her hand. "You've been through a great deal, and the media hasn't helped." He frowned. "Honestly, I would have expected it to have died down by now.
You know how fickle the media can be, and with you giving them nothing new to work with..."

Bilba shrugged. Privately, she would guess her grandfather had something to do with it, but the thought was too terrifying to truly contemplate as it would mean his reach, and power, was far, far greater than she'd ever thought. If his reach extended outside Shire, then it would mean there was nowhere in Middle Earth where she could be safe from him.

"I didn't mean to hurt Bofur," she said, choosing to ignore the comment about the media altogether. "If I'd had any choice in the matter--"

"I know," Bombur said. "Bofur made it quite clear whose fault he felt it was."

Of course, Bofur wouldn't blame her, Bilba thought with a flash of bitterness. That was because he was a genuinely good and decent person, unlike the short-tempered, unfaithful, narcissistic jerk her grandfather had shackled her to. She should have realized her grandfather would never let her stay with someone like Bofur. He was determined to make her as miserable as he'd made her parents.

An image of her mother, crying in a chair as her father tried to comfort her, flashed through her mind. It hadn't been the first time such a scene had played out as the Thain had found some new way to hurt them, and far from the last.

She clenched her teeth, anger spiking through her. Trying, she corrected herself firmly. He was trying to make her life miserable. That didn't mean she needed to lie down and take it, no matter how badly he scared her.

"Bofur said to come here if I needed anything," she started hesitantly. "I don't want to intrude, or put any pressure on you, and I completely understand if you say no... but...I was hoping...maybe...you might have a job I could do?" She rushed on, nearly running her words together as she added, "It doesn't have to be anything big. I'm happy to take out the trash cans and sweep the floors if that's what you need."

Bombur gave her an incredulous look. "You want me to hire the Crown Princess to sweep floors?" He frowned. "Why would you even want to? Surely you have plenty of money from the palace?"

Bilba shrugged. "I've never much thought of myself as a princess. I mostly lived a normal life back in Shire, and I was used to taking care of myself. I don't like feeling indebted to anyone."

It wasn't a great answer, but she was hesitant to go into any detail. Bombur, after all, was from Erebor. She didn't know him, and while he might like her for Bofur's sake, it didn't mean he would settle for her disparaging his king or the royal family. Best to let him think she was simply a noble being quirky and eccentric.

Bombur frowned. "I need a new decorator. What do you think?"

Bilba's heart jumped at how quickly the offer was made and she sat up straighter. "I've never done it, but I'm a good artist. I can draw. Would that help?"

"Couldn't hurt." Bombur's eyes narrowed suddenly. "You're not here on your own, are you? I can't imagine the palace thinking that would be a good idea."

"Oh, you know palace security," Bilba said airily, even as she internally cringed with guilt at lying to him. "They wouldn't be much good if you could see them."

"I suppose." Bombur didn't look quite convinced, but after a second, he simply shrugged and said, "How about you come back here around seven tomorrow, and we'll see if we can get you started?"
Bilba let out a short shriek and impulsively threw herself forward to wrap her arms around his neck and hug him. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

He chuckled and patted her on the back. "Any friend of Bofur's is a friend of mine." He stood and put out a hand, that she quickly took to allow him to pull her to her feet. "I imagine you prefer no one know you by your real identity?"

Bilba nodded. "I'll try to come up with a name I'll actually remember to answer to."

"I'll have to pay you cash then," Bombur said slowly. "Under the table, as I imagine you can't get a bank account under a false name."

Bilba felt her face heat. "Will that be all right?" she asked nervously, wringing her hands together. "I don't want you to do anything that would make you uncomfortable."

"It's fine," Bombur said, waving a hand absently. He patted her on the shoulder and then reached to reopen the door. "Tomorrow at seven, yes?"

Bilba nodded. "Tomorrow at seven."

She gave him a brilliant smile, and practically skipped out the door. For the first time, something was going her way.

The good mood continued, all the way across the bakery's front room and to the door, right up until she opened it and an earth-shattering boom of thunder snapped her out of her exhilaration and had her head snapping up to see what could only be described as a torrential downpour doing its very best to drown Erebor. An ice-cold burst of wind tossed a sheet of water straight at her and a chorus of voices behind her yelled at her to shut the damn door already.

Bilba obeyed slowly, and then carefully stepped to one side to look out the large bay window at the downpour.

Apparently, her grandfather wasn't the only one who couldn't stand to see her happy. Erebor itself seemed out to get her, ensuring there was no possible way she could make it through the passageway and stranding her for Yavanna knew how long.

Oh well, she thought, refusing to let it dampen her good mood. It was barely afternoon, and she was in a dry place. Surely the rain would have cleared up by that evening and she could make her way back. The storm had come in ridiculously fast, so it'd go out just as fast too, right? It wouldn't be fun, but it wasn't the worst thing in the world. She could wait it out. She could --

"You're the Shire princess, aren't you?"

Bilba's insides turned to ice and she sucked in a short breath as shock rattled through her. Slowly, she turned to face the voice that had spoken behind her. The long line had dissipated with the change of the weather, and the room was empty save for a handful of people scattered amongst the few tables. Even the employees behind the registers had vanished back into the kitchen, where the loud clatter of dishes and voices drowned out anything happening in the front.

"Excuse me?" she asked. The person who'd addressed her was a tall, skinny young man with dirty blonde hair, and dressed in slacks and a dress shirt. He'd stood up from a table near her and was standing only a few feet away.

"The Shire princess," he repeated. "The one they forced on the crown prince."
The room was relatively quiet, outside of the rain pounding the sidewalk just outside the door and the howling of the wind. The man's voice carried, and Bilba saw several others in the small room look up in surprise.

Bilba rolled her eyes, even as her body tensed and her stomach started doing backflips. "Not that again," she said with a sigh. "It's not my fault I look like her."

She was awful at thinking under pressure, and now was proving to be no exception. Her mind had already gone completely blank, and about the only thing she could think about was why she'd ever thought dressing in a different outfit and braiding her hair would hide her identity from anyone.

"You sound like her too." This was from another person, a woman sitting at a nearby table. "I've seen all the interviews done right after the wedding. You sound exactly like her."

"Okay?" Bilba said. "So I should be making money doing impressions, then. Maybe I could do birthday parties."

Another man, further in the back stood up, and approached. There was something about him that Bilba didn't like and made her instinctively take a step back. Her back hit the base of the wall behind her and, unless she wanted to climb into the window, that was as far as she was going.

"I think you are her," he said shortly. "What are you doing, spying on us? Planning to take back our secrets to Shire so they can invade us?"

"Are you delusional?" Bilba blurted without thinking. "What possible secrets could anyone hope to find in a bakery?"

The man scowled, eyes narrowing. He looked about to say something else but, before he could, the door burst open and two figures hurried in. The larger of the two turned to force the door shut while the other turned toward Bilba with a broad grin.

"Allison, there you are! So sorry we're late, stupid storm came in with a vengeance, didn't it?"

Cerys frowned. "Cerys?"

"They think I'm the Shire princess," Bilba said, voice flat. "I was just telling them I wasn't."

Cerys pulled back and started brushing at Bilba's clothes. "Oh, I'm sorry! I'm so silly, getting water on you like that!" She was drenched, as was Gareth. There was no umbrella in the world that was going to save anyone from the water sheeting down from the sky outside. The wind was so strong it was flinging the rain nearly sideways. Cerys turned, and frowned at the group of people as if seeing them for the first time. "What are you all looking at?"

"They think I'm the Shire princess," Bilba said, voice flat. "I was just telling them I wasn't."

Cerys rolled her eyes. Gareth came to stand next to her, the two of them placing themselves just in front, and to each side, of Bilba. "Oh, that nonsense again? Because the Shire princess would really be prancing around by herself in some random bakery, in the middle of a storm? Please."
"That's true, I suppose," the woman who'd spoken earlier said. "And she seemed to have a really good sense of fashion from all the interviews. I don't think she'd be caught out in--" her hands absently waved, taking in Bilba's clothing, "that."

The others began to murmur as well, apparently accepting that idea that Bilba was not, in fact, the princess now that two random strangers had come in and identified her as someone else. They slowly returned to their tables, leaving Bilba alone at the window with Gareth and Cerys.

They turned to face her, only to stop whatever they'd been about to say at the sight of Bilba straight backed, and absolutely furious. "No."

Gareth frowned. "No, what?"

"No, to whatever your employer wants," Bilba said shortly. "I don't care who he, or she, is or what it is they want. If they think my loyalty can be bought because you two ran off a couple of idiots, they've got another thing coming."

Anger rose even higher inside her, bringing a flush to her cheeks, and she crossed her arms in irritation. This was not the first time something like this had happened, and most likely wouldn't be the last, even here. Sometimes it wasn't even real, but a test orchestrated by her grandfather to ensure she was still "loyal" to him, or at least still properly terrified.

Other times, it was real, and for a whole host of reasons. Some wanted a pathway to the royal family, others thought she could get them a meeting with one of the members of the royal family or the Thain himself, others --

Her mind softened fractionally at the memory of the young nobleman who'd been one of the very, very few to know her grandfather for what he was. He'd wanted her help to raise a rebellion and roust her grandfather from his throne.

Bilba had turned him down. He'd been young and naive and had no concept of the true power the Thain wielded within the borders of the Shire. She'd told him to let it go, return home, and focus on being the best he could be, and use his own power and influence to negate her grandfather's actions as best he could from behind the scenes.

He hadn't listened.

They never did.

Raising her chin, Bilba leveled a dark look on the two in front of her. "As far as I know, you orchestrated this whole thing, and probably the scene at the movie theater, in the hopes I'd feel indebted to you." She tilted her head to study them, deep irritation flashing through her. Outside of her family, this was another reason why she hated the palace, and nobility. All they ever seemed to see were pawns instead of people, there to be used as a stepping stone to further one's own selfish agenda, whatever it may be. "Well, guess what? I don't."

Gareth raised an eyebrow. "You're a bit paranoid, aren't you?"

"No," Bilba said shortly. "I'm really not. I've just learned better than most how to recognize a snake when I see one."

With that she twisted to the side, stalked to the door, threw it open and, without a backwards glance, headed out into the storm.

Probably not the best decision she'd ever made but, really, when given the choice between a pair of
vipers, and a raging tempest?

She'd choose the storm, every time.
Chapter 18

While still living in Shire, had anyone asked, Bilba would have said of course she'd been outside during a storm.

She loved storms as a matter of fact. Often, when the distant sound of thunder heralded their arrival, or the first patter of rain began to hit the windowpane, she'd already be outside, waiting.

Rosie or Bofur would often be with her, not because they also loved storms, but because they feared her getting struck by lightning in her exuberance and were prepared to drag her inside at the first hint of crackling electricity.

Bilba still loved them, slight risk of death notwithstanding. She'd even practice her ballet in the rain sometimes, twirling about in the puddles with her eyes closed, pretending she was in some grand production with an insanely good production budget.

So, yes, she would have answered to any questions, she had been outside during a storm. They were fun.

What she stepped out into in Erebor was not fun, and it was certainly not a storm.

The wind slammed into her like a freight train. One second, she was standing, the next she was on the ground. Pain barked up her side and shoulder, while a stinging in her hands and head suggested she'd picked up more than a few scrapes.

She was instantly drenched, the rain pummeling her like a thousand small pebbles, leaving even more stinging pain in their wake. It was ice cold and her body was shivering almost immediately, teeth chattering as she struggled to get her feet under her. Fear caused the muscles in her stomach to clench painfully, and she gasped for breath as the wind and rain sucked away her air.

The rain was blinding her, and the wind kept her pressed to the ground, but she managed to half crawl, half fall in what she hoped was the direction of the bakery door. Her hands encountered empty air and her heart jolted as her body fell forward. Asphalt scraped against her fingers, and pain radiated through her knuckles as her flailing sent a hand cracking against the bumper of a parked car.

Arms grabbed her suddenly and dragged her to her feet. A large, male body placed itself between her and the rain, creating a buffer, and the edges of a heavy trench coat were dragged around her head and upper body.

The effect was a bit of a shelter against the storm. Bilba sucked in oxygen and grabbed onto the man's shirt as dizziness washed over her and her legs threatened to buckle. He wrapped his other arm around her, a second set joined in to help support her, and then she was being half dragged, and half manhandled back onto the curb and out of the street.

She expected to be taken back to the bakery. Instead, she felt them pause for a moment, and then the hands were bundling her into the back seat of a car. The door slammed shut, reducing the fury of the storm to a loud roar of wind and rain against metal, and then she was alone.

Still breathing hard, Bilba pressed her hands into the black upholstery and watched as Cerys and
Gareth crossed around the front of the car, fighting their own battle against the storm. She shot a look at the door, biting her lip, but dismissed the thought. If she tried to go back out she'd just find herself on the ground again.

Doors opened, and then Gareth was sliding into the driver's seat while Cerys got into the back, next to Bilba. As she did, Bilba tensed, and dug her fingers harder into the seat. She was still soaking wet, and freezing, but she carefully schooled her face into a blank expression.

"I need you to take me back into the bakery," she said, voice firm but neutral. "I can wait out the storm there."

"I don't think that'd be a good idea," Cerys said, also breathing hard. She shrugged off her jacket and accepted a towel from Gareth with a smile of gratitude. "Pretty sure they recognized you."

"I can handle them," Bilba said. She could always hide in the back with Bombur. "I need you to take me back inside, now." As she spoke, she inched closer to the door, one hand lifting slightly toward the handle. She doubted she'd have much luck against the storm, but it'd be better than staying here.

Cerys exchanged an unreadable look with Gareth, and then sighed. She shifted to reach into her purse, which appeared to be surprisingly waterproof from what Bilba could see, and pulled out her wallet. She removed a card from it and handed it to Bilba. "It's all right, your Highness. We're palace security."

"Your personal security, to be exact," Gareth said from the front seat. He started the car and began to pull away from the curb, slowly. Very slowly.

Bilba sincerely hoped he was an exceptionally good driver.

Cerys was still holding out the card, so Bilba humored her and took it. It was certainly an identification card but given how she didn't know what an official Erebor security card looked like, it meant little to her.

Not to mention...

"You're claiming the palace knows I've been sneaking out?" she asked. She should probably be surprised, but, right at that moment, her mind was pretty well taken up with trying to stem the rising tide of panic welling up inside her.

She didn't want to be here. Images of her grandfather, and that damn limo of his, and all the people who got in and never got back out again flashed through her head. Her heart was beating rapidly in her chest and she moved one hand to her leg, digging her nails in through the wet fabric until dull pain ran through her leg.

Keep it in, she ordered herself.

Her grandfather had always so enjoyed seeing her afraid. The only satisfaction she'd ever gotten, the only time she'd ever felt like she had the least amount of control, was when she denied him that satisfaction.

It wasn't much, but it was something.

Cerys frowned at her. "Are you all right, your Highness?"

Bilba handed her the card back. "Even if you are palace security, why tell me?"
Cerys looked startled. "So you'd know you could trust us, of course."

This time it was Bilba's turn to look confused. "Why would I trust palace security?"

The car chose that moment to hydroplane, fishtailing on the road before Gareth got it back under control. Bilba jumped, eyes going to the windshield. A flash of pure fear ran through her as she realized they weren't anywhere she recognized. "Where are we going?" There was the slightest waver in her voice that she hoped they didn't pick up on.

"It's too dangerous to try and go up the hill to the palace in this weather," Cerys said with a frown. She hesitated. "Your Highness -- Bilba, we can call someone if you want. Someone you trust from the palace. They can verify who we are if that'd make you feel more comfortable."

Bilba tore her eyes away from where they'd been fixed outside the car long enough to give the other woman a blank look. "There's no one I trust at the palace." She looked away before Cerys could give any reaction. The last thing she wanted was the other woman trying to play at pity or sympathy. She despised fakes.

The car turned onto a quiet, suburban street, complete with white picket fences, trees bending and bowing in the wind, and the occasional child's toy currently being drenched by the near torrential downpour.

Gareth pulled into the driveway of a two story, clapboard home with a wraparound, covered porch. A large tree in the middle of the yard had a tire swing being tossed around violently in the storm and, on the porch, she could see a porch swing swaying to and fro.

Bilba's eyes narrowed. "You're palace security but you don't live inside the palace?"

"Would you live inside the palace if you had the choice?" Cerys asked cheerfully. "It's like living under a microscope, even if you aren't royal."

"Not to mention the constant politicking from all quarters," Gareth added from the front seat. "It's more peaceful out here."

There was little about that Bilba could argue with. If she had her way she'd be back in Shire, looking forward to graduating and having her own, nice quiet life far from anything even remotely related to royalty or nobility.

Ahead of them, she saw a garage door yawning open, the view beyond of a normal looking space filled with all manner of sports equipment, scattered toys and tools. The car started to pull forward, only to stop at a quiet word from Cerys.

As Gareth turned the car off, Cerys grabbed the back of the seat and pulled forward to speak quietly in his ear. He leaned his head back against the headrest and tilted his head toward her, listening.

They had told her before they were married, Bilba remembered. She didn't know about the rest of what they had said, but she did believe that much. They had too much of an ease with one another, demonstrated too much of a natural intimacy to be a lie or a fake.

Cerys dropped back down into the seat and Gareth, with a nod at them, got out of the car and hurried into the garage.

"He's going to get us some towels, and something hot to drink," Cerys said calmly.
Bilba frowned. "We aren't going inside?"

Cerys gave her a bright smile. "Not unless you feel comfortable. If you like, it's perfectly fine for us to stay here until the storm passes. Gareth will make sure we're taken care of."

"You're going to stay too?" Bilba was pressed as tight against the door as possible, ready to do her best to bolt if the woman made a move toward her. If she was actually palace security, it'd probably make it worse in the long run, but she was willing to take the chance.

Cerys had fished her phone out of her purse and settled back to start surfing from what Bilba could tell. "I wouldn't be much use as security if I left you here, would I?" she said absently. She hit a button and a video started playing. It took Bilba a few seconds to recognize it as a comedian she liked, but she didn't comment. Finding out her likes and dislikes wasn't hard and would be a basic way to try and gain her trust.

"She wasn't that stupid."

She looked away, studying the street they were parked on. If it weren't for the storm, she could almost believe they were back in Shire, on one of those quiet, rural streets she'd once dreamed about living on when she finally graduated.

"Are storms like this normal?" The question was innocuous enough, she hoped.

"No," Cerys glanced up absently before going back to the video on her phone. "This is pretty tame."

Bilba must have made a strangled noise of some sort, because Cerys shot her a raised eyebrow. "What? Are they not like this in Shire?"

"Not so much," Bilba muttered.

"I should visit sometime," Cerys said. "I've never been out of Erebor, so I'm pretty used to it." She gave Bilba a bright smile. "If it makes you feel any better, they're usually only during the winter, and only about once a month or so. Summer isn't so bad."

That was slightly more comforting, Bilba thought, but only slightly.

"The Prince has an odd fascination with them," Cerys suddenly said, eyes still fixed on the phone. "His guards keeping threatening to weld his balcony doors shut so he can't go out during them."

"The Prince?" Bilba echoed. "Thorin? Or the younger one?" She knew Thorin had a younger brother, but his name escaped her at the moment.

"Thorin," Cerys said. "I would say I don't envy his guards, but then I've got a charge who insists on squeezing through dangerous passageways and running about with no protection at all."

Bilba kept her eyes fixed straight ahead, studying the open garage. If Cerys knew about the passageway it raised the likelihood she was, in fact, who she said she was. The odds of security keeping an eye on her, and spotting her going through the passage, were higher and far more reasonable than thinking some random noble somehow spotted her going through and followed her. She had checked, hers and Thorin's windows were the only ones on that side of the palace that would allow an unobstructed view of the beach, and she'd checked the cliff edges before going out.

The fact Cerys was most likely telling the truth did not make her feel any better. The palace guard in Shire had been true assholes. They knew the status she held, or didn't, and had taken true delight in torturing her. Every snide comment one of her aunts made, every time Beatrice looked down her
nose at them, every time her grandfather forced them to work extra hours without extra pay.

All of it had been taken out on her for no other reason than she was a royal and they could.

Inside the garage, the door leading into the house opened and a small figure stepped out, little more than a pair of feet and legs behind the stack of towels they were carrying. Gareth walked out just behind them, carrying a tray with two mugs.

He set the tray on a table and carefully took the towels, revealing a little girl of about four or so with dark hair pulled back in a thick ponytail. She was dressed in striped leggings, a tunic and white shoes with flowers that Bilba would have loved when she was that age. As she watched, the little girl clasped her hands together and bounced up and down in response to something Gareth had said before spinning to wave excitedly at the car.

"I think your daughter wants your attention," Bilba said. Cerys had mentioned having a kid at the movies.

Now that she thought about it, their appearance at the movies at the same time she'd been there probably hadn't been the coincidence she'd thought it'd been. If that was true, then it meant the palace had known she was sneaking out from the beginning, which raised the obvious question of why in the world they'd simply gone along with it?

If it were a matter of them simply not caring, or hoping she'd trip and fall off a cliff, why send anyone to keep an eye on her? And if they did care, for reasons beyond her understanding, why allow her to continue doing it?

It was a paradox.

She hated paradoxes. There were those in Shire who might call her grandfather a paradox, generous to those he loved and ruthless to those he did not, compassionate and merciless, wise and yet mercenary.

Bilba knew the truth. There was no contradiction. The generosity, compassion, wisdom, it was all just an act. Just a mask to cover the monster underneath. Members of her family, like Beatrice, rested on the false security that the Thain wouldn't turn on them if she crossed him, or if he simply deemed it beneficial to do so.

They all liked to forget her mother had once been his favorite.

In her experience, there was never a paradox, just cleverly packaged lies. She knew what the lies were in Shire. She knew who they came from and, most importantly, she knew why.

She didn't know any of that here.

Cerys looked up and her entire face brightened. "Wynne!" She put her phone down and with an exclamation of "I'll be right back!" scrambled out of the car into the storm and ran into the garage to scoop the girl up into her arms.

The sight brought a pang and dull ache as Bilba remembered similar scenes with her own parents.

She sighed and leaned her head against the glass of the window. She felt chilled to the bone, was shivering violently and felt generally miserable. In the garage, Cerys was over dramatically exclaiming over having gotten water on her daughter while the little girl giggled at her antics. Gareth was standing over both, gazing at them with a mixture of pride and affection.
Bilba considered the scene. If they'd wanted, they easily could have driven the car into the garage and shut the door behind, hiding anything they wanted from the street. The fact they hadn't at least suggested their intent was gaining her trust rather than her fear. For what purpose she didn't know, but if that were the case...

Indecision warred within her but, in the end, misery and the desire to not be sitting in a puddle of freezing cold water while she did an excellent impression of an ice cube won out.

With a growled, "Fine," she pushed the door open.

Well, she tried to push the door open anyway. The wind had other ideas in mind and pushed back rather aggressively.

Gareth noticed her struggle and came to help, pulling the door open almost effortlessly before taking her arm and helping her from the car into the garage.

"Your Highness," Cerys greeted her, daughter perched on her hip. "I'd like you to meet my daughter, Wynne. Wynne, this is her Royal Highness, the Princess Bilba."

She set the little girl down as she spoke, and Wynne promptly dropped into a slightly off balance, but proper curtsy.

Bilba smiled in spite of herself and returned the gesture.

"You do it so pretty!" the little girl exclaimed.

Bilba outright laughed. "It's because of all the ballet," she said, pressing her hands to her knees so she could lean over. "It helps my balance."

Wynne's eyes went wide, and she clasped her hands together in front of her. "You're a princess ballerina?"

"That is what she'd pick up on," Cerys said with amusement.

"She's your daughter," Gareth answered. "Of course she would."

Bilba knelt on one knee in front of the little girl. "I am," she said solemnly, "but you want to know a secret?"

Wynne nodded fervently, eyes still wide.

Bilba leaned forward toward the little girl's ear and dropped her voice to a stage whisper. "If I had to pick, I'd much rather be a ballerina than a princess."

"Me too," Wynne whispered back, before suddenly grabbing Bilba's hand and tugging her toward the door into the house. "Come on! I wanna show you my dolls! I have a princess one and a ballerina one!"

"Your dolls aren't going anywhere," Cerys said in exasperation. "You can show them to her after she's had a chance to clean up."

Bilba doubted the little girl heard a word her mother said, so intent was she on dragging Bilba inside. Bilba shook her head in amusement, and obediently followed the little girl.

She'd see Wynne's dolls and maybe show her some beginning dance moves and maybe, just maybe she could be Bilba the ballet dancer and leave Bilba the princess behind.
If only for a little while.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Finally introducing FemOri! :D So genderswapped because I thought Bilba deserved another female inside the palace, within her social circle who wasn't Thorin's sister or Thorin's ex. I wrote her a bit different than canon for the simple reason that I was bored with the canon version, this version is how I envision her being had Nori had a LOT more influence on her growing up. A LOT more influence! :D :D I hope you enjoy! :D

In Dwalin's world, there were several constants, most of which dealt with the belief the Durins were out to drive him into an early grave.

There were a few non-Durin related constants, however, the chief one being that absolutely nothing good ever came of walking into his rooms to find his wife and brother-in-law huddled at the table over cups of coffee.

Stopping just inside the door to the kitchen, Dwalin raised an eyebrow. "Now what?"

Nori flashed him a brilliant smile. "What's wrong, Dwalin? I can't just decide to come drop in to see how my favorite little sister is doing?"

"She's your only sister," Dwalin growled, "and no. What are you up to, and who are those people in the corridor?"

The middle-aged man and young woman, both dressed in the uniforms of palace staff, had been standing against the far wall when he'd arrived and had been the first tipoff that his hoped for relaxing evening was not to be.

All he got in return was that grin again before Nori shoved to his feet and strolled past him toward the door Dwalin had just entered through. Ori joined him and Dwalin frowned. "Where are you going?"

"To go harass the Prince," Ori said happily as she fell in alongside her brother, barely coming up to his collarbone as she bounced along. Dwalin had always found it the oddest contradiction in his wife, that she could have a personality so similar to her brother, contained in a body only half the size.

He followed them out, just in time to see Nori absently gesture at the two staff members to fall in behind them as they headed off toward the royal level.

As Dwalin fell in at Ori's side, she gave him a sideways look. "I hope you're not coming because you think I need protection from the Prince."

Dwalin snorted. "Of course not. I'm going because I think he needs protection from the two of you."

"That's better," Ori said with a nod.

Beside her, Nori simply smirked.
He looked positively gleeful, and Dwalin resisted the urge to sigh.

Sometimes he was convinced Nori had only agreed to Dwalin and Ori's marriage because he knew it gave him more freedom than ever. Dwalin couldn't kill him without upsetting Ori and would be honor bound to try and protect the idiot from Thorin for the same reason.

Of course, there was also the possibility he'd agreed to the marriage to avoid having to deal with an enraged Ori, but Dwalin somehow doubted that was the case, as entertaining a thought as it was.

It was an incredibly entertaining thought.

They reached the royal level, which was only one above where Dwalin lived and, without even pausing to knock, Nori grabbed the handles on the door, shoved them open and strolled in as if he owned the place.

Dwalin shook his head in exasperation as he went in after the idiot. The two staff members both froze outside the door and held their position. It spoke well of their ability to think for themselves and not just blindly follow. Dwalin approved.

Thorin stood up from where he'd been leaning back in his chair, watching the storm instead of working on the mountain of paperwork laid out on the table in front of him. Typical. Kyra was usually the one who nagged him to get his paperwork done. "What's going on?"

"Don't mind us," Nori said cheerfully. He strode straight to the Shire girl's door and reached into his pocket for a key that Dwalin recognized as one of the palace master keys. There were only two in existence, one was with Nori while Dwalin had the other locked in a safe in his office.

"Nori!" Ori jumped forward to put her hand on the door handle as her brother fit the key into the lock. "You can't just barge into her room, knock first!"

Nori rolled his eyes. "Please, she's not even there. She snuck out hours ago."

"She what?"

That came from Thorin and Dwalin simultaneously, both men looking automatically toward the rain lashing the window. The imagine of the diminutive Shire girl, possibly smaller than even Ori, crossed his mind, and his stomach knotted suddenly as his mind replaced the Shire girl with it being his own wife out there in the storm.

"Nori." That came from Thorin, growled in the tone of voice he used when one of them had crossed a line. It was a tone Nori heard the most, almost exclusively as a matter of fact.

"Relax." The lock clicked and Nori shoved the door open with an exclamation of triumph. "She's fine. Gareth and Cerys have her."

"Ori slapped him on the arm as she walked past into the room. "You still should have told someone! Stop treating people like they're chess pieces!"

"Aren't they though?" Nori muttered, as he swept into the room behind her. "Besides, that's why I have you, isn't it?"

Dwalin crossed his arms and looked at Thorin. "Still sure you want him as Spymaster?"

Thorin gave him a dry look. "He gets the job done, it's just his methods I sometimes question."
Ori appeared in the doorway, face flushed, and Dwalin felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. That was another thing that was never a good sign.

"Why is this room decorated like Kyra's rooms?" she demanded.

Thorin shrugged. "Probably because it was her room?"

"And you didn't think to offer your wife the opportunity to redo it so maybe, just maybe, she didn't have to live in a room that was literally designed and decorated by your ex?" Ori demanded. Before Thorin could answer, she turned to point a finger at Dwalin. "This is your fault!"

"Mine?" Dwalin asked, incredulously. "How in Durin's name is it my fault?"

"Because you said I couldn't talk to her yet!" Ori said, stamping one foot to punctuate her annoyance. She whirled to march back into the room. "Give her time to adjust, you said," her voice rang out from within the room. "You have kind of an overwhelming personality, Ori," she added, now doing a rather insulting impression of him. "We don't want to scare her, Ori. Just wait awhile, Ori. Well, I waited, and look what happened! She ends up stuck in a bloody room for a month staring at Kyra's color scheme."

"I thought Ori liked Kyra," Thorin said absently to Dwalin.

"She does." Dwalin replied before raising his voice to say, "Language."

Ori had been the one to ask him to help her watch her language, as it was one of the habits she'd picked up from Nori that she'd decided she didn't want.

"Shut up!" came the aggrieved response. "We could have been friends this whole time!"

"She assumes Bilba wants to be friends," Thorin said. His voice was idle, but Dwalin noted his arms were crossed, shoulders tense and he kept shooting looks toward the window. Apparently, Dwalin wasn't the only one having issues with the thought of the small woman running around out there. The fact she was with Cerys and Gareth, two people he'd trust with not just his life but Ori's, was a relief but, still...

Thorin muttered something under his breath suddenly before striding into the room. Dwalin shrugged and went to stand in the doorway. Thorin was only a few feet inside, to the right, with Nori standing next to him. Ori, meanwhile, was in the girl's wardrobe, grumbling to herself as she pushed through to the back of the piece of furniture.

"What are you doing?" Thorin asked.

"Looking for something," Nori said cheerfully. "Or Ori is. I felt the princess would feel more comfortable if she learned another woman went through her things, as opposed to a strange man."

"Strangely considerate of you," Dwalin said dryly. "You think the girl's hidden something?"

"Nope," Nori responded happily.

On the bed behind them, a sound started up and, almost as one, the three men turned to face it. Dwalin recognized the noise as an incoming computer call, though he didn't know the program. A large black box was popped up full screen on the open laptop screen and a small, ringing telephone icon started vibrating excitedly in the center.

Nori edged toward it, and Dwalin frowned. "Knock it off, Nori."
"Knock what off?" The spymaster asked innocently. Suddenly, he tripped, rather melodramatically, stumbled forward, and landed partway on the bed. One hand flew out, and a single finger tapped on the laptop, answering the call. "Oops," Nori said. "Sorry about that."

No one believed he was sorry.

The screen cleared to reveal a young woman with dark hair and worried eyes sitting very close to the screen. "Bilba!" she said as the screen cleared. "It's about time, I've been calling for hours! What--"

Her voice stopped. A second after that, her entire demeanor changed, expression cooling and eyes going flat. "Who are you?" she ordered, eyes fixed on Nori, "and what did you do to Bilba?"

"She's out at the moment," Nori said, pushing up to lean on his elbows. "Who might you be?"

"Not answering a damned thing until you tell me what you did to her," the girl shot back. "We had plans. She didn't just up and decide to go out."

Nori turned his head slowly to look pointedly at Thorin, and Dwalin followed suit.

"I may have been...slightly unreasonable with her after speaking to my father," he grumbled. "I'd planned to apologize, but she left."

"Slightly unreasonable," the girl on the screen said. She leaned forward, as if it could somehow let her see more into the room. "Is that the prince?" she made a disgusted sound and muttered something unintelligible under her breath before raising her voice, "I told her to give you a chance, but I take it back. You're an asshole."

A male voice asked something off screen. The girl leaned back and answered in another language, that Dwalin assumed was Hobbitish. He couldn't speak it, but Nori was leaning forward, and looked fascinated.

Thorin looked stuck halfway between surprise and annoyance at the insult while Dwalin did an exceptionally poor job of holding back a snort at the girl's brazenness. He liked her, he decided. He didn't necessarily agree with her, but he liked her. Thorin had the well-earned reputation for being intimidating, and there were few outside the royal family that had ever stood up to him. Dwalin was a firm believer in the need for royalty to be occasionally taken down a peg or two by commoners.

"Found it!" Ori suddenly proclaimed, pushing back out of the wardrobe. She had her hand up, fingers clutched around something, but the object was too small for Dwalin to make it out at that distance.

On the screen, the girl's eyes, if possible, narrowed further. "Found it? Are you searching through her things?"

"Not exactly," Nori said, voice dropping into the neutral tone he took on when he was working. He pushed to his feet to take the object from Ori. As he carried it over, Dwalin felt a jolt of recognition run through him. "Is that a bug?"

"A bug?" Thorin asked in surprise. "Why would she be bugging her own room?"

"She wouldn't." The words came simultaneously from Nori and the girl on the computer.

"Speaking of which," Nori said, voice back to cheerful, "I should probably let you know I fired Dardren and Hadra, you'll probably be hearing about that."
"You did what?" Thorin demanded, straightening.

Nori tilted his head slightly, considering. "I take that back. I didn't 'fire' them," he corrected using air quotes. He knew full well how much Thorin hated air quotes. "I encouraged them to retire or be charged with treason. Personally, I think they made the right choice."

Dwalin raised an eyebrow, trying to picture the older couple as traitors to the crown. "Treason?"

Nori waggled the bug at him. "You know what's worse than a traitor?"

"A traitor who thinks he's being patriotic," Dwalin said immediately. "Interrogating them is obnoxious."

"Isn't it though?" Nori dropped back down to face the computer again and lifted the bug up on his palm. "So, question of the day, why would someone be bugging the girl's room?"

"They didn't tell you?" Dwalin asked in surprise.

"No," Nori said, sounding aggrieved. "They claimed they didn't know, just that whoever it was promised it'd help the Crown and paid exceptionally well. Whoever it was must have rather deep pockets."

"No kidding," the girl on the screen muttered.

The words caught Nori's attention and he refocused on the screen. "I take it you have an idea?"

She opened her mouth to answer, only to snap it closed and look sharply to the side as the male voice spoke again in a curt tone. A young man, who looked strangely familiar though Dwalin couldn't quite place him, bent into frame, one hand on the back of the girl's chair and the other braced on the desk. He put his mouth next to the girl's ear and spoke quietly for several moments. There was no way to tell what he was saying, but the girl looked more and more annoyed as time went on.

Finally, he pulled away, vanishing off screen once more, and she looked after him in annoyance, though Dwalin had a feeling the emotion wasn't specifically directed at him, but rather at whatever he'd said.

"I have no idea," the girl said, breaking into his thoughts. "Why would you think I would know anyway? It was probably someone from Erebor, they've certainly been lambasting her in the media enough."

Dwalin raised an eyebrow in surprise. The girl's tone was flat and robotic while her expression looked thoroughly disgusted. The guy spoke in Hobbitish from off camera again, sounding half exasperated and half amused, and she shot him a defiant look before settling back in her chair, crossing her arms, and glaring at Nori as if he'd personally offended her.

