Growing Dwarves (And Kingdoms)

by Lumelle

Summary

Sometimes, Bilbo finds, not everything goes according to plan.

First an injury and the coming winter delay his leaving Erebor, then word from the Shire leaves him mourning his beloved Bag End. And because getting added to Thorin's council isn't trouble enough, Kili is in love with an elf, Fili may or may not have his eyes on a certain little scribe, everyone seems to think he is a lady hobbit, and Thorin needs to find someone to marry.

Okay. So the last part might not be trouble, exactly, except for the part where it makes Bilbo's rather hopeless attachment even more painful. Or it wouldn't if he hadn't possibly accidentally promised to provide Thorin with an heir... and Dáin just might still be scheming something.

Fortunately, if there's one thing hobbits are good at, it's growing things. And Thorin did promise him a garden.

Notes

So this whole fic started from the idea of Hobbits growing in bushes like fruit, or possibly very big berries. It... kind of got out of hand after that. Also turned out somewhat more
serious than I expected, though the fluff and a bit of crack are still there.

Mostly canon-compliant, except that, obviously, none of the Durins died in the Battle of Five Armies. Bilbo, on the other hand, got injured. Yay?
Even given the chance, there was nothing Bilbo would have done differently.

Of course, things had not exactly gone as well as he might have hoped, but that had not been anything his actions could have changed, certainly not to a conclusion he would have preferred. He did not regret stealing away the Arkenstone, nor giving it to Bard to trade with. He did not regret going back to take part in the battle, nor fighting his way over to Thorin, even at the risk of his own life. No, there was nothing he would have changed of his own actions.

Every time he shifted in his bed, though, he was reminded that not everything was dependent on his own actions, as a sharp pain inevitably tore at his side from the injury he had been dealt in his efforts. It was getting better, though, under the close care and stern instructions of Óin. The old dwarf had taken it upon himself to care for Bilbo's injury along with those of the rest of the Company, even though both Dáin's men and their new allies had offered healers to help with the aftermath of the battle. Not that Thorin would have ever agreed to have an elven healer tend him, no matter their successes. His pride would have never allowed that.

With or without elves, though, Thorin was now fully healed, or so Óin told him. Bilbo had not seen much evidence of this himself; the one time Thorin had visited him had been soon after the battle, with both of them quite worse for the wear. Not that he would have expected anything else. Thorin was quite busy getting everything running again, so it was only natural he wouldn't have the time to check on a convalescent burglar. The others more than made up for it, anyway; he was quite sure everyone in the Company had visited him at least once, and some of them were by practically every day.

It made him feel somewhat guilty, the way they were all taking the time to come and visit him when they would have had plenty of other things to do. He was an adult hobbit, he could have amused himself well enough without constant visitors. Not that he wasn't grateful for the distraction, but really, they must have had much more important things to spend their time on, and yet they wasted it away on a useless burglar.

He would have tried to tell them that, but the one time he dared to voice his thoughts, Bofur practically pounced on his bed to shake him out of such foolish thoughts, while Fíli and Kíli wailed about how they were terrible friends for letting him think so little of himself, and of course they would visit, they would have had to be monsters to stay away. It had been very touching and embarrassing all at once, and left Bilbo quite flailing at anything to say. He had tried to explain himself, pointed out how Thorin was focusing on the things he had to get done, and really, he would not have blamed any of them for doing the same. Surely the rebuilding of Erebor and Dale alike required every capable pair of hands, and since he couldn't have done much even if he hadn't been bed-ridden, the least he could do was not keep others from their duties as well.

At his explanation, both Fíli and Kíli had gotten a strange look in their eyes, then excused themselves. That had been three days ago, and he hadn't seen Kíli since then. Bilbo rather hoped he hadn't offended the young dwarf, though the others had assured him that was not the case, still adamant about visiting him over and over again. Fíli had been one of those visiting, once again telling him Kíli was by no means mad with him, really he wasn't, something had just come up that Kíli had to do. Bilbo figured he could probably trust Fíli on that, though he still wasn't convinced this was entirely unconnected to his little outburst.

The even stranger comment, though, had been Fíli's information that he had spoken with Thorin, and
the king had sent his regrets for not having visited Bilbo more often, citing his duties as the reason. His regrets! As though he owed any visits to the silly little burglar who had stolen his family heirloom.

He did not say that to Fíli, though. He had the feeling he would have been shot down most vigorously, regardless of how reasonable his opinion was. These stubborn dwarves were going to be the death of him one of these days, and not only because he apparently kept getting hurt around them.

The following morning Thorin himself came, clad in the rich clothes of a king once again though the madness was thankfully gone from his eyes. He looked the kind of tired that could not be cured with a simple good night's sleep, once again bringing his apologies for not visiting earlier. Bilbo tried his best to tell him that really, it was all right, Thorin had much more important things to do than attend to a grown hobbit whose main complaint was boredom as his injury could not allow him to sit up and read for more than a moment.

Apparently, it was the wrong thing to say, as Thorin's face darkened. "It is a stain on all of our honour, and mine before all," he said. "Had I not been so stubborn and blinded by the gold, you would never have come to such harm."

"It's not like that, really." Bilbo sighed. "I knew you'd get mad, and made my choices anyway. Then I chose to take part in the battle, and that was my own choice as well; I doubt anyone would have blamed me if I'd decided to hide away instead. Really, none of you should feel guilty for my injury, and certainly not obligated to keep me company. Not that I'm not grateful, but I'm sure you have much more important things to accomplish."

"More like things to keep from getting accomplished." Thorin sighed, though the line of his shoulders relaxed minutely. "Some of the elders from the Iron Hills have taken it upon themselves to arrange a council to advise me, which in practice means they are doing their best to turn things to their own advantage."

"And the advantage of the Iron Hills, I presume." This, he could do. This was so much better than discussing the unfortunate circumstances of their fight.

"Precisely. I know many of them would rather see Dáin on the throne in my place, and I dare say none of them would have grieved much to see me fall in battle."

"But the mountain is rightfully yours," Bilbo pointed out. "And even if you had fallen, Fíli would have taken over, not Dáin."

"I know, but mere words do little to remind them of true bloodlines when the gold of Erebor yet shines in their eyes." Thorin sighed again. "It is fortunate for me that my cousin, loyal as he is, would not hear of such things. He came to my aid when I needed it, and will not wrench away what is rightfully mine."

"That's good at least." Bilbo hesitated. There was really little he could say, in way of advice or otherwise. Hobbits had no kings, and while bloodlines could bear some importance, it was far from this ferocity. Yes, he knew some of his relatives would have been very happy to claim Bag End to themselves, but that was a matter of one hobbit hole, not an entire mountain that would soon be full of people. "I wish there was something I could do, too."

"You have already done more than your part." Thorin reached out a hand to touch his, a brief contact that was surprisingly gentle. "You helped us reclaim the mountain, and stalled the inevitable when my foolishness was about to lead us all into an honourless death."
"I couldn't stop the war from happening, though. I just bought a little time."

"But thanks to you, it was us and our allies against the foul orcs, not my Company slaughtered in our own halls by the forces of elves and men. For that, I'm sure I am not the only one to be grateful."

"And I still didn't manage to do what I wanted to." Not to say his way of going about it had been the best, but still.

"Oh, I am not certain." Thorin's lips twitched into a ghost of a smile. "I have regained both the Arkenstone and Orcrist, in return for quite a hefty part of the gold and some quite shiny gems. It is far from the ideal solution, but this way carries no lost honour to any, and even the elders of Iron Hills cannot truly argue against my decision to spend the gold to obtain such treasures."

"Would it be bad for me to say I am glad to hear that?" Because while it was certainly the truth, he was not foolish enough to think Thorin would ever thank him for his betrayal.

"Not at all. If I cast aside the pride and gold sickness that maddened me before, it is plain to see this is for the best." Thorin shook his head. "Erebor has ever been an ally of Dale, and will be so now once again, and while I bear no love for the elves, I would rather have them as tentative allies than open enemies. If the return of that is a little less gold in my halls to tempt new worms about, that is a price I am quite willing to pay."

"And perhaps next time you need help, they will be happier to give it."

Thorin snorted. "I rather doubt it, but we shall see. Not that I ever hope to find us in such dire straits again." His eyes were sincere as he looked at Bilbo again. "I will not soon say this again, but you were right, Master Hobbit, and I was wrong. For all that I acted rashly and in madness, it was wrong of me, and for that, I can only apologise."

Well, that he certainly hadn't expected. "Oh. Uh. I accept your apology?" He really wished he could have thought of something else to say, or at least made it sound less like a question. "Really, though, I don't blame you for getting mad at me. I tried to force your hand, and even if it did turn out for the better in the end, it should have been your call to make."

"Yet I would not have made it without your aid." Thorin's lips twitched again. "Even the best king is only as good as his decisions, and all too often those are no better than the wisdom of those who advise him. I would be fortunate indeed if my new council was more like you."

"You mean, bedridden and useless?" Bilbo sighed. "I'm feeling quite guilty, you know, for making everyone take the time to visit me."

"You never should, Master Hobbit. You have risked everything for our cause and gained nothing but pain and hardship in return. If there is any kindness we can offer you, it is only your due."

"I do hope you won't tire of showing that kindness, then, because I do not think I will be leaving any time soon." And that was a regret, yes, but again nothing he could help. "Even without my injuries, winter closes in fast, and it would soon be foolish indeed to even think of passing the mountains."

"Not that we would allow you to leave on your own." Bilbo was almost surprised at how soft Thorin's voice was. "You are one of the Company, Bilbo Baggins, and if you were never to lift a finger again, you would still have a place in my halls for as long as you live. When you are fit and willing to head home, we will arrange for plenty of warriors to accompany you on your way. And before you complain, there will be plenty of fit dwarrows travelling the way in the coming years. Most of my most loyal people except for those in the Company still dwell in Ered Luin, and while
some will undoubtedly choose to stay, there will be steady streams between the two colonies for years to come."

"In that case, I would be happy to join one of the parties setting off in that direction." Bilbo managed a faint smile. "Speaking of dwarves setting on their way, would you happen to know where Kíli has gotten off to? He was rather upset when I told them I did not need constant company nor wish to keep them from their duties, and I would hate to think that I might have offended him."

"He set off a few days ago, to speak with Bard about the rebuilding of the two cities and how we might aid one another." Thorin's eyes softened, though he otherwise appeared grave. "I get the impression there is more to his little trip then just that, but as long as he returns whole and brings some word from the Bowman, I will not contest his claim. It's been an arduous journey and a battle the likes of which he should not have seen in all his life, and if he wishes to destroy some targets alongside the new Lord of Dale now that we have peace, I'm more than happy to allow him the reprieve."

"Right." Bilbo's smile turned somewhat relieved. "As long as I didn't make him angry with me."

"Believe me, if you had earned his ire, you would know." Thorin snorted. "He does not hesitate to make his anger known, even to me. In that, he is a true Durin without doubt; it rather runs in the family."

"I never could have imagined." Bilbo was rather gratified to see that his teasing had been understood as such, judging by Thorin's quiet chuckle. "But honestly, I don't wish to keep you. If your so-called advisers are indeed working against you, that is all the more reason why you should not spend your time amusing a convalescent."

"Do grant me some reprieve, please." Thorin touched his hand again. "I promise I am not neglecting my duties by being here."

Bilbo gave him a careful look, then narrowed his eyes. "Being here is not one of your duties."

"Perhaps not, but showing proper gratitude for your aid is, and it would not be very courteous of me to extend my thanks via a third party. Therefore, my visiting you is certainly within the scope of my duties, and I can only apologise that it has taken so long before I could take the time to do so."

"Very well, then." He might have argued further, but honestly, it was taking all his calm not to get flustered at such words. "But don't think I will accept that excuse twice. I did not help you win your mountain back just so some wily politicians could steal it away while you sit by my bed offering apologies."

"Duly noted." Thorin stood up and smiled, and it was his true smile, the one that Bilbo could scarcely believe could ever be directed at him. "I suppose I shall simply have to come up with a new excuse for the next time, hmm?"

It was the fault of that smile, really, that stupid smile was to blame and nothing else, because there was no other reason why Bilbo would have been left gaping like that without a response while Thorin walked off, easy as you please.

Dwarves. Honestly. How on Earth was a respectable hobbit supposed to deal with such things?

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Thorin couldn't quite stifle a sigh as he finally reached his rooms at the end of the day. The day had been a busy one, as all days seemed to be as of late, and he was more than ready for a moment of
peace and quiet.

He took the crown from his head as the door closed behind him, setting it carefully at a small table nearby. It was not the heavy thing Thrór had worn, the one he had claimed for his own in the depth of his madness, but a fine thing wrought of mithril and silver, some of its construction so delicate it might have seemed elven work if not for the sharp angles and firm lines. He did not believe the madness lay in the crown, knew well enough his own vulnerability to the sickness before he ever lay hands on the thing, but if there was anything he could do to lessen the chances of that, he would do so without hesitation.

He could not allow himself to fall to the madness again. For the sake of his people and all he loved, he would not.

He walked further into his small apartment, shedding his heavy outer robe as he did so. These were not the opulent royal apartments that Thrór had occupied in his time; those had been torn out by the worm for their gold and gems, and again, Thorin found himself not even wishing for their return. The rooms he had taken for himself had been hastily cleaned in the part of the mountain that used to house important guests, one of the finer apartments there, quite fit for a king but mostly intact from the worm's wrath. In any case, it was more than he could have ever dreamed of during his countless years in exile.

"Don't you look chipper."

Thorin merely raised a brow as he found the figure seated quite comfortably in one of his chairs. "I'm glad you find it so amusing. Chances are you are sighting into your own future, here."

Fíli shrugged, toying with the small circlet in his hands. "Not for a while yet, I hope. This thing is heavy enough, I can wait a while before I take on yours."

"Let us both hope it's a long while yet coming, then." Thorin walked over to the box that held his pipeweed, what little there was left of it. Few traders had yet managed to make their way here in the wake of the battle, and those who did carried mostly food and other necessary goods. Between the ruin of Laketown and the long neglect of Erebor both their wares were gone, and while he supposed he could have demanded for some extra comforts for himself, that was not the kind of king he wished to be.

"Indeed." Fíli kept his eyes on the circlet he passed through his hands. It was a simple thing, little more than a smooth circle of gold well fit for his head, but Thorin suspected he saw quite a lot more than the metal itself. "I heard you offered to buy all that traders bring in and share that with Dale."

"Indeed." He packed his pipe, not hurrying the task. "It makes more sense than one of us buying everything and charging the other, or letting the traders play on our desperation to hike up the prices for both. Besides, the only ones who have yet reached us are those from Iron Hills, and I dare say they will give us a better price than they would to the men."

"Not all are happy that you're just giving away food to the men."

"It's part of their payment." As though he allowed his decisions be swayed by those who would have held onto each last grubby coin. That was a darkness he would not fall into again. "Even more so than the last time, it was through our actions that the worm destroyed their homes. Even if they had not had the Arkenstone to trade for, it would not have been honourable for us to deny them compensation." Which was entirely different than keeping the promise that had been forced from him in exchange for his freedom and life.
"You know, I kind of like hearing you speak like that." As he glanced at his sister-son, Fíli was looking at him at last, his eyes almost twinkling. "I like this Thorin better."

"Good. I'll just have you smack me over the head if I ever seem to fall to the sickness again. Don't look at me like that; if there's anyone who can do it, it's my heir." And it had been proved he would not even listen to Dwalin when he sank deep enough. Perhaps his sister-sons would have more success than that.

"Aye, I'll do it if I must, but I hope it never comes to that." The gaze Fíli now gave him was that of a serious adult, not a boy still playing at adventure. For better or worse, he had grown during their journey.

Thorin was only grateful he was still here to see this changed dwarf.

There were whispers already, in tones as close to reverent as dwarves were capable of, of the way Fíli had carried himself in battle. They spoke of the way he had made his way through the waves of orcs, crying out challenges to any who would try to pass him, to take Erebor with their filthy hands. It was so great an image Thorin might have thought it a mere battle tale had he not been there himself, had he not seen the glory of the warrior his sweet little sister-son had become. He had seen the sun set behind Fíli's sturdy form, lighting up his hair in a glowing halo, dark blood dripping from his blades as the curses fell from his lips.

Fíli the Golden, they called him, for his hair and his defence of the shimmering Erebor alike, and Thorin could not have thought of a dwarf better suited for such a name. Yes, Fíli was made of gold and mithril and all things precious, and as much pride as he carried in finally sitting upon the throne under the mountain there was yet more in the knowledge that he would one day have leave to trust it in the hands of someone so strong of heart and soul.

Gold madness would not take Fíli, no matter the yield of Erebor's mines or the riches of its halls. How could it? He bore all the gold he could need in his person.

"You look thoughtful." Fíli paused. "By which I mean you actually forgot to light your pipe. Is something the matter?"

"Just thinking." He made to light the pipe now, then took a seat himself. "So. What can you tell me about what your brother is up to?"

"He's down in Dale. I thought you knew that."

"Oh, certainly I've been made aware of it. I just wonder what exactly is keeping him there. If it was indeed just talks with Bard, he might have at least shown his face once or twice." There was a fleeting hint of something almost like guilt on Fíli's face before he hurried to hide it, and now, wasn't that interesting. "You know what it is, don't you."

"I may or may not." Please. As though the boys could ever truly lie to him. "It's not something that's mine to share, though."

"You think I would be angry with him." That much was clear.

"You might be." Now Fíli was practically squirming. So much for keeping confidences. He'd have to learn himself out of that habit if he was ever to deal with a councilful of idiots.

"And would this have to do with a certain elven lady Bofur may have mentioned?" At the plain surprise on Fíli's face, Thorin sighed. "Please. According to Bofur his interest was plain as day, especially when he made to make promises in front of all the assorted men. He told me so I wouldn't
end up catching the rumour mill through Nori once the tale had grown into something quite indecent."

"He loves her." Fíli's voice grew quiet, his eyes again fixed on the circlet. "At first I thought it was just some silly infatuation, but... he asked her to come with him, when we left for Erebor. And when she would not, he gave her mother's runestone as a promise. And ever since... I know my brother, Uncle, better than myself sometimes. I've never seen him so serious about something."

"I see." He took a puff or two from his pipe, turning this over in his head. "And would this be the elf who healed him in Laketown? And then rose against Thranduil when he made to leave?"

"It's more than that." Fíli shook his head. "She was banished from his court, for aiding us, it seems. Ever since the battle she's been living in Dale because there's nowhere else for her to go. I hear Bard's quite pleased with her healing skills."

"So she's definitely not in Thranduil's favour, then." Which was a point in her favour in Thorin's eyes, at least. "And what do you think are Kíli's intentions for her?"

"I know he plans to court her." Fíli looked at him again, almost desperate. "I — please don't deny him that, Uncle. If you do, I don't know what he might do. I wouldn't put it past him to run off with her, and then we'd have a right mess in our hands."

"Calm down, lad." Oh, there was still a small part of him that reared up in protest, yelled into his ear about honour and duty and filthy deceiving elves, but for now, he pushed it back. It sounded an awful lot like the part that had hissed at the idea of parting from even one piece of gold, anyway. "I have no intention of parting him from her."

"You — what?" Fíli blinked in surprise. "But — she's an elf."

"Yes. And from what I hear, one that's as different from Thranduil as they come, in as much as I believe one elf is different from another." He shook his head. "Moreover, I know how you boys get when you have your heads set on something. You're right, if I denied him his wish, he would run off and get into trouble and then your mother would bash my head in with her favourite axe, and I would hate to see her ruining it on my hard skull." His lips twitched. "I do expect him to court her properly and not rush things along. It's no small matter, I wouldn't think, falling for someone who will never join him in the Halls. If she accepts his suit, and they are both still in agreement after the courtship period, I will see them wed and enjoy the knowledge that even one of Thranduil's own would rather have a dwarf for a mate than his precious shining son."