"You should put it back. You wouldn't want to tip anyone off that you're onto them."

"Maybe that's exactly what I want to do," Nori said, cheerfully.

Something in the girl's eyes went dark, and she leaned forward, until her face filled the screen. "Or maybe," she said through clenched teeth, "you should consider the possible consequences of your actions."

"I think I can handle it," Nori said.
"I wasn't talking about you," the girl shot back. "And, speaking of that, why don't the lot of you stop standing around like you're bloody useless and go find my friend before she gets herself into trouble?"

And, with that, she reached forward and stabbed the keyboard on her side. The screen went dark and the call box minimized, revealing a wallpaper of a fluffy kitten on a pink, satin pillow.

"Why did you think she would know anything?" Thorin asked.

"Because the payment was in Shire currency," Nori said, pushing upright. "Amusing really, they were promised a certain amount of cash, and then paid in Shire money that had to be converted into Ereborean cash."

"Which would have made it worth substantially less as our currency is significantly stronger," Thorin said. "Amusing."

"Serves them right," Dwalin growled. Traitors pissed him off.

Ori had stepped up to stare at the screen, and Dwalin could swear one of her eyebrows was twitching as she stared at the wallpaper.

Then, in one quick move, she spun around to face Dwalin. "That's it," she announced. "She and I are best friends. Let's go."

"Go where?" Dwalin asked in surprise.

"To go get her!" Ori shouted, already on the way out the door.

"It's raining," Dwalin shouted after her. "Gareth and Cerys will bring her back when the weather clears.

"Don't care!" Ori's faint voice came back. "I'm going. You can come or sleep on the couch!"

Thorin snorted beside him, and Dwalin glowered at him. "Weren't you saying something about apologizing to the girl? No time like the present."

Thorin shrugged. "I'll wait until you get back. Being faced with Ori on a mission will probably be enough for her to deal with for one day." He raised an eyebrow at Nori. "Are you going?"

Nori lifted his eyes from where he'd been examining the bug. He gave them an outright fiendish grin before pocketing it and gesturing toward the door. "I have a few things to look into. You lot enjoy yourselves."

A new sound came from the computer and, as one, they all turned to see an icon appear at the lower left-hand corner of the screen.

"You have one new message from: Arwen"

"You don't think..." Dwalin started to ask.

"She is royalty," Nori said, "and Shire does have a relationship with Gondor."

"You know," Thorin said slowly, "on second thought, I think I will go after all."

Dwalin snorted. "That'd just figure, wouldn't it? Trying to find an inroad to Gondor all this time, and the girl turns out to be on speaking terms with the Queen?"
"Shut up," Thorin growled. "I'll let Kyra know. She'll be thrilled."

He vanished out the door while, behind him, Nori let out a laugh. "Oh, yes, I'm sure she'll just be ecstatic."

Dwalin shook his head as he followed the idiot prince.

Ori occasionally wondered how Thorin had ever gotten a date to begin with, let alone convinced Kyra to marry him.

Dwalin was beginning to see her point.
Bilba sat at the kitchen table and watched Gareth patiently show his daughter how to make a pasta dish. The little girl was on her tip toes on a stool in front of the stove, focused on a pot with all the determination of a soldier going to battle. Gareth was next to her, one oven mitted hand holding the pot in place while the other was wrapped around her tiny hand to steady it as she stirred.

The sight brought back memories of her own father and Bilba felt her heart wrench painfully in her chest. She grimaced, and focused on the cup of hot chocolate clutched in her hands to get her mind off it.

Outside, the wind still howled, and rain lashed the house loud enough that it was a constant background drum against the walls. In Shire, there'd probably be broken windows and damage to siding but, here, she couldn't see so much as a tremor in the windowpanes. The fact the homes, and homes farther inland no less, were built that way did not reassure her about how often such storms must hit.

Cerys bustled into the room, now wearing dry clothing and with her damp hair pulled back in a bun. She smiled at Bilba, who returned a shy one of her own. Cerys had insisted Bilba take a shower and clean up first and had then had given her a fluffy, slightly ill fitting, robe on her to wear until her own things were ready to come out of the laundry.

Wynne had grabbed her hand after that and pulled her into a room that was an explosion of all things ballerinas and princesses. From dolls to the bedspread to posters the little girl had haphazardly stuck on her walls with tape.

That had been when the first wave of nostalgia had hit, evoking images of Bilba's own room as a child. It hadn't looked quite the same as Wynne's, all paneled wood with beams and carved shutters to give it a rustic feel rather than carpet and white walls. She'd had more books than dolls, had decorated her walls with poorly done landscapes from when she'd had more belief than talent, and had a four poster, canopy bed complete with gauzy, white curtains. A padded window seat had overlooked her parent's garden, and, on dreary days, she'd sit for hours watching the rain patter down outside.

It was all gone now. Her parents cremated and scattered over the broken bones of her home. It had burned down, mysteriously, three days after the accident, while Bilba had still been at the hospital hoping for her parents to wake up. Her neighbor had awakened her and dragged her to the hospital without a chance to change out of her nightgown, and with barely enough time to grab a pair of flower shaped barrettes to pull her hair back. No one had offered to go home and get her things and so, by day four, those barrettes and her nightgown had been all she'd had left to her name. The nightgown had gone to the palace laundry and never returned, while Beatrice had decided she liked the barrettes.

From having everything to having nothing at all in the space of a single week. Bilba couldn't even honestly say she'd still had herself by then. Certainly, the bright eyed, happy little girl who'd awakened at the start of the week, ignorant of the gallows looming before her, had not been the same one who'd come out the other end.

Cerys dropped into the chair on the other side of the table with a sigh of relief, and Bilba jumped slightly as the action startled her out of her thoughts.

"So," the other woman said, smiling at her husband as he handed her a cup of hot chocolate. How
he'd known when to make it, to have it hot and ready for exactly when she'd arrive from the shower, Bilba had no idea. "Why have you been sneaking out of the palace, Your Highness?"

At the stove, Gareth heaved an exasperated sigh. He lifted Wynne to the ground and went to strain the water out of the pot. The food smelled delicious, and Bilba felt her stomach rumble in protest that it wasn't being filled already.

Wynne, meanwhile, came over and hopped up onto Bilba's lap. Having found out Bilba was both a princess and a ballerina had cemented her as one of Wynne's favorite people ever. Bilba was like one of her dolls come to life, an analogy probably more fitting than the little girl knew, or than Bilba was comfortable with.

"I just wanted to get out," Bilba said vaguely, with a shrug.

Cerys raised an eyebrow sarcastically. Bilba was unsure of how one managed to make an eyebrow sarcastic, but Cerys certainly managed quite well. "There's a front door. Far less risk of death or abduction. Also helps the collective blood pressure of palace security."

"I didn't know security knew anything about it," Bilba muttered under her breath. If she had, she'd have been more careful.

Cerys' eyes narrowed but, before she could press farther, Gareth set an enormous plate of pasta in front of her, topped with a red sauce and containing a thick slice of buttered bread next to it. A second one was set in front of Bilba and her mouth began to salivate in a most undignified manner. Two more plates were set out and Wynne was sliding off her lap to take her seat as Gareth took his own next to her.

As Gareth sat down, Cerys absently grabbed his hand, their fingers intertwining and resting lightly on the tablecloth. Neither even seemed aware they had done it but functioned so flawlessly with the hand they still had free it was obvious this was a regular occurrence.

Bilba dropped her gaze to her plate to hide the half smile, half grimace on her face as what felt very much like a dagger buried itself deep inside her heart.

Her parents had had that kind of relationship.

Her grandfather had ensured she never would.

She took a bite of pasta, and felt her eyes widen as her taste buds began to do a dance of joy and happiness in her mouth. "This is amazing, it is a family recipe?"

"Nah," Gareth said, putting his fork down. "Just something I came up with on my day off."

"Something you just came up with?" Bilba repeated. "I think you missed your calling."

"You assume I'm better at cooking than I am at security," Gareth retorted with good humor. "I'll have you know I happen to be exceptional at both."

Next to him, Cerys groaned and shot him a look that was half exasperation, half amusement.

"Really?"

Gareth shrugged. "What? It's the truth."

He leaned in as he spoke, pressing his forehead against hers for a brief second, and Bilba ignored the way her heart wrenched again in her chest. Honestly, at this rate, she was going to wind up with a
heart condition.

"Do you like to cook?" Cerys asked, turning to face her.

Bilba nodded. "My mother taught me. I don't get to do it as often anymore, but I always did enjoy it."

Wynne, who had been focused on carefully twirling noodles around her fork until she had a bundle larger than her mouth could ever hope to handle, looked up sharply. "You have a mom?"

Cerys laughed and ruffled her daughter's hair. "Everyone has a mom, silly."

Wynne furrowed her nose as she considered this new, paradigm shifting information. "Is she a ballerina princess too?"

"She was a princess," Bilba said, anger flashing through her at the memory of how badly her grandfather had treated her mother. Belladonna had been a princess, but certainly hadn't lived like one, especially at the end. "Not a ballerina." She hesitated, before adding, "A schoolteacher actually."

Cerys looked surprised. "Your mother works?"

Bilba nodded, not bothering to correct the tense. Aside from not wanting to alert a small child to the harsh reality that mommies and daddies could die, she knew from experience that pointing it out would simply cause awkwardness and pity she didn't particularly want.

Rosie and Bofur always tried not to talk about their parents, as if they felt guilty for still having them. Bilba had assured them, repeatedly, that it was fine but, even then, it was stilted and awkward and they'd watch her as if worrying she'd break down in tears at any second.

Sometimes they were right but, other times...other times she'd really like to forget just for a moment. Her parents had been so much more than the tragic way they died. That had been a single moment in a lifetime of moments and sometimes it was those other moments she wanted to remember.

The sound of her mother's laugh. The smell of fresh cookies baked from a secret recipe lost the moment her parent's car had crashed through the thin layer of ice frosting the surface of the lake. Her father tossing her up in the air and catching her when she'd been very young, combined with her mother's worry in the background. The way the two of them would squabble good-naturedly, bickering in the front seat as they headed off on some new adventure or another.

Sometimes it was nice to just forget. Forget the fact that they were dead, and instead remember they'd once been alive.

Hesitantly, she began to recount a story her mother had once told her from her days as a teacher. This led to Cerys recounting a story of her own mother, followed by Gareth with one of his own before it returned to Bilba. This time her voice was stronger, and more confident as she recalled a childhood incident that had resulted in a total ban of all things frog and frog related. By the time she was done, Gareth, Cerys and even Wynne were laughing so hard they were practically crying and even Bilba found herself laughing a time or two.

Gareth was in the midst of telling a story about his father teaching him and his brother to fish, when the doorbell rang. Bilba jumped in surprise, so engrossed in the small dinner she'd almost forgotten there was still a larger world surrounding them. Her eyes went to the window, where the storm was still in full swing, and a sense of unease settled in her stomach.
Cerys and Gareth exchanged glances of their own before Gareth pushed to his feet. "What idiot is out in this storm?" he muttered, before heading into the living room.

"Will you show me how to be a ballerina after dinner?" Wynne asked.

Bilba pulled her eyes away from where Gareth had gone and nodded at the little girl with a slightly forced smile "Sure." There were several moves she could show Wynne in the tighter confines of the house, as well as a few Wynne could probably master reasonably well herself with a little help.

Cerys sighed. "I see dance lessons in the future, don't I?"

"It's good exercise," Bilba said, with a slight, unapologetic, smile. "It's great for balance and coordination too."

Cerys laughed. "I get it, Your Highness."

Bilba flinched, the title like a dash of cold water. For a split second she'd managed to forget she wasn't back in Shire, a young girl at a dinner, enjoying time with friends while her parents sat up at home watching a movie, waiting for her to return.

"You don't have to sell me on it," Cerys continued, seeming to not notice Bilba's reaction. She smiled at her daughter. "What do you think, squirt? Maybe an early birthday present?"

Wynne sat up straight, eyes wide and sucked in a sharp breath. She clasped her hands in front of her and froze so completely, and for so long, that Bilba started to worry she might pass out if she didn't take a breath soon.

Then, without warning, the little girl suddenly said, "Excuse me, I have to go tell Daddy."

She started to slide out of her chair, only to stop as Cerys lightly caught her arm. "Why don’t we wait until Daddy comes back, and you can tell him then?"

Her voice never changed cadence, but the air in the room seemed to suddenly cool considerably. Wynne looked surprised but nodded politely and resumed her seat. "Okay, Mommy."

Cerys smiled and settled back in her seat. As she did, Bilba suddenly realized the other woman had stopped Wynne, and was now resuming eating, with the same hand. The other was under the table and had been there since Gareth had left.

The front door opened in the living room, and Bilba heard the howl and rage of the storm outside. It muted a few seconds later as the door closed again, and Bilba was startled to hear muffled voices.

Cerys frowned and pushed back from the table. "Excuse me, Your Highness. I'll be right back."

She vanished through the portal as well, both hands empty, and then Bilba was alone in the kitchen with Wynne.

Absently, she took a bite of her meal, hoping to erase the nervous look on Wynne's face. A low, rumbling voice reached her from the living room, and suddenly the food was ash in her mouth. Her stomach tightened until it threatened to make her sick, and pure ice rushed through her veins.

Thorin.

That was Thorin's voice. She remembered it from the wedding and interviews the day after, not to mention the constant stream of it from past her door as he talked to Kyra every night and, oh yeah,
from earlier when he'd been *yelling at her*.

Yelling because he'd been angry, and she'd gone and mouthed off at him because she was an idiot, and now he was *here* and if he was here that probably meant he knew *she* was here and *that* meant he knew she'd snuck out of the palace and ---

"Uncle Thorin!" Wynne dropped her fork on her plate and started to scoot out of her chair.

"Uncle Thorin?" Bilba asked blankly, and with only a slight edge of panic. "He's your uncle?"

"Not really," the little girl explained as she hopped to the floor. "I just call him that."

"Do you see him often?" Through the haze of panic slowly clouding her mind, Bilba hung onto the thought that maybe, just maybe the man liked children and that, just maybe, it might prove he wasn't *so* very bad.

Her grandfather despised children.

"Nope." With one-word Wynne dashed all her hopes. The little girl paused and smiled brightly, oblivious to the way Bilba was clutching the edges of the table so hard her knuckles had gone white. "Just sometimes when I go play with Fili and Kili. They're really nice, for boys."

She said the last words in a tone of voice that might have drawn a laugh at any other time, and then was off, skipping into the living room with all the carefree innocence of a child who'd always had someone there to protect her from the darkness of the world.

Who probably didn't even realize there was darkness in the world.

Bilba's chest tightened and her breathing came in short, strangled gasps. She put her own fork down carefully, barely noticing how badly her hand was shaking, and then pushed up from her chair. Her legs shook under her and she locked her knees, leaning on the edge of the table as she tried to calm herself down.

The stance drew her attention to her clothing, and she felt her gut clench. She needed to change. Her grandfather was always so particular about public appearances. Thorin would no doubt be the same. He was the heir to a kingdom and, unwanted or not, he would expect his wife to look the part. He'd already been so angry, and knowing she'd snuck out would just make it worse.

If he saw her like this...

An old memory, one long buried and held down through sheer force of will, threatened to surface and she held a whimper back between clenched teeth. It was the only time she'd ever seen her grandfather truly angry. He was always so controlled, so calculating but once, only once, she'd seen the alternative.

Once, and she'd only just survived it.

The stairs to the second floor were, thankfully, in the rear of the kitchen. The view of them was blocked from the living room portal, meaning she could get there without fear of being seen.

She'd just reached the bottom step when she heard a sound behind her. She turned, and froze as a short, dark blur, raced toward her.

It was fear alone, locking her muscles as securely as iron chains, that kept her from reacting as the
blur launched into her and resolved into a small woman about her own height with light brown curls and a radiant smile.

"Your Highness!" The arms that had been wrapped around her were gone so fast Bilba didn't even have the time to process the fact she'd just been hugged for the first time in over a month. "I'm so happy to finally get a chance to meet you!"

The woman was literally dancing on her feet, hands clasped together in front of her.

Bilba stammered, struggling to squeeze words past her closed-off throat, but the young woman wasn't done talking yet.

"I'm Ori," she said happily, still bouncing on the balls of her feet. She shot a glare over her shoulder before looking back to add, "and we would have met weeks ago if someone hadn't said I had to wait until you settled in."

Bilba blinked, opened her mouth to respond, and then snapped it closed again as Ori's action a moment earlier registered.

A cold, sickening feeling settled low in her gut as she slowly lifted her eyes past Ori's shoulder, and found herself looking straight into Thorin's.

"I was just going to change!" Bilba managed to blurt out before he could say anything. Her heart began hammering in her chest and her fingers dug into the hem of the ill-fitting shirt she wore. "I know, I look awful, but I wasn't going to go out, and my other things were wet and--"

She was babbling, voice almost frantic as she tried desperately to find the right combination of words to ward off his anger, or at least prevent his anger escalating past where it already was. If she could just show him she hadn't meant to make him angry, or that she was trying to do what he wanted, then maybe...just maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

"I'll be right back," she finished, before spinning on one heel and nearly sprinting up the stairs. Her foot caught about halfway up, tripping her and sending her knee slamming painfully into the edge of the top step. Luckily, the stairs were carpeted, and she caught herself well enough to cover any sound of it from downstairs.

She dragged herself upright, pain radiating along the nerves of her leg, and half-limped, half-ran toward the master bedroom. The washer and dryer were stacked on top of each other in a closeted space right next to the room, built in a space designed to fit them and nothing else. Cerys had muttered about poor planning when she'd thrown Bilba's clothing in, saying they'd had to schedule the washing around Wynne and their own sleep schedules to avoid the sound waking them up.

Bilba stopped the dryer to get her clothes out, and felt her heart almost stop at the realization that they were, of course, the clothes she'd snuck out of the palace in.

He was going to kill her.

Not only did the clothes make her look messy and unkempt, but the shirt had originally belonged to Bofur. Thorin might publicly flaunt Kyra to the world, but there was no possible way he'd react well to his unwanted wife running around in public wearing another man's shirt.

He was royalty, double standards were one of the many perks that came with the title.

Bilba sagged against the wall next to the small closet, clothes clutched against her chest and forehead pressed against the stucco.
For the first time, she wished she'd never left Shire. There had been limits there, albeit small ones, to how far her grandfather could go. She'd had friends, professors and a ballet company that would have noticed her absence. Even the media, ambivalent as it had been toward her, would have started to ask questions if a princess had up and disappeared.

Not only that, but there'd been rules there. She'd known how far she could, and could not, go. She knew what her grandfather's buttons were and how to avoid pushing them, and how to mitigate his reaction, to an extent, when she accidentally did.

Here she had none of that. She didn't know Thorin well enough to know what the rules were. She had no idea how to ward off or mitigate his anger, and he had nothing to make him pull back from fully unleashing it on her if he wanted. He could throw her in the deepest, darkest hole in Erebor and no one would care.

The media would probably celebrate. A sudden image of perfect Kyra prancing out at Thorin's side to the adulation of the crowds celebrating her reinstatement as Thorin's fiancée ran through her mind and despair fell over her, coupled with a bone deep, heavy fatigue.

Why was she even bothering to try?

Thorin, no doubt, had been simply looking for a reason to lock her away so he could bring Kyra back out again, and she'd gone and handed him three. There was nothing she could say or do that would stop that from happening.

Nothing at all.

With a sigh, she pushed off the wall. Her body felt like it weighed a ton and it was all she could do to drag herself into the bedroom and carefully close the door behind her.

She made it the few feet to the bed, collapsed on top of the comforter and curled into a fetal position on her side, facing the wall. She pulled Bofur's shirt free from the pile in her hands and clutched it to her chest, the way a child afraid of the dark might hold a stuffed animal, and waited for the axe to fall.

Why couldn't she have just left it alone? Just stayed in her room, kept quiet and to herself the way she'd been doing. No one would have noticed her, no one would have bothered her, and she could have just...

Even as she thought it, however, she knew the answer.

In Shire she'd spent most of her time in Hobbiton, far from the palace and its intrigues. It had always been there of course, looming like a dark shadow in the back of her mind and giving her paranoia every time the phone rang or a knock sounded on the door, but it wasn't there.

Once upon a time, if asked, she'd have said it was an awful way to live. A constant stress, an ever-present worry and fear that any moment her grandfather would miss his audience and summon her back to the palace for a visit.

It was nothing, however, compared to being in it all the time. Every minute of every hour of every day of every week, surrounded by royals, always afraid she'd misstep somehow or draw attention or Thorin would just get tired of her existing and lock her away somewhere dark and lose the key.

She managed to not think about it sometimes, but it was always there, and a thousand times worse than it had ever been in Shire. The only time she was truly free of it was when she was asleep, and sometimes for a few, brief seconds when she woke up and momentarily forgot where she was.
Behind her, the door opened but Bilba couldn't find the energy to react. She was just *tired*.

Soft footsteps padded across the floor.

_Won't grandfather be pleased to hear you've finally given in?_

The words bubbled up from somewhere deep inside and, along with them, the tiniest spark of light pushed at her. Little more than a dying ember in the midst of a long dead fire it was, nonetheless, enough to send her pushing to a sitting position where she gave a half-hearted attempt to wipe at the moisture in her eyes before the newcomer made it close enough to see clearly.

"Sorry," she said, back to the room, hoping the waver in the voice wasn't noticeable. "I must have dozed off for a second."

A shadow fell over her, and she risked looking up to see the young woman from downstairs standing over her with an unreadable expression in her eyes.

"Ori, right?" Bilba said, struggling to find the energy to fake a smile. "Sorry, I'm not more prepared to meet you. Probably not the best first impression, is it?"

Ori tilted her head to the side, arms crossed, and studied her. "It's like trying to defuse a bomb no one else even knows is lit, isn't it?" she asked finally, voice quiet.

Bilba blinked in surprise. "I'm sorry?"

"You say that too much." Ori turned suddenly and sat on the edge of the bed next to her with a heavy plop, legs hanging off the edge. "I have two brothers," she said without preamble. She frowned again, kicking her feet absently, eyes fixed on the wall of the room as if it were the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen.

"Oh," Bilba said, struggling to process the sudden, random shift in topic. "That's nice. I always wanted siblings, but I was the only one."

Too much stress, the doctors had reported. Her mother had been under so much stress thanks to the Thain and his machinations that it had taken a physical toll on her health and rendered her unable to conceive. The fact she'd been able to have even one child had been a miracle in and of itself.

Her grandfather had no doubt taken it as a personal insult.

"I have two," Ori repeated, "both older, so they tend to be a little protective." She turned her head enough to smile at Bilba. "If you tell anyone I said this I'll deny it, but they're both pretty awesome. One of them taught me how to take down an attacker with my bare hands, and the other taught me how to pick locks when I was thirteen."

"Oh," Bilba repeated lamely. "That's -- is that what brothers do?"

If so, she'd clearly missed out.

"Mine did," Ori said with clear pride. "They're both kind of rogues, I guess, but with hearts of gold, you know?"

Bilba really didn't, but she nodded anyway. It seemed to make Ori happy as she leaned back on her hands to stare up at the ceiling.
"I kind of got it into my head that all rogues were like that, rough around the edges but with a heart of gold." She kicked her feet and flopped on her back, crossing her hands over her stomach. "So when I was about sixteen or so, I met this guy. Charming, handsome, had a bit of a temper and could be an ass, but I figured 'hey, he's just a rogue, like my brothers. I bet, underneath all that bravado and jackassery, there's a great guy.'"

"Let me guess," Bilba said softly. "He wasn't like your brothers."

"He was not." The look of levity faded from Ori's face. "Looking back now it seems so obvious but, then...I just never really saw it. He'd say I misunderstood, or what I thought happened wasn't what happened. He'd tell me I was imagining things, and I was a terrible person for thinking such awful things about someone as wonderful as him." Her voice fell to a near whisper, so that Bilba had to strain to hear. "He'd have me doubting my own sanity, and then he'd say it was my fault to begin with. I upset him, pushed him, made him crazy, or whatever."

Bilba raised an eyebrow. "He'd blame you for the things he insisted hadn't happened or that you'd misunderstood?"

"Right?" Ori said with a slight smile. "If only I'd known you then."

"Did you tell your brothers?" Bilba asked. There had never been anyone she could tell. Her family, and particularly the Thain, were above the royalty, and thus above the law. No one could touch them.

"They found out eventually," Ori said, "but not because I told them. I was too..." she shrugged. "I don't know. I was supposed to be the tough one, raised to be badass and strong and independent and all. I wasn't the one that sort of thing happened too. I was the one stopping it from happening to others."

Anger laced her tone and she pushed up to a sitting position, whirling to match Bilba's pose. "One of my brothers noticed I'd stopped smiling. The other realized I hadn't laughed in a very long time. Next thing I knew, I had them both facing me down at dinner to inform me I was now single, and my ex had chosen to move to Rohan."

Bilba bit back a smile. Bofur had not enjoyed living in Rohan, complaining it was far too hot and almost overrun with horses. The people who lived there were very insular, he'd told her, and did not take to newcomers easily, or quickly. "What did you say?"

"Thank you," Ori replied simply. She shrugged and looked down. Bilba followed her gaze and saw the other woman was idly toying with a ring on her ring finger. "A few weeks later I was introduced to Dwalin, and the rest was history as they say."

Dwalin? The name sounded familiar but Bilba couldn't place where she'd heard it. Knowing her luck, he'd turn out to be Kyra's brother, which would make Ori her sister-in-law and undoubtedly another member of the Kyra Fan Club.

She was somewhat surprised to find her spirit had settled a little as the other woman had spoken, which didn't make a lot of sense as absolutely nothing had changed about her circumstances, but there it was.

A hand fell over hers where it was still playing with Bofur's shirt, and she looked up in surprise to see Ori studying her with a serious expression.

"I told you all that," Ori said gently, "so you'd know I recognize the signs, and you can talk to me."
Bilba froze, eyes wide. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes," Ori said firmly, "you do."

Bilba frowned and tried to pull her hand free but Ori clasped it in both of hers and gave her a searching gaze. "I think you know what I'm going to say."

"I really don't," Bilba responded, slightly panicked even as she did her best to put her face into a neutral expression. She had no idea what Ori thought she was doing but one thing was perfectly clear.

The other girl wasn't used to being around royalty. She couldn't be, not if she thought it was as simple as talking or having a brother willing to threaten someone.

You did not talk to, or threaten, royals. They could not be reasoned with, and they could not be stopped. They did whatever they wanted, and they got away with it because there was no one who could, or would, do a damn thing about it. They weren't just above the law, they were the law, and anyone who dared get in their way was simply crushed by the weight of their passing. She'd seen it. She'd lived it. Ori would never survive it.

A sound caught her attention, and she turned to see the partially closed door to the bedroom being pushed slowly open.

Ori, still holding both of Bilba's hands in hers, clearly hadn't noticed, too intent on whatever it was she was trying to do.

"Bilba," Ori repeated, grip tightening on Bilba's hands. "Did Thorin hurt you?"

The door swung the rest of the way open, revealing a, by then, all too familiar huge figure, and Bilba felt her heart drop all the way to her toes.

Thorin, and she could see by the look in his eyes he'd heard every word.
Before Bilba had the chance to fully process what had just happened, let alone formulate a reaction, Ori was off the bed and standing face to face with Thorin.

Well, face to breastbone, but Bilba mentally applauded the effort.

“Are you serious?” Ori demanded, hands clenched into fists and leaning forward as if preparing to go to battle... or perhaps pantomime skiing. It was hard to tell. “What part of a closed door don’t you get?”

“What are you talking about?” Thorin asked in confusion. “The door was open!”

“Really?” Ori asked incredulously. “That’s what you’re going with?” She gestured at the door. "It's clearly closed, or at least it was until you opened it!"

Thorin's eyes narrowed and, on the bed, Bilba tensed.

"Closed," he growled through clenched teeth, “would require my turning the doorknob to open it. I didn’t, which means it wasn’t shut.”

“Closed,” Ori said slowly and in an exaggerated manner that was just a little insulting, "is anything that isn't open. If you can't see in the room because the door is in the way, then it means the door is closed!"

"That’s ridiculous!" Thorin said. His voice was rising as he spoke, and he was beginning to make hand gestures to punctuate his point. On the bed, Bilba was still holding onto Bofur's shirt, fingers curling in tighter to the fabric. It probably wasn't the best decision, holding another man’s shirt in front of her angry husband, but she couldn’t seem to convince herself to put it down.

Ori made an aggravated noise. "Having to look up like this is hurting my neck, you jerk!"

"How is that my fault?" Thorin demanded.
"Gee, I wonder," Ori said sarcastically. She looked around the room and then, with an annoyed mutter, stomped over to an office chair shoved in front of a small writing desk. She dragged it out and shoved it toward Thorin. The chair was on wheels, and Bilba frowned, hoping Ori wasn't about to do what she thought the other woman was about to do.

Ori put a hand out to Thorin, who also frowned. "You'll break your neck," he said, "and Dwalin will have me assassinated."

Ori's only response was to glare at him, until he finally sighed in exasperation. He ignored her hand and instead put his hands on her waist, lifted her like she was a doll rather than a full-grown woman, and set her feet carefully on the seat of the rolling chair. He then grabbed her hand and steadied her while he lightly spun the chair until the back was facing him and he could grab and anchor it with the other hand. The effect reminded Bilba of a music box she'd once owned featuring a ballerina en pointe, twirling gracefully to a tune she could no longer really remember.

There was no music now, and Ori wasn't exactly what Bilba would call graceful at that precise moment, but the comparison still worked, more or less.

"Happy now?" Thorin asked dryly.

"I'll be happy when you apologize for barging into a room and not respecting a closed door!" Ori said, setting herself with her free hand on her hip, other one still clutching Thorin's hand to keep her balance just in case the chair suddenly ceased being under her feet for one reason or another. She hadn't thought to raise the chair's seat before clambering on and Bilba had a feeling Wynne had been the last to sit on it given how low it was. Even standing as straight as possible, Ori still had to lift her head a bit to make direct eye contact with Thorin.

Bilba wisely kept her eyes focused on his shoes.

"For the last time, it wasn't closed!" Thorin retorted, and Bilba flinched at the tone. She stiffened, half-expecting to hear the crack of Thorin's hand across Ori's face. From experience, she knew such a blow, coming from a man of his size could lead to anything from a black eye to a broken nose to, depending on just how angry he was, a fractured jaw.

Trying to eat with a fractured jaw was a special kind of awful.

Behind Thorin, Cerys appeared in the doorway, arms folded across her chest. She sighed, rolled her eyes and then called over her shoulder, "Hey, Captain! The prince is enabling your wife's suicidal tendencies again!"

Thorin looked over his shoulder at her, while Ori leaned enough to see past him to where Cerys stood. "I am not! He is not!"

The words were shouted simultaneously, so in sync one could almost think it had been rehearsed. In the doorway, Cerys merely raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. Stomping footsteps sounded on the stairs and a minute later the hulking bodyguard Bilba remembered from Shire came into the room. Shaking his head and muttering under his breath, he went over, wrapped an arm around Ori's waist, lifted her right off the chair and began to head out of the room again.

"Don't you dare!" Ori managed to squirm free from her husband, probably only because he let her, and ran back to plop herself on the bed next to Bilba. "Well?" she demanded, looking at Thorin. "Didn't you come here in the first place to say something to her?"
Bilba blinked in confusion, wondering what had happened to the door argument but no one else in the room seemed the least bit surprised by the sudden shift in topic.

Thorin scowled, crossing his arms and setting himself in a stance that could only be defined as stubbornness personified.

"I did," he said, voice flat, "but I'd prefer to do it without an audience."

Ori crossed her arms and settled back into a more comfortable position on the edge of the bed. After a few moments of silence, Cerys came, and proceeded to sit on Bilba's other side, arms also crossed.

Dwalin made a choked, almost snort like sound before saying, "Think I heard Gareth call. Better go see what he wants."

Thorin half turned to watch the other man leave, muttering under his breath about how Gareth had the most sense of any of them by staying downstairs to begin with, before turning back to face the three of them with a scowl.

"I wanted to apologize for getting angry at you," he said without preamble. "I was already angry about something that had nothing to do--" he paused, frowning for a moment, before continuing. "In any case, I was angry, and I took it out on you and, for that, I offer my apologies."

"It's fine," Bilba said, voice barely a whisper. It was what she was expected to say, so she said it. She'd gotten good, over the years, at saying what she was supposed to say. Whatever it was that might mitigate the damage later. Mitigate, not avoid. Ori was right in describing it like trying to defuse a bomb. To date, she'd never managed to find the exact set of words to successfully defuse anything, but she kept trying.

Even if she was fairly certain that trying the same thing over and over again expecting different results might be the definition of insanity.

Thorin gave an absentminded nod. He started to turn, almost as if planning to leave, only to stop mid-step and turn back. "Do you know the Queen of Gondor?"

Bilba's eyes narrowed in confusion, wondering if random shifts of topic were simply a cultural thing in Erebor that she hadn't been aware of until that point. "Arwen? Yes, she's a family friend."

Sort of. A family friend of her and her mother's, not so much the royal family of Shire but he didn't need to know that.

Thorin nodded, eyes distant as if considering something. Bilba couldn't begin to imagine what.

"Erebor has been trying to open relations with Gondor," he said finally, "but we've been unsuccessful so far."

"Oh," Bilba said faintly. Was that why he'd come out in the pouring rain? She'd assumed he had some motive as royalty never did anything without a reason, but she did wonder why he hadn't waited until she returned. "I could open a channel for your ambassadors," she said slowly, hoping that was what he'd wanted, "but I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why not?" There was no anger in Thorin's voice, simply interest, but Bilba wasn't an idiot. Her grandfather could look someone dead in the eye with sincerity and kindness, all the while knowing he planned to have them and their entire family killed later that night. It was all just part of the facade.

"Arwen and Aragorn aren't known for stonewalling other kingdoms, and they have no grudge
against Erebor that I'm aware of." Every eye in the room was on her, and it was rapidly increasing her anxiety. She hated being the center of attention, had spent the last month doing her utmost best to be the exact opposite in fact. "It sounds like someone doesn't like you, and they're high enough to do something about it. If you go behind their back without first discovering who they are and what their intentions are--"

"We risk having a foe we're blind to in future negotiations," Thorin concluded. He shrugged. "Fine, how would you suggest we proceed?"

Bilba's eyes widened. That was not what she wanted to hear. Now, if anything went wrong it was going to be her fault.

"I can talk to her," she said weakly, because there was nothing else she could say. Mentally, she cringed from the thought. Arwen had been emailing her since the wedding, mostly to demand why Bilba hadn't told her about said wedding and wanting to know how she was. So far, Bilba had ignored her, unsure of what to tell her. Arwen was scarily adept at knowing when Bilba was lying. Simply refusing to answer could eventually cause the other woman to hop on a plane and simply show up, so she'd have to respond eventually. She'd just been hoping to put it off a little while longer. "She can find out what's going on from her end and keep Erebor's name out of it."

Thorin nodded. "All right. Thank you."

Bilba raised an eyebrow just a little. Thank you? She couldn't remember her grandfather ever thanking her, for anything, not even as a way to show off his so-called graciousness and civility in public.

The act startled her so badly, in fact, that she simply stared at him blankly until he gave another short nod and turned to leave the room. It was only as he got near the door that something occurred to Bilba and, before she could stop herself, she blurted, "You're not going to say anything about my sneaking out?"

Perhaps not the smartest thing to remind him about but, as one of her aunts liked to say, she wasn't exactly known for being bright. Besides, the pressure of it hanging over her head was killing her and while she didn't think he would reveal how he really felt in a public setting it still might give her at least a hint of what might be coming later. Her grandfather had his tells, they were subtle but once she'd learned to read them she'd been able to guess at how he was truly feeling in any given situation. Just what kind of anger was boiling beneath the stretched smile, handshake that was just a little too tight, and the glint in his eyes that papers were ever misidentifying as a twinkle.

She had no idea what Thorin's tells were, or how just deep his anger at her would run. She'd caught his slip up in his apology. He'd been angry about something involving her and had taken it out on her in response. It was her own fault. She'd let her guard down and drawn his notice, something she'd spent the last month doing her best to avoid. Now all that mattered was whether he'd let her slip back into obscurity or not. If he did, then fine. She'd fade back into her room and make damn sure she didn't repeat the same mistake that had landed her in this current situation.

If he didn't, however --

If he proved to be more like her grandfather, a snake that had just seen a mouse to play with, well --

It meant she'd better learn his tells, and his triggers, and fast.

Thorin had stopped in the doorway and half turned. Bilba kept her eyes on his chest but she could practically feel his eyes boring into her. It made her feel a little like that mouse, under the scrutiny of
a hungry cat, and she tensed, shoulders bunched up so tight it was a wonder she didn't suffer a muscle spasm.

"I grew up in exile," he said, voice casual. "Moving from that to a royal lifestyle was...restricting to say the least. I can understand the desire to get away from it all from time to time." A trace of what could almost be called levity entered his voice. "Some of us just manage to not get caught."

And then he was gone, apparently forgetting, or just choosing to ignore whatever he may or may not have heard when he had first come in. That or he just didn't want to restart the door closed versus open argument with Ori, also a distinct possibility.

Behind him, Bilba sat and stared at the doorway, fingers still clutching Bofur's shirt so tight she had a vague worry her fingers might tear right through.

She hadn't been able to read him, at all, which meant he was potentially a better actor than even her grandfather and he had almost everyone in Shire utterly fooled. It also meant she couldn't read Thorin's tells or triggers and she had absolutely nothing to base her future expectations on. What she could expect when he was truly angry, even what she might expect later that night when she got back to her rooms and he didn't have to worry about any public eye being on him. It meant she didn't know his ulterior motives, aside from the obvious one about wanting to open talks with Gondor and that meant --

_Maybe he didn't have any other motives. Maybe he was sincere._

Bilba blinked and wondered where in the world _that_ thought had come from. She wasn't naive, not anymore. Not since the day her parents had died, and she'd first met her grandfather, shaking from grief and exhaustion, in her pajamas in a crowded throne room. She knew what happened to naive people, those who foolishly thought people were altruistic, or genuine or that they wouldn't turn on her the second it became profitable for them to do so.

_What about Bofur and Rosie?_

Bilba resisted rolling her eyes at her own subconsciousness. Bofur and Rosie were different.

_They weren't royals, or royal sycophants._

_What about Arwen? And Aragorn?_

They don't _count_, Bilba informed her subconsciousness sharply. Now shut up.

Cerys cleared her throat, and Bilba jumped, having managed to forget the other woman was there. "He hasn't done anything to you, has he?" she asked. "The prince?"

Would it matter if he had, Bilba thought in confusion. As nice as Cerys might behave she was still employed by the palace, and the Durin royal family. She wasn't going to protect Bilba from _them_. In Shire, Bilba had only had guards when at the palace and they were more to ensure she kept her mouth shut, and to ensure her grandfather knew about her daily movements.

"No," she said softly now. "Of course not."

She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice when she spoke. She was mostly successful.

"Whose shirt is that?" Ori said suddenly, breaking into the awkward silence that was starting to fall over the room. "It's too big for you."
"Oh," Bilba forced herself to finally set Bofur's shirt down in her lap. "Just some old thing I found once upon a time. It's comfortable."

Ori nodded sagely. "I steal Dwalin's shirts all the time. It annoys him."

Bilba frowned sideways at the other woman. "He's really your husband?"

"Yep," Ori pushed forward so she could scramble off the bed and twirled in a circle for seemingly no reason at all. "So what else did you do after you snuck out? Did you get to do anything fun or did Cerys and Gareth get to you first?"

"I resent the implication that my husband and I are fun killers," Cerys said dryly.

Ori rolled her eyes. "You can resent it, but it doesn't make it less true."

"I got a job," Bilba interjected. She kept her eyes on her lap, idly fiddling with the collar of Bofur's shirt. Her shirt now, she supposed as she had no plans of ever seeing him again to return it. The thought brought a heaviness she'd been trying very hard to ignore. She missed him, and Rosie too, but at the moment mostly him. He'd made her feel safe in a way she hadn't felt in a very, very long time. "At a bakery," she added, pulling her mind back to the situation at hand with difficulty. Her voice wavered only a little and she cleared her throat, trying to mask it.

"Really?" Ori stopped twirling and leaned forward, somehow showing no signs of being dizzy. "Why? Your stipend is four times anything you could make in a bakery, or any other job for that matter."

"Stipend?" Bilba asked blankly. "What stipend?"

Ori's eyes narrowed. "The one you get from being Thorin's wife?" At Bilba's continued confused look, the other woman asked, "Doesn't sound familiar? Huh." She frowned, looking off into the distance for a few seconds. "How about your ladies-in-waiting? Schedule? Maid service?"

As Bilba shook her head at each question, Ori's eyes grew wider and wider and her tone of voice grew more and more incredulous. At the last question, she closed her mouth slowly, stared at Bilba and then, without a word, turned and walked out of the room.

Bilba looked at Cerys who shrugged. "Don't look at me. She probably went to yell at the prince again, or Dwalin, or both. You never know with her."

Bilba tried to imagine the other woman, who was about her height if not an inch or two shorter, yelling at Thorin's bodyguard. Then she tried to remember if there had been any chairs in the living room. "Why are all the men so enormous here?" she muttered half to herself.

"They aren't," Cerys said, leaning back on her hands next to her. "It's just the Durins...oh, and Gareth, I suppose."

Bilba frowned. "Does that mean Thorin's bodyguard is related to him?"

"Dwalin?" Cerys asked. "Yep, not in the direct line, but he is related. He's more than Thorin's bodyguard too. He's the Captain of the Guard of Erebor."

"Oh." That made sense, Bilba supposed. If the man was related to the Durins he was pretty much royalty in his own right. It also meant Ori was associated with the Durins, though not as directly. She'd have to keep that in mind.
Still gripping Bofur's shirt, she scooted off the bed and stood up. "I think I'll go ahead and get dressed," she said quietly. She was only mildly embarrassed that Thorin and Dwalin had seen her in a robe.

It wasn't like either man had even noticed.

"Trust me, dear. No one's infatuated with your beauty."

Bilba frowned as her aunt's words floated through her head. Bofur had liked her, she thought stubbornly, in spite of her supposed lack of a single redeeming quality. Her family had tried to insist he'd only liked her for the fame or wealth he hoped would come from dating her. Bilba had made it clear to him that he'd get neither and, in fact, he'd probably suffer from being close to her.

He hadn't cared. He'd been sweet and kind and caring and had loved her in spite of her flaws. For a first, and last, boyfriend she'd say she'd done pretty well for herself.

"All right," Cerys said. "I'll wait for you downstairs." She made her way toward the door before hesitating. "Did you have security in Shire?"

Bilba wasn't sure what had prompted the question, but she gave a non-committal shrug in response. "I had guards, sometimes."

Cerys nodded, a considering look in her eyes before she resumed her walk and exited into the hall. Behind her, Bilba headed into the bathroom. It was only after she'd shut the door that she allowed herself a shaky breath and scrubbed absently at the moisture gathering in her eyes. Then, with a sigh, she sagged against the door, clutching her clothing to her chest.

"All right," she whispered to herself after a few minutes. She needed to get dressed and return to the palace. There was nothing she could do about Thorin or how he might or might not react later, once she was alone without witnesses, so there was little use worrying about it. No doubt Rosie was wondering what had happened to her and she was going to have to come up with a good explanation.

Hopefully, by the time she got back, she'd have one.

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Cerys walked slowly down the stairs, one hand absently trailing along the smooth wood of the bannister.

The kitchen was empty, but she could hear the murmur of voices and the low undertone of the television from the living room.

Cerys spent a few minutes tidying up the kitchen, moving plates to the sink and cleaning off the table. A messy environment made her twitchy and she was forever organizing in an admittedly futile effort to keep things as clean as possible.

Once the kitchen was as clean as she could make it within a short timeframe she dusted her hands off on her pants and headed into the living room.

Ori was speaking animatedly to the captain, who was lounging back in a chair, arms crossed as he listened to her. The prince was on the phone near the front door, voice low as he spoke to whoever was on the other end.
Wynne was curled up on the couch, holding one of the stuffed animals her father had gotten her that was nearly as large as she was. Her eyes were glued to the television, showing one of her favorite movies, a cartoon full of bright color and overly happy characters that tended to give Cerys the creeps. She didn't remember the story of that one, but they were almost always the same, tales of princesses and princes and fairytale palaces far away.

None of them ever seemed to mention the assassination attempts, political maneuvering, power trips and arranged marriages that managed to destroy the lives of those they affected. She supposed it didn't make for particularly good merchandising to sell the idea of "be a princess! Have little to no control over the course of your own life!"

The little girl was so engrossed she didn't even notice her mother's entrance so, with an amused smile, Cerys went to hop up and sit on the low bureau Gareth was leaning against.

"You look like you're deep in thought," he said with a sideways look.

"Just being cynical," Cerys replied. "Who's the prince on the phone with?"

Gareth shrugged. "Pretty sure it's Kyra. She seems upset about something." He was silent for a moment or two before leaning over to bump her shoulder lightly. "How's the princess?"

"She's fine." Cerys crossed her arms, fingers absently tapping on her forearms. She didn't realize she was staring rather fixedly at the Captain until he said something to Ori, stood up and walked over to stand in front of Cerys.

"What?"

Behind him, Ori flounced over to drop on the couch next to Wynne and began watching the show with all the concentration and focus of someone personally invested in the outcome.

Shaking her head at the other woman's ability to go from raging defender of the oppressed to young girl in love with cartoons, Cerys focused on the captain. "Have you seen the file on the princess?"

She nodded toward the ceiling as she spoke, clarifying which princess she meant.

"Of course," Dwalin rumbled in the aggrieved tone he got when he thought people had forgotten he was in charge of palace security and that it made him Nori's boss, not the other way around.

Technically, as the spymaster liked to say. He liked to describe their positions as more lateral. The captain did not agree.

The spymaster did not care.

"Has she suffered any trauma?" Cerys kept her voice low.

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. "Aside from her parents' dying? No."

"Both of them are gone?" Cerys asked. She'd noticed the princess referring to her mother in the past tense and had caught the nostalgic tone when she'd spoken about the past but hadn't known for sure what it meant. It did make sense, however, given that neither had been present at the wedding, or in any subsequent coverage after that she'd seen.

Actually, now that she thought about it, it was odd that there'd been no coverage of her parents at all. The girl's mother, if she recalled correctly, had been the Thain's daughter, but not a single story had been run on her, life or death, in the coverage surrounding the marriage? It had been years now since
Princess Dis' husband, Vili, had vanished and Erebor still faithfully ran specials on it every year on the anniversary of his disappearance. The only people at the palace who watched it were Nori and Dwalin who sat in silence and viewed the entire program, year after year, as some type of strange penance for having failed to protect a member of the royal family, and for having let another year pass without bringing him home.

How strange that Shire apparently didn't give the same thought to their own lost royals.

"Car accident," Dwalin said. "They slid on ice and went right into a lake. The water was frozen, but not enough to hold the weight of the car."

Cerys nodded slowly. "And the princess was in the car?"

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. "No. She was at home."

"Oh," Cerys said, confused, "so then, anything else? Kidnappings, attempted assassinations, bullying gone wrong?"

"No," Dwalin said, eyes narrowing. "According to her files, outside of what happened to her parents, her life has been quiet. Why?"

Cerys chewed idly on her lower lip before checking to make sure Wynne and Ori were still engrossed in their show while the prince was still talking animatedly on the phone in the corner. "Her hands are scarred," she said finally, keeping her voice to a near whisper. "You'd barely notice unless you were paying attention," or, for example, if the girl's hands were blanched from a white knuckled death grip on a shirt, "but they're there. Finger tips, all along the fingers themselves, and the sides of the hands."

Beside her, Gareth frowned. "She could have fallen and damaged her hands trying to catch herself."

"Maybe," Cerys said, "but then why isn't it in her files? It was no simple fall if that's what happened. Her hands had to have been shredded, and more than what a bandage or two would have fixed."

"Her medical report is less than a page and a half," Dwalin said. "Yearly exams, all ending with a clean bill of health, no major incidences. She hasn't even broken a bone according to the paperwork Shire sent us."

"And yet her hands suggest at least one serious injury at some point in her past," Gareth mused. "I wonder what else is missing."

Cerys smirked. "And you say I'm the paranoid one."

"It's contagious," Gareth quipped back easily.

Cerys shook her head, only to feel her good humor fade as her eyes fell on Ori. "Your wife seems to think the princess is an abuse survivor." She pulled her eyes back to Dwalin as she spoke and saw a dark look in his eyes. Dwalin had a particular hatred for violence toward women as he saw his wife in every face. "She thought the prince might be at fault."

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. "Girl was terrified before she ever got here. She played a good game for the camera but couldn't look us in the eyes in private. She frowned to himself, as if remembering something, before shaking his head and rocking back on his heels absently. "She got her life turned upside down, and thrown in with a bunch of strangers, one of them being Thorin. He's not the most personable on a good day, and less so of late."
"Could be," Cerys agreed. "We haven't exactly seen her in her normal environment."

Near the front door, Thorin ended his call, and strode over to them. "I need to get back."

Ori bounced up and came to join them. "I want to stay. I'll go back when Bilba does."

"You're on a first name basis?" Thorin asked, sliding his phone back into a pocket on the inside of his suit jacket.

"Of course," Ori retorted. She grabbed Dwalin by the collar of his shirt and dragged him down to kiss him, before saying, "I'm going to go see if she's ready. I'll see you back at the palace!"

With that she was gone, bounding back into the kitchen and up the stairs.


"Bye, uncle Thorin," the little girl said absently, completely absorbed in the movie.

Cerys chuckled. "Apparently you're not nearly as interesting as a cartoon prince."

"Story of my life," Thorin said with a chuckle. He nodded, and then he and Dwalin headed out.

Gareth went to join Wynne on the couch. He liked to critique the princes, hoping to teach Wynne how to tell between men with good characters and those he planned to get exiled as soon as Wynne was old enough to date.

Cerys briefly considered going upstairs to rejoin Ori and the princess but decided against it. The girl had been stressed enough for one day and probably didn't need her and Ori harassing her. Cerys had a lot of questions, but there was nothing that said they had to be answered right then.

Maybe she'd go reorganize Gareth's desk, she thought absently. It had been getting annoyingly messy of late. He always complained he couldn't find anything after she was done, but that should just serve as motivation for him to stop letting it be messy.

Really, it was his own fault.
Chapter 22

Thorin watched the rain pounding the earth outside the car window and did his best to not think about the Shire princess sitting on the edge of a bed dressed in nothing more than a robe. An oversized robe that had led to the neckline slipping and leaving one shoulder bare.

She also must have adjusted her position at some point before he came in, because the robe had fallen away from her legs, a fact she either hadn't noticed or simply hadn't thought to address. The resulting view of her legs, up to just past the knee where they were lost under the blasted shirt she'd been holding, had caused him to wonder how someone with legs that long could possibly be as short as she was.

It also caused him to question just what she did to stay in shape as her legs had been --

A low-grade heat rushed through him and he grimaced in annoyance before shifting his weight with a frown. Focus, he ordered himself, staring out the window with all the focus of a man going to battle. There was little to see, unfortunately, through the driving rain. Everyone had gone inside when the clouds had first started boiling in, and most of the shops were closed and shuttered.

With little else to occupy his mind, Thorin began to tap an irritated beat on the armrest of the seat. Almost of its own accord, his mind conjured an image of the girl again, tracing the line of the collar of the robe where it crossed over her --

For Durin's sake, he was a grown man, not his teenage brother losing control over something as simple as a woman flashing her legs and a shoulder at him.

Not that that was what she'd been doing. He had years of experience with women trying to seduce him. Not every woman of course, not even every woman who'd been raised on fairy tale fantasies of princes and castles and dragons that could be defeated in the course of a sunny afternoon.

There were always a few, though, no matter where he went. Either they'd created a fantasy about him in their heads that they couldn't seem to let go of, or they wanted what they thought he could offer them be it wealth, power or something else entirely. Frerin had a similar problem, not that he referred to it as such; and even Dis had to deal with idiots thinking they could somehow replace her missing husband.

In any event, he was used to it by now, and the Shire girl had been trying none of the tactics he'd come to recognize. Her body hadn't been arranged in anything resembling a seductive pose and her eyes had never gone higher than his breastbone. In fact, if he'd had to guess, he'd say she'd been doing everything in her power to not draw his notice.

He'd stared down women openly trying to seduce him, as recently as Beatrice when he'd been in Shire. The woman was certainly attractive, not that it went farther than skin deep, and she'd openly and repeatedly thrown herself at him. He'd felt nothing, had shut the door in her face without a second thought. Yet now here was this girl sitting on a bed barely dressed and he was reacting like a hormonal teenager in dire need of a cold shower.

"The Prince has traded up. Princess Bilba is damn hot."

The memory of those idiot reporters, and the subsequent look of pain on Kyra's face at their heartless words, had his blood boiling all over again, for an entirely different reason.

"Problem?" Dwalin drawled from the driver's seat next to him.
"No," Thorin growled, hand clenching into a fist where it lay on the armrest. The last thing he wanted was for Dwalin to know he couldn't control his own damn body.

It was lust, plain and simple. The girl was attractive, and he wasn't dead. Any red-blooded male would have reacted the same. Except for Dwalin or Gareth, as far as he could tell, but both their wives had been present in the room and neither man was suicidal.

They also both had wives so out of control hormones could be handled readily enough. He technically had a wife but that was out of the question, as was Kyra for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which being he wasn't an adulterer. He may not like the marriage. He may not have wanted the marriage but, at its base, it was still a marriage. Arrangements like this had been made for generations amongst the royalty and nobility of countless kingdoms, and he had no doubt many had claimed cheating was justified because their marriages had been arranged rather than chosen.

He wasn't that type of royal, which meant he needed to get it under control, because the last thing Kyra needed to find out was that he felt any sort of attraction to the girl, physical or otherwise.

Particularly since it wasn't the first time he'd felt it. He'd thought her attractive at the wedding, when all he could see was the way her body filled out her dress, and he'd thought it again when he'd seen her walking up a flight of stairs, flanked by guards, eyes snapping with fire and head held high in defiance. She'd met his eyes then, if only for an instant.

"It's like she's two different people," he muttered, half to himself.

"Come again?" Dwalin asked. He was driving casually, one hand on the steering wheel as if navigating through a downpour so heavy it made visibility near zero was perfectly natural. For Erebor, it pretty much was, especially in the fall and winter.

"The Shire --" Thorin cut off himself off, belatedly remembering his decision earlier in the day to try and form at least a civil relationship with the girl. Referring to her by name would probably be a good first step. "Bilba." There, take that Nori, he thought with some degree of smugness. "She throws the mother of all tantrums, sneaks out of the palace and is escorted back in behaving for all the world like she's the Queen of Shire herself --" he waved a hand absently, as if to punctuate his point, "then she comes here and holes up inside her room, refuses to speak to anyone or accept a schedule and then, a month later, she arbitrarily sneaks out, not to go to parties like she apparently did in Shire, but to go to the movies, alone."

"And to get a job at a bakery" Dwalin added.

Thorin frowned, momentarily startled out of his train of thought. "She did what?"

"Ori's pissed at you over that by the way," Dwalin continued as if Thorin hadn't spoken. "I told her you'd ordered the girl have no access to your accounts."

Thorin scowled. "You could have lied."

"I could have," Dwalin agreed, utterly unrepentant.

"She spent a hundred thousand in a week in case you've forgotten." Thorin said in annoyance. He settled back in his seat, watching through the front windshield as the car wound slowly through the streets. He couldn't see much, but figured they had to be nearing the palace given how long they'd been traveling. "If I gave her access to the accounts she'd have drained them in a month and then started on the treasury."

Dwalin snorted. "Good luck on one little girl managing to drain that in her lifetime."
Thorin shrugged. "Just because we're well off doesn't mean I want to see the money spent frivolously."

Truth be told, Erebor was better than well off. The kingdom sat on top of underwater oil fields worth tens of millions. Most of it was shunted off through underwater channels, set up that way to avoid spoiling the natural beauty of the ocean as well as to avoid the massive storms Erebor was so prone to experiencing. Smaug, as it turned out, was something of a hoarder so when they'd reclaimed the kingdom it was to find the treasury nearly quadrupled in size, and that was just what they had in physical coin and jewels. They had several times that amount stored digitally in various accounts and banks.

The Thain and his family were already doing their level best to try and put a dent in that, and the last thing he wanted was for the girl -- for Bilba to try and do it from Erebor's end. "If she wanted money, she could have simply asked for it."

"Or she could circumvent you entirely and get a job," Dwalin answered, sounding almost cheerful, "which is exactly what she appears to have done."

"And only adds to my claim that she's two different people," Thorin retorted, pulling the conversation back to its original purpose. "She played the Thain in the Shire for that money, we both saw it. She goes behind my back to get what she wants and sneaks out to bypass security. All of that suggests confidence, but then she runs the second I raise my voice and needs Ori and Cerys to brace her to face me."

"Sounds like the common denominator is you," Dwalin mused.

Thorin shook his head. "I've done nothing to her. I've barely spoken to her."

"She was scared in Shire too," Dwalin said. "She just hid it better."

"Was she?" Thorin asked, narrowing his eyes as he tried to remember. He'd only really seen the girl during the interviews the day after. He barely remembered her aside from the stunt she'd pulled to get money from her grandfather but, now that he thought about it, that very fact said something, didn't it?

He'd barely noticed her and, if asked to define her in the month since, wouldn't that be his answer? She escapes notice.

"Ori thinks she's been abused," Dwalin said mildly.

"So I heard," Thorin muttered crossly. "She also thought I was the one at fault." He scowled. "I've never struck a woman in my life. I don't appreciate the insinuation."

Dwalin didn't seem concerned. "You know how she gets."

It wasn't much answer, but Thorin knew it was all the concession he'd get from the other man. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. It was damp, as were his clothes, and he questioned just why he'd thought going out in this deluge had been such a good idea. He liked watching storms, not being soaked by them. It wasn't as if the princess wouldn't have returned to the palace at some point. He could have waited and spoken to her then.

His father's words about him behaving like a child ran through his mind, and his annoyance level ramped up even higher.

"It's a bit of a stretch isn't it?" he asked Dwalin, voice sharp. "Anyone would have been nervous in
her position, particularly given how the media's been treating her." The slightest sliver of guilt ran
through him at having allowed that to continue unchecked, but he was too irritated to give it much
notice. "It's only been a month, and she's already started sneaking out. Give it another week or two
and the palace could be escorting her back from parties she's run off to."

"Maybe." Dwalin's eyes were fixed out the window and his brows were creased in that way he got
when trying to work something out in his mind. "But then there's the fact her medical files appear to
have been sanitized."

Thorin's eyes narrowed. "How so?"

"She's got evidence of old injuries to her hands," Dwalin said. "Her files have nothing on them, have
nothing on any injury of significance in fact."

"So maybe she's led a charmed life?" Thorin said with a shrug. "With the exception of one event that
someone forgot to enter into the file. The absence of one thing doesn't automatically prove the
presence of something else."

"True," Dwalin agreed. "But it doesn't mean nothing is there either, and you do pay us to consider all
angles. If something did happen, and the oversight was intentional--"

"Why?" Thorin asked. "Why cover something like that up?"

"Maybe it was someone in the palace and they wanted to avoid the public embarrassment?" Dwalin
suggested.

"Perhaps," Thorin agreed, "except how do you explain her defiance then, in the very place where
she was possibly abused and the abuse was covered up?"

"Her abuser isn't there anymore," Dwalin said immediately. "That or she knew she was going to
have the media watching her. There's not much that could be done with that much attention on her."

"There's plenty someone could have done to her," Thorin muttered. "I think you're reaching." They'd
reached the gates of the palace, gates rumbling open before they'd even arrived to allow them in
without having to so much as slow the car down.

Dwalin drove through and turned the car onto a sloping drive that led off around the back of the
palace. Here it angled downward into a secure, underground parking garage that was secured for
exclusive use by the royal family. The doors leading to the lower garage opened smoothly as they
approached and the car took the sharply slanted drive down into the garage. As they passed into the
cavernous room, the drumming sound of rain on the car gave way to blessed silence.

Through the window, Thorin saw his sister's car as they slid past. Next to it sat Vili's car, parked in
the same space it had been the last six years, looking pristine only because the staff saw to it.

Vili had never driven it, never even seen it in fact. He'd vanished the first week after Erebor had been
reclaimed, two months before Kili had been born. It was Dis who'd insisted on buying the car along
with hers, a sign of her confidence that he'd be found, or return on his own, soon.

Six years later he was still gone and now the car sat like a silent sentinel, or condemnation depending
on who you asked, as the world changed around it. Six years, and there hadn't been so much as a
whisper on his whereabouts, no matter how many resources the palace expended, and it had
expended a great deal.

No one who'd known him believed the rumors that he'd disappeared voluntarily. There was no
question he'd loved his family and had been ecstatic over the impending birth of his second son. Mahal, but Erebor wouldn't have been reclaimed without him, not that many outside the royal family and a few high ranked nobles knew it. They'd been trying to protect him.

They'd failed.

Dwalin parked several rows away, and Thorin shoved the door open and got out almost before the car was fully stopped. The garage had been carved directly out of the rock of the cliff that sat beneath the palace, walls left unfinished to give it a natural look and feel. The floor had been smoothed, and the ceiling was low enough he could reach up and touch it if he wished.

Well, he could. The Shi -- Bilba -- Bilba would probably have to stand on a box to reach and even then she might have to jump to clear the final few inches.

He tried to picture her trying, only to have his brain highjack the image and put her back in the damned robe and, suddenly, just like that he was back to being his teenaged brother, or himself at that age, when unexpectedly faced with a pretty girl.

Cursing liberally under his breath, Thorin clenched his hands into fists and stalked toward the elevator, Dwalin's footsteps echoing behind him. The elevator car was already waiting, door sliding open with a soft whoosh as Dwalin, somehow catching up, leaned past Thorin to push the button before he could.

"I doubt there's an assassin waiting in the elevator," Thorin said in exasperation.

"I didn't realize they were emailing you their itineraries," Dwalin retorted.

Thorin sighed and then went to lean against the back of the elevator. Dwalin took up a position on the wall adjacent to him. The door slid shut and Thorin felt the shift in his gut as the car began to rise to the lowest level of the palace proper.

As the doors slid open to the main foyer of the palace, the first thing Thorin saw was Kyra, arms crossed and tapping one foot in irritation on the marble floor.

Dwalin snorted. "Good luck."

He pushed out of the elevator and, with a nod toward Kyra, headed off toward his office. Thorin sent a baleful look after him before stepping out as well. "Kyra," he said. "Let's continue this in my office, shall we?"

"No," Kyra said shortly, falling in alongside him as he headed toward the stairs. "Why don't we continue this now? Dardren was six months from retiring, Thorin. Six months, and they would have had a full pension and retirement package. Now? They get nothing! After serving this family for decades."

Thorin sighed. He'd really hoped the time between talking to her on the phone and traveling back to the palace would cool her off a bit but, if anything, it seemed to have only made her angrier. "Maybe they should have taken that into consideration before they engaged in treason."

They'd reached the base of the stairs. Thorin grabbed the bannister and strode up, ignoring the looks he was getting from various staff members, and a few of the nobility, as they passed by. It was a testament to just how angry Kyra was that she didn't seem to notice or care. She was usually far more aware of propriety.

"For Durin's sake," Kyra rounded on him at the top of the stairs, blocking his path forward. "It
wasn't treason! They thought they were doing the right thing."

"They took money," Thorin said, keeping his voice low, "in return for planting a bug in the bedchambers of a member of the royal family. How is that not treason?"

"Oh, please," Kyra scoffed, "like she's a member of the family."

Thorin's eyes narrowed. "I married her, Kyra, whether you, or I, like it or not. That makes her a member of the royal family. Any action taken against her is an action taken against the family."

To be honest, he would still say that even if he hadn't married her. The gir -- Bilba -- was completely alone in Erebor. Even if she did turn out to be a spoiled brat, or an immature princess who partied too hard, none of it meant she deserved to be spied on or put at potential risk.

And she had been put at risk. Dardren and Hadra had no idea who'd paid them, or to what purpose. There was no telling what the motive behind the bug had been, but he doubted it had been good. People with good motives did not place a bug in a young woman's bedroom.

Kyra raised an eyebrow. "Really? They've been with me since I was a child. Did you expect them to treat her like an honored guest?"

"I expected them to not commit treason!" Kyra's inability to understand the severity of what the two had done irritated him and he raised his voice in frustration. The words echoed through the foyer and stopped several noblemen, two courtiers and three staff members in their tracks.

Thorin swore before turning and striding toward his office. His blood was pounding in his temples and his breathing had increased.

Kyra put a hand on his arm, struggling to keep up with his stride. "Oak, listen to me," she started. "They shouldn't have their entire legacy tainted or lose out on their retirement because of one mistake."

"They have children who are well off," Thorin said shortly. "They'll be fine."

"That's not the point!" Kyra insisted. "They thought they were helping me--"

"They had no idea who they were helping!" They'd reached the door to his office and he stopped to face her. "They still don't know, and neither do we for that matter. They betrayed the crown, Kyra, and showed more loyalty to you than the throne while doing it."

He'd always known that Dardren and Hadra were loyal to Kyra. They'd been her family's servants before becoming servants to the crown. He'd just never stopped to think that, if it came to it, they would pick Kyra over the crown.

It had been an oversight, one that bothered him the more he considered it.

"They showed loyalty to us," Kyra said, tone suddenly shifting into the one she used when acting as an ambassador. She started to put a hand on his chest, only to tense and lower it as a maid scurried by. "You're right," she said quietly. "We should talk about this inside."

Thorin nodded and shoved the door to his office open. Inside, he scowled as he saw the remnants of the stress ball he'd broken still scattered across the floor, reminding him of the original reason he' been angry just a few hours earlier.

He turned once he reached his desk, just in time to see Kyra beginning to close the door. "Don't
close it."

Kyra froze, door nearly shut but not quite. "Excuse me?"

Thorin leaned back against his desk and crossed his arms. He hadn't been looking forward to this. "My father wasn't wrong. You and I shouldn't be alone together, especially not in my quarters."

"We haven't done anything wrong," Kyra said.

"You and I know that," Thorin agreed, "but you have to admit it looks bad. It's damaging both our reputations, Kyra. It's--"

"Don't you dare say it's for my own good," Kyra said sharply. She crossed her own arms, defensive. "This is about the Shire princess, isn't it?"

Thorin gave her a blank look, wondering where in the world that had come from. "What? Of course it isn't."

"Really?" Kyra said, voice rising. "You suddenly start talking about wanting to have a 'civil relationship' with her, then Hadra and Dardren get fired and then you abruptly decide to go flying out in a raging storm to go see her after she sneaks out!" Her eyes flashed. "Have you slept with her?"

she demanded.

"For Durin's sake, Kyra," Thorin said, straightening from the desk. He had no idea where any of this was coming from. "Of course not. I had no idea she'd be half dressed when I went over there. She knows the Queen of Gondor. We both know how hard you've been working to try and gain an inroad. I was thinking about you."

Kyra's face had gone completely flat. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice unnaturally calm, and cold as ice. "Did you just say she was half dressed?"

"What?" Thorin asked in confusion, even as his stomach twisted uncomfortably inside him. "I never said that."

"Yes, you did." Kyra had been standing with one hand on the doorknob. Now, she shut it with an almost defiant gesture, before coming forward to stand in front of him. "So," she said in that still, strangely calm voice, "she was only barely dressed? Did you get a good look?" Her words turned acidic on the last part, almost taunting.

He'd gotten an incredibly good look, Thorin's traitorous mind informed him. Kyra's expression, if possible, turned colder as if she'd read somehow read his mind and knew exactly what he'd just thought.

"She wasn't--" he protested. "What I meant is she got caught out in the rain so Cerys loaned her a robe--"

"And nothing else," Kyra cut in, lips pursing. "So she was half dressed then."

She looked away from him and swallowed, expression now tight with anger.

"Kyra--" Thorin started. He stepped forward, only to stop as she held up a hand.

"Let's not right now, all right?" she spit out through clenched teeth. She paused for a second as if planning to say something else, only to just shake her head, turn on one foot and march from the room, slamming the door behind her.
"Damnit all," Thorin whispered into the now empty room. He ran a hand through his hair and turned to face his desk. He braced his hands on its surface, and leaned forward, eyes shut and breathing harshly. "Damn it!" he shouted suddenly and, in an explosive mood, swept one arm across the desk, knocking a pile of paperwork and several other items onto the floor. He also managed to catch the edge of his laptop, hard enough to knock it sideways and send a bolt of pain rushing through his hand.

Thorin grimaced, shaking the hand as if he could somehow shake the pain off. Then, muttering under his breath, he stalked out of the room and headed toward the royal level and his quarters.

He needed a shower.

Preferably a cold one.

For a variety of reasons.

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Kyra stormed down the hall, head held high and hands clenched into fists at her side. She kept her eyes focused straight ahead. Any time someone approached, she kept her eyes fixed and looked through them as if they weren't even there. Her eyes were burning, and her vision was blurry, but she took a deep breath and pressed on.

She was not going to cry in the hallway, and she certainly wasn't going to scurry through the halls and cause a larger scene than she already had. She had no doubt her eyes were bloodshot, and her face was red, and could imagine the rumors that would soon start spreading, if they hadn't already.

Her quarters were several levels below the royal level and, by the time she'd reached them, she was regretting not just going to her office, which had been mere steps from Thorin's.

After what seemed like an eternity, her door came into view. She very nearly ran the final few steps, shoved the door open, rushed inside and slammed the door behind her.

Then, and only then, did she allow a single, strangled sob to escape. It was a mixture of sorrow and frustration and just overwhelming anger. She sagged against the door for a moment in relief, and then clenched her teeth against the next sob and headed into her room.

It was half the size of the royal quarters, a simple bedroom and bathroom rather than a full suite of rooms. The entire thing would probably fit in the Shire princesses' room.

Her room. It should have been hers.

The anger that had been slowly building over the last month boiled up and she clenched her fists and leaned against the wall, pressing her forehead against the wallpaper until she threatened to leave a bruise.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't.

She pounded a fist against the wall and resisted the urge to scream in pure rage and frustration.

Not fair, not fair, not fair, not FAIR.
The words, inadequate as they were to define the depths of how she felt, became a mantra inside her head, an endless chant that encompassed everything she'd gone through over the past few months.

Having the man she loved taken from her.

Having to watch him marry someone else on the very \textit{day} she'd been expecting to marry him.

Having to watch as some other woman moved into \textit{her} rooms with the man who should have been \textit{her} husband and the worst part of all of it?

The \textit{very} worst part?

She was expected to be \textit{fine} with it.

To sit back and smile and talk about her disappointment as if she'd missed out on the final piece of cake at a birthday party. As if her heart hadn't been broken, her entire world upended and as if time would heal all wounds instead of causing them to fester. She wasn't stupid. She understood she was allowing bitterness to seep in, but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

If she did, it would be like she really was accepting it.

Like she really was saying it was okay.

It.

Wasn't.

She slid down the wall until she was crouching. Her breath came in heavy, short gasps and she could feel the beginnings of a headache pounding in her temples. She closed her eyes, crossed her arms on the wall, and rested her head on her forearms. A few, angry tears squeezed their way out and she left them alone to track down her face. Slowly, her anger began to drain away, until she felt only exhaustion, and despair.

She'd thought it would all be fixed.