"But... why?" There was something akin to desperation in Fíli's eyes, and it tore at Thorin's heart to know he had put that feeling there. "I mean, I'm not complaining, but why? You hate elves, always have. Annoying Thranduil isn't enough to make you change your mind."

"Perhaps not." He stood, walking over to the fireplace. The fire that someone had started, Fíli perhaps, was starting to wane, and he added some wood while considering his words. "I came close to losing both of you during the battle," he said at last at some length. "Closer than I ever would have wished. And while I have felt fear before, I have never before felt such pain as I did that day." The pain of seeing blood in Fíli's fair hair, of Kíli's face ashen and unmoving on the battlefield.

The pain of seeing a small body, so much smaller than a dwarf, motionless on the ground amidst the fallen warriors.

Fíli said nothing, waiting for him to continue. Thorin stared at the rekindled fire for a moment before he did so, not quite ready to face his nephew just yet.
"I have reclaimed my home, and I have fallen to the sickness that claimed my grandfather, and almost cast aside everything important for the sake of glittering gold and a single shimmering stone." It would have shocked most to hear him speak so dismissively of the Arkenstone, but Fíli did not react. Though then, he had seen Thorin's madness, had seen the depths of it. "Now that I am of sound mind and heart again, I would give away every last coin under the mountain to guarantee the safety and happiness of those close to me."

"That's the uncle I know," Fíli murmured, and Thorin wasn't entirely sure the words were meant for him. "That's the king I'd follow."

"So, if seeing your brother wed to an elf is the price of having him happy and by my side, as opposed to lost to me in death or exile? By Mahal, I will carve her wedding beads with my own two hands if that's what it takes."

"Thank you." The words were only barely louder than the murmur before. "I'll admit I was worried."

"And I don't blame you for that." Thorin turned around again, giving an exaggerated sigh. "I suppose I'll have to ask Bard to act as a chaperon, as long as she is living in Dale. For all that it's probably a lost cause either way, I do have to at least keep up the appearances of propriety. Your mother's going to have my braids either way for letting him be alone with his chosen while I presumably did not know of the interest; if I didn't take any measures now, she'd take my beard as well."

"Now, now. Mother wouldn't be that unreasonable, I'm sure." And yet Fíli was grinning with amusement at his impending doom, because really, these boys had absolutely no respect for their uncle and king.

Fíli's hair was golden in the firelight and there was no blood to be seen, though, so Thorin was rather content for the moment.

* Bilbo did not look up from the book he'd managed to get his hands on even as he heard the door being opened. "You know, while I am somewhat grateful that you have started to find actual reasons to visit me, I actually do not require more than four separate people to tell me that Glóin's group is doing well. In fact, I would be quite happy just to hear the news once for every message he sends."

"Glóin's doing well? That's good to know." The voice did make him raise his eyes, now, being one he hadn't heard in a few days now. The dwarf standing in the doorway had likewise been missing from the frequent visits as of late.

"Kíli! It's good to see you again, my lad. I was rather worried I offended you somehow." Bilbo reached for a bookmark, careful not to aggravate his wound too much. This was clearly more important than any reading, and besides, he was starting to get a headache. Not that he would have ever admitted that, or someone would have instantly announced he would never be fit to strain his eyes by reading again thanks to his head wound, no matter how well it seemed to have healed.

"Uh. Sorry for just disappearing on you like that." Kíli gave him a slightly sheepish grin. "It's just that I thought of something I could do to help things, and didn't stop to leave a note or anything. So, ah, sorry?"

"You're quite definitely forgiven. Do come in. What I've said about not spending all your time here does not apply when you've first made me worry so." Which was perhaps selfish of him, but then, he trusted someone would come to inform them if Kíli was actually required elsewhere.
"I hope you don't mind, but I brought someone else along as well." There was a kind of excitement in Kíli's tone that made Bilbo curious as to the identity of this guest. Probably not one of the Company; they certainly seemed to think nothing of dropping by whenever they could. The only one besides Kíli he hadn't seen at least twice in the last four days was Glóin, and that was because he was taking a group of warriors west to bring official word to the Blue Mountains about their retaking of Erebor. Perhaps some unfamiliar dwarf, then, or even Bard or one of his children?

A figure appeared in the doorway as Kíli stepped out of the way, tall enough to have to duck their head to step in. Not a dwarf, and not even one of Bard's family, tall and slim and with red hair falling over her shoulders.

Kíli had brought along an elf.

"I do not believe we have formally met, Master Baggins." The she-elf nodded at him in greeting. She wasn't dressed in official armour, not like the army Thranduil had led to Erebor's gates, but even Bilbo's rather unaccustomed eyes could tell she was prepared for combat if need be. "I am Tauriel, formerly of Mirkwood, at your service." There was a hint of something dark in her tone, sorrow perhaps, but her eyes were soft as she glanced at the grinning Kíli by her side.

"Ah. Bilbo Baggins, at yours." The name tugged at his memory somehow. "You're the one who healed Kíli in Laketown, aren't you? Óin talked about you, said you were rather good." For an elf, Óin had added with some disdain in his voice, but then there was no reason for Bilbo to repeat every word that had been said.

"I am not a healer by trade, but I do know something of the healing arts." Tauriel offered him a small smile. "That is, I believe, why I have been brought to your side."

"Uh. Not that I'm not grateful or anything, but are you sure you should be here?" Bilbo frowned. "I know there have been some elf healers around, but I'm pretty sure Thorin hasn't let any of them this deep in the mountain, and Óin might take it as a personal affront if anyone else were to treat the Company." Surprised though he had been to find that he still counted among them even after his actions.

"Thorin knows that she is here." If at all possible, Kíli's grin only grew wider. And that? That required some explanations, and soon. "And Óin said he can't do much more for you right now, didn't he? So I thought there couldn't be any harm in letting her look at least."

"I cannot promise to make much of a difference at this point," Tauriel warned as she came up to Bilbo's bedside. "My expertise is mainly in keeping someone grievously injured alive long enough to bring them to a proper healer. However, I have promised to see if there is anything I can do, if you would allow me to see your injuries."

"Ah." Bilbo was doing his best not to be embarrassed, really he was, she probably had seen much stranger things in her time, but he still had to fight down a faint blush as he sat up straighter in the bed and took off his shirt. At least he still had his trousers on, so it wasn't entirely indecent, though it still felt quite improper to be without a shirt in front of a lady. "It's, well, I'm sure it looks worse than it is."

Tauriel's eyes narrowed as Bilbo got his shirt off, taking in the bruising over most of his chest. "What happened to you?"

"I, ah, kind of got stomped on by an orc?" Bilbo scratched the back of his head, feeling somewhat sheepish. "I was wearing armour, and it did stop blades, but it didn't really do much to stop the crushing. Óin says I'm lucky none of my broken ribs punctured anything, and that there's no internal
bleeding, but even with his remedies it hurts to even breathe, never mind move much."

"He also hit his head," Kíli added in a helpful tone. "Got us quite worried with that, though it seems nothing worse came from that."

"I see." Tauriel ran feather-light fingers over his chest, taking note as he winced at a particularly painful touch. "Well, if it's just the ribs that are paining you, the best course of action is simply to try and breathe as usual to let them heal themselves. There is a pain remedy I could make if I can find the necessary herbs, though I might have to consult with Master Óin first on what he has been giving you."

"I would be grateful." Bilbo sighed. "Not to say Óin's concoctions aren't helping, because they are, but frankly I'm not sure dwarves and hobbits agree on what is an acceptable amount of pain."

"Óin is a master in such things." The new voice cut in before Tauriel could respond. "Though I suspect he might be giving you smaller doses of his remedies than he might to a dwarf, on account of you being so very small."

"Thorin." Bilbo straightened again, though his eyes did flick towards Kíli. The boy tensed, for all his reassurances that Thorin knew of Tauriel's presence. "I didn't mean to say —"

"I know, I know. You are far too polite to insult a dwarf's abilities behind his back, for all that you might have a few words to their face." Thorin's lips twitched into a small smile, just for a moment, before he turned serious again as he looked at Tauriel. "So you are the elf I have heard so much about."

"I believe so." Tauriel took a step away from Bilbo's bedside, turning to face Thorin. She was quite a bit taller than him, for all that Thorin was tall for a dwarf, her simple green clothes a stark contrast to the regal blue robes that told Bilbo Thorin had come straight from a meeting with his council. "And you are Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain."

"So I am, now. And I see my sister-son has brought you quite a ways under said mountain." There was no open hostility that Bilbo could see in either Thorin's expression or his voice, though there was a certain wariness to his bearing that didn't match his usual reservations with people he didn't know.

"I believe so." Thorin, in turn, took a quick glance over Bilbo's shoulder. "He asked me to see your burglar, to see if I could ease his pain to allow him to leave his bed."

"Is that so." Again, Thorin's eyes came to rest on Bilbo, meeting his gaze for a moment before flicking down for a moment. "I suppose that's as good an explanation as I can expect for you walking in and starting to undress members of my Company."

Bilbo flushed at the implication, and Kíli seemed equally flustered, but Tauriel gave no visible reaction to the barb. "I assure you there is but one member of your Company I would have any interest in disrobing for another purpose, and that will have to wait."

"You're not exactly helping the matters, Thorin." Bilbo belatedly remembered to grab his shirt and pull it over his head. His hurry sent another wave of pain flashing through him, and he had to halt for a moment. When he finally got it pulled all the way down, Thorin was watching him with an unreadable look. "Did you actually have a reason to come here besides teasing me?"
"Several, actually." Thorin took on his serious expression, again, the one he wore for matters of state. "One of them was to see this elf that Kíli apparently insists on dragging around."

Tauriel tensed a bit, barely perceptible but definitely there. "I was under the impression you had given your permission for my presence."

"Oh, believe me, if I had not you would not have made it this far." Thorin gave Tauriel a small nod. "I have heard enough good things about you, and high enough pleas for your sake, that I will reserve my judgement of you until I know you better. I cannot promise to ever be fond of you, but if the Elvenking has indeed cast you out, my gates are open to you."

"I hope I will not give you reason to dislike me any more, then."

"I'm sure we both hope that." Thorin nodded again. "And do you have family left in Mirkwood?"

If Tauriel was surprised by the question, she did not show it. "None alive who would claim me."

"Well. That certainly simplifies things." Then, before Bilbo could demand to know just what Thorin meant by that particular statement, the king turned towards Kíli. "Kíli. I had an… enlightening, shall we say, conversation with your brother." As there was no response, he went on after a second, "I do hope you realise that as a prince of Durin's line, you must meet certain expectations. And as such, this elf of yours is only allowed to remain here on certain… conditions."

"And what would those conditions be?" Kíli was, if possible, even tenser now. "Not besmirching my line's honour by having a public affair with an elf?" Oh. So that was what was going on.

Thorin lifted his eyebrows. "That would be quite preferable, yes."

"Well, forget it." Bilbo had rarely seen Kíli actually angry before, but there was a kind of fury in his eyes now that was hard to miss. "I will not treat my One like some dirty little secret just because you refuse to get your great big kingly head out of your hairy arse when it comes to elves."

Thorin appeared entirely unaffected by the insults. "And a good thing it is, too, given that I never suggested such a disgraceful thing."

"So you can take your shiny little crown and shove it right up your —" Kíli paused and blinked as Bilbo managed a small cough. "Wait, what?"

"I never asked you to keep her a secret, nor will I ever do so. As though it would be possible to hide such a thing, anyway." Thorin snorted. "Trust me, I know better than to part a Durin from his heart's desire. All I ask is that you remember your position and court her properly, as a prince should."

"King Thorin." Tauriel was the one that spoke now, as Kíli seemed to be left gaping. "As the head of your line and in place of his mother, are you giving your formal permission for our courtship?"

"I am." Thorin gave a curt nod, as serious as Bilbo had ever seen him about anything. "Of course, I will expect everything to happen in an appropriate manner, but I'm sure matters such as chaperons can be arranged easily enough."

"Well, technically, chaperons aren't required until we're formally courting." Apparently Kíli had recovered enough from his shock to start causing his poor uncle trouble again. "And that won't happen until I present my first courtship gift."

"True enough." To Bilbo's surprise, Thorin still gave no appearance of taking notice of his nephew's schemes. "But given that I do expect you to wait the full formal courting period before you marry, I
am somewhat surprised to hear you haven't already prepared your gift for her." He paused, just long enough for Kili's eyes to widen, then added, "And no, simply picking something up from the treasury is not sufficient."

Kili made a small, strangled sound, then fled from the room. Tauriel gave the two of them a sharp glance, then followed him out, leaving Bilbo and Thorin alone.

"Well." Bilbo sank back against the pillows. "I have to say that wasn't quite what I expected."

"I presume you mean my permission." Thorin gave a small shrug. "As I have already told Fili, I would rather have the lad here and married to an elf than never see him again. It may not be what I would have wished for him, but if she is the one Mahal has prepared for him, I'm not good enough a smith to hammer them apart."

"Thank you." It seemed rather insufficient, but it was the best he could offer right now. "Truly, thank you. I... I know this cannot be easy for you."

"I'm not sure why you would have cause to thank me, but you are welcome nevertheless." Thorin walked closer to his bed, now. "So the pain has not subsided?"

"No, I'm afraid." Bilbo sighed, then regretted it as the movement made the pain flare anew. "Óin's remedy does ease it a bit, but as it stands I do fear I have some quite trying times ahead until I heal."

"Perhaps the elf's skills will bring you some relief." Thorin's tone was rather doubtful, but the mere fact that he was making this suggestion was quite the victory, Bilbo mused. "In the meantime, is there anything I can do to ease your pain?"

"I would say a distraction would be welcome, but I find myself fearing you are again neglecting your duties just to amuse a poor little hobbit." Bilbo lifted an eyebrow. "Unless, of course, your 'several reasons' were not limited to meeting Tauriel and scaring your poor nephew."

"Ah! Right. That reminds me." Thorin smiled now, an actual smile, though there was a hint of tiredness to it. "I thought you'd like to know that Glóin's group sent word that they are progressing safely on their journey."

Bilbo barely resisted the urge to hide his head in his hands. Dwarves. They were definitely going to be the death of him one of these days.

However, as he decided as he saw the rather pleased look on Thorin's face, he was fortunate enough it was not to be today.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Though Tauriel brings Bilbo some relief from his pain, Kíli is another matter. When the prince gets a strange idea, Bilbo is worried, Thorin is annoyed, and Fíli gets angry enough to startle even himself. Of course, there is still the matter of how Tauriel relates to the rather unfortunate situation.

One thing is for sure: These confounded dwarves certainly have their ways of distracting Bilbo.

Thorin had little love for elves, but even he could admit they had their uses.

For all that Lord Elrond might have sought to hinder them on the journey, his aid had also been invaluable, and Thorin was not so ungrateful as to forget that in a hurry. While Thranduil would never earn anything but his ire, he was reasonable enough to feel some grudging gratefulness to the arrogant elf's son for his help in the battle, and he had made sure the elf healers who had volunteered their aid afterwards would be treated with as much respect as his people could muster for any pointy-eared weed eater. Simply being an elf did not make someone utterly without worth, and he could admit that, thank you.

Then there was Tauriel. Tauriel, who had saved his sister-son's life and then promptly stolen his heart, and who even Thorin could see would not be leaving any time soon.

There was also the part where she had been banished by Thranduil for her aid to dwarves. He wasn't about to forget that.

Now, though, he found himself with renewed gratitude for her skills and aid. He hadn't known of Kíli's agony at the time, had only heard of her part in the battle afterwards. For all that he owed her for his nephew's life and quite possibly his happiness, all that paled next to seeing it all for himself.

There was no miracle here, no starlight and barely saved lives. However, as he found the hobbit sitting up in bed without a flinch for the first time since the battle, looking almost surprised with his own success, Thorin found he could not regret his decision to allow her to remain.

"I take it you're feeling better." He held back from stepping in to help as Bilbo worked his legs over the edge of the bed, taking a moment before attempting to stand. "The remedy is working, then?"

"Quite well, yes." Bilbo offered him a faint smile before pushing himself up to his feet, and that, that was something Thorin had been waiting to see for a while now. "Óin's does make me feel better, I mean no slight to his skills, but now I can actually move about." He took a few steps, and if there was any pain he was hiding it well.

"I suspect you'll be happy to see something besides this one room for a change." Thorin held himself back from offering a hand, since Bilbo seemed to be doing well. For all that Bilbo often had a word or a dozen about dwarvish pride, Thorin knew by now that a hobbit's pride was nothing to sniff at, either. "Which reminds me, I should let the boys know. They've taken it upon themselves to prepare a set of rooms for you in the new royal wing. I'm not sure how far they are in their efforts, with
everything else to be done, but I'm sure they'd like to know that you'll be ready to move in as soon as they are done."

"What?" Bilbo seemed startled, looking at Thorin from where he had been inspecting his usual clothes, newly washed and repaired as best as anyone had been able. They were quite worn after the various ordeals he had been through, but Thorin had thought he might still prefer to wear them after spending so long in an over-sized dwarven tunic during his bed rest, at least until they could arrange something better for him. "I — no, that wouldn't be proper at all!"

"I don't see why not." Thorin shrugged his shoulders. "I know you are anxious for your armchair and fireplace, but you still need time to recover, and by the time you are ready for the road, winter will have closed off the mountain passes. Whatever your wishes, you will have to remain here for a time, and if your services did not earn you more than a bed in a dusty room I would consider any remnants of my honour lost indeed."

"I — even so, the royal wing?" Bilbo fiddled with his clothes in a nervous manner. "Surely that would be simply improper!"

"Why so?" Thorin lifted an eyebrow. "If you are concerned about space, don't be. The space we have claimed was designed to house several sets of guests at once. Even taking into account the eventual arrival of my sister, and the fact that Kíli will want his elf moved in at some point, there is more than ample room for one little hobbit to set his bedroom and a study besides."

"But it's meant for the royal family!" Bilbo shook his head vehemently. "No, it would be quite against any propriety for me to be there."

There was a deep temptation to point out that he was the king and thus the final authority on what was or wasn't proper, but he held the words back. Somehow he didn't think Bilbo would have reacted well to such decrees. "You have been granted royal protection," he said instead. "That means that you are as good as family, and certainly should be treated as such. Besides," he added, knowing this would be his greatest hope of convincing Bilbo, "the boys would be quite upset if their efforts had been for naught. I don't believe I exaggerate if I say they have come to view you as another uncle; of course they would want to see you housed nearby."

This left the hobbit somewhat flustered, but his protests quieted a bit. He then started fiddling with his clothes again, prompting Thorin to turn away. True, it was hardly anything he hadn't seen before, but the poor hobbit had suffered enough insult to his decency during his recovery. Thorin listened to the muffled sounds of a hobbit struggling with clothes, examining with idle interest the book Bilbo had set on the nightstand. It was written in Westron, and in far too good a condition to be spoils from the royal library. Someone in the Company must have gotten it for him, salvage from the ruins of Laketown perhaps, or a rare find from the traders.

Thorin really should have thought of it himself.

A small sound from behind caught his attention, a hobbit clearing his throat no doubt, and he turned again. Bilbo was properly dressed now, the tunic neatly folded at the foot of the bed. The clothes were worn indeed, as Thorin had suspected, yet even in their current condition they seemed to lend some ease to Bilbo's previously tense shoulders. At least, they did until the hobbit seemed to grow uneasy under his gaze, kicking at the ground.