She wasn't sure how, but she'd believed it. Her life had been laid out, and part of that life had involved being married to Thorin. After her father had died, his father had become like a surrogate to her. Dis was another sister, Frerin a little brother. She'd fought just as hard for their survival in exile, rejoiced just as much over the reclamation of Erebor, and had sat and cried along with Dis when Vili had gone missing.

She'd thought of the Durins as her family and had treated them as such.

She'd believed they felt the same in return.

She'd believed they would fight for her, just as hard as she had for them.

Instead, when her life had turned upside down, what had they done?

Nothing.
Not a damn thing. Oh, they'd expressed their sorrow, offered to talk, wanted to hold her hand, assured her she was still welcome at dinner and as an ambassador, but they'd done nothing.

Not even Thorin.

Thorin, who'd announced he wanted to be civil to the Shire princess, that he wanted to talk to her, who was very clearly attracted to her.

She'd thought about it. Lying in her bed at night, unable to sleep, she'd wondered what was going on in the royal suite. Wondered if the princess came out of her rooms after Kyra had left, if she and Thorin talked or did anything else. She tried not to think about it, convinced herself she was being paranoid and foolish, but the thoughts always seemed to creep back in when she least expected them.

The Shire princess was his wife after all.

She shouldn't be, but she was.

"I had no idea she'd be half-dressed--"

It wasn't the words, or not just the words. It was the look in his eyes when he'd said them. The tone of his voice. The way he'd held his body.

She wasn't stupid.

Just don't think about it.

Don't think about it because, if you do, the injustice will choke you.

You won't survive it.

So

Just

Don't

Think.

Something inside her shut down. She felt nothing. No emotion. No feeling. Nothing at all. She might as well have been an automaton with the power switch flipped off. She pushed to her feet woodenly and wiped at her face. Then she smoothed her hands down her shirt, erasing invisible wrinkles, before walking stiffly toward her desk.

She needed...um...she needed to call Dardren and Hadra. Yes, that was it. She'd promised to call them after she spoke to Thorin. She'd expected it to go so easily. She'd tell him what happened, he'd agree it was a mistake and he'd rehire them.

It had never occurred to her that he'd already known, much less that he'd agree with the decision.
Now...now what? She couldn't talk to Nori. He wouldn't change his mind. He never changed his mind.

She walked slowly behind her desk and stared mindlessly at her laptop and the cell phone lying beside it.

She needed to call Dardren and Hadra. She'd promised.

She picked her phone up and pushed the button to wake it up. It cleared to her lock screen, featuring a shot of her and Thorin shortly after they'd publicly announced their engagement. It was a professional shot, both of them dressed up and standing against a backdrop. They were standing close, arms around each other's waists, her other hand resting on his chest, ring prominently displayed. It was her favorite photo, the one that had run in all the papers.

They looked happy.

Kyra stared at it without expression before entering her passcode to send the phone to her home screen. She didn't have a photo on that one as her icons always covered it and she couldn't see the point to a photo she could barely see.

She went to call up her keypad, only to pause as she noticed the folded-up square of paper that had been lying under her phone.

She'd almost forgotten about that.

Dardren and Hadra had told Nori everything they knew about the person who'd hired them to bug the Shire princesses' room. He, or she, had contacted them via an email account and had signed their correspondence simply as a "Friend of Erebor."

That was what they had told Nori, along with the account information that had transferred them the payment.

They hadn't told them that the person had contacted them a second way two days after the initial contact, via an account on Ravenhill. They'd spent their entire lives around diplomats. They knew the value of leverage.

Just before they'd been escorted out, Dardren had hugged her, and pressed the small piece of paper into her hands. On it had been a simple explanation, and the account information for their contact.

Kyra had looked it up after watching them leave. The page was buttoned up tight, allowing her to see little other than a name and profile picture.

Gandalf Greyhame. Not the real name, obviously. Gandalf was the name of a mythical being, a wizard of immense power who sought to right wrongs and lift up the innocent and oppressed. The profile picture was artwork of the character, an elderly man with a white beard, dressed all in gray and holding a staff as he stood on a dirt lane and gazed into the distance.

The contact, whoever they were, certainly had a flair for theatrics.

Kyra had looked it up simply out of curiosity. She'd planned to pass it onto Nori immediately after, once Dardren an Hadra were safely out of the palace and she'd had a chance to speak to Thorin.

She'd assumed Thorin would side with her. He'd overrule Nori and she'd be able to call Dardren and Hadra with the good news that they had their jobs, and retirement benefits back.
What a surprise it had been to find out how very wrong she'd been.

In an almost daze, Kyra pulled up her Ravenhill account and clicked on the search bar. Gandalf's name came up as the last search she'd done, and she selected it.

The account came up immediately. It was still there, and she should immediately hand it over to Nori...who would then add it to the email and the accounts he already had...and then what?

And then nothing, she realized. The account wouldn't add anything. He already had the means to start tracking the person down. If anything, he'd probably be angry that Dardren and Hadra had kept the information from him. He could decide to revoke the deal and have them charged with treason after all.

They'd given it to her because they'd trusted her.

Because they thought she could use it to help them.

Because they thought it would be leverage.

Leverage.

Not on its own.

What if it wasn't on its own?

She was an ambassador after all. She was literally trained to deal with people who may or may not be adversaries. She was trained to see through lies and deceit, to gain the trust of those who didn't readily trust, to get information and deals that no one else could.

What if she could find out who this person was?

Before Nori even? What if she could find out what they'd wanted, what their future plans had been? What if she could find out information no one else had and present it to the royal family?

Her finger hovered over the friend request icon.

This is stupid, her mind informed her. She should just set it down. Pick up the piece of paper and take it to Nori immediately.

She should...and yet...

She'd kind of already done it, hadn't she? If she took it to Nori now, she'd have to explain why she'd had the paper to begin with, and why she'd gone to the effort of pulling the account up.

She'd have to explain to Thorin why she'd done it.

"I had no idea she'd be half-dressed--"
Her stomach twisted and, before she could think about it, Kyra hit the friend request button. It changed to "request sent" and she swallowed down a suddenly dry throat.

It was fine, she told herself firmly. She could do this, had done things like this in the past, sort of. This would be no different. She'd find out information and take it to Nori and then Thorin would be proud of her and realize there was more to a person than just looks.

And maybe the rest of the family would realize their mistake too. Maybe they'd start helping instead of consoling and maybe --

Her phone pinged in her hand and she looked down in surprise at the notification screen. Her stomach jumped, and she took a shaky breath at the words on the screen.

*Your friend request has been accepted.*

*You and Gandalf Greyhame are now friends.*

Well, Kyra thought as she took a shaky breath and tried to calm the butterflies raging in her stomach, there was certainly no going back now, was there?
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Happy Halloween everyone! I hope you all have a safe and fun time trick-or-treating/celebrating or whatnot! :)  

After his shower, which was exceptionally long and ice cold, Thorin found he had little desire to deal with anyone, family or strangers, for the rest of the day.

Instead he dressed in loose sweats and a t-shirt, pulled his hair back in a low ponytail and dropped down at the desk and computer in his room to get some work done. Technically, if he wanted, he could do all his work from his bedroom. His office was primarily for meetings with foreign officials or other times when he needed to be His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Erebor. He'd used it for everything for the simple reason that it was near Kyra's office and made interacting with her easier.

He managed to get a surprising amount of work done before deciding to take a break to go into the main part of the suite to watch the storm. It had picked back up in intensity at some point and he felt a burst of disappointment at the fact night had fallen, which prevented him from seeing it in its full glory.

He was sitting in a chair near the back windows, in the dark to avoid light pollution, when the sound of the door opening caught his attention.

Idly, he spun the chair sideways to watch as the Shire girl entered. She had both hands on the door handle and leaned in, chewing on her lower lip. She looked around, as if searching for something, before moving inside. The light from the hallway bracketed her for a brief instant and then she closed the door firmly behind her and was lost in the darkness of the room.

It took his eyes a few minutes to adjust and, once they did, he could just make her out, still standing silently near the doors. She didn't appear to have noticed him and, a moment later, she began to move toward her own room. She blended into the darkness briefly as she reached the door and then it was opening, and he heard the soft click as she hit the switch. Glaring light spilled out into the main room and Thorin squinted as his eyes adjusted yet again.

Through the glare, he saw the girl start to enter her room, only to draw up short and freeze with a sharp gasp.

Without thinking, Thorin pushed to his feet. "What's wrong?"

His voice sounded loud even to him and, in retrospect, he probably shouldn't have been surprised that she reacted by shrieking and spinning around, one hand going to her chest in shock.

Thorin flinched and quickly flicked on the lamp on a nearby table. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

Bilba continued to stare at him, eyes wide. "Were you waiting for me?" she asked finally, words oddly breathless.
"What?" Thorin shook his head and gestured at the window. "I was watching the storm. You can see better with the lights off."

As if to punctuate his point, lightning suddenly lit up the sky outside the main balcony doors, splintering in all directions in brilliant bolts before vanishing just as quickly.

Bilba's eyes darted toward the display and then back to him, fixed on his collarbone again, Thorin noted. It had been the same way back at the house, her eyes never going any higher. He tried to remember if she'd made eye contact with him when they'd argued but couldn't decide if she had or not.

The girl started to move, and then stopped, before nervously rubbing her hand up her opposite arm and then crossing both over her chest.

Thorin hesitated and then walked down the few marble steps that separated the alcove from the rest of the room. As he stepped onto the carpet he resisted the urge to sigh in relief as his feet sank into the fibers. Marble might be attractive to look at, but it got damn cold at times, even with the heating turned up.

Bilba tensed as he approached, shoulders bunching up around her ears. When he got within only a few feet she suddenly backed up, sliding behind the door until she was practically hugging it with only part of her upper body visible, and one hand clutching the edge of the door.

Thorin paused mid-stride, as the sight called to mind the image of her face draining of all color right before she'd fled into her room and slammed the door in his face when they'd argued.

"Ori thinks she's been abused."

The idea was so farfetched. A royal suffering abuse when they were surrounded by people whose sole role was to prevent such things? And then to think the media had never caught wind of it, not even so much as a rumor?

And not to mention she'd had no problem getting in an argument. She'd come right back at him, and then there was the tantrum she'd thrown in Shire, the way she'd manipulated her own grandfather to get money that she'd then proceeded to blow over the course of a few days.

And yet --

He frowned, and then deliberately moved to the opposite side of the doorframe from where she stood, grabbed it with one hand and leaned forward to look inside her room, doing his best to look nonchalant. "What's wrong with your room?"

She studied him for a few minutes, expression now strangely blank, before glancing over her shoulder into the room. "It looks different. I was just surprised."

The answer was vague, but he could already she what she meant. The bed was made, towels and other items could no longer be seen on the floor through the bathroom door and the giant pile of cardboard she'd had stacked in one corner was gone entirely. "The maids must have finally cleaned it." He straightened as he spoke and leaned sideways against the wall next to her door, arms crossed. "Probably because we fired our head housekeeper and head butler. They'd apparently taken it upon themselves to tell the staff you didn't wish to be disturbed."

He expected her to be surprised, perhaps even outraged. Instead, her only response was a quiet, "oh." Neither her expression, nor her posture changed. He might as well have told her the time.
"They also planted a bug in your wardrobe," Thorin added. Surely *that* would garner some sort of reaction. "We're looking into who paid them to do so, and why."

"Was it video?" she asked, tone unchanged.

Thorin arched one eyebrow in surprise. "Audio only."

She nodded. "That's good. No one wants to see stills of me half-dressed."

Thorin was strongly convinced the exact opposite of that was true. A picture of a royal in a state of undress would fetch an obscene price among some of the more unscrupulous reporters out there. Depending on how they obtained the photos, it might be possible to sue over it, but the damage would already be done. Once the photos were out, there would be no taking them back.

"We had the rest of the room checked just in case," he added. "There was nothing else found."

She nodded, looking over her shoulder again into the room. "I hope he enjoys listening to in depth discussions about movie plots."

Thorin's eyes narrowed. "He?"

Her eyes came back and met his for the briefest of seconds. In that moment, he thought he saw a flicker of...something in her eyes, but it was gone too quickly to identify. "Him," she repeated, "or her, or whomever. Probably some reporter. Isn't that usually how it goes?"

"Is it?" Thorin asked. "Is this something that happened a lot in Shire?"

She shrugged. It wasn't an answer but had a feeling he wouldn't get any farther by pushing. An awkward silence began to slowly fall over them. Thorin pushed off the wall, only to pause as she made a poor attempt to cover a flinch. He cleared his throat before saying, "I've spoken to Kyra. She won't be coming in here anymore." He'd planned to tell her that before, at the house, but hadn't felt like doing so with an audience. Bilba gave no reaction, and Thorin swallowed a flash of irritation. He was usually good at reading people, had to be in his position.

"It's for the best," he continued, when it became clear she wasn't going to say anything. "It was a risk to her reputation, having Kyra in here. I should have thought of that."

She still gave no response, simply kept her eyes fixed on his breastbone which, to his knowledge, wasn't doing anything of particular note. Frustrated, Thorin let out a sigh and raised a hand. He'd planned to run it through his hair, a nervous or agitated habit he'd had for years, but froze mid-movement as Bilba sucked in a sharp breath and pulled away, farther behind the door.

Thorin lowered his hand slowly, back down to his side.

For several long minutes, the two simply stared at each other, until a particularly loud boom of thunder came from outside and broke the silence.

"You can come out here whenever you want," he finally said, gesturing at the room. "It's a common area after all." He nodded toward the kitchen. "The kitchen is stocked, and you can make a list of anything that isn't there that you want. It'd save you having to go all the way downstairs."

Surprise flashed across her face for an instant and Thorin silently congratulated himself on getting a reaction, before subsequently questioning why he even cared to begin with.
"Anyway," he said finally. "You're probably tired. I'll let you go."

She snorted and muttered something under her breath.

Thorin frowned. "Excuse me?"

Bilba's eyes went wide and she drew back again, until she was almost entirely behind the door. "Nothing." Her voice was barely a whisper, and now her eyes weren't on him at all but focused off on some random point just to his left.

Behind him, the glass in the balcony doors and windows began to rattle and a loud peal of thunder signaled the storm getting still more intense. Thorin gave an absent-minded nod toward the girl and turned away.

The door nearly slammed shut behind him as soon as his back was turned, and he shook his head to himself as he returned to his chair.

At least they'd managed to have some sort of a conversation that hadn't resulted in either of them losing their temper.

It wasn't much, but he'd take it.

It was about the only thing that had gone marginally right that day.

***

The lock clicked in place, and Bilba sagged against the door, harsh breath escaping her as she did.

Her knees buckled under her and she slid down slowly into a crouch, forehead pressed against the wood. A shudder ran through her and she wrapped her arms around herself.

She'd thought he was going to hurt her.

She'd been terrified of it since she'd seen him at the house earlier. He couldn't do anything to her there, appearances needing to be maintained and all, but she'd known she'd have to face him when she got back. She'd dragged her feet about changing and returning, pasting on a fake smile and pulling out all the stops in her "I'm perfectly fine" routine.

She'd had plenty of time to perfect it over the years.

Her grandfather adored the slow agony of making someone wait. It was so simple a technique, and yet so devastatingly effective. A simple order, demanding her presence at the palace in a week's time, or a quick word whispered in her ear at a party that he needed to talk to her...later.

He didn't even have to do anything.

Just...make her wait.

Let her imagine what was going to happen in a week, what she'd done to make him want to see her. Her mind could conjure any number of scenarios that would torment her every waking moment, and sometimes her resting ones, until she'd almost looked forward to the appointment if only because it'd meant she'd finally have it over with and the stress could just stop.
It had been the same today. Knowing that Thorin was aware of her sneaking out, and how she'd been dressed and the fact she'd mouthed off to him before it all and just...everything.

And then she'd returned, and he'd been sitting there in the dark --

She'd almost passed out on the spot when she'd realized he was there.

She'd managed to make it through, somehow, and had nearly been free entirely and what had she gone and done?

Mouthed off.

*Again.*

Yavanna, what was wrong with her?

Shakily, she pushed to her feet, and paused for a moment to wipe the moisture from her eyes. The glass in her balcony doors rattled from the force of the storm raging outside and she jumped. Did the stupid thing never end?

Her laptop was still sitting on her bed where she'd left it. Grabbing it with one hand, Bilba crawled up onto the mattress, sat cross legged and set the computer on her lap. A glance at the screen showed over a dozen missed calls from Rosie, with the latest less than fifteen minutes earlier, and Bilba cringed in guilt.

“Crap,” she whispered to herself. “She’s going to kill me.”

She chewed on her lower lip absently and then hit the call button. Rosie had probably already left for class, but she could at least say she’d—

The screen changed to an image of Rosie, looking annoyed, and Bilba jumped in surprise.

“Bilba!” Rosie shouted, her face clearing from annoyance into relief. “I was so worried!” She looked over her shoulder, “Bofur! She’s back!”

Bilba tensed, eyes widening. Bofur was there?

Before she could react, he was suddenly on screen, leaning over with one hand braced on the table and the other on the back of Rosie’s chair.

“Bilba,” he said, smiling in relief. “Thank Aule, you’re all right.”
“Sorry,” Bilba whispered. Her heart had jolted in her chest the second he’d appeared, and she bit back a sigh. She would pay for that.

“I called him when you never came back,” Rosie explained. There was a hint of guilt in her voice as if she understood how seeing him had affected Bilba. She probably did. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“It’s okay,” Bilba said. “I should have gotten back to you.”

To her horror, her vision blurred, and she clenched her hands into fists, digging her nails into her palms until it hurt.

Rosie’s eyes narrowed. “It was that stupid Prince, wasn’t it? Did he hurt you?”

“What?” Bilba asked, surprised that Rosie would make that leap. “No, of course not.”

“Then why are you crying?” Rosie asked, “and why did you run off?”

“I’m not—” A stray tear escaped and Bilba looked to the side as she wiped it away. “It’s just been a long day,” she whispered.

“Rosie,” Bofur put a hand on the other girl’s shoulder before refocusing on the screen. “We talked to him. He answered one of the times we tried to call. Him and a couple other people.”

“Oh,” Bilba shifted and shot a nervous look toward the door as if the prince could somehow hear that they were talking about him. “He mentioned something about a bug in my room, but I didn’t know he talked to you guys.”

“I’m surprised he told you that much,” Rosie grumbled. “Probably because he knew we’d tell you.” She crossed her arms on the desk and her eyes darkened. “I can’t believe I ever had a crush on that ass. I wish he’d—”

“Don’t—” Bilba said sharply, and with the slightest hint of panic. She had no doubt her grandfather had her old apartment bugged. The last thing she needed was him with a recording of Rosie threatening a member of Erebor’s royal family.
A particularly loud boom of thunder came from outside and Rosie frowned. “What is that?”

“The apocalypse,” Bilba muttered, eyes cutting toward her balcony doors. “Over here they apparently call it a ‘storm’.”

Bofur snorted. “They can get a little out of hand.”

“A little?” Bilba asked. “I don’t want to see what you’d consider a lot.”

She moved so she could rest against the mound of pillows at the head of her bed. “Anyway, I’m sorry I worried you. I really am fine.”

“She said she was fine,” Bofur repeated quietly, giving Rosie a warning look before the other girl could push further. “As long as you’re okay now.”

Bilba nodded. “I met your brother.”

Bofur’s eyes lit up. “Did you? How is he?”

“Good,” Bilba reported. "He gave me a job." With that, she settled in and began recounting her adventures of the day. She left out most of the stuff involving Thorin, including the argument that had started it all, but she had a feeling they could fill in the blanks.

“You should probably keep an eye out for other problems,” Bofur said after she was done. “You had a bug in your room without any maid service, when no one but you should have been in there. Think of what could happen now.”

Bilba nodded. She always kept an eye out, having learned it the hard way, repeatedly. Bofur and Rosie didn't know the full extent of what her grandfather had done, and still did, to those he didn't like. They knew she had a strained relationship with him and weren't happy with how he'd treated her about the marriage, but they didn't know everything.
There were very, very few who knew everything.

She wished she wasn't one of them.

"Didn't you have a test today?" she asked Rosie now, hoping to change the subject.

Rosie frowned, eyes cutting to the side and then back again. "I guess. I'm already late, but I can probably still make it if I hurried."

"Then what are you waiting for?" Bilba asked. "I don't want you failing because of me."

Rosie rolled her eyes but obediently pushed back from the desk. "Fine, mother, but don't think I don't know what you're doing." She stood up and then dramatically pointed at the screen. "We're not done talking about how stupid the Prince is."

With that she flounced off with a flourish. Bilba laughed, only to then feel her heart skip a beat as Bofur slid into the chair Rosie had just vacated.

He crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward, lowering his voice. "On that note, are you all right? Really?"

"What would you do if I said I wasn't?" Bilba asked without thinking. "Storm the castle?"

He snorted. "Don't laugh, I'll have you know I'm pretty handy with a mattock."

"Are we talking about that old one at the theater?" Bilba asked with a laugh. "It's made out of Styrofoam."

Bofur nodded. "And many a battle has been won with it during lunchtime death matches."

Bilba snorted. "Clearly, I was missing out."
"You were," he agreed. "We could have trained you with some foam daggers and you and I could have done a few dual matches."

"I probably would ensured we lost," Bilba said dryly. "The only place I'm good with daggers is in video games."

Bofur shrugged. "In that case, we'd just put you on the other guy's team."

Bilba laughed out loud, leaning back on the pillows as she did. Almost immediately, she clapped a hand over her mouth and shot a nervous look at the door.

"What's wrong?" Bofur asked.

"Nothing," Bilba said. "He's out in the living room and I didn't want to bother him."

Bofur frowned. "I doubt he could even hear you over the storm."

From behind him, Rosie came back into view, backpack slung over one shoulder and books and car keys clutched haphazardly in her other hand. Bilba smiled as the other girl leaned into view, doing her best to cover up the surge of envy and nostalgia that rushed through her.

There had been days when going to school and ballet had been boring, or even tedious but, right now, those days seemed like the best she'd ever had.

The fact that, at the time, she hadn't been face to face with her grandfather in two years had made the days even better.

"Wish me luck," Rosie said with a smile.

Bilba smiled back. "Good luck, Rosie."

Rosie straightened and grabbed Bofur's shoulder for a second. "You can't lock the deadbolt without a key, but can you get the bottom lock for me when you leave?"
"I could always lock both and go out the window," Bofur replied, turning to look at her.

Rosie clapped him on the shoulder and pushed off to head toward the door. "That is not comforting," she called back as she headed out, "for a number of reasons."

She left, and Bofur swung back around to face Bilba again.

"So," he started slowly, eyes going to the desk before back up to meet hers. "I've been thinking -- I know we agreed to not communicate but maybe --"

"No." Bilba wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold. "That's a bad idea, Bofur, and we both know it."

He scowled. "It's less than what the Prince is doing."

Bilba sighed. "You shouldn't believe everything you read or see on the news."

"So you're saying he isn't carrying on with his ex?" Bofur asked, frustrating lacing his tone.

Bilba tensed. "I don't know what he's doing," she said, her own voice getting short, "and I don't particularly care. Just because he's doing something doesn't make it okay for us to do it."

If that were the case it'd mean her grandfather could justify his behavior by pointing to some other ass and saying, "Well, they're doing it."

"It's not healthy," she continued, "for either of us."

He sighed, dropped his head onto his crossed arms and let out a sound of frustration. "It's just so irritating," he said finally. "We can't even speak to one another while he--" he gestured in annoyance.

"He's royalty," Bilba said softly.
"You're royalty," Bofur retorted.

"There's no need to be insulting," Bilba said mildly. She glanced toward her windows as a gust of wind threw a sheet of water against the glass. "I am sorry."

"You're the only one who is," Bofur said with a sigh, "and you're the only one who had nothing to do with it."

Bilba wasn't entirely sure about that. She'd known what her grandfather was like. She knew he liked nothing more than upending her life, driving away any potential friends, shipping her off to every boarding school under the sun just to ensure she was always off balance.

To ensure the only hint of stability she had was when she spent time at the palace.

And then she'd graduated and managed to beg off going to the palace for two years without repercussions... and she'd gotten complacent. She'd slowly stopped facing every day with a sense of dread, stopped watching every word she said, stopped seeing every stranger through a lens of paranoia and mistrust.

Over those two years she'd grown into a far more confident, independent and all-around happier person.

And then her grandfather had waltzed in and taken it all away in an instant and, really, how in the world had she not seen that coming? Granted, there was probably little she could have done to stop it, but had she bothered to keep it in mind she'd have never befriend Rosie, and certainly never dated Bofur. She wouldn't have saved herself, but she'd at least have spared them.

"I should probably go." Talking like this, one on one, with Bofur was as bad an idea as them e-mailing or having any other sort of communication. "It's pretty late, and it's been a long day."

Bofur gave her a tired look but nodded. "You're right." His expression turned into a mixture of exasperated and affectionate. "I hate it when you're right."

"Me too," Bilba said. "I'm sorry I made you guys worry. Thanks for looking after Rosie."
"I didn't come for her," Bofur said dryly. He reached out and grabbed the lid of Rosie's laptop with one hand. "You take care of yourself, darling, all right? And if you ever do need anything, let me know. I'll be there."

"I know you will," Bilba whispered, struggling to speak past the rock suddenly lodged in her throat. "Bye, Bofur."

He nodded, and pulled the lid closed. The call dropped, and she was left staring at her laptop's wallpaper.

Bilba let out a slow breath and looked toward the window. The bridge of her nose started burning and her vision blurred. For an instant, she had the urge to go on Ravenhill to scroll through Bofur's account. She'd removed him from her account after reaching Erebor as part of their agreement to have a clean break, leaving Rosie as her only friend, but it was mostly a symbolic gesture as his account was an open one.

She took a deep breath, and deliberately closed the laptop lid. Cyber stalking him would only hurt her. Not only that but, if she made a habit of it, it would most likely mean she'd go on one day and see pictures of him and a new girl. She knew she should want him to move on and be happy and was confident that one day she would be able to genuinely feel that way.

One day, but not that one, or the next.

Someday.

She hoped.
Chapter 24

The storm was still raging when Bilba went to sleep but when her alarm went off, rudely interrupting a dream where she was dancing in a ballet with a perfectly normal family cheering her on, the storm appeared to have abated.

At least she hoped so. The sun wasn't up yet, leaving her room shrouded in darkness, but the only sound she could hear was the occasional rattle of her windows as a burst of wind hit the panes. Given the near apocalyptic violence from last night it was a welcome change.

She got up and headed into the bathroom for a quick shower, followed by a not so quick blow drying and hairstyling of the mass that was her hair. After that, she wrapped a towel around herself and headed back into her bedroom to stand in front of her wardrobe.

Holding the door open with one hand, Bilba studied the clothes with a frown, absently chewing on her lower lip in worry. She couldn't very well start her new job in the clothes she'd been sneaking out in but dressing normally raised the risk of someone recognizing her.

Of course, someone had recognized her the day before anyway, but she'd made it out of that relatively unscathed. Plus, she'd be in the kitchen where people wouldn't see her much and....

She frowned, looking toward the window where the darkness was just beginning to look marginally less black. If she hurried, she could probably make it there before the sun was fully up, and before a lot of people were out on the roads.

Best get a move on then.

The gusts of wind she could still hear told her a dress would be a poor choice, so she grabbed a pair of skinny jeans and a fitted, silk blouse. She started to reach for her heeled sandals, thought better of it, and grabbed knee high boots with a short heel instead. She dressed quickly, and then put on earrings and a necklace before finally finishing with her makeup and a clip to pull her hair away from her face.

"Okay," she said at last, smoothing her shirt down in the futile hope it would get rid of the butterflies currently doing backflips in her stomach. "You can do this. You're going to be great."

She marched over to her balcony doors, jerked them open, and promptly shut them again as a burst of ice-cold air and drizzle slapped her right in the face.

"Crap." She hesitated, suddenly wishing she could crawl back under her covers and stay there until warmer weather returned. Yavanna she hoped what Erebor considered warm was actually warm.

Either way, Bombur had offered her a job and she'd said she would be there so, with a sigh of resignation, she returned to her wardrobe to retrieve her heavy jacket. She doubted it would be much help as she was quickly learning that what constituted a heavy jacket in Shire was little more than a windbreaker in Erebor, but it was better than nothing.

She pulled it on, zipped and buttoned it and then, steeling herself, went back to the doors. This time, the burst of cold and wind nearly took her breath away. Wishing she'd thought to invest in a jacket with a hood, Bilba pulled her hair over her shoulder and held it with one hand. She managed to get the door closed behind her and headed out, planning to carefully make her way down to the beach and through the not-as-hidden-as-she'd-once-thought passageway.
The roar of the surf was strangely loud. She'd heard it faintly in her room, which was unusual through the thick rock of the walls and glass, and it was several times louder outside.

A small, pitiful cry just caught her attention and she frowned in confusion. The cry came again, cutting through the roar of the surf, and she turned to look behind her.

A small, miserable ball of fur shifted at the corner of her balcony before releasing another cry and Bilba sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh, my gosh." She rushed over and knelt to pick up the small cat. "Have you been out here all night?"

The animal responded with a mournful yowl before snuggling against her. Bilba carried her inside and grabbed a towel from the bathroom to dry her off. After, she set the animal on her bed where it promptly crawled under the comforter and vanished.

"Why in the world didn't you go home?" Bilba asked, crossing her arms and studying the bed. From under the covers, she heard a quiet meow in reply, and then nothing.

Bilba shook her head in exasperation. "I'm heading out so you're going to be stuck there until I get back." It was the least she could do for the small creature. She would have never found the secret passage, after all, if the cat hadn't shown her the way.

She started to leave again but stopped and went to her desk instead. She scrounged out a piece of paper and pencil, quickly scrawled, "cat sleeping under covers," and set it on one of her pillows. She wasn't sure if the maids really were going to come back, or if it had been for show, but she didn't want to risk the little animal getting hurt just in case.

"Okay," she said, stepping back. "I really have to get going now." The sky was definitely lighter, if she didn't hurry it'd be fully up before she made it halfway. As she stepped back out, she could see the dark shadows of the cliffs rising on either side of her, while overhead the clouds occasionally lit up with lightning that wasn't reaching the ground. The roar of the ocean was so loud it hurt her ears and she made a note to try and buy some ear mufflers with her first paycheck, hopefully along with a heavier jacket as the wind was cutting through the one she had on like it wasn't even there.

The rocky steps leading down to the beach were wet and slippery and Bilba kept her eyes on her feet, arms out to the side as she carefully picked her way down. She stepped off onto the sand covered landing about halfway down and paused as a different sound reached her.

Was that someone shouting?

She started to turn, just as what felt like a sheet of pure ice rushed over her feet. Bilba stumbled and her heart jolted so hard it was a wonder it didn't burst from her chest. The water raced over her feet, passed her ankles and began to surge up her calves. Frantic, Bilba tried to turn and scramble back up the stairs. She saw the water flow past her, outpacing her at a speed that made it abundantly clear she'd never overtake it, and she bit back a whimper of fear.

The force of the water shoved her from behind and she stumbled and fell forward. Freezing cold water closed over her head and pure panic set in as she had a horrifying mental image of the water rushing back out to sea, and dragging her with it.

Then arms were grabbing her in a rough hold and a body was alongside hers, bracing her as they both rolled against rock and sand. Bilba's lungs felt like they were about to burst, and her panic increased as she realized she had no idea what way was up. She flailed, trying to push somewhere, anywhere, but the arms around her simply tightened until she thought she might be crushed instead of drowned.
And then the water released her, leaving her collapsed in a heap as it slid off her body and vanished back out to sea. The arms around her loosened and she curled on her side, choking and gasping as she dragged air into her lungs. She could feel a much larger body behind her but had no time to process as it proceeded to get up, momentarily staggering before rising and looming over her.

Then hands were grabbing her upper arms in a rough grip and she was being dragged to her feet. "Move," a voice she recognized, but really wished she hadn't, ordered sharply.

Bilba sluggishly lifted her head to see Thorin as he let go of one of her arms to wrap around her waist and practically lift her off her feet. Bilba struggled to follow, feet sinking in the wet sand and --

-wait---wet sand?

She looked down, and felt her heart almost stop in her chest.

The wave had dragged them all the way to the beach. The short ledge that led to the stairs was several feet in front of them. She started to turn, and look over her shoulder, but Thorin blocked her view and forced her forward.

"Don't look," he commanded. "Just run."

Bilba felt a surge of adrenaline, wiping away the dizziness and weakness in her legs. She ran or tried to as best she could with Thorin half dragging, half carrying her. Her legs buckled at several points as she struggled to navigate the rocky stairs, all the while hearing the roar of the surf seemingly on their heels.

Then the balcony was in sight and they were dragging themselves over the ledge to collapse in an ungraceful heap, chests heaving as they both fought to catch their breath.

Beside her, Thorin groaned and then slowly pushed to a seated position. He was still dressed in the clothing she'd seen him in the night before, barefoot, and now as soaking wet as she was. He grimaced suddenly, before wrapping an arm around his ribs with an almost annoyed look.

Oh, please don't be hurt, Bilba thought in panic. Everyone already hated her. She could only imagine what would happen if they found out she got the Crown Prince hurt.

Not to mention what Thorin might do. He hadn't hit her last night for sneaking out, but that didn't mean he wouldn't hit her now for almost killing him.

"What were you thinking?" Thorin demanded. He grabbed the edge of the railing and painfully dragged himself to his feet. Bilba went rigid and struggled to a seated position to awkwardly push herself away from him. It had never done her any good with her grandfather, but it was hard to fight instinct.

"You could have been killed," Thorin continued, oddly sounding more irritated than the rage she'd expected. He gingerly peeled back the wet t-shirt where it was glued to his skin and Bilba felt her blood run cold at the dark bruising already forming on his side. Dropping the shirt back down, he turned his attention to her. "It was sheer luck I saw you."

Bilba honestly wasn't sure why he'd bothered. She'd have been gone and he'd have been free to marry Kyra without risking Erebor's honor or the alliance.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know the water did that."

"Did what?" Thorin asked. "Came in? Surely you know what tides are."
"Of course I do," Bilba said, still trying to keep her tone soft. It was a delicate balance, staying quiet enough to not appear as if she were challenging him, while still being loud enough that he didn't get irritated by not being able to hear her over the surf. "It doesn't go that high usually."

His eyes narrowed. "Have you never seen the ocean before?"

Bilba shook her head. "Not in real life." She'd seen it online and in movies and pictures of course, but that was about it. "I've seen big waves in movies from storms, but I didn't know tides changed too."

Surprisingly, some of the anger seemed to drain from Thorin's eyes, leaving him looking exhausted. "Well, they do," he muttered. "So perhaps next time, pay attention before you go rushing down there, all right?"

Bilba nodded, only to grimace and shut her eyes as dizziness washed over her and her head pounded in time with her movements. She'd taken a knock to it while she'd been swept down the stairs but didn't think it was anything too serious.

She opened her eyes again and gasped at the sight of Thorin's hand mere inches in front of her face. Without even consciously deciding to do it, she ducked her head and threw up an arm, hoping to block at least part of the expected blow.

For several long seconds, the only sound was that of the wind and the roar of the still angry surf from down below.

Then Bilba felt his fingers wrap lightly around her wrist and tug on her arm, pulling it away from her face before he slid his hand into hers. Tentatively, Bilba raised her head, and saw he had his other hand out. She swallowed, or tried to anyway, and carefully took that hand with her free one.

He tightened his grip, and she bit back a whimper, expecting anything from him kicking her, to crushing her hands in his, to simply throwing her over the edge of the balcony. Just because he wasn't openly raging at her didn't mean he wasn't angry. Her grandfather was a master at that, pretending to be calm when he was anything but.

Thorin lightly pulled her to her feet, and then easily transferred one arm to around her waist, on his good side, balancing her until she caught her feet under her.

Bilba automatically put one of her now free hands around his back, and the other on his hip, squeezing her eyes shut once again as a wave of dizziness washed over her and had her briefly swaying on her feet.

When it passed, she opened her eyes and risked a look up, only to find him looking down at her. Their eyes locked, and an awkward silence fell over them.

Bilba felt her face heat and she carefully disentangled herself from him, putting herself a few feet away until she could rest a hand on the rock wall of the castle, next to the closed doors of her balcony. After a second, she opened the doors, warm air washing over her, and stood nervously in the doorway, eyes fixed on his feet.

Thorin cleared his throat, and opened his mouth as if to speak, only to snap it closed again with a grimace as his side apparently protested whatever movement he'd made. He was shivering, Bilba realized, as was she but he was the major concern. Maybe...if she could fix him...or at least show she was trying...maybe the fallout wouldn't be so bad?

She didn't doubt a fallout, be it a beating, being thrown into whatever they had that passed for a
dungeon, or something she hadn't even considered yet, but if she could just mitigate it...

"It's like trying to defuse a bomb..."

Ori's words ran through her mind, and Bilba felt her gut twist uncomfortably inside her. Not really the mental image she wanted at the moment.

"Are your ribs very bad?" she asked. "Do you want me to get someone?"

Getting someone was the very last thing she wanted. It'd raise the entire palace, for one thing, and the media shortly after. He was the Crown Prince after all. Him getting a hangnail probably warranted a lower third in the evening news. Him actually getting hurt? And because of her?

She suppressed a shudder that had nothing to do with the cold and wrapped her arms around herself. Maybe if she could just get him fixed up first, and into dry clothes, he'd be better? Or at least look better when he invariably got over his shock, and called palace security to let them know his unwanted wife had nearly killed him?

"It's fine," he said. "I think they're just bruised." He frowned. "What about you?"

"I'm fine," Bilba said absently, mind racing and attention barely on him as she tried to puzzle out the exact, right sequence of events that would save her, or at least lessen the punishment. "I've had worse."

She'd been staring at his bare feet as she spoke, chewing on her lower lip until she risked splitting it. Hesitantly, she left the doorway again to put a hand on his forearm. Her entire hand fit with room to spare, and she winced at how ice cold his skin felt under her fingers. He didn't react, so she lightly tugged on him, trying to get him to go inside the room with her. He followed and, once inside, she released his arm and hurried as fast as her sore body would allow her into the bathroom to turn the shower on. Everything hurt, but the dizziness was clearing, and her headache had leveled to a dull throb, leaving her more and more convinced that her injuries were mild.

Her nose burned, and her vision watered but she clenched her teeth and quickly turned the water on in the shower. It was massive, practically a room in and of itself, marble on two sides and the floor with glass walls comprising the other two sides. There were jets all over the thing and it was one of Bilba's favorite things in her entire suite.

It was highly doubtful the dungeon would have a shower anywhere as nice, her mind pessimistically informed her.

The water heated, and she adjusted it to what she hoped was an acceptable level, before returning to the bedroom. Thorin was standing next to her bed, frowning down at the note she'd left on the pillow.

"A cat?" he asked in confusion.

Bilba nodded. "Just a little one."

Thorin raised an eyebrow and looked under the blanket at the small ball of still miserable fur, who gave a soft meow in response.

A sudden flash of panic ran through her and, before she could stop herself, Bilba blurted, "Don't hurt her!"
"People who choose to harm those weaker than they are, are cowards," Thorin muttered absently, almost as if by rote, as he gently laid the comforter back down and turned to face her.

Bilba flinched again and drew back until she was partly hidden by the doorframe of the bathroom. "The shower's all ready, I can go grab new clothes for you."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "I can go to my own room. You take it."

"You're hurt worse than I am." Bilba stepped out and went to her wardrobe, skirting the edges of the room as she did to keep out of his reach without, hopefully, being obvious. She grabbed some fresh clothes as fast as possible, keeping him in the corner of her vision, and then went to her own door. "I'll be quick."

She darted out before he could answer, shutting the door quickly, and then stood, frozen for several long moments as she waited to see if he'd come out after her. When he didn't, she let out a sigh of relief, that quickly turned into a half-strangled sob as her emotions took the opportunity to assert themselves. She swallowed it and let out a slow breath, trying to calm her nerves and churning stomach.

Shaking, and clutching her clothing to her chest, she spun around and quickly made her way to his room on the other side of the suite. To her surprise, she found it was not at all what she'd expected.

She'd expected it to be ostentatious, a display of wealth and power much like her grandfather's office, or the rooms belonging to her relatives. Beatrice's room alone was nearly obscene in the sheer amount of wealth on display.

This room certainly showcased luxury, but it was understated, and rather sparse. The floor plan was the same as hers, the bed mahogany with a dark purple comforter that matched the drapes. A desk and small bookcase filled with books, a few weapons hung from the wall, and that was about it.

She took it all in with a glance as she made her way into the bathroom which, thankfully, was identical to hers. She undressed and stepped into the shower, turning it on after she closed the glass door.

The pressure of the jets on her bruised skin was painful, but also felt amazing at the same time and the feel of heat washing away the ice was equally wonderful. Unfortunately, there was little the water could do to wash away the trauma of nearly dying, or the almost sick feeling as she worried over what would happen once word got out of her stupidity.

She managed to stave off the crying fit her ragged emotions were championing, but there was no stopping the sudden, almost violent ay her stomach clenched, or nausea boiled up her throat. Before she knew it, she was on her knees, losing everything from the dinner at Cerys and Gareth's that hadn't already been digested while she slept. Her body refused to give up until everything was expelled and she was left on her hands and knees, exhausted, watching as it was all washed down the, thankfully, oversized drain.

Shakily, she pushed back to her feet and used the spray to rinse her mouth out. Gross, she thought in agitation, and now her stomach was sore in addition to everything else. Her emotions tried to convince her to give in and start crying again, but she forced herself to breathe and fight them off. Crying never helped, and just made her feel awful, and she already felt more than miserable enough.

She shut the water off, stepped out and began carefully drying herself off with a towel from a nearby rack. She checked her body over one last time, noting several spectacular bruises that were forming, and a few superficial scrapes that had barely gone deep enough to draw a hint of blood.
Thorin must have taken the brunt of it. She shook her head and pulled on the loose sweat pants, chunky sweater and socks she'd grabbed from her wardrobe, before adding the heavy robe she'd also pulled out. She'd given up on heading to Bombur's. There was no way she could walk there, much less work for a full day, with her body so sore and her nerves shot all to pieces.

First day on the job and she didn't show and didn't have a cell phone or his number to even call and let him know why.

Great start, very auspicious, Bilba.

She left the bathroom and went to Thorin's wardrobe. It took a few minutes of hunting, but she finally found another pair of sweats, a t-shirt and then, with some more hunting, socks and a pair of boxer shorts that had her face blood red from embarrassment.

She shoved those in the middle of the pile, shuffled into the main suite, and stopped in surprise to see Thorin, already dressed in yet another pair of sweats and a t-shirt, seated at the table in the small kitchen. Two cups were on the table beside him, steam rising from them.

"Showers are a waste of time," he explained when he saw her expression. "I tend to try and waste as little as possible."

He sounded downright smug, and Bilba had a sudden suspicion that he took ridiculously fast showers as a personal point of pride. Vaguely, she wondered if he had a personal best record and, if so, if he regularly tried to beat it.

The thought was strangely amusing and, for the briefest of instances, it transformed him from a royal to a man. It was only for a moment, however. Bilba wasn't stupid. Her grandfather was a master at appearing human when it suited him.

Thorin gestured to the table. "I wasn't sure what you liked, but the options were hot chocolate and hot chocolate so that made selecting easier."

"I like hot chocolate," Bilba said softly. "I'll um --" she held up the clothes she'd gotten awkwardly and then lowered them again. "I'll just put these back. One second."

She headed back into his room and paused as she spotted the open door to the bathroom. The one she'd left open while she'd showered. She didn't like it when steam filled the room and it became overly hot so it was simply second nature for her to leave it open. She'd never even thought about it.

Surely, he hadn't --

Almost as soon as the thought crossed her mind, she mentally chided herself for her vanity. Of course, he hadn't looked. Who in their right mind would ever want to see her in the shower for Yavanna's sake?

She put his clothes back where she'd found them and returned to the main room, slower this time as trepidation filled her. As she took a seat on the other side of the table, Thorin set a small, plastic bottle on the surface and shoved it over at her.

Bilba caught it, pills rattling in it as it came to a stop, and saw it was a common brand of pain killer. That was a good sign, maybe? She gave a tentative nod in thanks and took two, before standing and walking over to the fridge. "Aren't people going to be worried you aren't out yet, or do you normally get a late start?"

Honestly, she was surprised he was up at all. Her family didn't usually get up until noon. Her
grandfather didn't come out of his room until past eleven on most days and he was the king.

"Someone already came by," Thorin explained from behind her. "I told them I'd be missing breakfast today and needed to push back a few meetings."

"Oh." Bilba paused in the middle of pulling the ice tray from the freezer. "You didn't tell them?"

"And have the entire medical wing brought down on my head?" Thorin asked. "I'd like to get some things done today. I tell them I banged up my side and suddenly I'm spending my day getting tests done." He turned, carefully, in the chair and watched as she dumped the ice tray into a large dish rag she'd found in one of the drawers. "Speaking of which, are you sure you'll be all right? Did you swallow water? Hit your head? You were dizzy when you got up. If you need the doctor--"

"I'm fine." Bilba forced a small smile and then handed him the cloth wrapped ice, pointing to his side, before retaking her seat and doing her best to burrow into her robe. She watched him warily, the way a mouse might a hungry cat. "I don't think I swallowed any water and I did bang my head, but it wasn't serious."

Thorin pressed the ice to his side, swearing for a minute under his breath, before settling back in the chair. "And you would know because you've had worse?"

Bilba blinked in surprise. Had she said that?

"I've always been clumsy." The routine answer, given to the few teachers or nobles along the way who cared enough to notice how often she appeared with bruises, or in a cast. She took a deep breath now, and wrapped her arms around the mug, focusing on it as if it had all the answers to life's mysteries contained within. "I don't think I said thank you, and I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

"You're welcome." Thorin propped a foot over his other leg and picked up his own mug. "And there's no need to apologize. It was a mistake."

"One that nearly killed us both," Bilba said, eyes fixed on her mug. She tensed, and her fingers tightened on the mug until the blood had drained entirely from her knuckles.

"So a serious mistake," Thorin allowed, "but still a mistake." She could feel his eyes on her but couldn't bring herself to look up. "Hopefully one that won't be repeated. I'd prefer to not spend my days worrying about you being swept out to sea."

"It won't happen again," Bilba promised. She doubted she'd be able to set foot on that beach again, much less try to go through the passage.

"Good." Thorin sighed. "I think I'm still going to seal up that damn passage. The last thing I need is Fili or Kili finding out about it."

Bilba nodded, mentally cringing at the thought of either of the two boys she'd met being in the same amount of danger she'd been in. She'd never even considered one of them potentially finding out what she was doing and deciding to investigate on their own.

She continued to stare at her mug as a second, awkward silence fell over the room.

Was...was that really it? Was he not going to do...anything?

It was Thorin who finally broke it, shifting in his chair and turning to face her. Bilba gasped in surprise at the sudden movement and jumped in her seat. Thorin carefully set the ice compress on the
table and wrapped his own hands around his mug. "I've been thinking about it, and I believe you and I should do something we should have done a long time ago."

Bilba frowned in confusion, lifting her eyes enough to be technically looking at his face but not making eye contact. "What's that?"

"Talk," he said flatly. "I think we should talk. We can start with you explaining just what it was you were doing this morning."
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

A massive thank you to Drenagon for helping me with this chapter as it was NOT cooperating! :) :)

Kyra studied her reflection critically and then adjusted her necklace. The piece was elaborate, solid gold spun out into delicate leaves and flowers that twined about her throat, and studded with diamonds, sapphires and emeralds. It was part of a set, matching the earrings and bracelet she already wore. She didn't wear them all that often for fear of losing them and had quite forgotten just how heavy they were.

Thorin had bought them years earlier, his first gift to her after they'd begun officially dating. She'd gotten him cufflinks if she recalled correctly, a simple silver design with the Durin crest etched into the metal. He liked simplicity and elegance, not like that awful ring they made him wear.

She'd arranged her hair down to mute the effect of the pieces just a little and taken extra care with her makeup and clothing. The top and skirt she'd chosen were ones Thorin had previously noticed and said he liked.

From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of her cell phone, laying innocently on the corner of her vanity. She had to resist the urge to check it, just to prove the events of the night before hadn't been a dream.

She honestly hadn't expected the friend request she'd sent to Gandalf Greyhame to be accepted so quickly. It had been such a pleasant surprise, as well as a welcome burst of accomplishment. Now she could finally prove herself to the During family and show them where their loyalty should truly lie.

Of course, given how her life had been lately, it hadn't been all that much of a surprise to discover things weren't going to be exactly as easy as she'd envisioned...

She almost gave up right then and there, called it quits and accepted she was never going to find anything. But then the look in Thorin's eyes as he'd slipped up about the Shire Princess being half-dressed passed through her mind. A new wave of resentment rushed through her and, before she could talk herself out of it, she pulled up the instant message feature. That led to a second, brief, bout of unease, as her fingers hovered over the keyboard, stomach churning before she finally shook her head, steeled herself and put her fingers on the keys.

She'd already gone too far, she told herself firmly. She couldn't, in good conscience, ignore the account and if she took it to Nori now she'd have to explain why she hadn't gone to him immediately, not to mention what might happen to Hadra and Dardren if it was discovered they'd withheld information.

No, she'd made her choice, and she needed to see it through. Besides, she was Erebor's premiere ambassador, it was her job to see through lies and attempts at manipulation to get to the facts, and Erebor's best interests. It was providence that this had come to her, a chance to prove her worth to the royal family once and for all.
A chance to show Thorin that while the Shire girl might have a pretty face and a few more curves, it was Kyra who had the intelligence and ingenuity.

She'd start simple. Let this Gandalf think of her as, if not a friend, at least someone who wasn't immediately judging his actions. Someone with an open mind who was willing to listen. Her fingers moved quickly across the keyboard, and then hit send before she could think enough to talk herself out of it.

Her message popped up on the screen, a brilliant gold box with black lettering staring back at her.

*Good morning.*

A pang of guilt flashed through her. She usually replied to emails and other electronic correspondence in the early morning, and the incorrect salutation was simply reflex. Writing at night, under cover of darkness, almost made her feel dirty, as if she were doing something wrong.

Maybe --

The instant messenger pinged at her, signaling a reply, and she jumped in her seat, heart racing. A second box, silver with black writing appeared beneath her own.

*What do you mean? Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?*

Kyra surprised herself by laughing and some of her bad humor from the argument with Thorin dissipated. Gandalf, whoever he was, had an unusual sense of humor.

*All of them at once,* she'd responded finally, though not, *I'm afraid, for Dardren and Hadra* there, that was a natural transition. *They were fired for planting that bug you wanted and forced to leave with nothing but the clothes on their back.*

Granted, that wasn't... *entirely* true, but it was certainly close enough. They'd faithfully served the crown their entire lives, even while in exile when the family had been royal in name only, and what thanks did they get at the end of it all? Armed security escorting them to a car to take them to the home of their nearest child. The stares, and whispers of all who saw them being led out.

It was disgraceful.

The message popped up on the screen and she watched the empty space beneath it for a response. It wouldn't make sense to not address what had happened, she told herself, but she hoped it didn't come out too accusatory. She briefly wondered how Nori managed to walk that fine line, interrogating someone without them even realizing it was happening, but set the thought aside as the reply came through.

*That is unfortunate. I had counselled them against taking any action on their own, but they were determined to try and help you. Such dedication is to be admired, even if the application of it was... unwise.*

Kyra frowned in confusion and quickly replied. *What are you talking about? What actions on their own?*

The answer was immediate.

*Actively sabotaging the girl and encouraging the other servants of the palace to avoid her. If the media were to find out, it would reflect quite poorly on the royal family, would it not? Moving*
against the girl so openly, it was only a matter of time before the family would be forced to confront it, and Dardren and Hadra made no effort to conceal their involvement.

Kyra had wondered why anyone had thought there might be a bug planted somewhere, let alone that two elderly servants on the verge of retirement had planted it. Had that been it? They had both held high level positions in the palace and could easily have influenced other staff members, if not outright given them orders. And Gandalf was right, after doing something so blatant, so open, there was no way the palace couldn't respond.

*I never would have allowed them to help had I known beforehand what they planned,* Gandalf wrote. *By the time I learned of it, the damage was already done. I cannot, however, fault them for their loyalty, or their desire to right what they saw as a terrible wrong,* Gandalf continued. *You're like a daughter to them, and seeing your sorrow crushed them.*

Kyra flinched. Her mind went to Dardren walking in on her in her office when she'd been so upset, or when she'd handed Hadra her wedding dress and ordered the woman to burn it, only to chase her down and beg for it back before the other woman could. She'd made the effort to be diplomatic in public, to smile and nod and pretend her heart wasn't broken, but in private...in front of them...she'd made no effort at all.

She'd let them see the true depths of her pain, and never once given a thought to how it might affect them to see her suffering and feel powerless to stop it. Guilt stabbed her and, with a groan, she leaned back in the chair and ran a hand through her hair.

This was her fault, at least in part. She hadn't known what they were doing, but she'd pushed them to do it. She'd even told Thorin as much. She'd made them feel the same way she had. Helpless.

On her screen, Gandalf was still writing.

*I blame myself. I confess, I happened across them in a cafe and overheard them as they discussed how best to help you. Their story touched me, as did hearing about the grave injustice done to you.*

An odd thrill ran through her, and Kyra shook her head at her own foolishness. Even so, that was the legend, wasn't it? Gandalf Greyhame, or Gandalf the Gray as legend sometimes called him, was recounted as a champion of the weak and downtrodden. He fought for the powerless, those unable to save themselves. He sought to right wrongs and restore justice to those cruelly used.

*I knew, however, that hearing only one side of a story is no way to get a clear picture,* Gandalf went on, *and, who knows, perhaps the Shire Princess herself was in need of my aid. She did, after all, have to leave all that she knew and loved for a foreign land, a stranger for a husband, and a people unwilling to accept her.*

Kyra bristled, and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She was aware public perception wasn't exactly in the girl's favor, but what did she expect when she simply locked herself up in her room all day or spent her time sneaking out to do Mahal only knew what?

*And what did you find out?* she wrote, gritting her teeth. The last thing she wanted to hear was yet one more person feeling sympathy for that girl. When was someone going to bother to feel some sympathy for her? She was the one who'd been wronged. She was the one jilted out of her rightful place. It had been bad enough to have it happen at all, but now with Thorin wanting to *talk* to the Princess, get to know her...

*Very little,* Gandalf responded. *The placement was not optimal and most of the audio was garbled. I'll need to learn more before I make my final decision.*
Here it came, Kyra thought, tensing in her chair. Here was where he'd try to get her to do something for him, plant another bug or spy or something.

*I will not, however, make the same mistake again. I will not allow anyone to endanger their wellbeing or livelihood to help me, no matter how earnest they are in their desire to help.*

Kyra blinked in surprise. What?

*Also, Gandalf continued. Please be assured that I will personally see to it that Hadra and Dardren are taken care of. I will not allow them to suffer for my mistakes.*

Kyra stared at the screen. She started to put her fingers on the keys, lifted them, and then put them down again.

She had no idea what to say. She'd been so convinced he'd try to get her involved in something but, instead, he was apologizing and offering to atone for his mistake?

Realizing she'd left it too long, she put her fingers down and forced herself to write, *That's very kind of you. I appreciate it. Thorin refused to do anything at all. We got in quite the argument over it.*

She hit send before it occurred to her that she might have overshared just a bit. She honestly wasn't sure why she'd even included that last part about Thorin, other than that it was just so nice to have someone listen to her. She'd been so convinced Thorin would intervene, but instead he'd backed the decision and then started talking about the Shire Princess and how attractive she apparently looked in a robe...

*The Prince is under enormous stress, as are you,* came the response. *I would not fault him for it.*

"Easy for you to say," Kyra muttered. At least Gandalf was willing to acknowledge the stress she was under, unlike some others she could name.

*He said he wants to get to know her better,* she wrote, fingers almost moving of their own accord. *And I think he's --* She stopped short of writing, "he's attracted to her," stared at it for several minutes and then deleted it back to the word "better" and hit send.

*Words most likely spoken in the heat of anger,* Gandalf replied. *I'm sure he will reconsider in the morning when he sees you. He will remember it was you who always stood by his side, and not the Princess.*

*It'd be easier if she were ugly,* Kyra sent, *or a shrew, but she never appears to leave her room,* except --

She froze with a gasp, and her heart jolted at the realization that she'd almost told him about the secret passageway the Princess was using to get in and out of the palace. Mahal, how could she have been so stupid? Heat rushed into her face and she shook her head.

Some ambassador she was.

She looked at the screen and shook her head again at the last message she'd sent before almost revealing a fatal flaw about the palace. What was she doing talking to him about this sort of thing? He wasn't her mother or close friend, he was a stranger for Mahal's sake and here she was --

*You underestimate your own beauty,* Gandalf wrote back. *And not just the outward sort. I have heard rumors about the Princess. If they are true, then I would suspect the Prince will soon abandon his notion of trying to get to know the girl.*
Kyra hesitated. Her heart was still racing, and she was shaking as the adrenaline wore off. She took a deep breath and took a few moments to think about what she would write before finally setting her fingers back down on the keys. *I think everyone has heard those rumors. I know she had some problems back in the Shire, but she’s only twenty after all.*

That was another thing, having her replacement not only be prettier, but ten years younger as well. How was she ever supposed to compete with that?

*Perhaps her youth might explain some of what I’ve heard, but not all.*

Kyra frowned. *What do you mean?*

*Nothing I’m willing to speak of now, not without evidence. It seems odd, though, doesn’t it, that Shire would be so insistent on the marriage? And why, do you suppose, would they choose her? A princess kept out of the limelight, suddenly brought forward to be thrust upon Erebor?*

*I don’t know,* Kyra wrote back in surprise. *I’d never really thought about it.*

*It could be nothing,* Gandalf replied. *They are only rumors after all. I shall investigate it on my own and see what I might find.*

*Will you let me know?* She was asking purely to keep in touch with him and try to discover his true ambitions, Kyra told herself firmly. If she just let him go off, she’d never find out who he truly was or what his intent had been in planting a bug.

Assuming, of course, that what he’d already told her wasn’t the truth. That he was actually Gandalf the Gray, walked right out of the pages of legend somehow to aid her in her time of need.

*Of course.*

A small line of text appeared under the message, showing Gandalf had gone offline and the conversation was now over.

Kyra sat back in her chair and shook her head at the small flame of hope welling up inside her. Don’t get ahead of yourself, she cautioned sharply. Things didn’t go a certain way simply because she wanted them too and certainly not because a man pretending to be a legendary wizard was offering to help. Fairy tales weren’t real, and wizards didn’t show up out of nowhere to help you when a foreign princess stole your fiancé.

She continued to tell herself that all night and was still telling herself that as she stared at her cell phone the next morning, wondering if she’d imagined the whole thing.

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Kyra tore her eyes away from the phone and took a deep breath, running her hands down the front of her skirt. She was pretty, she told herself firmly. She might not be barely out of her teens, but that was only a plus. It meant she was mature, a woman instead of a child, capable of being responsible and not throwing tantrums and spending money frivolously like the news reports said.

Turning on her heel, she stalked to her door, put her hand on the knob and steeled herself. Head up, back straight, and smile. Thorin would be waiting outside as he always was, argument or no argument. Whenever they did argue, they both always tried to dress up and look their best when they met again, it had almost become a private joke between them and it was important to her that he know --
Her thoughts derailed as she pulled the door open to reveal an empty corridor beyond. Suddenly unsure, she stepped out and paused. The corridor remained empty, in both directions. Kyra stepped back into her room and checked the clock. She was a few minutes later than usual, perhaps he’d thought her still mad at him and gone on without her?

She left the room again, shut the door behind her, and headed toward the royal dining hall. She walked slightly faster than normal, hoping to catch up to Thorin so they could go in together, but saw no sign of him along the way. She did see a few courtiers and staff members, all of whom either gave her sympathetic looks or avoided her gaze entirely.

She reached the doors finally, giant, golden monstrosities carved with all manner of images from Erebor's history and studded with gems. Two guards were stationed outside, and they easily caught the door handles and pushed them open to allow her to enter.

Kyra rushed inside and froze.

The dining table was massive, able to fit a dozen or so people comfortably, if not more. The royal family always sat at the far end, with the king at the head. Thorin always sat to his right, Frerin on his left, and then Dis next to him, Kyra next to Thorin, with Fili and Kili seated next to their mother.

That was how it normally worked. From where she stood now, Kyra could see every seat was filled, except hers and Thorin's.

"Are you planning on standing there all day?" Thrain's voice rang out, echoing through the room exactly as it was designed to do, and Kyra flinched and snapped out of her trance.

"Of course not, Your Majesty." She curtsied and then hurried forward. "I was just surprised to not see Thorin is all. I had expected him to already be here."

"He's chosen to eat in his rooms this morning," Dis explained, leaning over to help Kili with something on his plate. "I imagine he'll be down later."

"Oh." Kyra took her seat quietly.

"Perhaps he would have chosen to appear if he weren't concerned about being further browbeaten by one of Erebor's ambassadors." Thrain's voice held a hint of steel in it and Kyra tensed, eyes wide as they lifted to meet his.

"Father," Dis broke in. "I hardly think the proper place to address this is in public."

Even then, the room was filled with servants bringing in food, as well as the usual guards standing along the walls. Word of the king rebuking her would be all over the palace by mid-morning.

"You're correct," Thrain announced, voice losing none of its steel. "Such things should happen in private. Perhaps someone might explain this concept to our ambassador."

Kyra flushed. "You're right, of course," she whispered. "My actions were inappropriate."

"They were an embarrassment to the crown," Thrain corrected sharply. "You are not even ranked in the nobility. Correcting the Crown Prince, much less arguing with him, in public or private, is so far out of line that it begs the question whether you even realize there is a line."

Kyra flinched, and a cold feeling settled in her gut. In the past she'd argued with Thorin on several occasions, both in public and private, and never had any problem.
But you were his fiancée then, an internal voice whispered. Now you're just...you.

Her jaw clenched, and, in her lap, her fingers dug into the napkin she'd already laid out. It was just one more way support was being denied her. Sure, they were still allowing her to have meals with them, still giving her unfettered access to the royal family, still insisting she was family, but were they supporting her? Assuring her they'd figure this out? Telling her that she was still Thorin's fiancée as far as they were concerned? Actively doing anything to try and find a way to restore her to her rightful position?

No.

"I do realize there's a line, Your Majesty," she said, the words pushed out through gritted teeth. Nausea roiled in her stomach and she found her appetite was suddenly gone. It was humiliating, being forced to act like she had no right to argue with Thorin, like he was so far above her suddenly when they'd been equals their entire lives. Just one more way the royal family was failing her. "I will not cross it again."

"See that you don't," Thrain said shortly, and then he was back to eating, dismissing her with the same disregard he would any other subject. On the other side of the table, Frerin was engrossed in something on his phone while Dis was busy with Fili and Kili.

"At least Hadra and Dardren tried," Kyra thought bitterly. They may have gone about it in the wrong way, may not have really understood what they were doing, but they had at least done something.

Right now, Gandalf had officially done more, was doing more than the people who claimed to love her.

The first course was set in front of her, and she started eating by rote. If asked, it was unlikely she could have said what it even was. Instead her eyes were fixed beside her, on Thorin's empty chair. Thorin, who even then, was up in his rooms with his practically-still-a-teenager bride.

Maybe she'd come out in a robe, and that was why he hadn't come down. Maybe he'd been so angry at Kyra that he'd gone straight up to seduce the Princess, a younger, prettier woman who didn't argue or challenge him. Who probably just batted her eyes and used her looks to get what she wanted like the spoiled, entitled little brat she was.

A low, burning anger began to uncoil somewhere inside her. Resentment, bitterness, frustration, all of it rolled up into one. She'd been good, diplomatic, kind. She'd cried in private, done everything she was supposed to do and what had it gotten her?

An empty chair, and a public rebuke from the king for daring to treat her fiancé like her fiancé.

She thought back to her conversation with Gandalf. At least he seemed interested in helping her. I have heard rumors about the princess.

Kyra frowned as the words from his message ran through her head. What kind of rumors could he have meant? She'd heard nothing other than the usual ones, that the princess was a spoiled, immature brat used to getting her own way.

Not enough to force the crown to take any drastic action but...what if...what if there was something else?

Why, do you suppose, they chose her?
Her frown deepened. Why indeed? Shire and Erebor had already had the alliance worked out, everything in place and, suddenly, the demand for the marriage had come through. A completely unnecessary marriage, one that had required her and Thorin to break off their engagement, and Shire had utterly refused to budge on it. They had been offered money, trade deals, even a reverse marriage where a noblewoman from Erebor would be sent to marry into the Shire royal family.

All offers had been rejected, so quickly it was likely they had never even been read or considered.

Why?

Kyra had been so focused on her own pain, and the chaos the actions had thrown her life and Erebor into, that she'd never even thought to consider anything.

Why a marriage, and why that girl?

The Shire royal family was huge, with all manner of unmarried nieces and granddaughters and even cousins. Bilba, by all accounts, hadn't even been involved in court life, living instead on the very outskirts of Shire and attending a fairly average university.

Why had Shire been so adamant on it being her?

A new fire erupted inside her, determination replacing the anger and resentment. Gandalf could look into it all he wanted but, then, so could she. She was an ambassador after all. She had plenty of contacts. It would be easy to contact a few to start making inquiries about the Princess. She wouldn't tell Gandalf of course. They weren't confidants, even if he proved to be a better listener than anyone that should have been listening.

No, she'd do this on her own. She might not find anything, but --

She glanced beside her, at Thorin's empty chair, and felt her eyes narrow.

She might not find anything, but at least she'd be doing something.

She was done feeling helpless.
Bilba's hands went white-knuckled on her mug, and her shoulders bunched up around her ears. Her eyes dropped, and she seemed to almost shrink in on herself.

The action sent a flash of anger through Thorin, though not directed at her. Rather, it was aimed toward whoever had made it so that a simple question caused her to react as if he'd threatened her with bodily harm.

He'd only interacted with her a few times, but the picture being painted by just those few instances was enough to turn his stomach and convince him more and more that Ori's suspicions were not so outlandish as he'd first thought.

"I was trying to go to my job."

Her words were barely audible, and her eyes never lifted from her hands, making him briefly confused whether she'd spoken at all. "The one at the bakery?"

Her eyes narrowed and she grimaced, but she simply nodded without further insight into her reaction.

Thorin started to shift in his chair, only to freeze as she sucked in a short gasp and tensed even further. Her hands were so tight on the cup he almost considered taking it away from her, concerned she'd shatter it and injure herself.

"You couldn't have thought the palace would be all right with it." He settled for saying instead.

"I didn't think the palace would even know about it," Bilba grumbled. "Shire wouldn't have."

"Shire was never taken over by an outside force," Thorin said dryly though, really, how poor must Shire's security be that they wouldn't notice a member of the royal family sneaking out to a job at a bakery? "You'll find we're a bit more paranoid."

She didn't answer, seemingly intent of staring at her cup of hot chocolate. An awkward silence fell over them until Thorin finally cleared his throat, causing her to flinch, and asked, "How about this then? Why did you get a job?"

"I needed the money," she said. There was the slightest hint of irritation in her voice, but her body language never changed.

"For what?" Thorin asked, not bothering to hide his exasperation. Getting answers from her was worse than trying to get them from Kili.

For the first time, her eyes flickered up to meet his, before darting back down again. "I wanted to go to college," she said, softly. "The current semester is already under way, but I thought with some money saved, and maybe if I could get a scholarship. I don't think they'd give me financial aid." The last was said under her breath, almost as if to herself, but Thorin couldn't help chuckling.

"No, I don't suppose they would." His ribs were bothering him more than he'd thought they would, and he had to consciously resist the urge to shift in his seat again.

Bilba's eyes lifted slightly and she frowned. "Are you sure you don't want me to get someone?"
"Positive." Thorin risked leaning back a bit, hoping to get make it a little less painful to take a breath. It had been years since he'd had bruised ribs, and they sucked worse than he'd remembered. He was going to have to come up with a good excuse to not spar with Dwalin for a while, a very good reason because the man wasn't one to have the wool pulled over his eyes. Great as a defense against the enemy, not so much when you were the one trying to keep something from him.

"Normally you would have been given access to a stipend," he said, refocusing on the girl across from him. "But there was a concern given how quickly you spent the money your grandfather gave you the week before you arrived."

She scowled. Her eyes were no longer focused on her cup but were now looking at a random spot somewhere at about the midpoint of the table. "I had to buy clothes that were appropriate for the weather here," she said finally, "and for...whatever. I didn't usually take part in palace functions all that much."

Thorin raised an eyebrow. "And a wardrobe wasn't provided for you?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps they thought you'd do it over here."

"In that case, you could have waited," Thorin said, "and saved the money."

"I suppose." She glanced out the window for a second, and then suddenly turned back and made eye contact with him. "I did save some, but my grandfather said I had to give it back."

She said the words all in a rush, before fixating back down on the mug in her hands again.

"Why?" Thorin asked in surprise.

She let out a sigh and chewed on her lower lip. Her eyes darted back and forth for a few seconds and Thorin suddenly wished he could see exactly what was going on inside her head. Finally, she seemed to come to some sort of decision and, in a tentative voice, said, "You know...I wasn't expecting this." She waved her hand about absently as she said it, indicating the entire room, and him. "I'm like..." she hesitated, and tilted her head for a second before continuing, "25th in line for the throne. I don't really visit the palace, or go to functions, and the media hasn't cared about me in years. When I got 'chosen' for this," here she stumbled briefly before picking up again, "I'd already had plans but I--"

"Did your duty," Thorin cut in dryly.

Her eyes flickered back to his again, and she nodded. "I wasn't exactly happy though, and after the wedding...when it kind of sank in... I kind of had a bit of a tantrum and destroyed a few things."

Her voice trailed off as she spoke the last, so that he more had to infer what she said instead of having actually heard it.

"A few things?" he asked. She'd been given a lot of money.

Her eyes never leaving her untouche, rapidly cooling hot chocolate. "Maybe more than a few," she whispered.

Maybe a lot more than a few if she'd wound up entirely broke at the end of it. Vaguely, he recalled being told her age at some point. She was younger than him, by at least ten years if he remembered correctly. That would put her barely out of her teens and, while it didn't excuse her behavior, it at least offered some explanation, particularly given the rest of it.
Thorin hadn't expected to be ordered into an arranged marriage either, but he had been raised with the understanding that he was a royal and, as such, had higher expectations than others. Duty was paramount, as was loyalty to the throne.

"You could have renounced your title."

Could he have though? Renounced his title when he'd had the importance of duty impressed upon him since birth? When he'd felt the injustice of their kingdom's loss, fought to reclaim her, stood proud in the spot he'd been told was his right from the time he was old enough to understand it?

He loved Kyra, he did, but leaving Erebor for her would have been the worst sort of betrayal, not only of his family but of the people he'd vowed to lead. He was the crown prince of Erebor. He didn't know how to be anything but that and trying, he felt, would have ultimately led to resentment. Resentment from him and, he was convinced, an eventual loss of respect from Kyra. He would have poisoned their relationship even as he sought to save it.

He wondered, however, what he would have done had he not been raised that way. If being royal was little more than an interesting fact, of no more note than one's eye or hair color. If that were the case, then not only was Bilba's acceptance of the marriage admirable, but her subsequent tantrum, when combined with her age, was understandable.