"So. Ah." Bilbo paused, rubbing his hands together. "Did you have reason to come here? I mean, besides making sure Tauriel hadn't poisoned me or anything." Thorin almost answered the accusation, only to be stopped by the slightest twitch of Bilbo's lips. Instead, he snorted and managed a smile.
"In fact, I was wondering if you would care to join me for a meal. I'm sure you have rather missed the luxury of eating at a proper table."

Bilbo's eyes lit up at the mention of food, as Thorin had suspected they would. A moment later, though, this was followed by a frown. "Are you sure that would be all right? I'm sure you are busy, and —"

"Even a king must eat, as I'm sure you'll agree." He refused to feel guilty for cutting Bilbo off before he got too far in his self-deprecation. "And with all the demands on my time, at least allow me to choose my company for this bit of time."

"Ah. Right." Bilbo seemed flustered for a moment, then nodded. "Well, if you're certain it's no trouble, I'd be happy to keep you company."

"Most excellent." With a smirk, Thorin waved his hand towards the door. "Shall we, then? I believe Bombur has prepared everything."

"Lead the way." And yet Bilbo settled to a step beside him, not following him. That was just as well, as it made it much easier for him to keep an eye on the hobbit for any signs of lingering pain.

There was no hidden pain that Thorin could notice, though Bilbo did seem rather more tired than he should have been as they arrived at the prepared dining room. That was no wonder, of course; he had spent quite a lot of time in bed lately, so he would need exercise to get back to his old strength.

Bilbo made a happy sound as he saw the spread prepared for them, a fact that Thorin noted with satisfaction. It was hardly as magnificent a feast as the one the Company had enjoyed at Bilbo's house, but then there was hardly room for such variety on a table that might have seated two or three more besides the two of them. Even so, Bombur had clearly done his best with the still somewhat limited resources, preparing the best meal he could to make up for all the time Bilbo had been limited to whatever he could eat in his bed without too much of a mess. Not that Bilbo was likely to cause a mess either way, scrupulous as he was with his table manners.

Thorin might have spent as much time watching Bilbo eat as he did feeding himself, but he figured that was an adequate use of his rare moment of peace. They had some conversation, though not much; it appeared a hobbit did not think much of the idea of interrupting a perfectly good dinner simply to exchange pleasantries. Even so, Thorin felt rather entertained, and found a rare smile playing at his lips.

Of course, this only lasted until Bilbo paused, giving him a suspicious glance. "Are you making fun of me?"

"Hm?" Thorin blinked. "Certainly not. Why would you think so?"

"You are smiling."

"So I appear to be. And here I thought I might at least be allowed some happiness now with a kingdom reclaimed and a friend recovered." Thorin lifted his eyebrows, again amused as Bilbo took on a somewhat flustered look.

"Ah, of course I didn't mean it like that! My goodness no, I just — you just usually don't —" Bilbo fell silent for a moment, then sighed. "I'm only digging myself deeper, aren't I?"

"Perhaps so," Thorin admitted in a light tone. "And yet, you are far more pleasant than many a dwarf in my council."
"I'd damn well hope so, going by what you've told me about them," Bilbo grumbled, only to blink. "Ah. I mean no insult by that, of course."

"Oh, by Durin's beard, Bilbo," Thorin sighed, and took no small amount of pleasure at seeing the hobbit first startle, then smile at Thorin's use of his name. "Feel free to launch any insult you wish at those fools, and I will simply agree with you. And even if I did take some offence, fret not. After everything I have done to you, you could well stab me to death with a dinner fork and still leave me in your debt for the greatest insult and injury suffered."

Bilbo's startled expression only lingered a moment longer before he sniffed. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of putting cutlery anywhere near a dwarf," he said with the utmost dignity. "I've heard they are often riddled with parasites, you know."

"Aye, indeed," Thorin replied with all the solemnity he could muster. "Not even fit for a troll to eat, I reckon."

Bilbo laughed, then, a sound he had quite missed hearing, and Thorin just joined him when there was a knock at the door. Forcing himself to some semblance of solemnity, though still with a curl to his lip, Thorin turned towards the door. "Enter."

The door was opened quietly, and after a moment, a familiar figure stepped through, hesitating as though unsure of his welcome. Bilbo's face, as Thorin glanced at him, brightened at the sight of Ori, who likewise smiled at Bilbo before looking at Thorin and turning serious again. "Ah. That is."

"Speak." The lad looked better than he had on the journey, now, with clothes as new as could be arranged in the mountain and his hair and beard properly clean and braided, though his hands were still stained with ink whenever Thorin saw him and he insisted on wearing his old gloves, even when he was sitting in on the royal council to take official notes. After all, there was no scribe Thorin would have trusted more, and he would accept no substitutes, no matter what some in the council might have grumbled.

He'd have to ask Balin to see about making the lad's appointment a permanent one soon. Perhaps it would help Ori gain some much-needed confidence.

"Your Majesty." Ori bit his lip for a second, apparently fretting over what he was to say. "If I may say something?"

"We are not presently in court, Ori," he reminded the younger dwarf. "You are one of the Company, and I will not have you stand on ceremony while we are in private."

"Ah. Right." The young scribe looked somewhat flustered, then straightened himself. He seemed to be steeling himself as though for battle, which Thorin supposed facing the King might well have been for one with such a gentle nature. Gentle for a dwarf, in any case. "I didn't want to disturb you, I know how busy you are all the time," the lad said, as though he wasn't just as busy, accompanying Thorin through most of his daily duties to mark down everything that required it. "It's only, there's something I thought you might need to know."

"Oh?" Thorin frowned. It was hard to imagine anything that might have required his attention that would be brought to him by Ori rather than any of the others. "And what is it?"

Ori drew a deep breath. "It's about Kili." His fingers twisted around the sleeve of his tunic, but he refused to bend under Thorin's gaze. Steel indeed.

"Oh? And what kind of trouble has my sister-son gotten himself into this time?" Come to think of it,
he hadn't seen Kíli all day. That was hardly strange, he was busy and the lads were running around all the time anyway, but he hadn't even been there when Tauriel had finally put together her remedy for Bilbo. That, at least, should have brought Kíli to attention.

Ori seemed to falter for a moment, his eyes falling to the ground while his mouth opened uselessly. Thorin almost prompted him again, but refrained as Bilbo laid a hand on his arm, stalling him. Indeed, a moment later Ori lifted his gaze again, renewed resolve blazing in his eyes.

"I think he has gone to the ruins of Laketown." Before Thorin could ask anything further, he added, "To dive for dragon scales."

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Ori was prepared for a strong reaction to his words. However, he hadn't quite counted on the king surging to his feet, knocking his seat out of the way, while Bilbo almost choked on what he was eating, starting to cough. Thorin immediately glanced at the hobbit, only turning his eyes back to Ori when Bilbo waved him away. Then Thorin strode around the table, eyes blazing.

"What did you say?"

"I think he's gone to Laketown," Ori repeated, forcing himself to stand his ground. "I'm not sure, I didn't see him leave or anything, but I overheard something last night and now I can't find him anywhere, and nobody else seems to know where he is, either."

"What did you overhear?" Thorin stood tall in front of him, furrowed brows shadowing his eyes. "Why would he do such a foolish thing?"

"For Tauriel." At seeing the rising ire in Thorin's eyes, he hurried to say, "She didn't ask him! She never would, not something like that. It's just... he's working on his gift for her."

"I'd imagine so, yes." Thorin gave a curt nod. "And what is he planning that he'd have to go freeze himself to death?"

"I, ah, I heard him talking about it with Fíli. He wanted to make her a quiver. He's so good at leatherwork, he thought it'd be a good way to show his craft." It would be a fine gift, Ori was sure of that; Tauriel would surely have nothing to complain about. "Except then he thought he'd better get her some arrows to fill it, too. But it's hard to make an arrow very special, especially when getting the shafts will be hard enough even without going for some fancy wood and for fletching he'll have to use whatever he can shoot outside or go look for chicken remains in the kitchen. So he thought, at least for the arrowheads, if he could get some of Smaug's smaller scales..." He trailed off, unable to continue under the weight of Thorin's glare.

"Dragon scales?" Thorin sounded equal parts angry and disbelieving. "That idiotic sister-son of mine went diving for dragon scales to use as arrowheads?"

"As I said, I'm not sure." Ori clutched his sleeves to keep from fidgeting too much. He hadn't done anything wrong, he shouldn't have been acting like someone guilty of a crime, no matter how the king glowered at him. "As I said, I just overheard them talking, and now I can't find him anywhere, and I thought that's why."

Bilbo had gotten over his coughing fit, now, stepping in before Thorin could say anything. "Thorin, stop glaring at the poor lad. He's not to blame for Kíli's folly."

Thorin sighed and shook his head. "Indeed not. Kíli is foolish enough to cause all his own trouble without need for aid." He looked at Ori again, though his expression was slightly less fearsome now.
"Do you know anything more about his plans?"

"I'm afraid not." Ori clasped his hands together, trying not to wring them. "He, ah, he thought he could get some of the men to take him out on a boat if he paid them. There's still people out there hoping for salvage in the ruins most days, so that part of his plan at least might work."

"Aye, until they decide to keep his gold and leave him to drown. After all, what's one more dead dwarf on top of all the ones we've already had?"

"You shouldn't think so badly of everyone." Even so, even Bilbo looked worried, now. "We should send someone after him."

"Indeed we should." Thorin sighed. "My apologies, Master Baggins. It seems I have to cut our dinner short to go look for Dwalin."

"No, no apologies, Thorin. Only if you don't mind, I'd like to come with you. I'm quite concerned as well, if indeed he has gone off on his own." Bilbo stood up, taking on a determined look. Ori rather suspected that if Thorin denied his request, Bilbo would simply ignore him.

Though then, Bilbo was one of the very few who could get away with ignoring Thorin.

"Follow me, then. I'm hoping the meal has left you strong enough to walk some more." The words might have seemed snide, insulting even, but the glance Thorin gave to Bilbo betrayed no such feelings. In fact, had it been anyone but Thorin, Ori might have almost said he looked concerned. Bilbo certainly seemed to take no slight at the comment, merely offering a small smile and nod in return.

Well. Wasn't that so very interesting.

Ori figured they didn't need him any further, as his knowledge on the matter was rather limited to what he had already said. He followed the two out to the corridor to see them walking off in search of Dwalin, then turned to the other direction toward the rooms he shared with his brothers.

Of course, as his luck would have it, he only made it just past the nearest corner before his way was cut short.

It probably said a lot about Ori's life that when he found himself snatched close to an unseen assailant with a knife pressed to his throat, his first thought was to scold Nori for startling him so. However, the words died on his lips as he realised the body he had been drawn against was taller and slimmer than his brother.

"So here I am, on my way to greet Bilbo since I heard he was on his feet again," Fíli said, his voice almost sweet in Ori's ears if not for the effect of the knife. "And what should I hear, if not a certain little scribe betraying my brother's confidence. Playing at being a spy like your brother, hmm?"

"I haven't spread anything told me in confidence," Ori replied, doing his best not to panic. The knife wasn't pressing in, not quite, but it was close enough that even talking was quite the harrowing experience. "Nor have I spied on anyone. I overheard you talking and thought the king should know."

"And why would you think that?" Fíli's arm tightened around his chest. "I know you're not after a reward, not with your share from the hoard. You wouldn't be punished for letting him go, either, since we didn't even know you'd heard us. So why would you go babbling to Thorin? To get on his good side? That's a hopeless battle if I ever saw one; he doesn't even like us half the time. At least you could have waited until Kíli was too far for them to catch."
"Because letting everyone think he just disappeared is such a good idea." Fíli made a small sound, not entirely agreeing, but the knife moved a bit further from his skin. Great, he might soon start breathing again. "I was afraid of what might happen when his absence was noticed."

"Afraid? Afraid of what?" He probably should have been ashamed of how easily Fíli turned him around and slammed him against the nearest wall, hard enough that Ori winced in pain as an arm pressed over his chest. "What is it you're afraid of? That Kíli might actually start courting Tauriel properly? Is that what you're trying to prevent?" Now, the tip of his knife was under Ori's chin, sharp and teasing.

"The opposite." Ori swallowed, doing his best not to panic. He knew Fíli wouldn't actually hurt him, not like this, not here. Well. He was reasonably sure anyway. "I was afraid of what might happen to her."

"Oh?" Fíli's eyebrows rose up. "What's this got to do with her?"

"Try to think about the consequences for once in your life." Ori regretted his words as soon as they left his mouth, but it was too late to take them back. Fíli's lips twitched, his brows knitting together in annoyance, and Ori hurried on to explain himself. "Kíli's spent most of his time with her lately. Meanwhile, half the mountain is only tolerating her because Thorin's told them to. They're just looking for the first excuse to openly hate her and you know it." He closed his eyes and swallowed again. He didn't want to see any more of Fíli's glare. "What do you think will happen if he suddenly disappears and she is left behind?"

"Nothing would happen to her." And yet, Fíli's voice suggested he was not entirely convinced of his own words. "That wouldn't make sense. Why'd she save his life and then betray him?"

"You think anyone would listen to sense? They'd go for her and not listen to anyone. Even if you stopped them and told the truth then, no one would ever trust her again." Ori opened his eyes slowly, meeting Fíli's as he gathered his courage for one last point. "Look what you'd do to one you call friend, at the first suspicion they might have betrayed your brother. You think the average dwarf would stay their hand for an elf?"

Fíli blinked, then seemed startled at what he was doing. His knife disappeared in an instant, then his arm before he stepped away. Ori pushed himself away from the wall, drawing a deep breath and trying to ignore the ache at his back where stones had dug into him.

"I'm sorry," Fíli murmured, avoiding his gaze. "That was inexcusable of me. I just — I want Kíli to be happy."

"I've got brothers as well." Ori shook his head. "I'd probably do really stupid things for them, too." Which was not the same as saying it was all right, but it was the best he could offer right now.

"That's not really making me feel better."

"I do apologise. I'm not very good at being comforting while I'm bleeding." Which was probably somewhat mean of him to say, and an exaggeration besides, but as he brushed a tentative hand against his throat it did come away with a hint of blood. Besides, he was sure even Dori wouldn't have scolded him for being snide to someone who threatened him with a knife, even if they were a prince.

Fíli, though, did not seem insulted. If anything, there was shame on his face as he finally looked up at Ori, grimacing at the sight of blood on his fingertips. "I really am sorry," he said, his voice low. "I had no right to do that."
"I've been hurt worse for less of a reason." This apparently failed to reassure Fíli, who only looked more uneasy by the moment. Which, well, which made sense, considering they had been talking about brothers. "Don't worry, I won't tell Dori and Nori about this."

"I… what?" Fíli blinked, finally looking him in the eye. "What do you mean?"

"You're worried about that, aren't you?" Ori tilted his head. "That they'll be mad at you for hurting me."

"You really think that's it?" Fíli looked upset again for some reason. "That the only reason I'd be upset about hurting you is because I fear your brothers?"

"It's what usually makes people feel sorry for it." Ori gave a sort of an awkward shrug. "It's not like I'm good enough a fighter to punish people myself." Not that he wouldn't defend himself when it came to that, assuming the situation was somewhat more permissive of self-defence than a friend's blade on his throat. He was a dwarf, after all. However, he knew very well the limits of his abilities.

"That's just — oh, Ori." Fíli's face twisted with some unidentifiable emotion for a second before he reached out the hand with his knife. Ori almost flinched back again before he realised it was being offered to him hilt first. "Here. It's yours."

"I… what?" Ori blinked. That was not what he had expected, not that he actually knew what to expect in such a strange situation. "What do you mean?"

"The knife." Fíli shook it, waiting for him to grasp it. "Kíli would tell me to melt it down and make something nice for you, but it's a good knife, and I'm afraid I'm more practical than I am dramatic. So, take it, and use it the next time someone hurts you, even if it's me." He paused. "Especially if it's me."

After another moment's hesitation, Ori reached out to take the offered knife. "It's not really my weapon of choice," he murmured.

"So ask Nori to teach you how to hide it and use it. I'm sure he'd be a most skilled instructor."

"Yes, because Nori wouldn't ask why exactly I have one of the crown prince's best knives." It was a fine weapon, indeed, sharp and strong and light all at once. It was also unmistakably Fíli's, with his seal on the end of the pommel.

"So tell him you won it in a wager. Make a fine tale of it, too, of your cunning and intelligence. That'll be sure to impress him." Fíli hummed in thought. "Or I could teach you, if you'd let me. I may not be Nori, but I do know a trick or two, myself."

"You're offering to teach me how to use the weapon you tried to cut my throat with?"

Fíli flinched, still, but hid it under a smile. "Seems a fair trade to me, no? Besides, I've got a feeling Kíli will have little time for me in the foreseeable future, and I do need a sparring partner. It's practically part of my duties as a prince, anyway; if a council meeting turns into a fight, it would be unfortunate indeed if the scribe did not survive to tell the tale."

Ori felt his cheeks warm with a hint of a blush as he turned his eyes down to the blade. "If you wish to train me, I'd be grateful," he murmured. "But you don't need to give me your own knife to do it."

"It's not mine, though, it's yours. I started a fight and I conceded it; you can call it spoils of war." Fíli reached over to close his hand over Ori's, curling it around the hilt of the knife. "If nothing else, it should do well on sharpening your quills."
"I'm sure it will." Ori looked down at the knife, then very carefully tucked it away at his belt. Fíli nodded at him one last time before walking past him, perhaps to rush after his uncle.

If this meant that nobody was around to see the blush that worked its way onto Ori's cheeks, well, all the better.

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After a moment of staring down at the page without actually seeing the words, Bilbo sighed, looking up from the book. The small sitting chamber was quiet, a low fire crackling in the fireplace, neither of its other two occupants saying a word.

"You don't actually think Tauriel did any of this on purpose, do you? Getting Kíli to leave the mountain, that is?"

"Hm?" Balin looked up from where he was perusing some documents at a small desk, one hand stroking his beard. "You mean me personally, or folk in general?"

"Well, I suppose you can only speak for yourself for certain." Bilbo put aside the book he was not truly reading. Even if he hadn't been rather distracted by his worry for Kíli, the sight of Tauriel sitting in a corner sharpening her knife over and over again would have stopped any attempt at concentration. Her actions might have seemed threatening to some, but all Bilbo could see was barely hidden anxiety.

Not that he blamed her for being anxious when she had very politely but firmly been instructed to stay in the chamber with Balin until the situation had been somewhat cleared up. At least Thorin hadn't truly protested when Bilbo had declared his intentions to wait with them, which meant he didn't actually suspect her of any wrongdoing.

Well. At least Bilbo chose to believe so. It would have been quite disheartening to realise that Thorin was, in fact, just that unconcerned about his safety. But then, considering that the opposing force in this matter was Thorin's mistrust of elves, he felt reasonably confident in his assumption.

"Me? Not one bit." Balin shook his head. "If you don't mind me saying this, lassie, you don't strike me as a fool, and you'd be a fool indeed to linger behind if you were the knowing cause of Kíli disappearing, or indeed even aware of his intentions." He paused, pushing aside his documents entirely in favour of taking out his pipe. "And besides, I've seen a young thing concerned for their beloved before a time or two. I'd sooner believe my brother had taken to courting an orc than that you hold any malice toward the younger prince."

Bilbo blinked. For as proper a dwarf as Balin certainly was, that was a very strong statement of support for one who surely would not have enjoyed it under most circumstances. Tauriel seemed to realise this as well, as she inclined her head in a small nod.

"I thank you for your confidence, Master Dwarf," she said, her tone smooth though Bilbo caught a hint of something akin to relief underneath. "Though I have to say it seems strange to hear myself called young by someone who appears to have barely passed his boyhood."