"I'll have your stipend put in place and make sure you have access to it," he said shortly. He'd have it monitored to ensure she wasn't going crazy with it, but trust had to start somewhere. He'd said he wanted to make some sort of progress with her, and he couldn't, in good faith, claim that while still restricting her like she was little more than a wayward child. "You'll need to speak to Balin and Dwalin to set up going to college. It'll be a bear logistically, but there should be plenty of time to get it done before the new semester starts."

She'd looked up sharply when he'd started speaking and was now looking at him with what could only be called a stunned expression. For several long seconds she simply stared at him and then, to his surprise, as if a light switch had been turned off, her expression went completely flat.

"Thank you," she said, eyes dropping away from his again. Her hands, Thorin noted, were still clenched tight on the mug and her shoulders remained bunched up near her ears.

His eyes narrowed. He'd thought she'd have been happy, not...whatever this was. The reminder that she was possibly a Shire spy occurred to him, but he dismissed it. If she were a spy it'd be important for her to behave normally, not trigger his suspicion by shutting down completely when he offered everything she'd wanted plus more.

"I still need to go to work," she said softly, voice nearly too low to be heard. Her fingers flexed on the cup and he could almost swear he heard the ceramic creak. "I made a commitment. It'd reflect poorly on the palace to not follow through."

"I doubt you'll have time." Thorin rested his elbow on the armrest of the chair and propped his foot on his opposite leg. The movement made him grit his teeth in pain, but if he had any hope of not bringing the medical wing down on his head, it was important he force his way past it and work on acting normally.

Mentally he made a note to himself to stop sitting in ways that could aggravate potential future injuries.

Bilba was giving him a confused look, so he added, "Your schedule?" At her continued look of confusion, he sighed. "Apparently something else the Head Butler ensured you weren't seeing. We
were told you had refused it."

"I never saw it." She frowned. "Why were those two so against me? I've seen others giving me dark looks, but no one has actually done anything." Her eyes narrowed further. "And how was no one able to see it? Are they very close?"

"They're married," Thorin said. "And they were Kyra's personal servants before the reclamation. Their positions were rewards for their service." A thought occurred to him and, before she could get the wrong idea, he quickly added, "Kyra had no knowledge of it, and was horrified to find out."

Technically, she'd been horrified to find out the two had been fired, but Thorin was sure that, upon being given a chance to calm down, she'd have realized how out of line the two had been and that the consequences they'd suffered in turn had been justified. Speaking of which, he made a note to have lunch with her later and, hopefully, repair the rift caused by their fight the day before.

"You put a married couple that held their loyalty to a non-Durin in such high positions?" Bilba asked, sounding genuinely startled. "That was poorly thought out."

Thorin stiffened. "As I said, it was a reward for their loyalty."

She had tensed at the sound of annoyance in his voice, but still, stubbornly, added, "You could have rewarded them without endangering the security of the palace."

And there it was, Thorin thought, the bizarre dichotomy of the Princess of Shire. Scared to death of him one second, and defiantly calling out Erebor's security in the next.

She flinched suddenly under his gaze, eyes going wide and then she was ducking her head to study her mug again. Thorin hesitated, and then leaned over to gently tug it away from her. "You're going to shatter it if you hold on any harder, and then we really will end up in the medical wing."

She didn't resist him taking the cup, simply watched it slide a few inches away dispassionately.

Thorin sighed and tried a different angle. "You've uncovered quite a few security flaws since you've been here."

From cameras to a secret passageway leading straight to the royal level, it was becoming more and more clear that Erebor's security wasn't near as impenetrable as he'd so confidently told her a few moments earlier.

"I missed my calling," Bilba said softly. "Apparently, I should have gone into security."

"Instead of giving your security gray hair?" Thorin asked dryly.

The smallest ghost of a smile passed her lips, and then was gone again. She started to speak, hesitated, and then forged ahead. "You might consider re-evaluating your entire staff." When he didn't respond she said, "It wasn't just those two. They had the people under them following their orders too." She frowned. "I know it may seem extreme to think this way, but planting a bug is pretty extreme. I know it was just me, but you have to wonder how far they would go and who they might get to join them."

Thorin was silent for a moment. "You're right," he said finally. "I'll see that it's done."

He pushed back from the table, ignoring the way she jumped in her seat as he did. He had a feeling he'd pushed her pretty far for a first meeting, and it was time to back off and give her some space.
"I'll have Balin come speak to you," he said, stepping a few feet away from the table. "He can help you with--" he waved his hand absently, "everything we spoke about."

"Okay," came the quiet response. She was back in the defensive posture again, eyes fixed on the table and hands clasped together until her knuckles were white. Thorin wished he knew what triggered the change, from spitfire to terrified, but left it alone.

He started to head to the door, only to pause and turn back. "Promise you won't attempt to leave the palace again without alerting your security team."

She frowned. "You said you sneak out sometimes."

"I know the city," Thorin countered, "and I'm not the size of a garden gnome."

She rolled her eyes but nodded. "I promise."

Thorin nodded, stood awkwardly for another second or two and then headed out into the palace proper. He didn't know her well enough to know if she'd keep her promise, but it was a start at least.

Now that he'd successfully managed to talk to his wife, it was time to find Kyra and try to repair that relationship. Hopefully he could make her understand the severity of what Dardren and Hadra had done. He'd have to speak to Nori and Dwalin as well, because what Bilba had said wasn't wrong. Erebor's security had somehow managed to be both paranoid and lax at the very same time, and it was high time something was done about it. Erebor had already fallen once thanks to overconfidence, he'd be damned if he stood by and risked it happening again.

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Bilba let out a low breath and sagged in her seat. That had been...less than fun.

She tried, unsuccessfully, to stop her hands from shaking and then pushed up from the chair. She gathered the two mugs, neither of which had been touched, and dumped them in the sink before washing them and returning them to the cupboard.

After that, she walked to the balcony doors and stood for a few minutes looking out over the raging surf. A shudder ran over her at the sight of the water slamming into the beach and running up the rocks.

She chewed on her lower lip. She needed a phone. If she didn't at least call Bombur to tell him she wasn't coming in, he'd call Bofur and then she'd have to explain to the royal family why a man was trying to scale the walls with a foam mattock.

She spun on one heel and headed toward the doors Thorin had just recently walked out. She grabbed the door handle, and promptly froze, gut clenching inside her. She didn't make it a habit of leaving the rooms this way all that often, and then only during times when she knew the route to the kitchen would be relatively empty.

Right now, it being morning, that was unlikely to be the case. She'd have to be out there, with people, many of whom didn't like her. That included the servants who'd known she was being deliberately ignored and had gone along with it.

Thorin's words about evaluating the staff, along with his promises about her stipend and college came back to her, but she shook her head and dismissed them. She'd been excited, at first, but reality had settled in shortly after.
Royalty didn't do anything simply to be nice. The security she could understand, it was just as she'd said, servants who took it upon themselves to go after her could just as easily go after Thorin or any other member of the royal family. Evaluating the staff was self-serving, ensuring his family and his own person were safe from potential risks.

The same could also be said for his insistence on her not leaving the palace without an escort. It wasn't out of any concern for her or her well-being. It was the same as with her grandfather. The guards had never been there to protect her, they'd been there to watch her, ensure she did nothing that would embarrass the family. Thorin already knew how she'd been dressed when she went out, and what she'd been up to. He simply wanted to ensure she didn't do anything to make the palace look bad, and the best way to ensure that was to keep her under guard.

She didn't know why he'd offered the stipend and the promise of going to college, just as she still didn't understand why he'd gone to the effort of saving her from the waves. Just because she didn't know, however, didn't mean there wasn't a reason. Who knows, maybe he was more like her grandfather than she'd first suspected. There were times he'd do awful things simply because he could. He actually enjoyed causing misery, simply for the sake of causing it. She didn't understand it, but she had long grown used to it. Long learned to suspect it, and she wasn't fool enough not to see it now.

Thorin could have saved her knowing that she'd be indebted to him, could be offering her money and college so he could threaten to take them away in the future if she didn't obey him. There were any number of reasons, and she had no doubt she'd learn them in time. She always did.

Bilba shut her eyes for a second, steeled herself, and then opened the door, mask firmly in place. She was a princess, she reminded herself. She'd been trained on how to behave like one in public even if she'd had few chances to put that training into use.

There were people in the hall, darting back and forth about their business. Some gave her strange looks, while others didn't appear to recognize her. No one gave her any openly hostile looks, but Bilba didn't doubt they were there, below the surface. She also didn't doubt her every movement would be reported back to Thorin, just as her movements and hiring at the bakery had been. She was slightly startled at the flash of betrayal she'd felt at the realization Gareth and Cerys had reported on her, but she'd quickly kicked herself for being such an idiot about it.

They were not loyal to her, and they weren't her friends. They were being paid to watch her and report her actions to the palace. Was she really so pathetic as to have instantly latched onto the first signs of friendship and treat them as if they were genuine?

Apparently.

She bit back another sigh and focused on keeping her head high and back straight, eyes forward and fixed on the middle distance. It took some time to find the door she wanted, but she finally stood in front of it, or at least she hoped she did. The night before had been chaotic and Ori had been talking very fast, but she was pretty sure this was where the other woman had said her rooms were.

Bilba hit the small buzzer to announce her presence, and then stood back and waited. As she did, she reminded herself that Ori was no different than Gareth and Cerys, and possibly worse. The woman was married to Erebor's Captain of the Guard after all. Who better to keep an eye on the princess? Befriend her and report back on her every movement? Gain her confidence, even, and see what she might say in an unguarded moment?

Bitterness, and a second pang of betrayal. She really had liked Ori when she'd met her the night before and had briefly let herself believe the other woman was more like Rosie, on the outside rather
than caught up in the never-ending politicking of the palace.

There was no mistaking the fact that Thorin had known literally everything about her movements, both the night before and even earlier now that she thought about it. They'd all known, in fact, and the longer she considered it, the more resentment and despair she felt.

She'd really thought, for a moment at least, that she might have a chance to lead a normal life here. Get out and do her own thing without the constant watch of the palace judging her every action.

The sound of the door unlocking came, and Bilba stood straighter, determined that when Thorin received this report it would have nothing at all in it to give him cause to be angry. He might not be the sort to resort to physical violence, yet, but that didn't mean he wasn't the type to punish her in other ways, especially if she kept pushing him. Everyone had their breaking point, right?

The question came on a wave of confusion, as her mind tried to slot Thorin into one of the roles she usually held for her grandfather or other palace officials only to falter as he failed to fit.

She had no time to think any further on it, however, as the door was flung open to reveal Ori, wearing a robe over a nightgown, hair pulled back in a sloppy ponytail. Behind her, Bilba could smell something delicious cooking in the kitchen, and mentally suppressed a groan of dismay at the realization it was still exceptionally early.

"I'm so sorry," she started to say stiffly. "I forgot how--"

"Bilba!" Ori lunged forward to throw her arms around Bilba, only to instantly let go and jump back as Bilba hissed in pain and stiffened. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing," Bilba said, gritting her teeth against the waves of pain that were currently radiating through her. She wasn't hurt all that badly, but that didn't mean being squeezed had been a pleasant experience. She was going to have some serious bruising, probably already did in fact. "I just needed to borrow a phone. I didn't know who to ask--" she hesitated, "it's not important though. I can wait."

Wait, and hope Bofur didn't have enough money to immediately buy a plane ticket. More likely, she'd have to go call Rosie, and have her contact Bofur and then have him contact Bombur. That would mean a lot of explanations to Rosie that she really didn't want to make, that would then get back to Bofur and then--

Honestly, she should have just stayed in bed.

Footsteps sounded, and then the giant man who usually shadowed Thorin was there, fully dressed and clearly wide awake. He stood over Ori's shoulder, and frowned. "Your Highness, what's wrong?"

"She's hurt," Ori said before Bilba could say anything. "She wasn't hurt last night. Did Thorin do something?" The last, Bilba assumed, was directed at her, but Ori turned to glare over her shoulder at Dwalin as she said it, as if holding him personally responsible.

"No, he--" Bilba snapped her mouth shut as it suddenly occurred to her that they were basically standing in the hallway having this conversation. Granted, it was fairly empty at the moment, but still, the last thing the royal family needed was half-heard words being translated into gossip and rumors and being passed about the palace. "Could we talk about this inside, please?"

As she spoke, she reached out and slid a hand through Ori's arm, tugging the other woman just a little close. She wanted it very clear before she went inside that Ori was present and that her visit was to the other woman, not her husband.
"Of course," Ori pulled her inside, shut the door behind her and then stood back and planted her hands on her hips. "Now talk. What happened."

"Ori," Dwalin growled. "You can't talk to the Crown Princess that way."

Ori scoffed. "You talk to Thorin that way all the time."

"That's different," Dwalin muttered. He frowned at Bilba. "Are you hurt?"

Bilba opened her mouth to deny it, or think of some excuse, only to hesitate as the image of Thorin trying to find a comfortable position in his seat ran through her mind. She knew he hadn't wanted anyone to know, but what if he really was hurt worse than either of them had thought? What would be worse, her telling on him and having it be nothing, or not telling and having him collapse in his office later.

The latter, her mind told her instantly. With the former, he'd be mad at her. With the latter she could well have the entire royal family up in arms and without him conscious to tell them it had been an accident.

"I exercised some poor judgement this morning," she whispered, clasping her hands in front of her. She tensed, and felt her stomach start to cramp. "Thorin saved me, but he got hurt. I don't think badly," she hastened to say before they could think she'd left him bleeding upstairs or something, "and he said he was fine and didn't want anyone to know, but he was hurt, and I was worried it might be worse than he's thinking or letting on."

Dwalin made an aggravated noise. "Sounds like him. How bad are we talking?"

Bilba shrugged and focused on her hands. "He might have broken a rib, or two."

"He broke a rib?" Ori exclaimed in shock. "What in the world happened?"

Bilba flinched, only to immediately stiffen as Dwalin moved forward. He went right past her though, and toward the door muttering under his breath about idiot Durins and their desire to put him into an early grave.

"He's not in the apartment anymore," Bilba said before he could leave. "I'm not sure where he went."

"It's fine, I can find him." Dwalin frowned at her, an odd suspicion entering his eyes. "Ori," he said finally, "do me a favor and get her to the medical wing too, will you? I'll find the idiot."

"I'm fine," Bilba hurried to say. "I wasn't hurt as badly."

Dwalin snorted. "Sure you weren't."

Ori grabbed Bilba's arm and smiled at her husband. "I'll get her there."

Dwalin nodded and left, and Ori promptly tugged on Bilba's arm. "In a few minutes. You probably haven't had breakfast yet, have you? We can do that, and you can tell me how it is that your morning was more exciting than my entire week."

And then you can compare it to Thorin's story later to make sure I'm not lying or embellishing, Bilba thought bitterly. Outwardly, she simply forced a smile and allowed the other woman to lead her toward the kitchen.

She knew better now. She'd let her guard down once already. It wouldn't happen again.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

My beta, Drenagon, is writing an awesome new story! It's a Modern AU Bilbo/Thorin in an office setting! Here's the link if you're interested:
https://archiveofourown.org/works/17636924/chapters/41587571

Kyra leaned against the wall next to Thorin's office and impatiently tapped her fingers on the rock behind her. Several servants gave her sideways glances as they walked past, and she forced herself to look them in the eyes until they dropped their gaze.

She refused to feel humiliated, either by the king dressing her down, or by the fact she was so clearly waiting for Thorin. She was Erebor's chief ambassador, it only made sense for her to interact with him.

She'd also been his closest and dearest friend since childhood, with total access to him any time she wished, and if anyone thought the arrival of some little chit from Shire - who'd barely talked to him more than once or twice in her life - was going to change that, they had another thing coming.

She caught sight of him and straightened and nervously clasped her hands together in front of her. She disagreed with the king's reasoning, but not with the notion that she shouldn't have yelled at Thorin. The last thing she needed was for him to start dreading the sight of her for fear she'd light into him again.

Resentment rose inside her. Once upon a time, she wouldn't have needed to watch her tongue. They'd bickered and fought, and she'd never hesitated to voice her opinion when warranted. Now she had to watch her every word and deed, keep herself above reproach to avoid being labeled as too familiar, or a shrew, or any other number of unflattering terms. Rising anger warred alongside the resentment and she clenched her hands behind her back to keep the emotions from leaking out.

"Kyra," Thorin stopped a few feet away. "I'd have thought you'd still be at breakfast."

"I didn't have much appetite," Kyra confessed, "so I left early." She didn't mention the King's words. Thorin would hear soon enough, and if she said anything it'd just make her look juvenile and whiny. Best behavior, that was her. "I wanted to apologize for my behavior last night. It was unseemly and--"

"It's fine,"

Kyra blinked in surprise at the curt cutoff as Thorin moved past her to push his office door open. He was moving stiffly and holding one arm tight to his side.

Kyra frowned in confusion. "Are you all right?" She followed him through the door and watched as he rounded his desk and sank down into his chair, barely hiding a grimace. "What happened?"

"Nothing." He gave her an annoyed look that she assumed was more directed at his pain, and whatever the cause had been, and jerked a drawer open with more force than necessary. "I slipped in the shower."
"You slipped," Kyra repeated blankly, "in the shower?" She studied him, taking in the tense way he held himself and how he leaned to one side as if favoring the other half of his body. "And, what? Rolled off a cliff?"

Thorin ignored her. He dragged his laptop from one of the drawers, set it on his desktop and shoved the lid open. Kyra heard him muttering to himself as he typed in his password and then sat back gingerly in his seat.

"Your shower has slip guards on the floor, and a railing." Kyra crossed her arms over her chest and tried to ignore a feeling of disquiet. He was lying to her. Lying, to her. "You'd have to work at it to slip. What were you--" Her voice trailed off as a truly horrific thought occurred to her, and she felt her face heat in a mixture of betrayal, mortification and anger.

Thorin let out a heavy sigh and lowered the laptop lid enough to look at her over it. "I slipped in the shower," he repeated. "Alone, Kyra. Just because something is difficult to accomplish doesn't mean it can't be."

"I didn't know falling was considered an accomplishment," Kyra retorted through gritted teeth. Her voice was sharper than intended and with effort she forced herself to relax. She had sought him out to make amends, not start another argument. If she didn't watch it, he really would start avoiding her.

"Are you sure you're all right? Maybe you should let Oin check you out?"

"I second that," a new voice spoke, and Kyra stepped aside to allow Dwalin to enter. He took up a wide legged stance a few feet inside the room, arms crossed over his chest and glower firmly planted on his face.

Thorin hated having to go to the medical wing, so it was a testament to the pain he must be in that he looked more resigned than annoyed. What was even more surprising, however, was the brief look of what could almost be termed amusement that crossed over his face. "She turned me in, did she?"

"Proving at least one of you possesses an ounce of common sense," Dwalin shot back. "Let's go."

"Her?" Kyra asked. "Do you mean the Shire Princess? What does she have to do with it?"

"She heard me fall," Thorin said, carefully pushing up from the desk. "It's fine. I'll be back shortly. We can talk about it over lunch."

With that he followed Dwalin out, leaving Kyra alone in his office. For several seconds she simply stood there, fingers tapping out a random rhythm on her thigh. In the past, Thorin would have told her what had happened immediately. He'd have invited her to go with him to see Oin.

He wouldn't have lied to her.

Of course, the biggest question was why had he lied to her? Had he been in the shower alone, or had the little tramp been in there with him?

No, she decided. He'd looked her dead in the eye when he'd told her he'd been alone. She was certain he was telling the truth about that, just as certain as she was that he was lying about how he'd gotten hurt.

Which begged the question of what, exactly, had happened and why he felt the need to hide it. She had no idea, but she damn well planned to find out.

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Dwalin leaned against a table and watched Thorin grumble at Oin as the other man checked him over. Thorin had taken his shirt off, gingerly, and the deep bruising about his ribs and lower side stood out in stark relief against his skin.

Idiot, Dwalin thought in annoyance. How he planned to be king someday when he couldn't even take care of himself was anyone's guess.

Nori was lounging against the wall a few feet away, also watching the proceedings with veiled interest. Dwalin had contacted him after dragging his idiot charge to the medical wing. Aside from the two of them, Oin and the idiot, no one else was in the small room. It was a part of the medical wing set aside purely for the royals and could double as a safe room if needed.

The door slid open, and Ori marched in, the princess a step beside. Dwalin saw her eyes go to Thorin, and immediately jerk away. Her face went blood red and she focused her gaze squarely on her feet, nervously wringing her hands in front of her.

Interesting. There were rumors about her lifestyle in Shire, and he distinctly remembered her cousin implying much the same the night of the wedding. Yet, going by her reaction to her own husband, he'd wonder if she'd ever seen a man up close with his shirt off, much less anything else.

Of course, going by another tack, if she hadn't by now that led to an entirely different question which, thankfully, was above his pay grade and, therefore, none of his concern.

"Ah," Oin said, stepping away from Thorin. "You must be the Princess. I'm Oin, the family doctor. A pleasure to meet you, Your Highness."

The girl's eyes flickered up toward the elderly man and the barest hint of a smile flashed across her face before vanishing again. "I'm pleased to meet you as well."

Her eyes went back to Thorin again, before darting away as she chewed on her lower lip. "I'm sorry I told on you."

"It's fine," Thorin muttered. "I'd have probably ended up here at some point today anyway."

She frowned. "Is it very bad then?"


"I'm fine." The words were barely a whisper. As she said them, Dwalin saw her shoot a confused look at Nori who, up to that point, hadn't moved from his position.

Ori must have caught the look because she jumped forward to catch Nori's hand and drag him forward. "Bilba, this is my brother, Nori. Nori, this is Bilba."

Nori gave a bright grin and swept into an exaggerated bow. "A pleasure to meet you, my Lady."

Bilba nodded. "Are you a member of the guard as well?"

"I think that would be a step down," Nori said cheerfully as he straightened. "Palace Spymaster, at your service."

The reaction was immediate, and dramatic. Bilba's eyes went wide and her face literally drained of all color. She let out a small gasp, stepped backwards, and staggered.
Thorin shoved off the edge of the bed, but Dwalin got there first, easily catching her about the arm and waist and holding her upright. Technically, he noted, Nori had been closer, but the other man had stayed where he was, studying her with a neutral expression.

"Bilba!" Ori lunged forward and caught her on the other side, helping her keep her balance. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She straightened, slowly, but Dwalin could feel her pressing against the arm he had around her. He had a strong feeling that, were it not for him, she'd have been on the other side of the room, if not out of it all together.

"Are you sure?" Thorin demanded, coming closer. "What happened?"

Bilba gave him a look that strangely reminded Dwalin of the one Fili had worn when told his father was missing, and, in a very small voice, said, "Are you going to lock me up?"

"Lock you up?" Thorin repeated blankly. "Why would I do that?"

"For getting you hurt?" She sounded on the verge of tears. She'd also started shaking, her entire body almost vibrating. She'd wrapped her arms around herself and Dwalin could see her fingers digging into her sides, creating deep grooves in the fabric of her clothing.

Thorin studied her for a few seconds, looking genuinely startled, before quietly saying, "No, you aren't going to be arrested. It was an accident, remember?"

She shrugged and focused on the ground again. "So?"

"Well, given by that display of athleticism it looks like the Prince is fine and I, therefore, have better things to do," Nori said suddenly, moving back toward the door. "We can—" he stopped himself. "It was nice meeting you, Your Highness. If there's anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask."

He left, and Ori immediately moved in closer, wrapping her hands around Bilba's forearms. "People don't get arrested for accidents, and if Thorin said it was an accident then it was."

"You don't know anything," The words were said almost under her breath, but had a hint of steel to them, almost anger. Bilba looked up and, for the briefest second, Dwalin saw a flash in her eyes before it was gone again. "You're married to the Captain of the Guard and the sister of the Spymaster?"

Ori nodded, eyes wide at the sudden change. "Sorry, I guess I should have told you that."

Bilba didn't reply. An oddly blank look fell over her face and suddenly she was about as readable as a brick wall. The shaking slowly faded, and she pulled away from Dwalin.

It was Oin who ultimately broke the silence. "I'd like to do an exam, if you don't mind, Your Highness. Just to ensure you aren't injured worse than you might think."

She shrugged again, and absently pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, eyes firmly fixed on some empty spot on the floor. "Can I borrow a phone? I need to call the bakery and let them know I won't be there."

"Thank you," Bilba said quietly. She stepped away, removing herself to the far corner of the small
Behind her, Oin cleared his throat. "Perhaps it might be best if I conducted the exam privately, without an audience?"

Thorin, who'd been watching the Princess with an odd look on his face, cut his eyes back to Oin and, after a moment, inclined his head. "That would probably be for the best."

"I'll have medication and an ice pack sent to your office," Oin said, gesturing them toward the door.

Thorin started to leave and stopped as he drew alongside Dwalin. "Keep the story I gave Kyra. The media attacks her enough without this to add to it."

"Fine." Thorin had told him, as well as Oin and Nori, what had really happened but, as he said, Dwalin saw no reason to publicize it. The girl had made a mistake and paid for it. Thorin's involvement had been of his own doing. There was no reason to drag it out any further.

Thorin vanished through the door and Dwalin gestured at Ori. "You too, let's go."

Ori frowned. "I think I should stay. She might not feel comfortable being in here alone."

"I'll be fine." Bilba had returned as Ori spoke, hands clutching Thorin's phone like it was some sort of lifeline. "I spoke to Bombur," she added, addressing Dwalin. "He said he understood and didn't think it reflected badly on me."

Dwalin shrugged, unsure as to why she was telling him that. "Send me the report after you're done," he told Oin. One of the downsides of being royalty, medical records weren't private. At least not to the Captain of the Guard. He needed to know the health of the people he was protecting and what they might, or might not, be capable of doing in the event of an emergency.

Ori showed no signs of leaving, so Dwalin grabbed her firmly by the upper arm and steered her toward the door.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Ori asked, twisting back around to address Bilba. "I can stay."

"I'll be fine." Bilba repeated. She went and pushed up to sit on the edge of the diagnostic bed as Dwalin pulled Ori out the door. The last sight he had of the girl was her sitting with her shoulders hunched around her ears and that phone still clasped between her hands. Then the doors slid shut and she was shut away behind them.

Ori wrenched her arm free from his grasp, glared at him and then, without a word, stomped away.

Dwalin sighed but didn't follow, as he caught sight of Nori lounging against the far wall of the ward, near one of the other exit doors. Grumbling under his breath, he angled in that direction and wasn't surprised when the spymaster fell in alongside him as they left the room.

"Ori seems displeased with you," Nori said cheerfully.

"She'll get over it," Dwalin grumbled.

Nori made a vague noise that could have meant anything at all, or nothing, and then lapsed into silence until the two of them had reached Dwalin's office. The second they were inside, he shut the door, spun to face him and asked, "So, did she have that reaction when she learned who you were?"

Dwalin didn't have to ask who Nori was talking about. He leaned back against the front of his desk
and crossed his arms over his chest. "No."

"So just me then?" Nori clasped his hands behind his back and rocked up on his toes. "Interesting. Have you ever met Shire's spymaster?"

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't aware it had one."

"It certainly has one," Nori said, still sounding as cheerful as ever. "He just doesn't get out much, or so the rumors go. Mostly a paper pusher, acts more like a glorified Captain of the Guard than a spymaster."

"You think otherwise?" Dwalin asked, refusing to rise to Nori's attempt to bait him. He reached behind him as he spoke and picked up a ceremonial dagger resting on a small stand on his desk. Ori had given it to him as an anniversary present and he'd taken to absently playing with it when he was bored.

"One never knows." Nori spun on his heel and was at the door in a few quick steps. "It is interesting, though, don't you think? That the Shire princess would show such terror over a spymaster?"

"Maybe someone filled her head with terrifying stories about them." Nori tended to have a one-track mind, quick to reach conclusions that, granted, were more often right than not. Still, it was never a bad thing to look at all avenues. "Or perhaps it's a spymaster from another kingdom she's scared of, or one no longer in service." For all they knew she'd seen a movie that had traumatized her.

"Perhaps." Nori pulled the door open and paused halfway out. "In any event, it will be quite interesting to find out, won't it?"

Dwalin replaced the knife behind him with a sigh. "You could always just ask her."

"I could," Nori agreed, "but I doubt she'd answer and, besides, where would be the fun in that?"

With that, and an entirely unneeded flourish, he proceeded to shut the door and leave Dwalin blessedly alone in his office.

At least until the next time Nori got ahold of a proverbial bone, or Ori got irritated with him, or Thorin or one of the other idiots in the royal family did something to nearly get themselves killed.

Really, he was beginning to think he should have followed his grandfather's footsteps and become a stone mason. At the time he'd thought the job boring but, as time progressed, he had to admit - boring had its appeals.
Chapter 28

Bilba walked quickly down the hall, making sure she kept her head up and arms by her side. In Shire, she'd had the habit of scurrying, as her aunt termed it; head down, shoulders hunched, and arms crossed over her torso.

"Really," her aunt's voice sounded in her head, as clearly as if she were right there. "One would think you were a rodent rather than a person, much less a princess. It's little wonder your parents rarely let you outside."

That hadn't been true at all, Bilba thought, petulantly saying in her mind what she'd never dared say out loud. She'd liked staying home. She'd had her books and her imagination to keep her company. She'd had friends back then and they'd often come over to hang out with her, playing in her room or running about the backyard.

Things had been much easier when her parents had been alive. Back when being a princess had been little more than a technicality, and when a checkup hadn't led to a doctor looking at her like she'd sprouted a second head.

She bit back a sigh. Oin hadn't asked her anything, but she'd seen the look on his face when he'd looked over her scans. She'd tried to insist she didn't need them, but he'd been adamant about checking for possible internal bleeding or hairline fractures.

She wasn't dumb enough to refuse. Doing so in Shire would have been an act of defiance and punished accordingly. She didn't know what would happen in Erebor and didn't particularly want to find out.

Her rooms neared and she quickened her step, eager to shut herself back up inside where she didn't constantly feel like everyone's eyes were on her. Not that, now, it was a feeling. Every person she passed, be it servant, guard or someone in fancier dress, was looking at her as they passed by. Some looked amused, others looked and then immediately jerked their eyes away, and still others looked openly aghast.

It was downright irritating. Bilba knew the media was still excoriating her on a semi-regular basis. She was the favorite topic of discussion on many a talk show, but one would think the vitriol would have died down a little by now. Even if her grandfather was behind the constant fanning of the flames, scattering new rumors like leaves in autumn, it had to settle eventually, right? Surely there were other newsworthy events happening...somewhere?

Besides, all the stuff about her was just rumor, aside from the tantrum she'd thrown in Shire, and the money she'd "supposedly" spent all in a single week. She hadn't done anything new since she'd been in Erebor. Hopefully they'd notice that, eventually.

She rounded a corner at a near jog, and bit back a groan of dismay at the sight of a woman, probably a couple years younger than her, leaning against the wall near her doorway. She straightened when she saw Bilba and dropped into a deep curtsey. "Pleased to meet you, Your Highness."

"I'm sorry," Bilba said, guardedly. "Do I know you?"
"Oh," the girl flushed, and looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. My name is Cecilia, but most people call me Cici. I'm your personal maid."

Bilba blinked in surprise. "Oh." She hesitated, and her mind went to Beatrice's maid, a snotty older woman who tended to sneer and look down her nose any time Bilba was near. She really didn't feel like putting up with that, especially not when the girl would undoubtedly report on every little thing Bilba said and did. It was bad enough having to worry about being perfect in public, having to worry in private would simply be too much. "I'm sorry. I'm pretty used to taking care of myself. I don't think I need a maid."

Cici frowned, eyes darting down Bilba's figure for a brief second before she said, "Begging your pardon, Your Highness, but I think you do."

What? With a frown of her own, Biba looked down, planning to question what it was that Cici thought was so wrong about her choice of -- her -- robe.

Bilba's mind shut down. Literally shut down and all she could do was stare in abject horror at the fluffy white robe and slippers she'd apparently been prancing about the palace in.

"Oh." The word escaped her in a huff as if she'd been punched in the stomach and had all the air driven out of her.

How -- how had that happened? How had she not noticed?

She'd been so upset about the whole nearly dying thing and then Thorin getting hurt and then he'd wanted to talk and she'd been worried about him being injured worse than he was letting on and then there'd been the doctor and realization that Erebor had a damn Spymaster which, in retrospect, of course they did but still and then the doctor had made her nervous because she didn't know anything about him or what he wanted and then --

Why, in Yavanna's name, had no one said anything?!!

Ori, Dwalin, Thorin. No one had said a single word about her wandering about the palace in a freaking robe.

Her heart began to race, and she felt short of breath. The looks people had been throwing at her suddenly made sense, and she cringed at the thought of the new rumors that would soon be floating about. Yavanna, her grandfather didn't need to create anything, she was perfectly capable of doing it to herself.

"Are you feeling all right, Your Highness?" Cici asked. She stepped forward and raised a hand as if to help her, only to stop and draw it back. "Perhaps we should go inside, and you can sit down?"

Right, because having an emotional breakdown in the corridor was the last thing she needed on the heels of nearly killing the heir to the throne and running around half naked.

She nodded shakily at Cici, who opened the door into her rooms. Bilba hurried inside, only to jerk to a nervous stop. "Is Thorin here?" she whispered.

Cici paused in the midst of closing the door. "The Prince?" She looked around. "I don't think so, Your Highness."

Bilba's shoulders slumped in relief, before she went and almost collapsed on the couch, hands
propped on her knees so she could cradle her head in them. "I just keep screwing up," she muttered.

She felt movement and then sensed Cici standing next to her. "It's all right, Your Highness," she said softly. "I doubt anyone even noticed. Princess Dis goes around in her robe all the time, and I've even seen Prince Frerin running about in his swim trunks."

The way she said it implied she strongly approved of the latter.

Bilba chuckled but didn't feel much better. She wasn't Dis or Frerin. They had impeccable characters from everything she'd heard, and no one behind the scenes working to tear them down simply because they could. "Has Thorin ever gone around like that?"

"Oh, no!" Cici said, sounding shocked at the very thought. "He would never! He's always in a suit and all majestic looking."

Bilba lifted her head enough to look at the girl and raised an eyebrow. "Majestic?"

Cici's eyes went wide and she lifted her hands to wave frantically. "That's not what I meant! I just meant that he's -- um --"

"He is rather majestic looking," Bilba agreed softly, face heating at the memory of Thorin's naked chest rushing back in. He was...very nice looking indeed. She let out a huff. "Others may do what they want, but I have to set the same example Thorin does, and he doesn't run around in a robe or swim trunks."

Cici narrowed her eyes in thought and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well," she said finally, "now that you've got me, and you've told me what you want, you won't have to worry about it anymore. Come on," she reached forward and flapped a hand at her, trying to get Bilba to get up without touching her. "Let's go see what you've got to wear today."

"But--" Bilba gestured toward the door.

Cici started to roll her eyes, only to stop midroll with a guilty expression. "What's done is done, Your Highness, that's what my mother always says."

Easy for her to say, Bilba thought dourly. She doubted the other girl risked being beaten or locked inside towers for a misstep, intentional or not.

"You apologize if you need to," Cici continued, "and then move on. I don't think you want to apologize to everyone who saw you, especially since I'm guessing a lot of them didn't mind."

She gave a waggle of her eyebrows as she said the last and Bilba frowned in confusion. Cici was still flapping at her, however, so she obediently got up and started toward her room. "You don't have to keep calling me, Your Highness, you know," she said absently. "You can call me, Bilba." She'd never been called by any title in Shire, and couldn't help a near flinch at it now, half expecting one of her relatives to show up and start berating her for putting on airs.

Cici made a strangled sound. "Oh, that wouldn't be proper at all, Your Highness! You're the Crown Princess of Erebor, not some...some...other person!"

Bilba snorted. She pushed open her bedroom door and immediately heard a loud yowl of complaint from the small cat, which was currently standing in front of the balcony doors and yelling to be let out.

"Really?" Bilba asked in exasperation. "You were happy to be in here earlier!"
"Is that your cat?" Cici darted forward and tried to scoop up the cat, but it complained and squirmed free from her arms, though politely, Bilba noted, and without using its claws.

"She hangs out on the beach below," Bilba answered. "I don't know who owns her."

The weather looked much nicer, and the surf no longer seemed to be coming in as far, but it was still certainly coming in farther than normal and looked angrier than she was used to seeing. "I don't know if I should let her out or not."

"If she spends time down there already she already knows what to watch out for," Cici said, coming closer. "She probably just wants to lie on your balcony in the sun."

There was a solid wedge of sunlight already evident on the concrete as the sun made its way across the sky. Bilba grabbed the handles and pushed the doors open. A gust of cold, but not bitterly so for once, air rushed in along with the smell and roar of the surf.

The cat immediately stuck its tail straight up, bent over in a hook at the top, and pranced out; where she did, indeed, settle down in the sun to gaze out serenely over the ocean.

Bilba shook her head and pulled the doors closed to cut down on the noise but left a small crack in case the cat wanted to come back inside. Cici had already gone to throw open the doors of her wardrobe so Bilba took a hesitant seat on the edge of her bed, nervously tangling her fingers in the fabric of her robe where it was bunched over her knees.

Cici spun around slowly and gave her an appraising. "Okay," she said, tone strangely neutral. "Where's the rest of it?"

"What do you mean?" Bilba asked in confusion. She'd spent a lot of time, and money, in Shire working on her wardrobe and had been quite proud of the results. "That's it."

Cici's left eye twitched, and her hands seemed to convulsively clench and open again. "Okay," she said breathless after a second, spinning back around. "We can work with this, at least until we get Dori in here to see you."

"Dori?" Bilba asked.

"Royal tailor." Cici's voice was muffled as she'd practically climbed into the wardrobe, as if hoping there might be a second row of clothing hiding behind the first. "He can set you up with a proper wardrobe."

Bilba tried not to bristle at the unintended insult. "I don't know if Thorin will like that," she hedged. The man had literally just explained his reluctance to give her access to any sort of money, and now she was supposed to get an entirely new wardrobe? Especially when she'd told him she'd bought one in Shire? She bit back a sigh. He would take back the stipend before she even had a chance to truly have it.

"Don't worry about it," Cici called back. "Everyone will assume anything that you wear is Dori's creation, and he takes such things very seriously. If the prince has a problem with it, Dori will just sic Ori on him, or on the Guard Captain which is kind of the same thing."

"Ori?" Bilba remembered Ori previously mentioning her brothers and guessed, "is Dori her brother?"

"Yep!" Cici whirled around again, hands now holding a bundle of clothes. "Okay, let's see what we can do."
Bilba raised an eyebrow, but obediently got up to slide her robe off, grateful that, even in her absentmindedness and panic, she'd at least remembered to put her undergarments on under the robe. She twisted to toss the robe on the bed, only to spin back at Cici's horrified gasp. "What?"

Eyes wide and mouth gaping slightly, Cici pointed to Bilba's side. "Your Highness, what on earth happened?"

"What?" Bilba followed her gaze and felt her own eyes widen at the sight of mottled bruising standing in stark relief along her side and stomach, left arm and upper part of her left thigh. She'd never really bothered to look down at herself in the medical ward and, as for any pain, she'd just kind of...shunted it off to the back of her mind after a while. She'd gotten used to doing that and, while it may have been a year or two since she'd been in that sort of pain, it had been almost second nature to get back in the mindset.

She mentally kicked herself for not being more careful. "I sort of slipped on the rocks leading down to the beach." She pointed toward the balcony doors and saw Cici's eyes widen even further, probably thinking of the ferocity of the surf. "I actually just got back from having Oin check me out. He said it looks a lot worse than it actually is."

Cici frowned. "You saw Oin?"

Bilba nodded, all the while cursing herself inside her own head. Word was going to get out that Thorin was hurt. The last thing she wanted was for word to get out that she'd been hurt too. People would start drawing conclusions, and they rarely seemed to draw good ones, especially regarding her. "Would it be too much to ask you not to say anything?" she asked. "I don't want anyone to know how clumsy I was, or stupid. Shire is landlocked, and I just never realized the surf came in like that after a storm."

"Oh." Cici's eyes narrowed. "You really did tell Oin about it?"

"I did." Bilba had no doubt the other girl would probably report it anyway. Thorin had certainly been aware of every little damn thing she did so someone was certainly reporting. "I didn't try to keep it to myself." Mainly because Thorin had known about it and she'd been forced to rat him out, leading to him ratting her out in turn, but, whatever.

"Okay." Cici gave her a bright smile. "My lips are sealed, Your Highness."

Bilba doubted that, but time would tell. If word did get out, it could just add to the ever-growing spate of rumors about her, ranging from her reported endless parade of lovers to Kili and Fili's friend believing she had horns and ate children.

Admittedly, that last was one of the odder rumors. Cici was standing in front of her expectantly, so Bilba focused on where she was and allowed the younger woman to help her get dressed.

She'd chosen a pair of skinny jeans with a light dusting of sparkling crystals on the back pockets and lower legs. The top was a deep green, form fitting velvet piece with bell sleeves and an off the shoulder neckline. Said collar, the edges of the sleeves, and the hem were lined with a lovely, honey colored fur that had drawn Bilba to it to begin with. She had to grit her teeth as she pulled the clothing on over her bruised side and leg, but simply gave a thin smile of reassurance at Cici when the other girl looked worried.

After that was done, Cici urged her into her chair at her vanity and proceeded to brush out and fix
her hair in a simple style that left it falling in loose waves over one shoulder and nearly down to her waist. She put two gold barrettes on the other side to hold the look in place, shaped to look like roses complete with delicate chains. They were more pretty than functional, but Bilba had loved them when she'd seen them in the store window and bought them impulsively. They came with a matching necklace and earrings that Cici quickly found and gave her to put on.

Once that was all done, Cici dug through the drawer to the vanity until she finally came up with Bilba's admittedly paltry makeup bag. The sight of it caused another eye twitch, and a long-suffering sigh but Cici didn't comment. Instead she simply came over and, faster than Bilba could ever have done, applied foundation, blush and lipstick. She then set out the mascara, eyeliner and an eyeshadow palette that Rosie had bought her once and Bilba had never used.

"I don't know," Bilba said with a frown. "I don't want to overdo it."

"Trust me," Cici said confidently. "It won't be too much. You'll look great!"

"If you say so." Bilba sat quietly until the other girl was done, doing her best to not blink when told to and to hold still.

"There!" Cici straightened and moved out of the way. "What do you think?"

Rather than go to the vanity, and the smaller mirror over the desk, Bilba headed toward the bathroom and the full-length mirror on one of the walls. She paused in front of it and blinked in surprise.

She didn't recognize herself.

The shirt and jeans emphasized curves she hadn't realized she had, while the hairstyle made her look more sophisticated than...well, ever. As promised, the makeup wasn't overdone, the most striking part being the light brown eyeshadow and eyeliner that made the blue of her eyes stand out.

"You know," her aunt's snide voice spoke in her mind, "Belladonna was quite beautiful. It's a wonder someone like you could have come from someone like. You look nothing like her."

A lie, Bilba thought. She might not have the looks her mother had, but she damn well did look like her. Her vision began to blur, and she clenched her hands into fists, not wanting to ruin the hard work Cici had done.

"I'll never be able to replicate this," she said, voice slightly shaky.

"You don't have to," Cici said happily from where she stood in the doorway. "That's why you have me. And, it'll be even better once we get Dori to create a bigger wardrobe for you." She frowned.

"If Thorin says it's okay." Bilba's emotions were settling again and she turned to see Cici holding out a pair of wedge sandals. "He might decide I have enough clothes."

"I think when he sees you, he'll decide you can have whatever you want," Cici replied. She tried to kneel down as if to put Bilba's shoes on for her, but Bilba stopped her and did it herself, much to the other girl's exasperation.

Bilba snorted in response to Cici's words. Thorin was obsessed with Kyra. Bilba was just the princess who lived in the other half of his suite and made spending time with his ex-fiancée awkward.

Thinking about Kyra made her falter, and she frowned critically at her reflection. "Do you think I look too young?"
Cici frowned in confusion. "You are young, though, right? You're like twenty, aren't you?"

"Yes," Bilba agreed. She frowned at her reflection. "I tend to get compared to Kyra a lot in the news, and usually get found wanting. One thing is I'm apparently far too young to be Crown Princess. They say Kyra would have been better because she's more experienced and mature."

She tensed as she spoke, half expecting Cici to turn on her simply from the mention of Kyra's name. Instead, the girl rolled her eyes and made a scoffing sound. "I think people should realize how young you are and start cutting you some slack." She put her hands on her hips and mock glared at Bilba. She'd stopped using "Your Highness" some time ago and had slowly become more and more familiar despite her insistence to the contrary. "Besides, my mother says you shouldn't waste your time trying to be what someone else wants you to be. Be yourself, and they can just deal with it. It's not like they're changing for you, after all, are they?"

"I suppose," Bilba agreed absently. She wondered if her own mother would have given her so much advice had she lived. Maybe.

A loud knock suddenly sounded from the main door of the suite, and she jumped in surprise. Cici stepped a few feet toward it. "I can answer it for you, if you like."

Bilba nodded. "Please do."

Cici trotted out into the living room and Bilba followed slowly. Her stomach was clenching, and she clasped her hands together in front of her. She was being forced to interact with people more in this one morning than she had the entire month she'd been there, and it was making her anxious. The more she interacted, the greater the risk of her screwing up (honestly, just look at how much she'd managed to mess up already) and the higher the risk of them punishing her.

She didn't understand why they hadn't already, but she wasn't stupid enough to let her guard down. Just because they hadn't done anything to her didn't mean they wouldn't.

She made it into the living room just as Cici opened the door. Standing on the other side was the elderly man she'd met when first arriving in Erebor. Next to him stood a middle-aged man with short, gray hair, and an average build.

"Ah, Your Highness," the elderly man said, bowing regally. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

Bilba sent a frantic, instinctive look toward Cici, who immediately mouthed "Balin" to her. Balin, that was right.

"It's a pleasure to see you again as well, Balin," Bilba said, cringing slightly at using his given name and potentially missing a title of some sort.

"Thorin asked me to come speak with you about your schedule and other palace matters," Balin said, straightening, "and to also introduce you to your own personal steward."

Thorin had mentioned that, but she'd been kind of hoping he hadn't meant it or planned to do it later...and by later she meant never.

Balin indicated the other man as he mentioned the part about her own steward and he, in turned, immediately bowed.
"Your Highness. My name is Soren. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"You as well," Bilba answered. "Please come in."

"I'll prepare some refreshments," Cici said, turning toward the kitchen. Bilba shot her a look of gratitude and went to take a seat on the couch. Once there she folded her hands quietly on her lap and prepared to listen to whatever Balin had to say.

Undoubtedly it would have to do with the expectations on her as the Crown Princess, a job she was afraid she was woefully inadequate to fulfill. Mostly likely they would see that soon enough and stop requiring her to go out in public. Then she could just go back to her room again and resume the way things had been, when she'd been able to just watch movies with Rosie and spend time on the beach and be left alone.

Of course, that was assuming they didn't try to punish her for her failure to be a proper princess. Her gut clenched even harder inside her at the thought. She just...needed to figure out a way to get the best of both worlds. Not screw up so badly that they would want to lock her away, but make it clear as quickly as possible that she was not cut out to be a princess.

Then they'd just...leave her alone. Thorin could go back to whatever he was doing with Kyra, Ori could find someone else to befriend, and Nori could forget she'd ever caught his notice and turn his attentions elsewhere. It was a good plan, she just...had to figure out how to get there.

Somehow.
Chapter 29

Bilba listened to Balin and hoped desperately her eyes weren't as wide as they felt. She was sitting rigidly, hands clasped tightly in her lap. Cici had placed a bowl of fruit and other snacks on the table, but her stomach was churning too much to even consider trying to eat any of it.

"You want me to what?" she asked, voice tight.

"It would only be a few interviews," Balin explained, as if that made it any better, "and only on the major stations. I think that part of the problem we're having is no one has really seen or met you."

"And so you think going on the news will help?" Bilba asked. Her voice sounded high pitched even to her and she struggled to calm herself down. "They'll eviscerate me."

"Thorin will appear with you, of course," Balin said quickly, trying to appease her. "He is quite capable of handling the media, and his presence will make it perfectly clear that the royal family has accepted you and the marriage."

Bilba resisted the urge to laugh, largely because she was worried it might sounder borderline hysterical. She hadn't met the royal family yet, and Thorin had barely started to acknowledge her existence, much less accept her.

In fact, most of their interactions so far had been in the form of arguments, interrogations and a single apology. The talk earlier been...all right but one conversation did not a relationship make, and it certainly didn't mean he now liked her.

For all she knew, he was already regretting dragging her out of the ocean's grip. It would have been much easier if he'd just ignored her and let the ocean sweep her away. She'd be gone, he'd be free to marry Kyra, and everyone would be happy wouldn't they?

The bitterness of her own thoughts startled her, and she frowned. She didn't want to become bitter. She'd given up a lot by coming over here, and some of it...was probably her own fault. She'd chosen to shut herself away in her room after all, where it'd be only natural for her to stew in resentment. Thorin and Kyra chatting and giggling on the other side of her door hadn't helped.

But she didn't want to be bitter. She'd gotten out and had a job and all that had felt really good, better than she'd thought it would, and as much as she was tempted to try and retreat back into her room in the hopes that Thorin would forget about her again...she didn't think she could.

She didn't think she wanted to. It'd just allow more resentment to take root.

"Now," Balin sat back and clapped his hands on his thighs. Bilba jumped in surprise and he gave her an apologetic look. "Aside from all that, I mainly stopped by to introduce you to your steward, and to answer any questions you might have."

"I need a phone," Bilba blurted before she could talk herself out of it. Her stomach twisted and she tried to breathe slowly in hopes of settling her nerves. The thought of getting out where people would notice her, and where she'd run the risk of pissing someone off and being punished in Yavanna only knew what way was terrifying. The only thought more terrifying was the idea of rotting in her room, slowly changing into a bitter, hateful old woman who only had the four walls of her room to look forward to for the rest of her life. "Thorin loaned me his, but I need one of my own. Oh, and I want to go to college, and I kind of have a job."
The last was said in a whisper that trailed off at the end before she snapped her mouth closed and sat gingerly on the edge of the couch. She was shaking and felt physically ill. The more she thought of it the more she wanted out, out of her room, out of the palace, out of the self-imposed exile she'd put herself into that was little better than the tower her grandfather so enjoyed locking her in.

She wanted out.

She chewed on her lower lip and nervously wrung her hands together. She didn't mention the stipend Thorin said she could have, or the wardrobe Cici wanted her to get. She didn't want to sound grasping with the first, and wanted to make sure Thorin would be okay with the second.

And she wanted to start slow, kind of. Easing her toes into the shallow end rather than do something stupid like leap straight into the deep end. She was on thin ice already, no matter how Thorin might have behaved. She'd nearly gotten him killed, and the longer he was in pain the more short-tempered he'd get and the less likely he'd be to let pissing him off slide.

So... slow, and careful and maybe, just maybe, she'd find the right places to step that wouldn't result in her triggering something awful.

Balin and Soren were both staring at her like she'd sprouted a second head and she tensed even farther. They couldn't hit her, right? Sure, some of the guards in Shire had hit her a time or two, and they'd certainly been unnecessarily cruel, but it hadn't been a common thing. Not like with her grandfather.

"A... job," Balin said finally. He had that look on his face, and quality to his voice, that people got when they were trying to be polite and neutral in the face of pure insanity. "...where?"

"At a bakery in town." She didn't mention how she'd gotten to and from said bakery. If they wanted to know that they could ask Thorin, or Dwalin, or that creepy spymaster.

She suppressed a shudder at the thought of Ori's brother. Thinking of him made her think of Shire's spymaster and she'd...really rather not. She knew it wasn't possible, but part of her was convinced just the act of thinking about him would summon him, like an imp crawling out from under a rock.

Balin was still staring at her while, next to him, Soren was keeping his features carefully schooled in what he probably hoped was a neutral expression. Neither looked particularly angry and Bilba relaxed fractionally.

"It might convince everyone I'm not such a monster," she said hopefully, rushing to try and prove her case. "You know, if they see me doing normal things. It'd make the monarchy more down to earth, too, maybe."

And it'd give her a source of income that the crown didn't control and a reason to be out of the palace. Thorin said no more sneaking out, he hadn't said anything about what she could or could not do once already out. She still really wanted to go find that ballet company. It had been a month since she'd done any dancing at all and she was in dire need of practice.

"I'll take it under advisement," Balin said, finally finding his tongue.

He used that tone as he spoke, and Bilba felt a flash of irritation overtaking the nerves that had been rattling her. She hated that tone. It was a placating tone, one that meant what she wanted had already been shuffled off to a mental recycling bin never to be seen or heard from again.

She wanted out damn it, and having it dangled in front of her only to now have it possibly taken away again was making her angry. Probably stupid too, but certainly angry.
"I'd prefer it if you did more than take it under advisement," she said, voice cool. "As well as the other things I mentioned. I need to get started on preparing for college immediately if I want to be ready for the next semester. That leaves little time for 'advisement'. Thorin said I could." She threw the last in as an afterthought, and mentally kicked herself for not having used his name to begin with. He had said she could, so he couldn't get angry that she'd used his name if they asked. Right?

She heard a quiet snort from Cici who stood somewhere behind her. Soren looked surprised, while Balin merely looked quietly amused.

"My apologies, Your Highness," he said. "Of course. I'll look into it immediately."

By which he probably meant he'd talk to Thorin, but it was better than nothing. Hopefully, Thorin would still be in a relatively good mood. She made a mental note to maybe take him a cup of hot chocolate and more pain killers later. The more comfortable he was, the more likely to still say yes to her going to college.

"What about a tour?" Cici suddenly blurted.

Bilba twisted in her seat to look at the other girl. "A what?"

"A tour." Cici had gone bright red as if realizing she'd spoken out of turn but pressed on. "About the palace, I mean. You were talking about people not having seen or met her," this was addressed to Balin even though Cici's eyes never left Bilba, "and I was thinking no one around the palace has really seen or met her either. Might as well start there, right?"

"That's a very good point," Balin said slowly. "Make a good impression and it will make the rounds in the social circles, smoothing your way into the interviews."

"Which will then smooth my way into the job at the bakery?" Bilba asked.

At this, Balin smiled, openly amused. "As well as your debut onto the college campus."

Bilba blinked in surprise, and then nodded. She honestly hadn't given much thought to her reception at the college given the current public sentiment toward her. She'd just wanted to go to class.

She nodded and took a shaky breath. "All right, when should we do the tour?"

Balin shrugged. "Why not now?"

Bilba just barely managed not to gape at him. Her palms started to sweat and her breathing increased. Right then? Prance through the palace in broad daylight, with everyone's eyes on her, having to meet and possibly speak to total strangers?

"You'll have to do it at some point," her internal voice informed her. It wasn't wrong. She would have to, if she wanted to make thing easier on herself. If she wanted to go to college and get to go to her job in the bakery and have a life here.

And it would be here, wouldn't it? What else did she have? Even if there were some way out of this marriage, there was no way she could go back to the Shire. She could probably go to Gondor if she truly wished, but then what? Become dependent on Arwen? She wouldn't be able to get a normal job, not with the attention that would follow her. It was one thing to be a random unwanted princess, quite another to be the ex-Crown Princess of Erebor. There'd been massive publicity, and there was no way of putting that back in the proverbial bottle. She could never return to obscurity, no matter how much she might want it.
Which meant, her best bet was to stay here and make the most of it, and since the thought of languishing in her room was no longer attractive that meant getting out here and trying to build a life here.

Even if the mere thought was terrifying and put her at the mercy of people whose temperaments and personalities and agendas were still mysteries to her.

She wanted to get out, and... what better way to start than with a tour of her new home?

Bilba pasted a fake smile on her face and stood. Balin and Soren both lunged to theirs, so fast it caused her to jump a bit in surprise.

"All right," she said with false gaiety. "Let's go on a tour."

***

She expected Soren and Cici to accompany them, but both seemed to almost dissipate into thin air shortly after Balin offered her his arm. Rude. She doubted they'd have dared do that if it had been Thorin instead of her.

Bilba slid Thorin's phone into her back pocket, unwilling to risk something happening to it if left alone, and then wrapped her hand around Balin's bicep to allow him to escort her.

As they faced the door, she took another deep breath and ran her free hand down her shirt as if it could somehow magically calm her jangling nerves.

Balin lightly patted her hand where it was curled around his arm. "It'll be all right, Your Highness."

"Easy for you to say," Bilba muttered. "I imagine they like you."

He chuckled. "And they'll like you too. They just need to get the chance to meet you."

Bilba nodded, and then gave him a side glance. "You won't let me embarrass myself too badly, will you?"

"Of course not." He patted her hand again and then reached to open the door. "You just have to trust me, Your Highness."

Bilba resisted the urge to snort in a very un-lady like manner. Trust was not something she simply gave, to anyone. At the moment there were probably three people she'd say she trusted and not one of them was in Erebor.

Balin opened the door and Bilba forced herself to stand straight, chin up, eyes ahead, smile but not so little that she'd look bored or so much that she'd look crazy.

Time to be the Crown Princess.

***

So, as it turned out, the Ereboran palace was massive.

Shire palace was little more than a manor house in comparison. Even the sizes of the various rooms were incredible. She'd known her rooms were large, of course, but hadn't realized that was the standard.

Beatrice's room would be little more than a walk-in closet here, and the thought most definitely did
not give her a burst of gleeful satisfaction.

"I'm going to need a map," she said after the fourth or fifth meeting room she was shown. Apparently, there were different rooms for different ranks, or sorts of meetings, and the room you were put in could tell you exactly what the royal family thought of you and whatever it was you were there about.

Balin chuckled. "Your steward will be able to help you find your way, as will your security."

Bilba frowned. "I'm going to have security inside the palace?"

Balin nodded. "You will. All the members of the royal family do, except for Thorin who has Dwalin."

"Why is he different?" Bilba asked. She'd begun to calm as they went from room to room. Nothing too terrible had happened, and she found she was genuinely interested in the history Balin told her as they traveled from place to place.

"Because he's stubborn and refuses to listen to reason," Balin said dryly. He'd guided her into yet another waiting room and, as his words registered, she looked at him in surprise, only to see him looking perfectly serene and innocent.

Bilba gave a small laugh. "I've been told the same thing from time to time."

He led her back into the hall, where they ran into yet another Lord whose name she'd never remember. They'd already met several, the King's various advisors or other government officials or simply bored nobles wandering about the castle in hopes of forging new alliances and furthering their own power.

With each, Bilba had done her best to smile and be gracious and charming. Balin, surprisingly, had stayed true to his word and had gently steered the conversation when needed, or even more gently managed to convey something she'd needed to say or do without giving away to the other party that he was doing so.

As the current noble wandered off, she took a breath and asked Balin in a whisper, "How am I doing?"

"Splendidly." He led her down the grand staircase to the main level and Bilba felt her excitement increase. She'd seen the gardens several times from a distance but hadn't yet had the chance to explore them.

Rather than take her to the doors, however, Balin led her to a large waiting room to one side where a second massive staircase wound down below ground level. There was an elevator on the far side of the room that he pointed out as leading to an underground garage where the palace fleet was located. Bilba was half worried he planned to take her there but, instead, he led her down the stairs.

She knew at once that the level they emerged on was a "show" level, designed to impress, which was saying something given how impressive the entire palace was. The floors were all carpeted in plush carpet with expensive, rugs over top. Alcoves built into the walls held statues of past Ereborean royalty, while tapestries hung between them depicted various important moments from the country's past.

There were portraits as well. She'd seen several on the other floors, but these were only of the current family, individual and group pairings with them in their finery and posed perfectly, gazing out into the middle distance, the perfect example of stodgy royalty.
She was mildly surprised there wasn't a portrait of Kyra up there. The media carried on endlessly about how the woman was family and had been there forever and so on and so forth.

Bilba grimaced and pulled her mind away from the uncharitable thoughts. No bitterness, she reminded herself firmly. Regardless of how she felt about Thorin's continued treatment of his ex-fiancée, and Kyra's acceptance of said treatment, it didn't change the fact that they both had suffered a great deal in this whole thing.

She should try to have sympathy, even considering how the media was using Kyra and Thorin's continued relationship to mock her endlessly and rip her into bloody little shreds. She'd heard it all, how Thorin was clearly the victim and Bilba must just be a frigid shrew to have driven him to take comfort in the arms of his flawless and entirely perfect childhood friend and ex-fiancée.

She scowled. Sympathy, she reminded herself. Must try, really, really, really hard.

She sighed and pulled her eyes away from a portrait depicting Thorin alongside a young woman and man. His siblings. She hadn't met them yet but had seen pictures. Fili and Kili were the sons of the sister. She couldn't remember what had happened to the boys' father and hadn't seen a portrait of him, not that she necessarily would have recognized one. She'd probably come across a picture somewhere online but had been so overwhelmed by everything it was a wonder she remembered anything at all.

Balin led her to an open set of double doors, one of only two sets of doors in the entire corridor. The second lay at the far end of the hall, huge and carved with images she couldn't make out, and buttressed by two, enormous statues of what she guessed were ancient kings.

The double doors they'd stopped in front of were simple and unassuming. Over the top of them hung a rolled-up tapestry that could be lowered to hide them from view entirely if wanted.

As they walked in, Bilba slowed to a stop, eyes wide at the sight of the largest library she'd ever seen. It seemed to go on for miles, rows upon rows of bookcases, each one crammed full of every size, shape and color of book. There was a second floor with even more books and a winding, wrought iron staircase leading up to it.

Releasing Balin's arm, Bilba moved in a few feet further. Oak tables were set out at intervals, many with people seated at them pouring over stacks of books. Others were up on long ladders on wheels, getting books from shelves or putting them back.

"The library is open for public use," Balin said, coming up beside her, "so long as the visiting patron has a pass. Many of those who use it are from the local college."

Bilba imagined the required pass came along with a very extensive background check. "Does the royal family use it often?"

Balin nodded. "The days and times it's open for public use are limited. The rest of the time it's available to the members of the royal family and the court."

As he spoke, Bilba noticed a few of the people, who she now saw were indeed her own age, beginning to catch sight of her. A low whispering started as her presence began to draw more attention and she tensed, suddenly aware of just how isolated she was. She doubted anyone would outright attack her in the palace library, but there was no way to stop anyone from vocally expressing their views, and she seriously doubted Balin would be much of an intimidation factor.

Even so, she took a step back toward him as her eyes moved over the room. Several more people
had appeared from behind and around bookcases so that her presence was beginning to draw a small
crowd.

"Perhaps we should leave," she said to Balin. "We can always return later."

He didn't seem all that concerned by the crowd but obediently offered his arm again. "Of course,
Your Highness. There's still one more room I want to show you, and then the gardens if you like."

Bilba did want to see the gardens so she nodded and allowed him to lead her out of the room. She'd
have to ask later what the times and days the library was closed so she could return.

As they left she couldn't help but stare at the books again, hoping to see a few titles. As they passed
the last stack, she looked down and was startled to catch a glimpse of someone who looked like Ori
at the far end, curled up in a plush looking armchair, book open on her lap and more scattered around
her.

Then they were past and back into the hallway. Bilba was half concerned they would be followed
but, as they headed toward the door at the end, the corridor behind them remained empty.

"Who are my security going to be?" she asked. "Gareth and Cerys don't live in the palace."

"They will soon," Balin said. "They've been finalizing the sale of their home so they can move into a
suite here in the palace. Once settled, they'll start the process of setting up a full team for you."

Bilba stopped dead in her tracks. "But they said they didn't want to live here. They liked it on the
outside."

Balin nodded. "Yes, but they also understand the needs of their new assignment, and that living apart
from you simply isn't feasible." He must have read something in her eyes because he patted her hand
again and said reassuringly, "They were chosen because they're the best, but they were not required
to take the assignment. They're doing it because they want to."

Bilba had to wonder about that. They had been very clear about how much they loved living in the
city and a suite of rooms, no matter how nice, was a far cry from a large house in the city. Had they
really agreed, or had it been more of an order posed in the form of a suggestion?

If it had been the latter, then it was quite likely she was going to end up with a security team, or leads
at least, that resented her. That in addition to Ori who was married to the Captain of the Guard and
the sister of the Spymaster and --

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion at Balin. "Are you related to anyone here in the palace?"

He nodded. "Dwalin is my brother, which of course makes Ori--

related?"

Balin chuckled. "Not everyone."

They'd reached the doors at the end of the hall. Before she could comment further he flung them
open, and Bilba promptly forgot everything she'd been thinking about.

She slowly stepped through the doors onto a marble landing that overlooked the most stunning
ballroom she'd ever seen. It was three times the size of the one in Shire, at least, with an enormous,
black granite dance floor so polished she could see her reflection in it when she leaned over the
bannister.

The landing had velvet runners that led to either side of the landing where it split into two staircases that slowly wound down until they joined into one, grand staircase leading to the floor itself.

Bilba rested her hand on the bannister, which was gold and designed to look like vines and leaves, complete with what appeared to be glittering gemstones standing in for flowers, and slowly made her way down to the floor.

Here the Durin family crest was engraved in gold in the very center of the room, surrounded by the black granite that gave it the appearance of floating in the night sky with stars twinkling about it. Mirrors lined the wall, set in panels between alcoves done in a dark blue color and edged in silver. Large stones that appeared to be sapphires and diamond alternated at the top, over more of the Durin crests.

Cushioned chairs and couches lined the mirrorless alcoves, all the way to the far back where more steps led up to a landing upon which sat several thrones for members of the royal family to watch the ball from.

Bilba let her eyes travel upwards, past a balcony where she imagined the orchestra played, and up to the ceiling where massive chandeliers hung. It was without a doubt the most unusual and unique ballroom she'd ever seen. It was magnificent, and it would be utterly perfect for practicing her ballet.

Bilba clapped her hands in excitement, let out a very undignified squeal of excitement and lifted on one foot to spin in a circle.

"I'm glad you like it," Balin said in amusement as he came down the stairs to join her.

"It's breathtaking," Bilba said. She was smiling so hard it almost hurt but she couldn't seem to stop herself as she began to explore every part of the room. She avoided the dais where the royal family would sit, instead choosing to examine the walls, and chairs and mirrors and floors and everything else because it was all so amazing. She could just imagine her castmates from Shire seeing this place and closed her eyes to try and visualize preforming Swan Lake here.

For the first time since she'd arrived, she found herself wanting to take pictures of something and post them on Ravenshill for her castmates to see. Of course, she'd have to send them friend requests first but that shouldn't be hard. She'd been on friendly terms with several of them and couldn't wait for them to see it.

Actually, now that she thought about it...

She tugged Thorin's phone out of her back pocket and managed to type in the four-digit passcode he'd shown her in the infirmary. She opened the photo app, deliberately not looking at the album because she didn't need any more proof of the man's continued obsession with his ex and started taking pictures of the room.

Once she was sure she had enough she plopped down in the center of the floor, crossed her legs and pulled up her Ravenshill account. She logged in and posted the pictures before sending friend requests to several of her castmates, as well as a few teachers she'd gotten along with as an afterthought.

"Your Highness," Balin cleared his throat and Bilba looked up in surprise to see him standing over her. "I hate to bother you, but it's getting toward the afternoon and we may want to head to the gardens if you want to see them before lunch."
Bilba wasn't sure why it mattered when she ate lunch. Probably Balin was just bored of standing around and had come up with the excuse to get her to leave. Feeling a flicker of guilt for having made him wait for so long, she grinned at him and allowed him to help her to her feet.

She slid Thorin's phone back into her pocket and headed out with Balin, but not before casting a longing look over her shoulder at the room. She'd be back, she promised, and with her computer and playlist.

She was nearly skipping with glee as they walked past the library again and up the stairs to the main floor of the palace. For the first time in a long time she felt like herself, just a normal girl who loved ballet and wanted to go to college and get a job and live a basic, normal life.

She knew she didn't yet have anything but a few promises, and a place to dance when she wanted, and tons of books to get through, but still. It was a start. More than anything she'd ever expected or thought she would have.

She was so caught up with a feeling that could almost be called hope, that she didn't even see Thorin coming down the stairs until they were halfway across the lower floor.

She didn't register the woman on his arm for a good twenty seconds after that.

She felt Balin's arm tense ever so slightly, in sharp contrast to her entire body, which instantly went from relaxed to completely rigid. She could feel her eyes widening and her throat was suddenly dry.

"Please tell me that's not Kyra Lundair," she whispered, even though she already knew damn well it was. She'd seen the pictures. Many, many, many pictures. All of them showcasing just how perfect and utterly flawless the woman was and how Bilba didn't even come close to measuring up. Kyra had been raised her entire life to stand alongside Thorin.

Bilba had been raised to simply be Bilba Baggins.

Around them, people began to take notice and the air was suddenly filled with an almost frenetic energy. People paused in what they were doing, and the same low grade whispering from the library started up again, though far more intense. She saw a few people take out their phones, prepared to hit the record button if needed.

Maybe she could run out the front doors, Bilba thought, or walk at a brisk pace. A totally not running away pace but a --- something that wasn't a running away pace.

Thorin had spotted her, but his expression remained neutral, unreadable. Kyra wore a dress, Bilba noted, a wraparound design with a low neckline and a drape that opened as she walked to give a very generous view of her leg.

She looked beautiful, especially next to Bilba, who was currently standing in the center of the palace's main level in jeans and a fancy sweater.

If she were a stranger, who knew nothing about anyone or anything and she walked in just then she'd think Kyra was the princess and that she was little more than an interloper. Some sad little girl obsessed with fairy tales who'd managed to sneak into the palace only to immediately find she stuck out like sore thumb. A duck amongst swans.

Someone who simply didn't belong.

The urge to run grew stronger, and she might have given into it if it weren't for the fact that, at that very minute, Kyra finally noticed her. Bilba saw the other woman tighten her grip on Thorin's arm.
An almost possessive look came into her eyes and she lifted her chin to look down her nose.

"You don't belong here," the look seemed to say and, in spite of her fear, in spite of her nerves and in spite of the good sense that warned her she'd already pushed Thorin far enough that day --

Bilba felt herself bristle.

Not because Kyra's expression was merely mirroring Bilba's own thoughts. No, she already knew she didn't belong.

What annoyed her was that, while she might not belong, _neither did Kyra._

Did not belong next to Thorin, did not belong holding his arm like that, and certainly didn't belong acting like she had the right to be there when Bilba did not.

Kyra might wish she were a princess, but Bilba actually was one, accident of birth or not, and she actually _did_ belong, wanted or not. And the last thing she was going to do was scurry away like _she_ was the one somehow in the wrong.

Bilba set her jaw, lifted her chin and tried to channel the look her mother had used to give her that commanded immediate obedience when Bilba was misbehaving. She gave the barest hint of a nod toward Balin who immediately straightened and stepped forward, leading her over toward the two while, around them the entire main floor held its breath in anticipation.

This should be fun.
I have a new story in progress up for those who are interested. It's called "Light in Her Darkness" and is a Bilba/Kili Star Wars AU. I screwed up when first going through tags and somehow managed to post it as Bilba/Kili, Bilba/Thorin. It is ONLY Bilba/Kili. The Star Wars elements are mainly just a backdrop. Anyhoo, it's there if you want to check it out! :) :)

The closer they got the more Bilba's confidence was replaced with anxiety. By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, a low-grade tremble had taken hold of her limbs. She really, really hoped no one noticed.

"Bilba," Thorin said as they arrived at the base of the staircase. He was several steps up, which was irritating, as it put him at an even greater height advantage than he already was and allowed Kyra to literally look down her nose at where she and Balin stood.

"Thorin," Bilba had no idea how she managed to keep her voice so cool but was quite proud of herself for it. She allowed her eyes to flicker briefly toward Kyra and then back to Thorin with the barest of raised eyebrows. If the man had any diplomatic training whatsoever, or even basic manners --

"Might I introduce Ambassador Lundair?" Thorin said smoothly. "Ambassador Lundair, Her Royal Highness, Princess Bilba."