Balin chuckled as he stuffed his pipe. "I'll admit I'm not as old as I could be, but there is also naught young about me. Aye, I know that in mere years you are much my elder, but we all remember our people age differently. Take our Kíli for example." If Bilbo hadn't known better, he would have sworn there was a hint of mischief in Balin's eye. "For a dwarf he is yet barely grown, and for an elf I do suspect he'd be little more than a child."
"Pray do not say such things, Master Dwarf, even in jest." Though Tauriel's tone was wry, Bilbo rather fancied he could hear some tension hidden within. "For all that I know our years are different, I do not much fancy the thought of courting a child."

"I have a name, and I know you know it, with your sharp ears and all. And fret not, lass. I'll admit he's not always the most mature of warriors, but he's old enough to make up his mind on the matters of heart. Even if the way he chooses to go about it may not make it seem so."

"I'll have to take your word on that, Master Balin. I'm left with little recourse, considering how nobody will tell me just where he has gone, only that he has left the mountain on his own." It was true enough; even Bilbo himself had been warned to stay quiet about the details. It had seemed somewhat cruel to him, but he'd trusted the dwarves had their reasons.

He had been hesitant, just for a moment, but the insistence in Thorin's tone had persuaded him, especially as he thought he'd spied a hint of worry hidden underneath all the annoyance he rather understandably felt over his nephew's little escapade.

"Indeed we have not. And for all it may seem worrying, that ought to be a good sign to your reckoning," Balin took a calm puff of his pipe. "It's our custom that courting gifts ought not to be revealed to the intended until they are presented with them. For Thorin to have told us all to keep quiet of Kíli's plans means he's treating you as he would a dwarven lass in the matter of courtship."

"Or perhaps he was hoping I would mention something I had no business knowing and thus reveal my complicity in the matter."

"Oh, no. If Thorin believed you held any ill will towards the mountain or any of his folk, never mind his beloved sister-son, it would be my brother sitting here with his hammers instead of me and my papers, and you should count yourself lucky for it to be only that. No, for all that he may not hold your folk in high regard, in this at least Thorin believes you faultless." Balin flashed them a brief smile, one with just a hint of teeth. "Me, I'm here in case any other dwarves happen to think he is wrong in his judgement."

So Balin wasn't here to keep the dwarves safe from Tauriel, but rather the other way around. For some reason, a part of Bilbo found this a soothing thought, for all that he should have found it a startling prospect that any might take justice into their own hands.

"It's hard to find myself faultless, though, if indeed he's gone because of me."

Balin scoffed. "Oh, if you were able to keep one of Durin's line under control and command, you'd be a miracle worker indeed. No, I'm afraid when they get something in their head it's rather impossible to sway them another way, and I say this as one who shares a measure of that blood." He tapped the side of his large nose, a hint of a smile still on his lips. "If you wish to find anyone but Kíli to take the blame, you could do worse than Thorin. He's quite brought this upon himself, making such demands, and I think he knows it."

"What do you mean?" Tauriel frowned. "I may not be very knowledgeable about your ways, but I do know that a courtship is supposed to begin with a gift. It's hardly unreasonable for Thorin to expect a prince to follow the tradition."

"Aye, that is true enough. And that would be the end of it, were this an ordinary courtship. While many dwarves will choose to craft multiple gifts for their One, for the ordinary dwarves, two gifts will suffice for a completed courtship, with each participant crafting one for their beloved."

Bilbo supposed it was about time he took part in the discussion again, lest they forget he even was
there. "I'm guessing this isn't about ordinary dwarves, though."

"Indeed it is not. I'm not sure if you've noticed, seeing as he does rather lack the proper manners for it, but Kíli is a prince of my folk. And when noble dwarves court, it's customary for there to be at least three gifts exchanged."

"Three?" Tauriel frowned. "And would one of these not be hand-made, then?"

"No. If both parties are of high enough birth, or there is a notable difference between their families, the one of higher status is also expected to give what is called a provider's gift. This one is not to be made by the suitor, but rather purchased or otherwise traded, and ought to be of high value. It's supposed to show the one being courted that they are indeed who they claim to be, and not someone pretending to be of higher birth. A strange old habit, I suppose, from days when our kingdoms were much more vast and it was not always possible to know all the nobles even in just your own mountain, but it's an established tradition nevertheless."

Bilbo lifted his eyebrows. "So when Thorin said Kíli couldn't just go and get something from the treasure hoard…"

"He was not being entirely truthful, no." Balin shook his head. "Well, it was within his rights, as the head of the family, to dictate which gift should be first. I presume he wanted to make sure this wasn't just a whim for Kíli, and that he has the will to see things through. Which does seem to have backfired as it made the lad rush off without much thought, which we might have avoided had Thorin permitted the provider's gift to come first, to give Kíli plenty of time to prepare his crafted gift."

"Knowing Kíli, he might still have rushed off on some mad venture, even given the time to consider." Bilbo was awfully fond of the boys, but that didn't mean he was blind to their faults, and enthusiasm could be counted as one when it led them down perilous paths.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. All we know is that in this instance he did not have the chance to think things through, not unless he wanted to delay the beginning of his courtship even further. To expect him to do that would be a rather harsh demand to make of any dwarf so clearly in love, never mind one with Kíli's spirit."

"He does seem rather wild and free." For the first time since Kíli had been reported missing, Tauriel offered them a faint smile. "Though then, I suppose if that was not true, he never would have confessed his love to an elf."

"Indeed not." Balin snorted. "As I said, the sons of Durin are a stubborn lot even among dwarves, and we aren't exactly known for changing our minds in a hurry. If Kíli was as set in his ways as Thorin is, he would rather suffer and take his love to the grave than confess to such silliness."

"It does seem rather impossible, the thought of Thorin making a confession of love." Yet as soon as he had said this, Bilbo found himself imagining that very scene. The tone that Thorin might employ, surely the same he had used on top of the carrock to declare how wrong he had been, the look in his eyes the deep desire he had held for the treasure yet not clouded by the accursed madness. His arms would be so strong, too, as he held his beloved close, perhaps tight enough to lift them clear off their feet against that strong chest, the kiss that would surely follow marked by the bristle of a short beard and —

Bilbo suppressed a cough, picking up his book again. Clearly he was getting quite distracted if his mind started to wander along such silly lines of thought. Tauriel and Balin must have noticed his distraction, as he caught them exchanging doubtlessly amused glances before they both took on an
expression of seriousness. Though then, surely he was allowed a moment's silliness every now and then. He was just a homesick hobbit, after all, and under the effect of Tauriel's pain remedy besides, so if it took him a moment to focus again surely they could forgive that as exhaustion after a rather busy day indeed.

Surely the heat pinching at his cheeks was merely a ghost of the flame in the fireplace next to his seat.

When he startled awake from his light doze much later, his ache from the weakening remedy combined with the noise of Bofur arriving with an offering of breakfast for them all from his brother, chasing away any pretence of sleep. As he listened with some relief to the report that Dwalin had, in fact, caught up with Kili after riding all night, and would be returning with the errant prince in short order if the message passed on by ravens held any truth at all, Bilbo even managed to ignore the fact that he couldn't recall a first thing about what he had presumably been reading.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Bilbo is dragged into bath with the heirs of Durin, not that he actually minds. Much, anyway. Later, though, it turns out certain dwarves have been harboring rather mistaken assumptions about their little hobbit, which clearly means Bilbo must demand explanations of Thorin. Fíli, meanwhile, just wants to talk with Ori.

Honestly, though. How hard is it to tell the lads from the lasses?

"So." Thorin set aside the last document he had been reading, looking up at Dwalin, who was patiently standing on the other side of his desk. "You caught up with Kíli by the morning after you set off."

"Aye, that's true." Dwalin gave a solemn nod. "There aren't that many roads to take, with there only being one river, and I don't think he expected anyone to follow him quite so soon, seeing as he wasn't exactly hiding."

"And at the time you sent word by raven, so we would know he was safe and would not worry."

"As I had promised to do, yes." Dwalin's expression still hadn't changed a bit.

"So, can you please explain to me why exactly you took a full week to bring him back?"

Now, Dwalin finally reacted, even if only by scratching the back of his head. "We had to return upstream?"

"Right." Thorin sighed. "Did he at least find some scales, to make the whole mess worth the trouble?"

"Aye. Turns out the buggers are much easier to pry loose than they are to pierce, which is to say it's possible at all." Dwalin shrugged. "Still didn't come home with more than a couple of handfuls, seeing how they were all at the bottom of the lake, but it should be quite enough to fill her quiver."

"How did that even work? I can't imagine the waters of the lake would be anything less than murky and dark." Not that dwarves in general had a problem with low light, but not even they could work in total darkness.

"Well, surprising though it may be, your prince is not altogether stupid." Dwalin flashed him a brief smirk. "He'd taken along a couple of the crystals miners use to provide light. Don't think he'd have found anything otherwise, what with all that water and ruined houses getting in the way."
"I'm not sure if it makes matters better or worse that he had the foresight to take those along but didn't stop to think he perhaps shouldn't go at all."

"Well, one hopes he'll think for a moment before he does such a thing again." Dwalin shrugged. "I've had a lot of time to explain just how many ways this scheme of his could have gone wrong. If he doesn't get it now, he never will."

"Thank you for completely ruining any attempt I might have made at being hopeful." Even so, Thorin couldn't help but smile a bit as he stood up from his seat. "I shouldn't be too surprised, though. Remember Dís preparing her own courtship gift?"

"As though I could forget," Dwalin murmured. "The royal princess deciding she should take down a wolf all by herself for the pelt. I'm still not sure if I'm more annoyed that she sneaked off without warning or that she actually managed."

"It's not like it would have been any different if she'd let any of us come along. We'd have ended up holding her cloak while she skinned the beast." Thorin stretched himself, feeling aching muscles slotting into place. "I do hope Balin isn't about to come up with more work for me to do, because at the moment, I rather believe I'm done for the day."

"You make it sound like he's making up more work just to annoy you."

"I wouldn't put it past your brother. He's had stranger schemes before." Thorin walked out of his office, Dwalin close on his heels. "I suppose I should go check on the boys. Fíli wanted to present Bilbo with his new set of rooms today, and I'm not sure if Kíli is going to be excited about it or disappointed that he didn't get to be around for much of the preparations."

"We all make our choices. His was to spend the last week outdoors getting himself cold and wet every day instead of staying in the cosy mountain, so he has no right to complain." Dwalin groaned, pulling his head to the side with an audible crick. "Now, if you won't be needing me, I think I'll be going. I've had quite enough of princelings for a little while."

"Wish that I could make that choice." Thorin patted Dwalin on the shoulder. "You go on, my friend. I'll make sure they haven't literally smothered the poor halfling."

The new royal wing was not far from his office, thanks to careful consideration in choosing the placement for both. The old visitors' quarters they had taken over were in the better part of the mountain, yet behind too many hallways and small chambers for the worm to have made its way there. The old royal apartments were unusable now; while some of the rooms remained, particularly those Thorin and his siblings had occupied so long ago, the larger, more lavishly decorated ones had been torn out by claw and fire for their gold and gems. Thrór's rooms had been trashed entirely, to the point where their structural integrity would have to be examined before any actual attempt at cleaning or reoccupation were made, not that Thorin was in any particular hurry to do so. He was of a mind to make the new assignment of royal apartments permanent.

Thorin had no desire for gilded walls and gem-encrusted fireplaces. There were still nights he woke up gasping for air in the fleeting memory of a floor of pure gold coming up to swallow him.

As he reached the door leading to the common area of the royal wing, though, he could hear some commotion from within. Frowning, he paused, then pushed the door open.

"Uncle!" Fíli offered him a brilliant smile from where his arm was wrapped around one of Bilbo's, Kíli occupying the hobbit's other side. "All done for the day?"
"I am, unless I need to start a lecture on how princes are not supposed to assault esteemed guests."
Thorin lifted his eyebrows, letting the door fall closed behind himself as he walked in. It was not quite the privacy of his own rooms yet, but he could still allow himself some measure of relaxation.
"And Kíli. I wasn't entirely sure if I would find you here; I'd have thought you would take the opportunity to see your elf again."

"I would have, except she's out of the mountain. Seems like Óin convinced her to show him where to find the plants for her pain remedy around here." Kíli managed to give a carefree shrug while still maintaining his grip on Bilbo. "And we're not assaultsing anyone. All we want to do is show Bilbo a good time."

"You'll forgive me if that sounds somewhat ominous to me." Thorin stepped closer. "Master Baggins? What is going on here?"

"You know, I'm not entirely sure myself." Bilbo made to affect a huff, but reminded Thorin mostly of an indulgent father playing along with his children's games even though he didn't understand their meaning. "I just mentioned that I might like a bath tonight when I saw the lovely little bath chamber attached to my rooms, and the next thing I know, these two are swinging me off my feet and off we go like a horde of orcs."

"We were more polite than that!" At Thorin's questioning look, Fíli relented. "Well. A bit more polite, at least."

"They've got the big forges going," Kíli hurried to inform him as a way of explanation. "And Fíli said he checked earlier and the plumbing works. There's no way we can let Bilbo wash in a teeny tiny tub if there's a chance the proper bath is working!"

"And it never occurred to you that he might actually prefer that tiny tub? Hobbits are rather different creatures from us dwarves." Thorin glanced at Bilbo, who was looking bewildered right now but quickly schooled his expression to something more sedate. "Master Baggins? Am I wrong to make the assumption that hobbits do not make a habit of public bathing?" It certainly seemed so from the way Bilbo had always refused to wash together with the rest on the road.

Bilbo's eyes widened a bit. "Not at all," he huffed. "That would be quite improper!"

"Nothing improper about baths, unless one's actions make it so." Thorin offered him a small smile. "I think my sister-sons are rather eager to show you the dwarven way of bathing. We only ever use solitary tubs if we are in a hurry, if only we can help it, but I can certainly have yours prepared for you if that's your preference. Don't let these two pester you into something you're not comfortable with."

"You have a public bath here?" Bilbo's eyes widened. "In the apartments?"

"Well, it used to be public, back when these were visitors' quarters," Fíli supplied helpfully. "But now that we've taken over, it's obviously a family bath. Completely different thing. We had a small one back in Ered Luin, but the open ones back there were pretty amazing, compared. I've heard the ones here in Erebor are something else entirely, once they get all the forges going to keep it all warm."

"Mother says all of Erebor could bathe at once and each have a place in the water," Kíli announced, a tone of wonder in his voice. "Can you imagine that? A mountainful of dwarves all in the same baths!"

Thorin chuckled. "It's not quite that impressive, I'm afraid, certainly not back when the mountain was
full. But I do admit they were much roomier than what Ered Luin had to offer. And they will be again, once we get them running, but for now, we'll have to content ourselves with the family baths."

"I have to admit, I never would have expected dwarves to be quite so keen on the subject of baths." Bilbo blinked as he realised what he had said, then flushed a bit. "Ah, not to say you are dirty or anything! It's just, I'd have thought you'd be too, well, practical to waste much time and energy on something as seemingly frivolous as bathing."

Kíli chortled. "Oh, believe me, it's a practical matter all right," he announced with a leer. "Never mind the miners and all the dirt and dust they carry, you don't know the meaning of stink until you've met a dwarf who just spent a whole day at their forge. Uncle here smells so bad sometimes, an orc would faint at getting a whiff of him."

"So I stink, do I?" Thorin's lips twitched. "And this from the lad who started off his apprenticeship smelling of piss every day."

Fíli chuckled at his brother's glowing grimace, then smiled as Bilbo gave them a slightly horrified gaze. "Kíli's a leatherworker by craft," he explained. "His master thought he should be familiar with where his materials come from, so he had the poor thing work for a tanner for the better part of a year before he was allowed anywhere near the actual workshop."

"Worked a treat, too." Thorin couldn't help but notice the boys were once again nudging Bilbo in the direction of the room that housed the large bath shared by the apartments even as Kíli complained of his miserable experiences. "I know precisely how to prepare my own leather, as well as why I'd rather pay someone else to do it for me."

"Ah. That is." Bilbo blinked, looking a bit bewildered. "I guess it's good to know they didn't let you off easier just because you're royalty?"

"Of course not." Thorin scoffed. "No true master would devalue their own craft so, no matter who their apprentice." Well. He supposed a hobbit wouldn't have known much about that. "All dwarves have a craft to call their own, for all that not all of us pursue it for a trade. I was already familiar with a smithing hammer before the worm ever came and forced me to labour to support my family. If anything, my master was only ever harder on me for my birth, because a prince ought to be excellent in everything."

"Which is why uncle is brilliant," Fíli said, ever loyal. "I know the basics of blacksmithing, mostly because men would always have work for a passable smith, but I'm nothing like him. He made most of my weapons, you know."

"He did?" Bilbo glanced at Thorin, who shrugged.

"I couldn't very well let him fight with substandard weapons, and I was the best weapon smith we could afford at the time." That was something he was never going to feel ashamed for. Some might have thought it beneath a king's station, but he would do whatever it took to keep his family fed and well.

"Yeah, well, I'm still going to keep using them." Fíli pushed open a door and guided Bilbo in, Kíli on his other side. "Maybe you could get uncle to make you a proper sword, too, instead of your little letter opener."

"Thank you, but I'm quite fond of mine." Bilbo glanced around. "And I see you have brought me to the bath after all."
"Well, we aren't going to force you into the water, but you should at least see how great it is." Kíli grinned. "Come on, it's going to be great."

"One would think you'd have gotten enough of water for a little while." Even so, Bilbo seemed to be looking around with some interest.

"Well, yes, but that was cold and dirty. Nothing like this." Kíli strode on ahead, already stripping off his topmost tunic. "Uncle? You going to join us?"

Thorin lifted his eyebrows as Fíli and Bilbo both turned to look at him. "You know, I do think I will. It has been a long day, even if I may not stink of sweat and smoke this time." He met Bilbo's gaze. "The offer still stands, Master Hobbit. Just say the word, and we'll have someone fill up your tub, privacy guaranteed."

A hint of flush appeared on Bilbo's cheeks, probably in embarrassment, but it was chased away quickly enough. "I, ah. I think I'll just join you three. I'd hate to cause more work to everyone, and, well, I suppose I should learn something of the dwarven customs."

"Great!" Now, Fíli stepped away from Bilbo at last, already hurrying after his brother. "Uncle, you tell him what to do, we're going ahead!"

Thorin snorted at the boys' hurry as they rushed through the small outer chamber into the actual bath area, littering clothes along the way. "Hopeless, both of them." If Bilbo noted the fondness in his voice, at least the hobbit didn't comment.

"So, ah. I'm assuming the principle is the same even in dwarven mountains, right?" Bilbo started fussing with the buttons on his waistcoat as Thorin made to remove his own belt and outer layers. "Clothes off and into the water?"

"That's the gist of it, yes." Thorin chuckled. "Not that the lads have always bothered with the first part. At least they've learnt to put clothes back on after. I rather lost count of the times we had to chase after nude little dwarflings straight out of the bath when they were small."

"You know, that really doesn't surprise me as much as it should." Bilbo glanced at the abandoned clothes marking a trail of the princes. "And I'm assuming leaving a track isn't actually part of the etiquette, either?"

"Not quite." Thorin made quick work of his clothing, folding it on the stone bench in the front chamber. At least there hadn't been a council meeting today, or he'd have had rather more to disrobe from. "Most of us prefer not to dirty our clothes any more than already happens."

"Right." Bilbo was doing his best not to look at Thorin, a pink tone already rising on his cheeks as he instead focused on getting his clothes off. Thorin decided to have mercy on him, heading out to the bath proper once he had taken off all his clothes.

It wasn't quite the royal bath he remembered from his youth, but it came close. Fili and Kíli were already splashing about in the large pool like a pair of children, laughing and shouting as they tried to get water on each other, crying out in protest at every splash as though they hadn't already been standing waist deep in the water. Thorin shook his head at such childishness, stepping into the water with what he thought was rather more grace and maturity.

The feeling of sinking into the warm water was near divine. He hadn't been exaggerating; even without dealing with the council, he had had a long day indeed, and for all that there hadn't been much physical effort involved, he still managed to find aching, tense muscles that loosened in the
warmth. Sitting on the low bench against the edge of the pool, he closed his eyes, listening to the boys squabble.

He didn't hear the approaching footsteps, the footfalls of a hobbit soft as ever. He did, however, hear the slightly hesitant voice going, "Ah. How do I get in?"

Thorin opened his eyes, looking up to the direction of the voice. Then, realising the effect of his sitting in the water and Bilbo standing at the edge, he looked up a bit further, finding a flushed face. Well, the best way to make this less awkward for his friend was probably to act as though it wasn't. "There's a bench running along the edge, under the water," he said. "It shouldn't be too far down for you to step in."

Bilbo nodded, wearing the kind of look of determination people often saved for dangerous battles and other such challenges. Despite his apparent reservations, though, he managed to make it down in the water well enough. He seemed to relax a bit as soon as the most critical areas were hidden by the water, taking a seat next to Thorin. "This really is quite nice."

"I do agree." Thorin leaned an arm back on the edge, gesturing with his other hand. "If we're actually dirty, we wash in the smaller basin first, so the bath proper doesn't get filthy. I know we were quite fine with roughing it up along the journey," he added, smiling a bit at Bilbo's badly hidden surprise, "but that was due to necessity, not desire. Just because people think of us as dirty little thieves doesn't mean we much care to live up to that unfortunate reputation."

"Ah. I didn't think that." Bilbo flushed again, though, perhaps recalling some harsh words he might have heard about dwarves in general. "And I'm sure things will change once you get the kingdom to flourish again."

"I can hope." He glanced over to the lads, who hadn't calmed down yet. "I want to leave Fíli with a better throne than the one I was given."

"Well, that will definitely happen, since that moment had better be far in the future." Bilbo gave him an admonishing gaze. "I didn't come all the way here just to see you die, you know."

"Indeed not." Thorin's lips twitched. "You came here to steal my treasure and give it over to elves." He could jest about that, now, and not feel that twinge of agonising pain mixed with desire anymore. It was a welcome change, though one he much feared might reverse itself one day.

"I didn't —!" Bilbo spluttered in annoyance. "I gave it to Bard! And I had very good reasons, besides. And it wasn't stealing when it was my share!"

"I know, I know. And I did hire you as a burglar; it is hardly your fault if you decide to follow that decree." Thorin smiled even as he sought out one of the braids in his hair, working out the bead at the end before starting to unravel the braid. "Truly, I should be proud. If there ever was a great burglar, it was the burglar of Thorin Oakenshield."

"Oh, now you are just trying to embarrass me." Bilbo's slight flush, though, made soon way for a curious expression. "Say, I've never seen you take off your braids before."

"That's not much of a surprise." Apparently the boys had squabbled enough for a moment, as they chose this point to join the conversation, wading closer through the water. "While some of us have great braids, others less so," at this, Fíli glanced at his brother with a grin, getting a scowl in return, "working on them isn't something just anyone may see. Some of us got a bit less prudish on the road, but you'd have a hard time finding a dwarf willing to braid his hair in front of anyone but family or their closest friends."
"I'll never understand you dwarves." Bilbo sighed, shaking his head, but there was a hint of a smile on his lips. "You'll run around with your privates hanging out without a thought, but braiding hair is too shocking for anyone to see."

"It's not quite the same." Thorin snorted, starting work on another braid. "And in any case, we don't go around naked much outside bath time. So, don't worry, your precious sensibilities are quite safe around here."

"I don't know. A proper hobbit would never go around without a shirt like your lot seem to do." Bilbo was amused for a moment, then blinked. "Wait. You don't mind doing that with me here, then?"

Thorin didn't need to look to know the boys were waiting eagerly for his response. He ignored them, focusing on a stubborn little tangle on the braid he was undoing. "If the lads think you ought to be living in the family apartments, I see no problem with my fixing my hair in front of you." His lips twitched into a small smirk. "Just don't ask me to braid your hair as well. We're not quite close enough for that just yet."

Bilbo seemed to understand enough of the implications to flush as Thorin glanced at him from the corner of his eye, with the lads tittering in the background. Thorin went on undoing his braids, enjoying the warmth and the relaxed atmosphere.

If his mind had some suggestions as to how very lovely Bilbo would look with a braid or two in his curly head, possibly woven there by an experienced hand, well, that was neither here nor there.

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The thing about Fíli and Kíli, Bilbo had come to notice, was that he could always tell when they were coming along.

Of course, this was hardly a surprise. They had not exactly been the sneakiest members of the Company, chattering away as they often did, and dwarves in general were not built for stealth. However, sometimes it almost seemed as though they made a point of making noise now that they were back in their rightful place, stomping along the stone floors with even more enthusiasm than the older and bigger dwarves. Therefore, he heard their steps approaching down the corridor just in time to set down his pen and turn towards the door before it was opened without as much as a by-your-leave.

"Bilbo!" Kíli cried out in lieu of a greeting as he burst into the room. "Look what we found!" He skipped closer, showing off some kind of garments he had draped over his arms.

Bilbo blinked, somewhat confused. "Are those dresses?" Dresses or robes, he decided, though they were quite different from what the hobbit ladies back home would wear.

"Yes!" Fíli grinned, showing off a couple of them hanging off his arms. "We found them right in the royal apartments, so don't worry, we're not robbing some poor lady."

"We think they belonged to our mother, back before the worm came," Kíli said, clearly enthusiastic. "It's hard to believe she used to be this small, but then she was pretty young when they had to leave."

"She definitely won't fit in these when she returns."

"I wouldn't imagine so, no." Bilbo frowned. "Not that they aren't pretty, but why exactly are you showing them off to me?"
"Isn't it obvious?" Kíli's grin got even wider. "We thought that since you're also pretty small, they would fit you just right!"

"Uh." Bilbo resisted the urge to squirm. "I do not think it would be quite appropriate."

"Oh, come on," Fíli tried to encourage him. "It's not like our mom's going to wear these anymore. And you do need more clothes, so why don't you at least try them on?"

"It's not really something I'm used to wearing." At first he'd thought this was some kind of a strange joke, but the boys seemed to be quite serious about their offer.

Kíli blinked. "Do hobbit ladies not wear dresses?"

"Yes, they do," Bilbo sighed, doing his best to keep the shrillness of indignation out of his voice. The poor lads seemed honestly confused, not malicious. "However, gentlehobbits do not."

"And?" Fíli frowned. "Are these the wrong style for hobbits or something? We know they're pretty old, but they'll have to be adjusted anyway, so…"

"Boys, I know you mean well, but I don't wear dresses. I'm sure they're very fine dresses, but I don't wear them. Because I'm not a lady." Could he possibly make this any clearer without getting crude?

For a moment, Fíli's frown deepened. Then his expression cleared into an understanding smile, and Bilbo let out a sigh of relief. Of course, his momentary respite was immediately crushed by the prince's next words. "Oh, don't worry about it, Bilbo! You don't have to pretend anymore."

"Right," Kíli agreed, catching on to whatever conclusion they had erroneously reached. "I know this isn't home like your hole is home, but you're safe here, promise. You don't need to keep pretending around here."

"I'm not pretending." Bilbo rubbed the bridge of his nose. Oh, he was going to have such a headache before this was over. "I'm not sure where you got this idea, but I am not a lady, not even in secret. I'm a male hobbit, always have been, always will be. There is no pretending or secrecy going on."

"Wait." Kíli stared at him as though he had just announced he was an orc. "You mean you're actually male?"

"Well, obviously," Bilbo sniffed. "I'm Mister Baggins, mind you. How could you possibly not know this?"

"We figured you were just using the male words while on the road." Fíli frowned. His arms with the dresses had sagged, and Bilbo almost felt guilty for disappointing him. "I mean, female dwarves often do that when they're travelling outside the mountains, so we just thought it was the same for hobbits."

"Oh, no. Hobbits just do not generally travel at all, regardless of gender. But if we did, you would have a hard time finding even one grown hobbit lady who would be so improper as to wear male clothes." He shook his head. "I simply do not know how you could have come up with such an idea."

"Well, dwarves don't make much of a difference either way," Kíli said, looking a bit uncomfortable now. "And you're the only hobbit we've ever seen. But we've seen men, of course, and in their places men grow beards and women don't."

"You don't have a beard, and you're fussy about things like kerchiefs, and you cook," Fíli added.
"We just figured that meant you were a lady hobbit, and you were just really bad at pretending to be male."

"We didn't say anything, though." Kíli shifted his weight from one foot to another. "None of us did. We figured that if you were doing it for safety, we could keep you safe between the thirteen of us either way, and if it was some weird propriety thing you might not want to draw attention to it."

"Wait. You said none of you," Bilbo realised. "Exactly how many of you thought I'm female?"

"What do you mean, how many?" Fíli's frown was back. "Pretty much everyone in the Company, I guess. Though Óin didn't really talk about it, and Bombur always shook his head, and Uncle Thorin and Glóin just told us we were being stupid. We just thought they didn't want to gossip like that."

"Oh. Oh, my goodness." It was a good thing he was already seated, or he might have needed to sit down. The entire Company thought he was female? How was that even possible?

"Um. We're sorry?" Kíli did look guilty, shifting again. "I mean, we just assumed, but we shouldn't have. We just didn't want to offend you by asking about something like that."

"It's quite all right." Bilbo sighed again. "I… I think I need to talk with your uncle."

"Oh?" Fíli blinked. "I think he's talking with Balin in his office right now."

"Thank you." Bilbo got up from his desk. The boys still looked uneasy, he noticed, and he sighed. "I'm not mad at you," he said. "I mean, I'm fairly sure I've seen dwarf ladies by now but couldn't even tell. It's not like you could have known."

"If you're sure." Kíli still shifted, though. "Uh, hey, Bilbo? Since you don't want these, what do you think we should do with them?"

"Well, if you're certain your mother won't have any use for them, why don't you go out and see if there are any young dwarf ladies among the Iron Hill dwarves who might?" Bilbo gave them a small smile. "After all, it would be a pity to see such fine things go to waste. If they are still intact after all these years, they must be of pretty sturdy make."

"Right!" Fíli nodded. "And if you'd like, we could then go look for Uncle Frerin's room. From what mother told us he was just barely grown in Azanulbizar, so some of his clothes might fit you if we find any left here."

"If you think it would be appropriate." He had not, Bilbo noted, ever heard of an Uncle Frerin before. But then, he supposed he could guess why, if the boys had only heard of him from their mother.

If he had been at Azanulbizar.

Bilbo tried not to think too hard on it as he headed toward Thorin's office, the young princes slowly returning to their usual carefree chatter in his wake.

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Thorin had barely called out his invitation to enter as the door was opened, hasty steps approaching. Balin might have expected such hurry to herald one of the two princes, not their burglar, but apparently even Bilbo could sometimes be called to hasty action. He certainly seemed a bit out of sorts, eyes dancing wildly around the room before settling on Thorin.
"Master Baggins." Balin smiled. "It's good to see you are up and well." Of course he had been to see Bilbo briefly since he had started taking Tauriel's pain remedy, but he was indeed glad to see it was still working.

Bilbo, quite unlike his jovial self, only gave Balin a curt nod before storming further into the room, stepping only a few feet from Thorin, staring up at him with what Balin believed to be annoyance. "You." It was rare indeed that anyone would address the King Under the Mountain in such a tone. "Fíli and Kíli were just in my rooms."

"I'm not too surprised by that." Thorin didn't react either to the sharp tone or the thunderous expression. "I'm taking it something about their conduct upset you?"

"Why exactly do they think that I'm female?"

Now, Balin was forced to blink in surprise. "You're not?"

"Obviously not!" Well, it certainly wasn't obvious to him. "Goodness, you all really thought that, didn't you? It wasn't just the boys being silly?"

"Not all of us." Thorin appeared perfectly calm despite the rather unusual subject matter. "I know at least Óin, Glóin, Bombur and myself were somewhat more informed, but we figured that correcting them would only lead to more unnecessary fuss. Mahal knows you would have been unbearable if we had brought up something that embarrassing about you, and the best way to keep the discussion from your ears was not to correct their assumptions, since they were so adamant on not telling you about your poor disguise."

"You could have told at least some of us, you know." Balin couldn't help the slightly scolding tone in his voice, though whether it was at the secretiveness over the journey or the way Thorin apparently failed to notice how his words only aggravated the hobbit further, he left that for the king to decide. "I'll agree the lads probably would have made a fuss, but surely you should have trusted most of us to keep things under wraps."

"And why was it our place to correct you? Clearly it wouldn't have made any difference to the situation, so as long as the hobbit was not bothered, it was hardly that serious."

"But how is that even possible?" Bilbo was waving his hands as though not able to entirely contain his frustration about the situation. "I mean, how did they come to that conclusion in the first place? I don't even look like a lady hobbit!"

"And how were we to know that?" Balin scoffed. "We hardly know how hobbits usually dress themselves, and even so dwarves don't always make a difference in dress between sexes. You were the first hobbit most of us had ever seen! We knew that the women of menfolk lack beards, and that seemed good enough a clue for us."

"That, and you were a very proper little creature all along the way," Thorin added. "If they couldn't read any clues in your clothes, and never saw you without, how were they to know better?"

"But I don't even have a bosom!" Bilbo had to be rather upset to be able to exclaim that without either faltering or flustering. "Surely that at least is in common in all the female folk I've ever seen, and that can certainly be visible even with clothes on!"

"There is such a thing as chest wraps; they're certainly common enough among female dwarves on the road." Thorin shrugged. "Besides, not meaning to offend, but it seems even a male hobbit is somewhat soft and round compared with a dwarf."
This seemed to annoy Bilbo even further, judging by the flush that rose to his cheeks. At least Balin was going to assume it was annoyance; he wasn't quite willing to consider otherwise. "Just because we're not all carved from bloody rock and stone doesn't mean we're all female! And besides, the boys still seemed to be in their mistaken belief even though we have shared a bath!"

Now, that was new information to Balin, who glanced at Thorin. The king chose to ignore him, instead regarding Bilbo with a calm air. "They've never seen a female form naked, though, so it's not like they're going to know the difference. The public baths in Ered Luin were separated by the sex, and their mother hasn't bathed with them since the day their father and I could be trusted not to drop them; they always were rather lively in bath, and Dís was of the opinion she was at least entitled to a peaceful bath if nothing else."

"So they know nothing at all?" Bilbo's tone was starting to get somewhat shrill. "They know nothing of how to tell apart male and female?"

"They know it's lasses who bear children and lads who father them." Thorin frowned. "Surely that is quite enough for now. Rather, I'm quite pleased to hear this. At least it means Kíli hasn't gotten up to anything too inappropriate with his lady elf."

"That's just all the more reason why he should be informed!" Bilbo's arms were flailing again. "If female dwarves bear children, then I'm assuming it all works for you the same way it does for men, right?"

"Far as I'm aware, yes." Thorin gave a shrug. "Not to say I've ever been privy to the information, but I've seen their women heavy with children, and they seem similar enough to female dwarves in the same state; I'd assume the beginning of it works the same as well."

"So perhaps Kíli should be informed as to the potential consequences, should he and Tauriel choose not to follow the propriety rules until their wedding?" Bilbo sighed now, rubbing the bridge of his nose as though dealing with something that was giving him a headache. Seeing how he was facing Thorin, Balin couldn't exactly blame him. "We may not do everything the same way back in the Shire, but at least I'm aware that two young people in love can be quite talented in figuring out what goes where unless they're given a good reason not to."

Now, Thorin's frown deepened. "Do you think so?"

"Well, obviously it's not absolutely certain, if Tauriel has the presence of mind to avoid such trouble, but I'd really feel better if they were at least somewhat informed. At least they should know the difference between lads and lasses at their age!"

"I'll think about it." Though even if Thorin did decide in favour of it, Balin rather suspected the actual talking would be done by someone unfortunate enough to be ordered into it by the king. Hopefully Óin. Balin wasn't any more eager for such talks than Thorin was. "But truly, their ignorance of your sex cannot be blamed on them, any more than the rest of the company. They see a soft form and a beardless face, so of course they will think you are female. It shouldn't matter, either way. My folk don't make much difference in how we treat the two sexes."

Bilbo paused, then made a rather displeased face. "Do you mean that other dwarves will think I'm female, too? Here in the mountain?"

"Unless you correct them? It's not unlikely." Balin stroked his beard. "I'd like to think I'm not a stupid dwarf, but I can only judge such things based on what I know, and I know little indeed about hobbits."
"Oh, by the Green Lady." Bilbo ran a hand over his face before fixing another sharp gaze at Thorin. "How did you know better than the rest, then?"

"Well, we had a rather different position from the rest of the Company. Óin is rather accomplished at midwifery, Glóin and Bombur both have wives, and I have lived with a sister for the better part of my life. Of course we would be more informed than those with only incidental acquaintance with the differences, if even that."

"No, I mean, how did you know it? Far as I know you didn't see me without clothes any more than the rest did." The slight hint of a flush was back, and this time Balin doubted there was much annoyance involved. How very interesting.

"We didn't, but it was a long time on the road. For all that you kept yourself quite private, we figured that if you had been dealing with your cycles, we would have noticed some evidence of it at least." Thorin's lips twitched a bit. "That, and to our combined reckoning it would have been rather unusual for a female to relieve herself standing up."

This time the flush and spluttering was surely embarrassment and nothing else, but even so, Balin decided to make a point of remembering the details of this particular interaction.

It was rare enough to see that particular smile on Thorin's lips.

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"Ori?" Fíli paused in the doorway, looking out into the dusty reaches of the grand library of Erebor. Everything seemed quiet and empty, though a couple of candles had been lit, barely giving enough light to chase away the worst of the shadows. "Ori, are you here?"

"Over here!" The familiar voice was coming from deeper in the cavern, prompting Fíli to leave the safety of the doorway. The heavy door fell shut behind him, closing away what light might have otherwise travelled from the corridor. It was a good thing indeed that his eyes did not need much light, or he wouldn't have made it three steps in the semi-darkness without tripping over something.

"Why are you hiding in the darkness like this?" Fíli navigated his way through the empty library. The floor had been dusted for the most part, for what little good it could do in the wake of so long a time without use, but most of the shelves seemed untouched for centuries. He couldn't help but wonder if some of them had been the same even before the worm came; a lot of what was stored on them seemed rather dull.

"I'm not hiding." Indeed, as Fíli got around another shelf, he found one corner of the library better lit with several candles scattered about. Ori was sitting in the middle of it all, sorting scrolls that to Fíli seemed to lack any distinguishing features, yet Ori was finding it easy enough to divide them into different piles. "It's just wasteful to light the entire place when I'm only using a small part of it."

"What are you doing here, then?" It didn't seem much different from any of the other corners Fíli had just passed by. The one shelf he could see was somewhat askew, drag marks on the floor where the heavy weight had been shifted, but aside from that he saw no difference from any of the other spots Ori could have chosen. It seemed the shelf had been mostly emptied out, its contents doubtless now surrounding Ori on the floor.