Bilba might have been impressed that he thought to use Kyra's title instead of her first name, if it weren't for the fact she knew he did it to try and protect the other woman's reputation. Protect her reputation that way, and then go traipsing about the castle with her. Rosie would say he was a contradiction, which was her polite way of calling someone an idiot.

Bilba's ire rose and the shaking in her limbs eased. She could just imagine the gossip, much of which she'd probably be forced to overhear accidentally-on-purpose from servants later. She'd seen the occasional smirk, and heard a few snickers, on this tour already. Then, of course, there was the fact the head housekeeper had ordered the maids to ignore her rooms, which all of them had happily done.

And, why had the head housekeeper and the maids felt so comfortable doing this? Bilba had no doubt it was largely because of Thorin. They saw him inviting Kyra into his rooms, having private meals with her, wandering about the palace with her, and took it as tacit approval of their own actions. They had no respect for her, because he had no respect for her.

"Your Highness." Kyra's voice was soft, and with a husky quality to it that Bilba imagined was feigned. Her irritation mounted. The woman was behaving as if she were the princess and Bilba was simply a lowly supplicant.

"Are you and Thorin discussing diplomacy?" Bilba asked in as innocent a voice as she could muster. Her tone was what Bofur always called her "sweetness and light" persona, which usually meant she was about to try and punch someone. "I wasn't aware there were any ongoing negotiations."
Mainly because she hadn't called Arwen yet. Bilba bit back a scowl as she realized that Thorin would undoubtedly put Kyra at the head of any talks with Gondor. The last thing she wanted was Kyra talking to Arwen and potentially securing her as a friend. Arwen was her friend, even if she didn't talk to her as often as she should.

On the stairs, Kyra blinking in surprise. She opened her mouth as if to respond, but then shut it again.

"She and I were about to go to lunch," Thorin interjected, his own voice cool.

Bilba bristled. Kyra Lundair had enough protectors, for Yavanna's sake, was it necessary for Thorin to jump in like she was some hapless little child in need of a parent? She was supposed to be an Ambassador, not a simpleton.

"Are you?" The words came out before Bilba could stop them or, more accurately perhaps, before she could find the desire to stop them. "I wasn't aware the Crown Prince had the time to personally meet and have lunch with each of his ambassadors." She arched her eyebrows in the slightly exaggerated manner she'd seen Beatrice do a time or two and put on the most innocent expression she could. "Perhaps I'll join you. I'd love to get to know Erebor's ambassadors."

Kyra looked almost apoplectic, which Bilba was certain was the exact opposite of how an ambassador should look. Thorin, in turn, looked irritated and Bilba tensed in anticipation of whatever stupid, Kyra-centric thing he was about to say.

"I was just about to take the princess on a tour of the gardens." Balin's voice startled her, and Bilba realized she'd forgotten the man was there despite her holding onto his arm. "Since you're here, perhaps you'd like to escort her instead?"

Bilba's eyes widened. Balin was completely ignoring the fact that Thorin had said he was taking Kyra to lunch. Around them, she could see the entire area had gone completely silent, all eyes on them.

Balin let go of Bilba's arm and stepped forward, almost forcing Thorin to step back as he took his place with Kyra. "In the meantime, I'd been hoping to discuss some of the recent trade deals with Rohan with you, Ambassador."

Kyra looked stunned. It was the second time she'd clearly telegraphed her emotions and it left Bilba hoping the woman showed much more discretion in her negotiations. Knowing Thorin, he'd probably appointed the woman to the position because she was Kyra and not for any actual talent.

Bilba gave herself a mental kick. No bitterness, she reminded herself firmly. She was going to be gracious and charitable even if it killed her.

At the rate things were going it just might.

Thorin was expressionless, but Bilba noted one of his hands had clenched into a fist at his side. The sight made her stomach clench and a cold sweat run over her. Reality set in and a flash of irritation ran through her. Balin could intervene all he wanted with impunity because he wasn't the one who'd have to pay for it. She'd just been a little mouthy, Balin was the one who'd basically just forced Thorin into doing what he wanted.

Before the man could speak again and make things worse, she swept into a graceful curtsey, one of the few things she was truly good at thanks to ballet. "I'm perfectly capable of seeing myself to the gardens." She straightened, and tried to keep her voice low and calm, because she knew dam well what she was about to do was rude and hoped to mitigate it as best she could. "I'm sure Thorin has
more important things to do than escort me about."

With that, she spun on one heel and proceeded toward the front doors without waiting to be dismissed. She was the Crown Princess after all, so that shouldn't be too horrible a gaffe, right? Her heart fell just a bit as she realized that, by the evening news, it would probably be reported that she'd slapped him or something equally heinous.

There were guards in front of the doors and Bilba's steps slowed as she neared. In Shire, she'd never been allowed out of the palace unless it was under heavy escort by her grandfather's guards. She knew Shire had beautiful gardens from photos. She'd never seen them in person.

The guards tensed and one of them widened his eyes, looking mildly panicked. Her face began to heat as the image of her standing like an idiot, all eyes on her, as the guards refused to let her out flashed through her mind. Her grandfather would have no problems doing it, would probably enjoy it in fact.

"Bilba." The low bass voice came from behind her and Bilba froze, muscles instantly locked up so tight it was a wonder they didn't go into spasms. Her breath hitched, but she still forced herself to raise her chin and turn her head in acknowledgement.

Thorin stepped up next to her and Bilba's mouth went dry. Why was she forever forgetting just how big he was? He towered over her where he stood next to her. She could probably stand behind him and no one would have any idea she was even there.

"Where are your guards?"

Bilba blinked, at the seemingly out of the blue question. "I'm not sure. Balin said they were in the process of moving into the palace."

He frowned. "You shouldn't be outside without them."

"I wasn't planning to leave the grounds," Bilba said, defensively. "I just wanted to see the gardens." She tried, but failed, to keep the disappointment from her voice. It was going to be no different than the Shire then. The palace nothing more than a somewhat larger cage.

To her horror, her vision blurred. She looked away, only to find there was literally nowhere in the stupid room she could look that some asshole wasn't looking back. She crossed her arms, faced Thorin, and focused on his watch.

A watch that was suddenly right under her nose. Bilba flinched back, only to realize he was offering her his arm.

She hesitated and then took it slowly. Thorin moved toward the door and she had no choice but to follow. The guards snapped to pull them open and a rain-scented breeze rushed in.

Thorin led her outside and to the left, toward the largest of the gardens that lay in the back of the palace. There were often paid tours of the ones in front, but the rear gardens were private. She'd seen them from her windows a few times, and from searches online.

As soon as they were there, Bilba dropped Thorin's arm and headed straight for a large hedge maze, the opening leading into a sea of green leaves dotted with blue flowers. She managed to make it inside, out of view of the palace and its many windows, just before the first tears escaped.

She sagged against the hedge, ignoring the feel of small branches stabbing her in the back, wrapped an arm around her stomach, clenched her teeth and angrily wiped at her eyes.
A handkerchief appeared in her line of vision. She accepted it shakily while Thorin went to lean on the hedge across from her.

"Sorry," Bilba managed to say, voice shaky. "I don't know why I'm crying."

"You've had a harrowing day," Thorin said simply, "starting with a near death experience. I think anyone's emotions would be frayed."

"Yours aren't," Bilba retorted. The words came out more accusatory than she had intended but he didn't seem to take offense.

He shrugged. "We all handle things differently."

He didn't elaborate and she didn't ask. He was acting strange, and it was throwing her off balance. After a few minutes, her emotions calmed. "I didn't ask him to do that."

He studied her. "You certainly set a tone."

Bilba tensed. "Would you rather I had just waved you off on your lunch with your ex-fiancée?"

He opened his mouth to respond, but Bilba cut him off before he could. "I get it's difficult. She's an ambassador, and a childhood friend, but the only thing anyone is going to focus on is she's your ex-fiancée. You may think having her in your room or going to meals with her privately is fine, but the media will have a field day with it, and you know it."

She honestly didn't know why she was pushing this. If he wanted to destroy his own reputation and honor it wasn't any of her concern, and she certainly didn't want him to stop paying attention to Kyra to focus on her. Honestly, leaving him to it would probably help her in the end, might get her some small modicum of sympathy from the media for the first time since she'd arrived.

He was still studying her, expression entirely blank, and exceptionally unnerving.

"I wish you'd stop looking at me like that," she said finally.

That got her another raised eyebrow. "How am I looking at you?"

"All...blank," Bilba said.

"It's just my face," He looked mildly amused now, which was also weird. He was simply acting weird all the way around not that, admittedly, she knew him well enough to make that assessment. He pushed off the hedge and held his arm out again. "Ready?"

Bilba sighed and obediently stepped forward to take his arm. He clearly didn't want to talk about Kyra and, to be honest, she didn't either. She just wanted to see the gardens.

Footsteps heralded the arrival of Dwalin who seemed to be glowering more than usual, probably because Thorin did not count as security when it came to leaving the palace.

Bilba gave him a weak smile and he nodded in return. She handed Thorin back his handkerchief, and almost followed it with his phone but decided to keep it. She'd use it to call Arwen later, and then maybe return it to Thorin.

_Or_ maybe she'd keep it until he got annoyed and got her the one he'd promised her.

That would be nice.
Until then, she was finally getting to see the damn gardens.

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Kyra stalked down the corridor, hands clenched in fists at her side and breath coming in short, harsh gasps.

She was literally seeing red.

How dare Balin? How dare he humiliate her like that in public? It was bad enough that little chit had the audacity to try and put her in place, as if she were the one somehow in the wrong but how dare Balin take her side? It had taken all her willpower to clench her teeth and speak to him civilly when she'd wanted nothing more than to rage and scream, and possibly throw something at him.

And then there was Thorin.

Thorin who'd yet again just stood there while she was mistreated. Embarrassed.

Humiliated.

She made it to the level where her rooms were and spotted two maids in a corner talking to one another in low whispers. They burst into giggles as she neared, and Kyra felt her blood boil. Clearly news of her humiliation had spread.

"If you two don't have enough work I'm sure I can speak to the Head Housekeeper and have your hours increased," she bit out.

The two jerked back, eyes wide, then hurriedly apologized and scrambled down the hall and out of her sight. Kyra felt a momentary burst of satisfaction, only to have it melt away with the realization she couldn't even do that anymore. Hadra and Dardren had been fired. She had no idea who the new Head Housekeeper and Butler were and would have zero pull with them.

Her eyes flickered toward Thorin's office; the door now closed since he was off escorting another woman. When she'd gone in that morning, she'd been quickly hustled off so Thorin could be taken to the medical wings for his so-called "slip in the shower."

She rolled her eyes. She'd returned later to see Thorin reading a file stamped with the logo of the medical wards but, when she'd asked what it was, he'd locked it in a drawer and changed the subject. Apparently, she wasn't allowed to know.

She bet that woman knew.

The anger boiling inside her reached a level where she wanted to simultaneously scream and punch something. Her temples pounded with the promise of a truly spectacular headache.

She forced herself to take a deep breath, clenched her fists and shut her eyes. It helped, marginally, but not much. Every time the anger started to abate the reasons for it popped back into her mind and started an entirely new wave of rage.

She opened her eyes and was mildly disappointed no one had been in the hall to see her. Perhaps word would have made it back to Thorin and he'd have finally realized who it was he should be supporting.

Speaking of which, she raised her chin and, with purpose, started to march toward the medical wings. She had a right to know what was going on with Thorin. She was his best friend, and still his
fiancée even if everyone wanted to pretend otherwise. It was all just temporary, until Ori found something in the archives or Thorin was able to convince the king.

The thought let her finally start to calm down. It wasn't that she was being ignored, or that the Shire princess was being given special treatment. It was all just an act, putting on a show until things could get fixed and that woman could be sent back where she belonged.

Something eased inside her and Kyra nodded to herself as she neared the medical wings. Thorin loved her. They'd figure this all out, send the Shire princess home, reinstate *her*, and she'd convince Thorin that Hadra and Dardren had simply made a mistake and deserved a second chance.

The doors of the medical wing were in front of her and she pushed through them, headed straight across and into Oin's office. The older man was seated at his desk, squinting at something on his computer, but looked up at her approach.

"Ah, Kyra," he said congenially. "What can I do for you?"

Kyra forced herself to smile and ignored the small acidic flash of anger at how he addressed her. She had always been "Kyra" or "Ambassador Lundair", never "My Lady" or, as she should have been by now, "Your Highness".

Just one more sign of the disrespect by the staff she was only just starting to see. It had never bothered her before, but now she mentally put it on the top of her list of things to change once she was back in her rightful position.

Perhaps, if she'd done that before, not been so nice and accepting all the time, the King would have thought twice about agreeing to the Shire's demands. He'd just assumed she'd accept it like she accepted everything. She'd practically taught them to disrespect her.

She wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Thorin sent me," she said, emphasizing his name ever so slightly to remind Oin that her not being noble didn't mean she didn't still have power. "He wanted some more medication for the pain."

Oin looked surprised. "Really? I would have thought what I gave him earlier would be more than enough."

Kyra shrugged. "You know Thorin. He acts tough, but he's really just a bit of a wimp."

That wasn't even close to true. Thorin was the sort who could lose an arm and insist it was fine. Dwalin usually had to keep a close eye on him and drag him to the medical wards, by force, if necessary.

Oin frowned but, thankfully, didn't question her. Instead he simply got up and went to a nearby, locked cabinet. He always kept the strongest drugs in his own office where he could keep a close eye on them. "And what about the Princess?" he asked, as he unlocked the cabinet and pulled a small bottle out.

Kyra blinked in surprise. "The Princess? I wasn't aware she was injured...as badly as Thorin."

An almost white hot but somehow still cold feeling raced through her and she felt her body stiffen. She brought up the image of the Shire Princess as the chit had the audacity to try and put *her* in her place. Kyra had already *been* in her place; it was the Princess that was out of turn.

The girl had been trying far too hard with an outfit so tight it left barely anything to the imagination.
It had certainly drawn Thorin's eye, which she imagined had been the point. She'd already heard about the girl prancing about the palace in a robe earlier that morning. Clearly, she'd realized she didn't have the personality or intelligence to draw someone like Thorin so she had to rely on her base assets.

In any event, she hadn't noticed any injuries on the woman, and she hadn't been favoring a leg or arm which meant she must have been injured on her torso. Exactly where Thorin was injured. Which meant, most likely, they had been injured at the same time doing the same thing.

"I slipped in the shower."

Heat flooded her face, even as she summarily rejected that thought. Thorin was clearly physically attracted to the girl, but she didn't believe he'd slept with her. There was still an awkwardness and stiffness to the way they had behaved around each other, closer to barely acquaintances than...anything else.

Besides that, however, was the simple fact she didn't believe Thorin would betray her like that. He'd married the girl from obligation, to help Erebor and his family, and he had to show the Princess favor in public because otherwise it'd reflect poorly on him. He wouldn't betray her.

But he would apparently lie to her.

The thought wormed its way in, insidious, and she frowned. Thorin had never lied to her before, not once. Why would he start now, and why about something concerning that woman?

"Miss Lundair?"

Kyra jumped in surprise. Oin was standing in front of her, and apparently had been for some time. She shook her head and gave him another forced smiling, accepting the small bottle of pills he'd been trying to hand her. "Sorry. I was just thinking I still can't understand how it happened. I mean, Thorin's usually so careful, you know? He rarely ever gets hurt."

Oin gave an absentminded shrug as he turned back toward his desk. "Well," he said as he sat down. "It was just a mistake in the end. I know the Princess felt horrible about it."

Kyra's eyes narrowed. Thorin had gotten hurt because of something the Shire woman had done? Her mouth opened to demand the details, only to snap shut again as she realized she'd be giving herself away by doing so.

Instead, gritting her teeth and gripping the bottle so hard she risked breaking it she left the medical ward and headed toward her own room.

Thorin had never been seriously hurt, not even during the retaking of Erebor, a battle he'd been very much involved in. So how was it now that a little slip of a girl would manage to do what Smaug's entire army couldn't?

And why would Thorin lie to her about it?

She reached her room, went inside, shut the door and leaned against it. Her mind was racing, trying to fit together the pieces of a puzzle she had no context for. She went to sit at her desk, mentally going over what she already knew.

- The Shire had wanted an alliance.

- They had demanded a marriage, specifying both the bride and groom even though it wasn't needed
for the alliance. The Thain had claimed it was the only way he could trust Erebor, completely uncaring of how insulting that was or of the fact that Thorin would have to break his engagement to her.

- The Princess they'd sent was a spendthrift, and prone to parties.

- She'd closed herself in her room after arriving and refused to interact with anyone in what had turned into a month-long sulk. Kyra had desperately hoped it'd prove she was sneaking out to go to parties or, better yet, engage in extramarital affairs but no evidence had surfaced. Kyra didn't believe for a minute it was because there was no evidence, but probably more likely she was just experienced enough to not get caught.

Oh.

It was a lightbulb went off in her head. Kyra froze, and then very slowly sank into her chair at her desk.

No wonder Thorin was practically panting at the girl's heels. The girl wasn't just a coquette. She was a practiced seductress. She wasn't just running about in a robe or wearing revealing clothing because she knew she had an attractive body and wanted to show it off.

It was *practiced*. Part of a much larger game used in coordination with what was probably experienced charm and false humility to manipulate Thorin and get him to overlook what she truly was.

To get him to a point where he'd openly lie to protect the snake.

No wonder the woman had spent a month in virtual seclusion. She'd probably spent it observing, possibly even searching through Thorin's things when he wasn't there, learning him and his personality and how best to manipulate him to her own design.

Fire flooded Kyra's veins and the bitter taste of acid flooded her throat. A crack startled her, and she jumped in surprise and looked at her hand. The plastic pill bottle Oin had given her was cracked from how hard she'd been holding it.

How in Mahal's name was she the only one seeing this? Especially *here*? In Erebor? After all they'd been through? After all they'd sacrificed and fought for? To have lived in exile, fought and retaken the kingdom from Smaug, and for what?

So some shallow little enchantress could come along and ruin *everything* they'd fought for?

Someone needed to say something, make them all see the truth.

Kyra shoved to her feet, hard enough to send her chair to the floor with a clatter and was halfway to the door before the truth stopped her dead in her tracks.

She had no evidence.

She could lay out her case, and she knew it was a good case, but how many would believe it? Especially if it came from *her*. She could just see the news mocking her, calling her a jealous ex and letting it overshadow the fact that she was right.

No, she couldn't just go to Thorin. Even if she could break through the web of lies, and lust, the Shire Princess had wrapped him in, she couldn't confuse the issue. She needed Thorin to listen to what she was saying, not focus on who was saying it.
And, for that, she was going to need proof. Actual, irrefutable proof.

She hesitated, and then went to her computer. She pulled up her Ravenshill account and went to the messenger app. For several seconds, she chewed on her lower lip while nervously tapping on the tabletop with one hand.

The only real thing she knew about Gandalf was he'd bugged the Shire princesses' room.

Because he didn't trust the woman.

Because he said he needed evidence.

Kyra shook her head. Here she'd been questioning the man and trying to find out more about him in the hopes of proving herself to Thorin, only to realize he'd been right all along.

She'd treated him the same way she knew Thorin would have treated her had she gone to him without proof.

Still, that didn't mean she shouldn't, or wouldn't, be careful.

She put her hands on the keyboard and typed a quick message. *Have you learned anything yet?*

Her heart began to race as she hit Send, and she sat back nervously in her chair, fingers steepled as she waited for a reply.

It didn't take long.

In less than fifteen minutes, she saw the words at the bottom of the screen - *Gandalf is typing*, followed shortly by a ping of an incoming message.

*Not yet. Has something happened?*

Kyra started chewing on her lower lip again, worrying it until sharp pain and the metallic tang of blood flooded her mouth. She wasn't stupid. She believed Gandalf was on her side when it came to the Shire Princess and what she really was, but that didn't mean his motives were altruistic. She had no idea what his true aspirations were and, until she did, she needed to be careful about what she did or did not say.

*I think the Shire Princess may have done something to endanger the Prince*, she typed back finally. That should be enough to get the point across while still being vague and not revealing the Prince was injured.

*I was afraid of this*, the response came back after a long pause.

Kyra's heart gave an uncomfortable jolt and her eyes narrowed. *What do you mean?*

*Gandalf is typing.*

*Gandalf is typing.*

Kyra's unease began to mount. Was he writing a novel? She started to put her fingers on the key, hesitated, and then pulled them off again.

*Gandalf is typing.*

She swallowed and felt a flash of irritation. "Come on already," she muttered. "What?"
The computer pinged, and rather than a book, Kyra saw a message with only five short words. Five words that, depending on how she responded to them, would change absolutely everything.

*I think we should meet.*
Touring the gardens with Thorin was...stilted.

As they walked, stiff and silent with Dwalin lumbering behind, Bilba couldn't help but imagine what it would have been like had she been with Rosie and Bofur.

She and Rosie would have probably raced through the maze, laughing and trying to find the center as fast as possible, while Bofur would have been hiding around corners waiting to jump out at them.

They'd have stopped to smell the flowers, listened to the birds and lounged about on benches enjoying the scenery. She'd have probably spent the entire day with them, just exploring and having fun.

She and Thorin were done in under a half hour. They hardly even slowed, let alone stopped to more closely examine anything they passed.

Afterward, he escorted her back to the suite and then excused himself. Bilba didn't ask where he was going. She didn't entirely care.

Instead, she went and sagged down on the couch with a sigh. Having to be "on" for so long was exhausting. The feel of the phone still in her pocket caught her attention and she fished the small device out. She chewed absently on her lower lip and then, before she could talk herself out of it, dialed.

It took a while to get through all the security layers - it didn't help that she was calling from an unapproved number and that it had been so long - but, finally, the line clicked over and she heard a familiar, albeit irritated, voice.

"Bilba Baggins, what in the world were you thinking keeping me waiting for so long?"

Bilba flinched in guilt. "I'm sorry, Arwen. I was just--"

She made a vague gesture she knew the other woman couldn't see and curled tighter into the cushions of the couch.

Arwen gave an irritated sigh. "It's fine. I just -- you need to understand that other people care about you, Bilba. You can't just -- go off and get married and think we won't notice!"

"I know," Bilba said. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to keep apologizing," Arwen muttered. She still sounded angry, but less so. "Anyway, how are you? Is that Prince treating you all right?"

"It's fine." Bilba said vaguely. "We don't know each other all that well."

"Still?" Arwen asked in surprise. "It's been a month; shouldn't you at least know enough to be friends by now?"

"I guess?" Bilba tried to figure out a way to diplomatcially explain the last month, and to also ask for trade negotiations to be opened between Gondor and Erebor.

Belatedly, she realized she should have probably thought of all this beforehand.
Maybe during that month she'd spent in her room watching movies with Rosie. A month that was beginning to look more and more halcyon the longer she was forced to be out interacting with people.

Still, she was out now and she didn't want to go back so that meant dealing with people which meant smoothing things over with Arwen so, with a sigh, she settled in and started talking.

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Thorin sat back at his desk, this time with the door closed and locked to prevent any further interruptions. A plate with a half-eaten sandwich sat to the side, just past a large file folder laid out across his desk.

He'd barely had it handed to him by Oin before Kyra had shown up and forced him to put it away for a later time.

"I wouldn't normally do this," Oin had explained as he'd handed over the file, "but I felt it important for you to know. I trust you'll show discretion in the matter, Your Highness."

The words had been surprisingly combative from the usually reserved man, but even the brief glance he'd gotten at the file earlier had been enough to reveal why.

The Princess of Shire had lived through an absolute nightmare.

If he hadn't known better he'd have thought the file Oin had given him was for several different people, not one. Multiple broken bones, evidence of internal scarring, and she'd apparently admitted under questioning to more than one concussion though she'd had explanations as to how each one was somehow an accident.

All that damage, and yet somehow she didn't have more than a very small number of fine scars, most of them to the fingers of her hands.

Someone had not only abused her but had deliberately done it in such as way as to leave no real outward sign of it.

Meaning someone had given enough foresight to the abuse to ensure they hid it. That didn't suggest simply a bastard, but a sadist who enjoyed the pain they were inflicting.

And the fact she was a princess...the fact that many of the injuries would have taken weeks if not months to heal...and the fact that her medical reports were sanitized to hide the evidence...all pointed to one inescapable conclusion

The Thain had either known about it or been responsible for it.

The entire royal family had most likely known, or at least suspected, but had done nothing to stop it. Thorin couldn't imagine it. Thrain had never raised a hand against his children but if Dis had started appearing with unexplained injuries -- well, Thrain would have quickly found both Thorin and Frerin in his face demanding answers.

The fact that not a single person in Bilba's family had been willing to help suggested some rather disturbing things about the amount of power the Thain wielded.

Thorin scowled down at the paperwork. He'd known the Thain of Shire was an asshole but hadn't realized just how much of an asshole. In retrospect, he probably should have. The man had handed his granddaughter over to a stranger who'd had to suffer a broken engagement to accept her. What
kind of man did that to his own blood? For all he knew, Thorin could have decided to take his anger at the situation out on Bilba.

The man wasn't stupid, Thorin knew that much. He'd known just what he was sending his granddaughter into, and the fact he so clearly hadn't cared about her safety and well-being was difficult to fathom.

Thorin gathered up the papers, shoved them back into the file and got to his feet. He left his office and made his way to Nori's. The other man was, for once, behind his desk absently whistling under his breath as he worked, but he looked up as Thorin came in and shut the door behind him.

"I want Gareth and Cerys briefed," he said flatly, dropping the file on Nori's desk and dropping into a chair. "If her family ever visits, or she visits Shire, she isn't to be left alone, especially not with any member of her family. That goes double for the Thain."

Nori flipped the file open with a frown. "I take it that means you intend for her to stay?" he asked after a moment. "Ori mentioned something about you wanting her to look for loopholes in Durin's laws regarding marriage." He raised an eyebrow. "My assumption is that, were you to find something, you'd have sent the princess back to Shire?"

Thorin frowned. He honestly hadn't given it much thought. He'd asked Ori more to try and appease Kyra. There was only the slimmest of hopes in his mind that anything could actually be done.

However, he mentally conceded, had such a thing been found then most likely he would, in fact, have expected Bilba to go back to Shire and into what was clearly a pattern of extreme abuse.

A deep sense of shame flooded him. He'd known from the beginning how little regard her grandfather had for her but had never bothered to sit down and really consider it. What it meant and what might happen to her were she sent back. He'd purely been concerned about himself and how it affected him and Kyra.

"She can't go back." His hand, resting on the armrest of the chair was convulsively opening and closing as if he held one of his stress balls and he regretted not grabbing one from his office. Perhaps he'd start carrying one in his pocket.

Nori nodded in a thoughtful way that Thorin was sure was somehow mocking. "I suppose you could always send her to Gondor, or Rohan."

Thorin grimaced. Rohan was so rural a kingdom that being sent there was usually considered a form of exile, while as for Gondor --

"Sending her to Gondor would be a political nightmare," he grumbled. "On multiple levels." Even if he could manage to do it in such a way that salvaged the alliance, he highly doubted the other kingdom would ever want anything to do with them.

"Well, at least you admit you'd be in the wrong," Nori said mildly.

Thorin bit back a flash of irritation. First Oin, and now Nori. It seemed everyone was out to take him down a few pegs today. "I wasn't aware Bilba had gained such a loyal following."

"Certainly no thanks to you," Nori retorted. He leaned back in his chair and reached behind him to one of the file cabinets dotting his wall. He opened one drawer and dragged out a massive file that he dropped on the desk in a mildly overdramatic fashion. "These are the death threats I've gotten directed at her, this week." He waved a hand behind him encompassing nearly the entire cabinet. "The ones I've intercepted since she's arrived are in there."
Thorin blinked in surprise. "What?" He leaned forward to grab the file and flipped it open. Inside were sheets upon sheets of paper on which had been dutifully copied some of the most vile and obscene threats he'd ever had the misfortune to read. "What's being done about these?" he demanded, feeling his anger rise.

"They're being handled." Nori settled back in his chair, hands steepled over his chest. "Imagine people's surprise when they discover threatening the life of the Crown Princess still counts as a threat against the royal family." He gestured at them. "Many of these are your fault." Before Thorin could respond, he continued. "They follow your lead. Some of this vitriol was to be expected. The fact it's continued so long is the people seeing your disdain for the girl and heeding your example."

"I don't hold her in disdain," Thorin growled. "I barely know her."

"Which counts as holding her in disdain." Nori leaned forward enough to retrieve the file from him. "She's excoriated in the press, and you do nothing. The staff talk about how little you acknowledge her in the castle. Are you really surprised to find the hatred hasn't died down? It's not so much that they're hating her as they're supporting you and Kyra."

It was a surprisingly long, and heated, rant from a man who normally played his emotions close to the vest, but then Thorin's eyes went back to the file he'd brought in and he understood why. Nori was projecting his sister onto Bilba, and that meant Thorin had probably inadvertently just given her an extremely powerful, and personally involved, ally.

Still, none of that meant Nori was wrong. Bilba had seemingly been content to sit in her room, and Thorin had been more than content to let her. He'd known about the media continuing to rake her over the coals and made excuses about why he couldn't get involved.

Still...

"What the Thain did..." he shifted in his seat uncomfortably, the wood creaking under him. "Kyra didn't deserve that."

Nori held up the medical file. "Neither did she."

Thorin agreed, but also felt his irritation return. He was sorry for her background, truly he was, and he would do all that he could to ensure she never returned to it. If that meant abandoning that small sliver of hope over an out to the marriage and keeping her under his direct protection, then so be it. "I can't just fall in love with her," he bit out through gritted teeth. "I'm not a robot."

"Of course not," Nori said in exasperation. Thorin had the feeling it took a great effort for the other man to not roll his eyes. "But you could start treating her less like the enemy, and more like a fellow victim of the Thain and his machinations."

"I haven't treated her like an enemy," Thorin argued, heated.

"Really?" Nori asked in mock surprise. "I'd hate to see how you do treat an enemy then."

Thorin's eyes narrowed. "You go too far, Spymaster."

Nori's eyes went back to the file. "Perhaps I haven't gone far enough," he mused. He pushed to his feet suddenly, gathering up both the threats file and the medical one. "If you'll excuse me, Your Highness."

There was a definite mocking tone in his voice as he used Thorin's title, before he proceeded to stride straight past him toward the door.
"I haven't excused you," Thorin called.

"So fire me." The door slammed shut, and Thorin was suddenly alone in the small office.

For a brief second a red-hot flash of anger raced through him and he had the urge to go after the other man and do exactly that. In the next instant he realized he'd then have to endure the humiliation of his father re-hiring him, not to mention facing Ori and Dwalin's ire.

He sagged in the chair and allowed his head to fall back. Things had been so much easier when they'd been fighting to regain Erebor. No politics, no power-hungry royals or nobles, no worrying about how everything he said and did would be interpreted. Just the simplest of tasks - breach the palace, and clear from it Smaug and all his underlings.

Kyra hadn't been involved in the direct fighting. She'd waited back at one of the command posts, helping coordinate communication and rescue efforts for wounded fighters. When he had left her that morning, neither had known if it'd be the last time they would ever see one another. If he fell fighting, if they failed and Smaug reached the tents before she could flee...

He could still feel, with crystal clarity, the burst of joy he'd felt at the sight of her standing at the tent entrance waiting for his return. He'd been filthy, bloodied and exhausted but she hadn't hesitated to come running straight into his arms. He'd barely had a chance to put his weapon down before she'd collided with him.

A picture of them embracing had been featured repeatedly in the news cycles, quickly turning into a symbol of Erebor's freedom and her hope for the future. At the time, Thorin could remember believing firmly that they had won, and the worst had been behind them.

Now he knew just how naive he'd been. They'd won Erebor back, but now had to focus on keeping it. Alliances, politics, having to look people in the face without having any idea of what ulterior motives they may or may not have.

It had been far easier when the enemy had held a weapon and been actively trying to kill him.

Now he could only guess as to someone's purpose, and quite often his guess was wrong. There was no way to tell who the enemy was until it was far too late. Anyone could be his enemy.

Anyone but his family, Nori who he trusted despite the man's occasional eccentricities, Kyra who'd been by his side since childhood, and a small group of others.

A very small group, among whom he was fairly certain the Shire princess deserved to be counted.

Because as much as hated to admit it, the man had a point. He'd been treating the girl like she was complicit alongside the Thain, instead of a fellow victim of his.

Thorin sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face before getting to his feet. Nori was right in that he at least owed Bilba civility. The man was also right in the idea that people were taking their cues from him. Would the media have continued their endless attack on the girl if he'd made it clear he was supporting her? Would the threats folder be as thick? Would Dardren and Hadra have dared betray the crown?

He left but, instead of going back to his office, he headed toward his suite. Perhaps he should have invited Bilba to lunch instead of leaving her and going to eat in his own office. Of course, if he'd done that, it would have effectively been him throwing off Kyra in favor of Bilba. She'd have been hurt, and understandably so.
He scowled. It seemed no matter what he did he'd end up hurting, or insulting, one of them.

His ill humor must have been apparent on his face because several maids gave him wide-eyed looks and scurried past him as if he were a raging bear on the prowl. Rather than try to appear calmer he simply clenched his hands into fists at his side and fixed his eyes straight ahead.

He was caught in an untenable situation. Trying to forge some sort of path with his new roommate, while simultaneously trying to be sensitive to Kyra's feelings. She'd done an admirable job the last month, keeping her head high in the face of the humiliation and pain she had to be feeling.

She'd suffered a lot in her life. The loss of her home, her mother, later her father and now her expected marriage. She'd also found her place in his life, the palace and his family suddenly uncertain, lacking the ease and familiarity it had once held.

It must be a struggle, he realized, for her to try and find out exactly where she fit but she'd either already found her new place or was doing an admirable job of carrying on while she figured it out.

He would have expected no less from her. Kyra had always been the epitome of grace under pressure, able to shoulder almost any stress without seeming to exert any struggle at all. He supposed it came from her background, preparing her along the way to handle each tragedy as it came to her.

Perhaps even conditioning her to expect it.

He reached his suite, pushed the door open and paused at the sight of Bilba stretched out on the couch, sound asleep.

He hesitated and then quietly stepped in and shut the door behind him. Bilba never moved, seemingly exhausted, which he could understand. She'd been out more in this one day than she'd been in the past month, the sudden shift in energy would tire anyone.

She was curled on one side, legs tucked up near her chest, one arm under a pillow her head rested on while the other was tucked up near her chin.

There was a throw folded over the back of a nearby chair and Thorin slowly retrieved it and unfolded it to lay over her. His ribs protested as he bent over her and he grimaced and slowly sank to his knees to give himself a more comfortable position.

For the first time he noticed she was loosely clutching his cell phone in her hand and he gently pulled it free of her fingers. Then, before he risked waking her up any further, he stood and retreated to his bedroom.

As he went to set it down the screen briefly flashed with a notification and he pulled it up with a frown. Ravenshill? He had a Ravenshill account, but it was mostly managed by his press team. Most of the royal accounts were, save the one belonging to Frerin. He was insistent on managing his own page. As it was mostly pictures of him surging, their father had allowed it.

He pulled up the page and was surprised to see it was Bilba's. Bilba Baggins according to the top of the page. The profile picture featured Bilba and the two he remembered from the call when they'd found the bug.

She'd posted pictures of the ballroom along with excited captions describing it. The notifications were of friend requests being accepted as well as excited comments talking about the pictures.

Thorin hesitated and then, before he could overthink it too much, he navigated to his own profile, found hers and sent her a friend request. To his surprise, he felt an odd clenching in his gut, similar to
what he'd felt when preparing to ask Kyra out all those years ago.

Thorin chuckled and shook his head. He was being an idiot. It wasn't much, he knew, doing something so small, but it was something at least.

It was a start.

Works inspired by this one: Walking Tall by akahime4

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