"These are all old maps of Erebor." Ori waved his arm at the scrolls he had gathered. "Sure, we need to check everything for structural damage before they can be taken into use, but it would help prioritise the different areas if we had more accurate documents of where everything was. Right now we're going by the memories of those who lived here before the worm, and it's not always entirely
reliable, especially when we're trying to figure out where to find a particular space behind a collapsed wall or the like."

"Okay, that does sound sensible at least." Fíli paused. Whatever people might have said, he wasn't entirely without manners or consideration. Well, not as much so as Kíli was, anyway. "Should I leave you to it?"

"Ah. I don't mind if you're here, really. I just can't promise to be very good company." Ori ducked his head for a moment, tugging at one of his braids in what Fíli supposed was embarrassment.

"I just need someone to listen, if that's not distracting you or anything." Fíli waited for Ori to nod before he went on. "So did you know Bilbo's actually male?"

Ori looked up at him, surprised. "He is?"

"Yeah. Kíli and me went to offer some dresses we found in our mother's old room, and he told us he wouldn't wear them because he's not a lady hobbit. Then we thought he was still pretending, but apparently he's actually, really male. So there we were, arms full of pretty dresses and having been mistaken about our hobbit."

"Ouch." Ori made a face, eyes falling back to his work. "That's, ah. Kind of embarrassing."

"You're telling me." Fíli sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Bilbo suggested taking the dresses to some young dwarf lasses arriving to the mountain, so I took them all to Dori. I mean, he's a dressmaker so he'll hear about anyone in need of clothes, and I figure he can decide who need them the most."

"Dori is good at those things, yes." Ori smiled at the thought of his brother. "Kíli didn't help you?"

"Nah, I think he went off to find Tauriel. Or maybe work on his gift and sulk. Wouldn't blame him, really; he's dealt a lot with people mistaking his sex because the ones with weaker beards are usually lasses." He noticed Ori now stroking in a hesitant manner his own wispy beard, and hurried to add, "You don't look like a lass at all! And look at your brothers; you'll probably have a magnificent beard in no time at all. Poor Kíli only has me to look at, and mine's really not very long for my age." Though his moustache was really coming in nicely.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with your beard." Ori's cheeks were still slightly flushed, so Fíli must have embarrassed him. A change of subject might be in order.

"Oh, damn. I wonder how hobbits are about same-sex couples." And now that he thought about it, that was a worrying idea. "I mean, most Men are really opposed to that sort of thing, right? What if hobbits are the same? That'd mean Uncle Thorin has no chance at all if Bilbo's actually male."

"Do you think so?" Ori frowned, though his eyes remained on the scrolls he was going through, sometimes setting them in one pile or another without even opening them for a look. "I'm sure I've sometimes seen him watching Thorin with interest."

"But what if he thinks Thorin is female? I mean, his beard isn't very long, and Bilbo said himself he's not sure he could tell dwarf lads from the lasses." No, that couldn't be. It would be so unfair for Thorin to get his heart broken over something so trivial. "Is there any way we can find out what Bilbo thinks of that without making it too obvious?"

"Well, we could just wait and see how he reacts to a couple he knows to be same-sex, but if he can't tell the difference with dwarves, he wouldn't really know unless it's someone he knows personally." Ori paused, his hand hovering over one scroll. "Wait. I think I have an idea."
"You do?" Fíli perked up. "What is it?"

"I'll tell you if it works. Maybe. It... kind of involves other stuff I'm not supposed to spread around." Ori's cheeks flushed again, and he scooped up one of the smaller piles of scrolls. "Ah. I think I'll take these to Bofur now, and then try and find Bilbo."

"He said he wanted to speak with Uncle, but I don't know how that would take. Probably not so long, if he just wanted to tell him how very rude we were." Fíli sighed. Wasn't that going to be a fun conversation. "You need help with gathering those up?" He gestured toward the rest of the piles.

"Oh, no, I'll get back to them later. Nobody's going to come here, anyway." Ori went around, blowing out most of the candles, leaving only one in a candlestick that he grabbed and handed to Fíli. "Hold this for a second, will you?"

Fíli did as requested, bemused. One arm still holding the scrolls close, Ori set his now free hand on the edge of the self Fíli had noticed before as being somewhat askew. In one push, Ori shifted the large stone shelving back to its proper position, then took the candle back from Fíli as though he hadn't just done something Fíli wasn't sure he could have managed even if he'd had his brother to help.

"Coming?"

Fíli hurried after Ori as he carried the light out of the library, pausing only once to test his hand against a similar, mostly empty shelf. As he had expected, he got it to budge with some effort, though just barely. Well. Clearly Dori's famous strength was something that ran in the family.

And here he had thought he had been watching the little scribe very closely.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Bilbo finally educates the young hopes of Erebor on some important things regarding lads and lasses. Kili has enough of an idea to finally make his formal offer of courtship to Tauriel, which of course draws attention from Mirkwood. Thorin is rather willing to negotiate terms of an alliance with the elves -- though if he can deliver one last insult to Thranduil, he will certainly take the opportunity. If that will see Tauriel made a proper princess, all the better.

Really, Bilbo almost regrets the fact that he must be leaving soon.

"Bilbo?"

Ori stood at the door, waiting for someone to answer his knock and trying not to feel too awkward about standing in the receiving area of the royal apartments. He knew Bilbo had told him not to mind such things, and he did have legitimate business here, but a part of him still worried this wasn't his place.

It was an entirely silly thing to worry about, of course. Ori liked to think he could call Fili and Kili his friends, and he absolutely knew he could call Bilbo that. However, it was one thing to be familiar with them on the road, or even in the relative privacy of the library, and quite another to be standing here in the royal rooms, knowing there was every chance Thorin himself might walk up any moment now.

No. No thinking of Thorin showing up, he'd just make himself even more awkward.

He really should have been here ages ago. It had been days now since he had promised Fili he would have a talk with Bilbo, and he still hadn't had the chance to speak with the hobbit alone. When he had initially planned to find Bilbo, he had been derailed into going over the old maps with Bofur, and after that there had always been something going on. The rare times Ori himself wasn't busy with court matters or helping his brothers, Bilbo would already have some company, and Ori was not rude enough to interfere with such things merely to satisfy his curiosity. Even if he had promised Fili he would.

Well. It was probably just as well that he hadn't been alone with the prince since then, either.

He was just about to knock again as the door finally opened, Bilbo standing in the doorway with a smile.

"Ori!" At least Bilbo seemed happy to find him there. "Oh, I was just about to send for you! Come in, come in."

"Send for me?" Ori echoed. That was somewhat unusual. "I'm sorry. Was there something you needed me to do?" He certainly couldn't remember anything special, but that didn't necessarily mean there wasn't anything.

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I'll explain in a bit. But you had some reason for coming, I'm sure?" Even
as he spoke Bilbo walked further into his rooms, starting to fuss with a little tea set. He seemed to be much better about walking around, Ori noted. Tauriel's remedy had to be working.

"Ah, yes. Dori sent these along." Ori indicated the pile of clothes he was holding. "They used to belong to Prince Frerin, I think; Fíli and Kíli gave them to Dori to be refitted for you. Dori says they should match your size well enough, but he was mostly working from estimates so don't hesitate to tell him if you need something adjusted."

"Goodness, I really have to thank him! And the lads as well, of course, but this must have taken him ages." Bilbo accepted the neatly folded pile of clothes with a look of genuine gratitude. Ori filed this observation away to pass it along to Dori.

"He said it wasn't too much work; the clothes the princes chose were close to your size anyway." Ori waited for Bilbo to set the clothes aside, trying not to feel too awkward about what he was going to say next. "Ah. Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Hm? Go ahead, dear boy. You'll take tea, right?" Bilbo didn't even wait for his nod to pour two cups. There were, Ori noticed, two more cups set to the side. He wondered if they were simply part of a set or if whatever it was Bilbo needed him for required others as well.

"I, ah. You're often around Dwalin, right? I mean, since he is usually near Thorin, and you spend a lot of time with him." Ori waited for Bilbo to give him a nod before he drew a deep breath, trying to will himself to continue. "Um. Have you noticed anything, well, strange about his behaviour lately?"

"Strange?" Bilbo paused in his fussing over the tea, seeming to consider this. "Well, he has made something of a habit of retiring to his rooms when he's not needed. That struck me as odd, since I can't imagine anything would tire Dwalin, but from his grumbles I'd imagine it's mostly to do with not wanting to spend any more time around the court or council than necessary. Why do you ask?"

"It's about Nori, actually." Well. Time to see if Bilbo indeed shared the more unfortunate beliefs of Men. "He's always been kind of secretive, always sneaking about, but lately he sometimes doesn't come home at all for the night. I thought he was just up to something again, but then that stopped for a whole week all of a sudden, and he was moodier than usual, too."

"Ah, let me guess. This would neatly coincide with the week Dwalin was out there with Kíli?" Bilbo was smiling, now, which surely was a good sign. "And you think there might be a connection?"

"The time would fit, at least." Ori tried not to make his relief too obvious. "Nothing else really does, though. The only connection between them that I've been aware of is all the times Dwalin had a hand in arresting him back in Ered Luin."

"Well, perhaps that has changed now that we are not in the Blue Mountains anymore." Bilbo hummed a bit. "Well, I obviously can't say anything for sure, but if you'd like, I can certainly keep an eye out for any more strangeness from Dwalin."

"I'd really be grateful. Nori rarely tells us what he's up to, even when it isn't something terrible, but we still want to know what's going on with him." Great, Bilbo hadn't reacted badly to the suggestion that there might be something going on there. Now he'd just need to report that back to Fíli to put his mind at rest about that at least. "So, ah. You said you were about to send for me?"

"Well, yes, but I'd probably best wait until the other two arrive before I start explaining." Bilbo offered him a cup of tea. "Would you like a biscuit?"

The mysterious other two, as it turned out, were Fíli and Kíli. They arrived as Ori was on his second
biscuit, rushing in without care for such basic niceties as knocking.

"Bilbo! Uncle said you wanted to see us?" Fíli grinned as he saw Ori. "Oh, is this something official enough to require a scribe?"

"Rather unofficial, in fact. Do sit down, have some tea." Bilbo smiled rather more indulgently than Ori might have expected.

Kíli rushed forward a couple of steps, then halted and eyed the table suspiciously. "We're not going to like this, are we?"

"Now, really, my boy. I only hope to offer you a little bite to eat." Bilbo paused. "Also, you are probably not going to like it, but I'm afraid I'm not going to give you much of a choice."

This apparently was good enough for the princes to accept, as they both sat down in the few chairs Bilbo had collected from somewhere, showing rather more interest in the little biscuits and pastries than the tea. Which was just as well, since they had barely settled when Bilbo started to speak.

"So. I've had a talk with Thorin, and then with Dori, and have come to a rather unfortunate conclusion." Bilbo sighed. "Your sexual education is rather lacking."

Kíli almost choked on his tea, leaving Fíli hurrying to slap his brother's back. Ori opted to simply stare at Bilbo in slowly dawning horror until he continued.

"You are all grown dwarves. As such, I think it's important that you all understand such basic things as how to tell if someone is male or female, as well as where babies come from."

"I know that!" Kíli piped up, now over his life-threatening run-in with tea. "When a lad and a lass love each other very much, Mahal makes a new dwarf in his smithy and puts it in the forge inside the lass so it can be finished."

That… really, really wasn't it. The few books Ori had found on the subject had been somewhat vague, but at least they had taught him enough that he knew that was not quite true.

"I'm afraid there's a little more to it than that." Bilbo took a sip of his own tea as though none of this concerned him one bit. "Now, I really think Thorin and Dori should be the ones to talk to you about these things, seeing how we hobbits work quite differently, but they were both dragging their feet even when I insisted you should know this by now. So, I talked with Óin to make sure I had it right, then checked with Tauriel to see that the elves work the same, and now I'm to teach you the basics."

"Hobbits don't come from Mahal's smithy?" Kíli frowned, then smiled. "Well, that makes sense. Where do you come from, then? Do you grow in the trees?"

"We grow from seeds." Well, Bilbo's answer wasn't any more silly than Kíli's guess, and at least it would hopefully stop any further questions. Ori rather suspected this would be mortifying enough as it was. "That's not relevant here, though. We'll start from the very basics: how to tell if someone is male or female."

It wasn't as mortifying as Ori had feared. It was much, much worse.

There were diagrams.

By the time Bilbo was done with his explanation of the differences between sexes and how these differences interacted to make a child, Ori had long since started wishing his tea was something quite a bit stronger and Kíli had a slightly dazed look in his eyes. Fíli, however, was frowning.
"But that's all with a lass, right?" he asked as Bilbo finally came to a blessed, blissful halt. "What if I don't want to lie with a lass?"

Ori was just going to ignore the slight jump his heart made at that, thanks. He was being utterly ridiculous here.

"Well, it's still good for you to know the basics. Believe me, I've only touched on the very surface of the matter." Bilbo hummed in thought. He didn't seem at all unsettled by the conversation. "Well, I suppose I can just as well ask. How are dwarves on the subject of two people of the same sex being in a relationship?"

Wait, just asking was an option? That would have been so much easier. Though then, Bilbo at least had some inkling from Ori's own question that dwarves weren't too set against such things; Ori hadn't had any such reassurances when he'd made his approach.

The two princes glanced at each other and shrugged. "Uh, nobody cares?" Kili offered. "There's less female dwarves than male ones, and it's not like you can pick your One anyway."

"It can cause problems with heirs or something, right?" Ori offered. "That's why some of the Men are against it, I think. But we dwarves count the entire family and not just direct descendants, so even for the nobles that's not a problem."

"That's an incredibly sensible approach." Bilbo nodded in satisfaction. "I figured I'd better check, since some races get rather strange about these things and I'd rather not get in trouble for teaching you something utterly scandalous."

What followed was quite scandalous enough if one asked Ori, with far more detail than any of the books he had managed to find. It was also quite instructive, though, and as long as he didn't look anywhere near Fili he might actually learn something.

Not that that was going to be a problem. He could probably never look Fili in the eye again.

There was a small voice at the back of his head that pointed out it wasn't Fili's eyes Ori wanted to stare at, anyway, but he was just going to ignore all that. It sounded an awful lot like Nori, anyway, so it was just teasing in any case.

That was what he was very firmly going to keep telling himself, at least.

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Thorin did not bother to look up from the documents he was perusing as the door was opened. The lack of either heavy footsteps or a loud announcement of arrival was as much of a declaration as any words could have been. "So how did they take it?"

"And good afternoon to you, too." Bilbo walked closer, which Thorin could only barely hear, his eyes still locked on the crudely drawn diagrams of tunnels spread out before him.

"I would have thanked you for not bothering to knock, but you would think I was being sarcastic and start with that again." It had taken him quite a while to make Bilbo believe it was all right for him to simply walk into Thorin's office, the way most of the Company had no trouble doing. If anything confidential was going on, he had assured the hobbit, there would be a guard at the door, and the door would be locked. Other than that, rushing right in was less of a disturbance than forcing him to answer, as long as Bilbo understood Thorin might not be able to pay him much attention right away. "And I notice you didn't answer my question. Do I still have heirs left, or are they traumatised beyond repair?"
"I doubt anyone suffered any permanent damage. In fact, I dare even say things have turned out for the better." Bilbo sounded slightly exasperated. "Kíli thought Mahal places a baby in the forge inside a lass. I'm still not entirely sure he didn't mean a literal forge."

"It's good enough for someone who isn't courting yet." He finally glanced up, then was left staring. Something was decidedly different about the hobbit.

Bilbo was not, for once, dressed in his much-suffered hobbit outfit. Instead, he was clad in black trousers and a dark blue tunic, with a simple surcoat taking the place of his usual waistcoat. As though it wasn't enough for him to be clad in such clearly dwarven designs, Thorin rather suspected he recognised the delicate embroidery along the hem of the surcoat.

"Thorin?" Bilbo frowned, and he realised with a start he had been standing there without a word for quite a moment. "Is something wrong?"

Thorin shook his head as much to clear it as to indicate his answer. "Oh, no. It's just." Just that someone had clad him in Thorin's family's colours with the ravens of Erebor embroidered as ornaments. And he happened to look rather fetching in that outfit, for such a small and soft thing. "Those belonged to my brother, I believe."

"Ah, yes. Fíli and Kíli gave them to Dori so he could adjust them for me." Bilbo frowned. "Should I not have accepted? I thought that since it was the boys who took them it would be all right, but —"

"It's perfectly all right," Thorin cut Bilbo off before he could work himself into more of a state. "I was just surprised to see them, that's all. I rather think Frerin would be happy to see them used again." After making some jokes at Thorin's expense over his reaction, but that was neither here nor there.

"If you're sure." Bilbo still seemed a bit tense, but he was already starting to relax. "They are certainly warmer than my old clothes."

"I would imagine so. We dwarves don't mind a bit of heat, but we are not quite as impervious to cold, particularly not the younger ones."

"And Frerin was young." Bilbo tugged at the hem of his tunic, looking slightly awkward.

"Aye, he was. Far too young to lose his only home, and even more so to go marching into a war we had no way of winning." Thorin suspected his grandfather might have disagreed on this point, but Thror was long dead and lost to madness longer still, while Thorin was King Under the Mountain with two wonderful heirs. Clearly he was the only one with any personal stake in the matters of the living, anymore, and thus the one whose opinion carried any weight here.

"I rather wish I could have known him." Bilbo wore a wistful little smile that made Thorin suspect he meant precisely what he said. "I keep trying to imagine him, but I just have nothing to go on."

"He looked rather like Fíli, except with dark hair." Thorin somehow managed a small smile. "Rather like him in personality, too. Sometimes I wonder if Dís didn't fall for the boys' father just because he reminded her of Frerin."

"From which I assume their father was rather similar in personality as well." Bilbo chuckled a bit. "I have to admit I had wondered just how the boys ended up so, well…"

"Unlike me?" Thorin suggested as Bilbo seemed unwilling to finish his sentence. "Oh, I had more than my fair share of mischief when I was younger, believe me. I just had no choice but to grow up."
”Right.” Bilbo’s smile faded a bit, but then returned, if a bit more subdued. ”Ah, I’m sorry. Did I interrupt anything terribly important by barging in?"

”Important, yes, interrupt, no.” Thorin gestured toward the papers currently covering his desk. ”The miners are working to map the tunnels again, since a lot of them were ruined during the dragon’s occupation. Technically I'm supposed to decide where they should start digging once they have enough people to do so, but frankly, I'm more inclined to leave that to someone like Bofur who knows what he is doing.”

”The great Thorin Oakenshield doesn't know everything to do with dwarven life?” Bilbo actually smirked, the disrespectful thing. ”I'm shocked, I tell you, utterly shocked by this revelation.”

”I'm a smith, not a miner.” Thorin snorted. ”I know the basics, of course, but hardly enough to tell from reports which vein is good to work on and which isn't. And if I'm to trust their word on that, why would they not also have the call of where they'd like to dig?”

”That's sensible enough, I suppose.” Bilbo nodded. ”I'd ask if there's anything I can do to help, but frankly I understand very little about any of these diagrams beyond that they are maps.”

”I appreciate the idea of the offer, in any case.” Thorin started to gather up the papers. ”So, why don't you tell me exactly how badly my sister-sons and Ori reacted to the murky matter of sex? I'd like to know just how closely I have to keep my eye on them.”

Perhaps it wasn't the most pressing of matters, but he could still tell himself it was rather important either way. These lads were the future of his kingdom, after all, all three of them if he wasn't utterly mistaken. He would certainly be surprised if Ori didn't merit at least a seat in Fili's court one day.

That it also allowed him to watch Bilbo’s smiling features as he recalled his conversation with the lads was neither here nor there.

* * *

Kili should not have been this nervous.

He knew Tauriel would not say no. It just wasn't a possibility, not after everything she already defied just by being near him. She would accept his offer, and then they would be courting, and all the grumbling dwarves could just shut up, thank you very much.

Even so, after all the weeks he had spent on preparing his gift, he was quite sure he hadn't felt this nervous when riding into battle against all the orcs of Gundabad and Azog and Bolg besides.

He clutched the box with his offerings close, trying to ignore any curious gazes he got from the townspeople or the brief nods from passing dwarves who recognised him. A traditional dwarven offer of courtship would have been made inside a mountain, as he well knew, but then it would also be made in the home of the one being courted, so that their family might know. Clearly he could only pick one or the other at the moment, and as things stood, the stone streets and walls of Dale would just have to suffice.

Besides, these were the stones that had been left standing in the wake of a dragon attack. Not even all of Erebor could say the same.

Bard and his family lived in one of the best preserved buildings of the town, very much against his wishes. He still seemed reluctant to the idea of actually leading his people, the memories of the Master too painful and terrifying, but even he had to admit that people needed leaders in hard times, and they needed these leaders to have certain symbols. He still insisted on not being the sole
occupant of the large building, only taking as much space as his family required and an office besides, but he could still be found by heading for the most impressive building in town, and that seemed to satisfy his people enough.

Kíli recalled some dwarves trying to convince Thorin to take up Thrór's old apartments despite their wrecked state, as a sign of his status. He also remembered the brief moment of what he could only describe as terror that had crossed Thorin's face before he had declined, there and gone again too fast for anyone to notice unless they were already well familiar with Thorin's moods. Perhaps men and dwarves were not all that different in the end, just like Bard and Thorin had more in common than either of them perhaps suspected.

Bard had also taken Tauriel under his wing after the battle, something that Kíli would forever be grateful to him for. Tauriel could have just stayed with some of the other elf healers volunteering their services, and things would have probably worked out well enough, but she had confessed to Kíli to feeling somewhat awkward around the other elves after her banishment. If she was willing to admit that much, even just to him, he suspected her feelings were not as much awkwardness as fear, and for Bard to have spared her from all that by taking her in was something Kíli was sure he could never thank him enough for.

Of course, it meant he had to deal with Bard's knowing smile as he arrived in his best clothes, hair properly braided for once and bearing a box, asking for Tauriel, but he could deal with that. He could even deal with the small sounds that indicated at least some of the Bowman's children, if not the man himself, were gathering behind the corner to listen in as she received him in the small room she had claimed as her own.

"Kíli! I did not expect you today." Tauriel smiled, though her expression faded as she saw his serious look. "Is something the matter?"

Kíli steeled himself, standing up as straight as he could. Of course, he still looked up at her, always would when they both were standing, but he didn't mind doing so.

"Tauriel of Dale, and of the house of Bard the Bowman." Not of Mirkwood, not ever more, but for all that Kíli could not give her back what she had lost he rather hoped he could offer her some small consolation at least. "I, Kíli, son of Dís, daughter of Thráin, and son of Tuli of Ered Luin, of Durin's folk and Durin's line, second heir to the King Under the Mountain… would offer you my courtship."

Tauriel's eyes widened, just a bit, which was just as well. He'd spent a long time memorising this, but he still wasn't sure he could finish if she interrupted him.

"I would give you my heart, to be your warmth. I would give you my home, to be your shelter. I would give you my sword, to be your honour. All of me is yours, for as long as you'll have me, because you are my love and my heart and my One, in this life and the next."

He swallowed, reaching out the box in his hands. "This is a gift I have prepared for you, with my own hands and my own skill, to show you my regard for you and my wishes for you. May it serve you well, with all the loyalty I wish to show you."

Tauriel still didn't say anything, but she took the box, setting it on the wide windowsill. Kíli had to remind himself to breathe as she opened the box, looking at the gift within.

Tauriel lifted the quiver out of the box, holding the strap with one hand while running the fingertips of the other along the letters and pictures he had worked into the leather. "This is my name."

"Aye, it is. I asked Bilbo for help, to make sure I had the characters right; not many in the mountain
know elven writing, or are willing to admit if they do."

"And the runes on this side?" She ran her fingers along those, too, lingering at the raven he had added to the end.

"They tell any dwarf who reads them that you are under the protection of Durin's line. I may not be the next king, but even so, I have the right to promise you that, and my family must honour that promise." He had to control himself. He would not panic, not here and now. "The gift is yours, and that protection as well, whether you accept my offer or not."

Tauriel didn't say anything, drawing one of the arrows out of the quiver. It had never taken Kíli so long to craft an arrow before, not even his very first one, but he had wanted to make sure these ones were absolutely perfect. The fletching was made from feathers dropped by the ravens of the mountain, collected with express permission and only allowed for nobles. Tauriel paused to admire it for a moment, then ran her finger down the shaft, coming to a halt as she saw the arrowhead.

"This is…"

"A dragon scale, aye." Kíli swallowed. "Took me ages to sharpen them, and they ate away more than one whetstone, but I put one to test, and it went straight through a thick oaken door."

Sharpening them had taken most of the time he had spent on his gift, but it was quite worth it. He hoped.

"This is why you left the mountain that one time." She did not make it a question. "To get some of the scales."

"Indeed. I was lucky Dwalin agreed with my plan, if not my execution, and agreed to stand guard while I went diving." He shook his head. "Took me another week or two to feel warm again once we got home, but I wanted to offer you the best I could make with my craft."

"You are a fletcher, then?"

"No, that's my secondary craft, out of necessity more than anything. I gained my mastery as a leatherworker, like my mother, but it didn't seem right to only give you an empty quiver and no arrows to fill it. Particularly as I could have done more to begin with." He shook his head. "For my mother's gift to my father, she used the hide of a wolf she had taken down herself, but there is not much game around here big enough to use, and it would have taken a long time anyway to get one through a tanner, so I had to use some leather I purchased instead. So I had to do more for you, because you deserve the best I can do, but I didn't want to take too long either, because it's already been months since I gave you my promise, and —"

A finger on his lips silenced him before he could work himself into any more of a state. Tauriel had set the arrow and quiver aside, smiling at him a bit. "You truly are a foolish creature, my dwarf."

"Oh?" Kíli's heart sank. He'd known it, this wasn't enough, he should have tried harder, now she would never —

The finger was replaced by soft lips, light and chaste and so very wonderful, and then she stood up straight again and smiled at him.

"I accept your offer." Wait, had she truly said that? "And I would have accepted it if all you gave me had been a dirty pebble you picked up by the road, though I'm glad you did not do so, because I doubt your uncle would acknowledge our courtship if that were the case."

"You do?" He wished he hadn't sounded quite so much like a little child desperately hoping for good
news.

"Of course I do." Tauriel gave him a brilliant smile, and he had never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life. "I love you, my foolish, silly dwarf. I could never not accept you."

It took Kíli a moment to comprehend this. As it sank in, though, he picked her up by the waist, spinning her around as he laughed in delight. When he set her down on her feet at last, she bent down to kiss him again, and this time he returned it with equal enthusiasm.

Of course, that was approximately when the Bowman's entire family burst in with their congratulations and well-wishes, but Kíli wasn't about to let that stop him. His One was his, forever and ever, and one day she would be his wife, and for all that the months since his first promise had seemed endless leading up to this day, the period of courtship that separated him from his wedding day seemed longer still. It was worth it, every moment of the wait was worth it, and so was every hardship he had encountered or would encounter yet.

And nothing, absolutely nothing and nobody, would be allowed to stand in his way.

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"How much longer is this going to take?"

Kíli's hissed question was quiet, yet somehow Thorin managed to hear, judging by the glare he sent to their direction. Fíli resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The elven ambassador they were supposed to impress hadn't even entered the throne room yet; no matter how sharp elven ears were, there was no way he could have caught the comment.

"We're doing this because of you," he murmured in response. "Just thank your luck you don't have to be here every time."

Not that he didn't understand his brother's sentiment, of course. Fíli had rather enjoyed court days at first; standing beside his uncle as a prince of Erebor had been exciting to be sure, clad in the finest clothes they could scrape together, a golden circlet on his head and looking really quite impressive if he said so himself. However, the shine had worn off very quickly. At least Thorin got to do something on court days, however much he might have complained about the inane decisions he had to make and the trivial matters he had to listen to, but all Fíli could do was stand there and not say anything stupid. He knew it was an important part of learning his duties, and one day he would be the one sitting on the throne, but he was nevertheless grateful that at the moment court days only consisted of a few hours at a time a couple of times a week.

A part of him rather dreaded the arrival of the caravans from Ered Luin and the much larger population that would follow, requiring longer sessions more often. He sometimes toyed with the idea of asking Thorin just how he had entertained himself during his own days of observation way back before Smaug, though Thorin would probably just claim to have been delighted to fulfil his duty or something equally unlikely.

Kíli, the lucky thing, was not required to attend even nearly as often, being the second in line. Sometimes he had to make an appearance, though, such as when they were receiving a particularly important guest, and today was one such day. More importantly, though, Kíli was not the only one standing beside Fíli today. Tauriel was standing the farthest from the throne, tall and proud next to Kíli in her courtship braids and the dark blue outfit Kíli had commissioned for her to echo his own. She wore a few shining gemstones, nothing like what a dwarf princess would have worn during the glory days of Erebor but still enough to make a point, and while she looked calm as ever to the outside Fíli rather doubted she was quite as peaceful inside.
Thorin suspected, and had said as much, that the only reason Thranduil had finally sent someone to them was to see if Tauriel truly was there. Fíli couldn't help but agree. He knew Thorin had sent word to Mirkwood as soon as the worst damages of the battle had been repaired, had again requested the arrival of an envoy through the elven healers who had returned home after helping with the wounded of Dale and Erebor. They had heard nothing from the woods, save that the messenger had been allowed to return, yet not two weeks after the word of Kíli's betrothal got out had an elven ambassador announced his visit. It was far too obvious a statement, and though Tauriel still officially lived in Dale, they had made sure she would be here to greet the ambassador with the rest of the royal family.

Thorin still wasn’t too trusting of her, but he had much more regard for her than he did for Thranduil. If having her stand as part of his family to receive an important guest would irk the Elvenking — as it surely would — Thorin was quite ready to give her every honour he possibly could.

The doors opened at last, and the ambassador walked in, announced by a guard. The elf was male, as far as Fíli could tell with them one way or another, and had a definitely arrogant air about him. He did bow before Thorin, though, so obviously he was smarter than he was proud. Little consolation that would be for him.

"Hail Thorin, son of Thráin, King Under the Mountain." The elf's tone suggested this to be more of an insult than the honorific it ought to have been, but at least he said it. "My king Thranduil of Greenwood has been informed that you requested an envoy to the mountain."

"Indeed I did." Thorin nodded. "As I recall, I specifically requested a group, though, and you seem to be alone."

"I did not arrive alone from the Greenwood, but my companions are in Dale yet." Listening to any and all gossip they could, no doubt. "Surely you do not suggest the mountain might be dangerous to me on my own?"

Fíli might not have been very experienced in the matters of diplomacy, but even he heard the hidden meanings within that statement. By his side Kíli tensed, a sign of his having done the same. A deliberate barb, and an insult to Thorin's honour, suggesting that he would allow or even cause an invited guest to come to harm.

"Oh, I have no concern for your safety within my mountain. However, I am rather glad to hear you will not be on your own, for you might prefer not to travel alone on the way back." Thorin's lips twitched. "I presume you have the authority to negotiate in place of your king?"

"As I see fit, yes." Which he would not, at least not easily. See, Fíli knew something about diplomatic speech, for all that he wasn't terribly talented at saying the right words himself.

Thorin must have heard the same, as he sat up a bit straighter, just clearly enough that the elf must have noticed it as well. He was no doubt feeling smug, now, thinking he had caused the dwarf king some alarm. Well, he would no doubt realise his mistake soon enough.

"There is a matter which I wish to negotiate with your realm." This was Thorin's royal self, the proud and wise king, not the one who had been driven mad by lust for a shining stone. It was awfully pretty, yes, shining there upon Thorin's throne, and Fíli had whiled away quite a few hours looking at it, but Thorin seemed unaffected by it now. "That is, the return of our old alliance."

The elf's eyebrows flew high before he schooled his expression again. It was little surprise. The situation after the battle had been that of a truce, no more, and while Thorin and Bard had found their way to an agreement readily enough once there was no immediate threat of war or gold madness
standing in the way, Thranduil had not been too eager to enter negotiations for anything binding.

"You know the price my king will require for that." They all knew, all too well.

"Oh, I do." Thorin glanced to the side. "Balin, if you would?"

Balin stepped forward, bearing a small chest. As he opened it, a pile of jewelry and spare gemstones gave out a silvery shine into the torch-lit cavern that was the throne room of Erebor. Tauriel could not hold back her gasp, and the elf ambassador did not do much better.

"This, I believe, is what Thranduil desires. The gems of starlight, are they not?" Thorin waited for the slightly awed nod before continuing. "They will be his, for you and your companions to bear back to him as you leave. All we ask in return is an alliance, one he won't betray." This time, Thorin didn't say.

"Of course, we'll do a proper contract of it," Balin added. "Make sure both sides are happy, so there will be no bad blood after. A dwarf will not break a contract, and I'm sure the same will hold for an elf."

The ambassador barely managed another nod, still fixated on the gemstones. He had only barely managed to clear the awe in his eyes by the time they had moved from the throne room to a meeting chamber, one more suited for the no doubt lengthy negotiations over details. Fíli had to attend, of course, for all that Kíli and Tauriel seemed free to flee after making their appearance in court, with Dori along as a dutiful chaperon, but it could have been worse, really. Ori was there, in his role as Thorin's primary scribe, taking care of the writing while Balin took part in the actual negotiations, and if Fíli stole a glance or two whenever Ori was focused on his work instead of his surroundings, well, surely he could be allowed that much.

He was certainly paying enough attention to the actual proceedings, though, or perhaps it was the goldsmith in him doing so. After all, even as the elven ambassador quite readily agreed that Erebor had most certainly fulfilled their end of the bargain, Fíli couldn't help but notice that the chest was not quite as full as it might have been. Knowing his uncle as he did, though, he rather suspected he knew where the few remaining stones were hiding.

Thranduil, he suspected, would be more furious than ever. And yet he could not do anything, not after his own ambassador had signed off on the treaty.

Sometimes, Fíli did not mind diplomacy.

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"Thorin?"

There was no response for a moment, making Bilbo wonder if Thorin was still in his office, or perhaps somewhere else. He usually had made it to his apartments at this time of night, but from what he had heard it had been a long day for the king.

Ori had confided in him that the elf ambassador had been offered dinner in the mountain, but he had deflected by claiming he had already agreed to dine with Bard in Dale. Bilbo wasn't sure who was more relieved by that, the elf or the dwarves.

"Come in." The voice sounded tired, even muffled by the thick door as it was, but welcoming enough that he didn't hesitate too much about opening the door to Thorin's private rooms.

"The negotiations went well, then?" He saw Thorin soon enough, seated in his sitting area, his
"Reasonably enough." Thorin rolled his head from side to side, working a kink out of his neck no doubt. "One good thing about elves, if one can say that, is that sometimes they work fast enough. We dwarves prefer to take our time when it comes to negotiating important things, but I suppose he wanted to get out of the mountain as much as we wanted him out of here. I have a document signed in the elf's own hand, assuring us of an alliance with Mirkwood, including safe passage through the forest as long as they receive advance notice of any larger groups passing through. In return, the elf bears a chest with my own seal, with the starlight gems Thranduil has been lusting for."

"And you trust that?" That didn't sound much like Thorin, sad though Bilbo was to admit that.

"The word of an elf? Hardly. However, I set Nori to follow him, to make sure he does not disappear with the chest, and I've been assured I will receive a similar agreement with Thranduil's own seal on it soon enough. Even if I do not, though, the tree-shagger can no more claim we are holding something from him, so he can't deny me a new negotiation on that excuse."

"That's, ah, that's good, I suppose." For all that it could not be very appropriate for Thorin to be speaking so of another king, whatever his personal opinion of Thranduil. "Kíli asked me to come talk to you, actually. He wondered if you would protest to Tauriel staying in the mountain at least until the envoys leave Dale. Her rooms aren't finished yet, but they should be passable for a couple of days."

"As long as they don't try to sneak somewhere out of sight together, I have no particular complaint." Thorin gave a small shrug, looking down at something small in his hand. "She is around often enough as it is, and if I have to dine with an elf, I'd much prefer it to be one of ours rather than Thranduil's lap dog."

"I'll make sure Kíli knows he shouldn't abuse the opportunity, then." Bilbo was about to go on, then paused as light caught the small object in Thorin's hand, giving out a brilliant shine. "What's that?"

"Hm? What's what?" Thorin gave him an innocent look, as though he hadn't known precisely what Bilbo meant.

"Whatever it is you're holding." Bilbo strode closer for a better look. It was, as he might have suspected, a gemstone, and a very particular one at that. "Isn't that... one of the starlight gems?"

"You know, it just might be." Thorin seemed entirely unrepentant. "I must have accidentally kept it in my hand when I was putting the rest away." There was a hint of a smirk on his face, now, one that made Bilbo suspect he did not mean the chest the ambassador had been presented.

"Did you, now." Bilbo lifted his eyebrows. "And where are the rest, then?" Following Thorin's nod, he walked to the nearby table. It was empty save for a small box Bilbo had thought to contain tobacco. As he opened it, though, a handful of white gemstones cast out a soft, shimmering light. "Thorin!"

"What?" Oh, yes, most definitely unrepentant. "I asked the ambassador several times to confirm that the chest held the gems Thranduil wanted. It's hardly my fault if the memory of elves is so short they cannot remember the exact amount."

"Why would you do something like that?" He had known Thorin disliked elves, but this was just ridiculous. "Just so you can feel you cheated Thranduil? That's just childish."

"Oh, I agree. It would be quite childish if I did so simply for that reason." Thorin rolled the small
Bilbo blinked, then smiled. "Well, I for one would rather like to see her all dressed up on her wedding day." He shook his head. "Even though I'm still convinced at least a part of your motivation is the fact you know Thranduil is going to be furious."

"Correction, my dear burglar: furious and powerless to do anything about it." Now, Thorin offered him a rare smile. "We dwarves are a practical lot. Surely you cannot fault me if I find more than one reason to go through with a plan."

No matter what Thorin said about his reasons, though, and even with the clear motivation of annoying Thranduil, Bilbo had to admit he was impressed. It had only been three months since the battle, and he was already so accepting of Tauriel; surely by the time of the wedding, he would have grown actually fond of her. After all, he seemed to have found acceptance for a little hobbit in a shorter time than that.

If something painful twisted in his chest when he realised he would not be in Erebor anymore at the time of the wedding, well, clearly it was just because he would have preferred to see Kili's happiness for himself.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Bad news from the Shire lead to Bilbo making up his mind: he's to stay in Erebor. Of course, Thorin takes this as the perfect excuse to give him some more permanent duties, which his council isn't too happy about. Of course, the council isn't too happy about anything, but Thorin can thankfully keep them in leash... if only just.

Kíli, on the other hand, has plenty of things to learn, and poor Balin has to try and guide him. At least the two of them can agree he is infinitely more sensible than certain other heirs of Durin they could name when it comes to matters of the heart.

Chapter Notes

Of the names in this chapter, Karhu means "bear" in Finnish.

For a king, Thorin was not always easy to find.

It was simple enough when he held a court day, or when he was scheduled to meet with his council. The rest of the time, though it sometimes took some guesswork. There were times when he was walking around Erebor, inspecting the mines or living quarters that were still being cleared for use, making decisions on where to extend the cleaning and repair efforts. Other times he was meeting with various important people, sometimes even venturing out into Dale, which to Bilbo didn't seem like a particularly large effort on his part, given the short distance between the two cities, but seemed to amaze the dwarves enough to have them murmuring about it whenever it happened. And sometimes, when there was paperwork that could not be avoided or he simply required a moment of peace, he would retire to his office.

Luckily for Bilbo, he had chosen the last option today, holed up behind closed doors after the court hours were over. Had he simply thought of something to discuss, he might have waited until later in the evening when Thorin's location was somewhat more predictable, but Bombur had asked him to deliver a quick meal to the king as Thorin had apparently neglected to eat his lunch. This, of course, was an utter crime, a fact that Bilbo and Bombur rather agreed on, yet they knew it to be all too ordinary; Thorin seemed to be of the obviously mistaken opinion that food was secondary to whatever dusty document he was poring over at any given time. Bombur was too busy in the kitchens, though, and despaired of the effectiveness of sending one of his already too few helpers along with a tray, knowing they would not get Thorin to eat if he decided it could wait. Even most of the Company would not have insisted, Bilbo suspected, with the possible exception of Fíli and Kíli, and they surely had better things to do than play babysitter for a grown dwarf. Not that Bilbo thought Thorin was a child, but he was somewhat reminded of toddlers protesting at the food offered.

Bilbo, however, had no such reservations, and had by now more than gotten over his hesitation of entering Thorin's office. There was no guard, and no lock at the door, and if Thorin had told him to take this as a sign it was all right to enter he could only blame himself if Bilbo did just that.
"Thorin?" Bilbo peeked in through the door, balancing the tray on one hand as he pushed the door open. "I brought some food for you."

Thorin blinked, looking up from some papers. "Food?"

"Yes. It's not quite yet dinner time, but you did not have lunch at all, and Bombur wanted me to make sure you actually eat something." Bilbo walked into the room. It was sparsely decorated, but Thorin insisted it had everything he needed, which Bilbo supposed was true enough. There was a nice, sturdy desk that Bilbo rather envied, along with a couple of chairs and a bookshelf that was still mostly empty. The desk, in comparison, was usually full of notes and documents. It shouldn't have surprised Bilbo, really, given the size of the contract they had presented him with, but somehow he had not imagined Thorin getting swamped in paperwork. However, from what he had seen so far, this was indeed the truth of a king's typical day when he could not escape to other duties.

"You make it sound like I'm not feeding myself."

"Yes, well, from what I have heard, you are less than consistent about that." Bilbo somehow managed to find clear enough a corner on the desk to set down the tray. "Please. It won't take up that much of your time, and you will have more energy to actually focus on your work."

"You're not going to give up either way, are you?" Thorin sighed. "Very well. I'll eat the meal."

"Good." Bilbo settled down in the free chair, making himself comfortable. "Because I plan to make sure you do so."

For a moment, Thorin simply stared at him, then sighed again, pulling the tray closer. "Somehow, I'm not surprised that you do."

"I'm a hobbit. We take our food quite seriously." Bilbo curled up in the chair as he watched Thorin starting to eat.

"So I have come to notice." Despite his wry words, Thorin actually turned to the food, which Bilbo took as a good sign.

As luck would have it, the project of feeding Thorin was interrupted as Ori arrived, looking somewhat rushed. "Ah… Your Majesty? I mean, Thorin?" He gave a little bow, rushing toward Thorin's desk. "We just received a raven from Ered Luin."

"Really?" Thorin frowned, pausing in his eating. "A letter, then? Since you did not bring the raven with you." Bilbo still wasn't entirely sure how the raven thing worked. He knew Thorin and some other dwarves of Durin's line could speak directly with the ravens of Erebor, yet sometimes they preferred to write letters for the birds to carry. According to Kíli, this was because the birds could not always be bothered to pass along all the details of a long message, but Bilbo wasn't sure if this was the truth or just Kíli's own theory.

"Precisely." Ori pulled a folded piece of paper from his sleeve. "It looks like Glóin's handwriting."

"Indeed." Thorin unfolded the paper on his desk, continuing to eat as he started to read. Soon, though, he paused, then looked at Bilbo. "Master Baggins. I believe this concerns you."

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"Oh?" Bilbo frowned. "What is it?" From their last report, Glóin's small group had been well on their way, and had not expected to send another word before they reached their destination. He certainly could not imagine what word would come for him from the Blue Mountains.

"Apparently, Glóin stopped by Hobbiton to see if he might find some clothes and such to bring to
you, for when you make your journey back." Thorin sighed. "It seems some of your relatives had announced you dead and taken over your house."

"What?" Bilbo could feel himself paling. "They took Bag End?"

"It's worse than just that, I'm afraid. From what they could get out of the hobbits, before they moved in, most of your belongings were auctioned off all around the place."

It was a good thing he was already sitting, or he might have fallen down. "No."

Thorin gave him a grave look. "Glóin scared them out of the house and made sure they didn't carry away anything that he recognised as belonging to you, but at the end of it there was very little remaining in Bag End." Thorin shook his head. "They left one of their warriors to sit in your house for the moment to make sure none try to take it over again. Glóin told your family that when they return from Ered Luin he would be expecting either the return of all your belongings or the full sum they were sold for, but he doubts he will ever get all of it, and I have to agree. Any who would sell out hope of a kin for their own selfish greed will not be honourable in repaying their debts."

Thorin's words registered somewhere, but Bilbo couldn't focus on it much. The thought of having his things sold off made him feel faint. Not just his belongings, either, but everything his parents had left behind. The doilies and the china and the chairs and the table, and the silverware, Lobelia was sure to have taken the silverware his mother had so carefully polished time and time again. And the drawings his father had made while he was still just planning Bag End, and the few pieces of his mother's jewelry he'd had left, and all the books and the furniture and the paintings and —

"Bilbo?" He looked up, and found Thorin looking at him expectantly. "What do you want them to do about this?"

"You shouldn't bother —" Bilbo started, but never got any further.

"Don't you dare say we don't have to do anything," Thorin cut him off. "None of this would have happened if we had not dragged you off without a warning or time to prepare. Obviously we cannot give you back everything that was lost, but our honour binds us to do all that is in our power to lessen your grief."

"Even so, I wouldn't want to hinder them on their way home at last." Even if the price of that was the loss of his own.

"Nonsense. I'm sure my sister will take great pleasure in administering some righteous justice herself, and Glóin will do everything he can to help. As I'm sure you have noticed, we dwarves do not take well to thieves, certainly not such honourless ones."

"...Right." Bilbo took a deep breath, trying to gather his thoughts, scattered by the shock as they are. "Ah. If we sent word now, would it reach them before they pass Hobbiton again?"

"Certainly. The ravens fly fast, and will get there in plenty of time. Just say what word you want sent, and we will do it." Thorin glanced at Ori, who nodded in agreement, already reaching for writing supplies on the messy desk.

"Ah. Tell them that I will be staying in Erebor for the foreseeable future. Anything of mine that can be regained, including Bag End itself, is to be put in the care of my cousin Drogo," Bilbo said, speaking slowly as he sorted through his thoughts. Drogo was one of his favourite relatives, and a young hobbit could certainly use a comfortable start to life. "He's to use them as his own, money and objects alike, until I return." If he returned. Perhaps one day he would be brave enough to do that,
but right now the mere idea of walking into Bag End and finding empty rooms and bare walls caused almost a physical ache.

"As you wish." Thorin nodded solemnly, while Ori was busy scratching down the angular runes. "Anything else?"

"Please have them ask Drogo to keep employing the Gamgees for the garden. They have been loyal to my family for many long years, and I'm sure they'll do the same for Drogo." Bilbo drew a deep breath. "Also, if — if they can salvage any of my writings, or my writing supplies, please ask them to bring them along." Though he doubted the Sackville-Bagginses would have hesitated for a moment before turning all his precious notes and drawings into glorified kindling. "And my parents' portraits, if they remain."

"We'll pass the word along." Thorin wore his most serious and kingly expression, as though this had been a matter of the state instead of the homely happiness of one little hobbit. "Of course, if there is anything you need us to get for you, just tell us. We owe you full compensation for the losses you have suffered because of us."

"I'm fairly sure that was not specified anywhere in our contract," Bilbo murmured. "And besides, my reward was long since chosen and spent."

"Don't be ridiculous, burglar. I've told you before not to mind the ire of my madness, and I tire of telling you so again." Thorin shook his head. "As long as you stand under the mountain, you will not need for anything, you have my word on that."

"I... thank you, really. But if they can't get back my parents' things, there's really not much I need beyond some clothes and writing things." Not that he had much need of those, either, as long as he didn't mind wearing dwarven designs. Perhaps once Dale was further along in its rebuilding he should ask Thorin for some coin to purchase fabric and hire a seamstress to make him something more suitable for a respectable hobbit. For now, though, he could well make do with Frerin's old clothes, and besides he didn't want to seem ungrateful by casting them aside so soon after receiving them.

"Nevertheless. If there is anything you need, just tell anyone in the Company to pass the word, or ask for coin to purchase it yourself where you wish. You are owed a fair share of the treasure, and I will see to it that you get it."

"I rather thought I was using my share to help the rebuilding of Dale."

"And I disagree. There is gold enough to rebuild both Dale and Erebor several times over, and yet enough left for each in the Company to live in comfort for the rest of their lives. Do you truly think us so cruel as to deny you your part?"

"I told you myself that the Arkenstone was my share."

"And you gave it away, so obviously you were not happy with it." Thorin sighed, a look of exasperation on his face. "Master Baggins, we dwarves are known to be stubborn creatures, but I think you might have a claim to challenge that. Even so, I plan to stand firm as long as I need to in order to convince you of your folly."

"He is right, you know," Ori piped up, though he became somewhat flustered as both Thorin and Bilbo turned to look at him. "Uh... I mean... what I meant to say is, nobody wants to see you go without. You helped us get the mountain back. It'd be a shame on all of Erebor if you didn't have everything you needed as long as you are our guest."
"Precisely," Thorin agreed. "And you are welcome to stay as long as you see fit. If you'd rather not accept all that as your due, I'm sure we can find something for you to do once you have fully recovered."

"I'm more than well enough to do my part already," Bilbo argued, somewhat relieved at this slight turn of events. "I don't even need the pain remedy now, unless I have a particularly bad day. I'm not strong enough for anything very physical, but then, I'm pretty sure there is no way I could accomplish dwarvish work anyway. But if there's some small way I could help, I would be happy to."

"Good thing, then, that I have just the appointment in mind. And one that won't be too taxing on you during your recovery, either." There was a somewhat worrying look in Thorin's eyes. Bilbo was not sure he liked it very much.

"Right. And what would that be?"

"Ori." Thorin glanced at the young dwarf again. "If you are done with the letter, would you take another note?"

"Yes, of course." Ori hurried to write off the last few runes, then set the letter aside to dry, reaching for another piece of paper. "What shall it concern?"

"An official appointment, as it happens. I'm sure you will know how to word it, seeing as you helped Balin create your own." Yes, definitely a worrying look. "Make it known that on this day, I appoint Bilbo Baggins of the Shire to sit in my royal council until further notice, with all the duties and rights thereof."

"Thorin!" Bilbo exclaimed. "You cannot do that!"

"I think you will find that, as the king of this mountain, I can do precisely that." Thorin gave him an innocent look. It was not very convincing. "Worry not, I will not expect many duties of you. All I want is someone who will actually take my side in the discussion with the elders."

"And what do you think they will say?" That, at least, had to be taken into consideration. "They're not going to accept me into the council, I'm sure."

"Then they will change their minds by the time I'm through with them." Thorin's expression turned firm. "You've done more for the mountain than any of them ever did, and I will make sure they know it if any of them even dream of protesting."

"And if they turn it against you?" Because that was something that worried him. Besides the whole awful business where he was supposed to play the part of a royal adviser. "Say that you are unfit for a king because you make such un-dwarvish appointments?"

"In that I expect you to take my side, Master Hobbit, whatever you may think of my decisions in private." Thorin gave him a smirk. "After all, someone has to stick close to me to make sure I get enough to eat."

Bilbo could hardly even believe he was almost regretting the act of bringing someone food, but he had to admit it was close to happening.

* "So." Balin was smiling, just barely, as he eyed Bilbo from where he was standing by the door to the council room. "Are you ready, Master Baggins?"
"Honestly? Not one bit." Bilbo shook his head, straightening himself. "But I don't suppose I have much of a choice, now do I?"

"Not really, no." Balin chuckled. "Unfortunate though it may be, I find our king is rather hard to convince otherwise once he has his mind set on something."

"Careful, old friend. I might think you are being disrespectful." Thorin walked up to them, looking every bit the king he was in his formal robes and crown. Bilbo wasn't sure why he seemed to dress in more formal attire for the council meetings than he often did for the general court, but then he supposed these people were less likely to be impressed than the average dwarf coming to the king with his grievances. "Though I'm sure you mean no such thing, now do you?"

"Wouldn't dream of it, Your Majesty." Balin's smirk said otherwise, though Bilbo knew he would keep any lack of respect to private settings rather than airing such things before the council. "I must say, Master Baggins, for someone with little in the way of beard, you look rather well turned out for the council."

"I, ah, I try." He was wearing the best set of the dwarven clothes Dori had adjusted for him, and given that they had once belonged to a prince, he had been assured they would be more than adequate for the meeting. The trousers were a bit too long for his liking, and the coat a bit too heavy, but then the mountain was not quite as merciful in its climate as his hole in the Shire, even as more of the grand forges were lit up every few weeks to radiate their warmth into the rest of the mountain. "Are you sure this is part of formal wear, though?" He tapped his fingertips against the hilt of Sting, securely on his belt. Sure, Thorin was bearing Orcrist, but then Thorin at least looked like he was supposed to have such a thing. For Bilbo, all it would accomplish was surely to make him look ridiculous.

"Well, of course. How else do you suppose you would respond if someone were to challenge you to a duel?"

"What?" Bilbo very nearly choked on his own tongue. A duel? Wasn't this supposed to be a council meeting, not a battle?

"Aye, in the olden times, most disagreements would have been settled with blades, though these days we rather prefer words. Now don't look like that, burglar." Thorin's hand on his shoulder should not have felt as comforting as it did, not when he was speaking such nonsense. "The tradition is rarely observed, and even if it were to happen, you hereby have my permission to request me as a champion. No sensible dwarf will think any less of you for it; even among our people, some are more trained in battle than others."

"Yes, well, it's not exactly the sensible dwarves that I'm worried about." Sensible dwarves he could deal with, and even some of the less sensible ones, a number that most certainly included Thorin. It was the other ones, the dwarves who looked at him askance for merely daring to walk inside the mountain, who worried him.

"Well, if they refuse to be sensible, that just makes it all the easier for me to decide where to start when I want a few seats opened." Thorin shook his head. "No one will harm you here, Master Hobbit, save if you let their words wound you. And knowing you as I do, I rather think you would be the victor of any such battle."

"I, ah, I hope so." It was all he could do, in any case. "So, shouldn't we go in?"

"Certainly, if you are ready." And, before Bilbo had any time to take back his earlier words, Thorin opened the door and marched in, leaving Bilbo and Balin trailing behind him.
Most of the council was already gathered, though he supposed that was just to be expected. After all, Thorin's arrival heralded the beginning of the meeting, so all had to be prepared. Bilbo quickly followed Balin to a couple of empty seats as the rest of the council rose up to bow to Thorin. Somehow they still had the time to give sideways glances to Bilbo, and few looked approving.

Well. Disapproval at social gatherings was nothing he hadn't faced before. He'd just have to pretend they were particularly unpleasant relatives, and he would be fine.

He did have a few friendly faces to fall back on, in any case, even aside from Balin's calming presence at his side and Thorin's majestic figure at the head of the table. Fíli was seated next to Thorin, giving him a quick grin, and though neither Dwalin standing to the side on guard duty nor Ori seated next to him with his scribe's equipment got quite that familiar, Bilbo found their presence rather soothing nevertheless.

Honestly, it would have all been fine if one of the dwarves hadn't apparently decided that Bilbo's presence ought to be the main topic of the day.

"Now, we have heard the formal assignment, and I would not dream of questioning the decisions of the King," though it sounded an awful lot like that was precisely what he was trying to do, "but I must ask, is this... hobbit... truly the best choice for the council?" Somehow, the dwarf managed to say "hobbit" in much the same tones most dwarves seemed to reserve for "orc". Or possibly "elf". It was hard to say how much of the distaste in his voice was due to his race and how much was just personal dislike, after all, so it wasn't all that easy to judge.

"It is my belief that Master Baggins will be most accomplished indeed in his task." Thorin was perfectly calm and collected, the perfect king as always, and by his side Fíli was smiling the bland smile that Bilbo knew by now to be his way of masking an angry frown. "Would you like to offer some reason as to why this should not be?"

"Well, for one thing, he is quite obviously not a dwarf." Another member, now, looking as though he had just smelled something particularly foul. "I know you have introduced some... changes... to the customs of the mountain, but surely the council room ought to be a place reserved for our own people alone, if nothing else?"

"Master Baggins is one of the Company, and as such, has as much if not more claim to this mountain as anyone else gathered here today." A deliberate jab toward all the people who had failed to answer his call for help, and one that did not go unnoticed, if the uncomfortable expressions around the table were anything to go by. "He has stood by me through all the hardships of our journey, and provided me with invaluable counsel. I believe I would be foolish indeed to abandon his words now that we have won back our rightful place." Of course, Thorin had failed to listen to most of his advice, but pointing that out here would have been quite counterproductive.

"Even so!" And yet another one protested, now. "How important could he have been during your quest, anyway? It's not like he could even fight by your side with that little knife of his!"

Now, Thorin frowned. "I'll thank you to refrain from passing judgement on matters on which you have no knowledge."

Clearly, this was the point where Bilbo was to step in, as evidenced by the several voiced raised at once. He cleared his throat, first politely, then louder, until at least most of them had settled down, letting him speak without needing to shout.

"No, no. It's all true, isn't it? My little knife is woefully small and not very threatening at all. Nothing like the great big axes these grand warriors are bearing, which I'm sure have inspired many a grand
tale of battle and honour." He gestured towards the loudest protester, who immediately started preening at the praise for his indeed rather impressive axe. Dangerously stupid or dangerously proud, then, and either possibility surely required a bit of a letdown.

"Your knife is not exactly without tales, though." Perhaps Thorin had caught on; perhaps he was simply being polite. Either way, it served Bilbo's goals quite well.

"Oh, you must be joking, my dear friend. After all, there is so very little I have done with it." He gave the council his best innocent smile, that of a hobbit who was simply looking around at all these wonderful, polite people he was having the pleasure of meeting today. "I have only killed some Mirkwood spiders with it, and born it into battle against the Defiler in defence of my king and come through on the other side. The Battle of the Five Armies is certainly its greatest triumph so far, and even there I hardly did anything any proper dwarf would not have done, had they been granted the chance to aid their king against that dreadful pale orc." Bilbo sniffed. "It hardly even did me any good against the dragon. I am certain any of the grand warriors here can claim much more impressive triumphs with their own blades."

"Oh, I am certain that is true." Fíli's grin took on a rather gleeful edge. "I must say, much to my regret, I know very little of the esteemed warriors gathered here today. Surely there are many tales of valour they could offer up for my education, ones more magnificent than Bilbo's accomplishments, as you have now heard them?"

"Ah. Right." One of the earlier protesters cleared his throat. "Perhaps we ought to turn to more urgent matters?"

"I do quite agree." Thorin's lips twitched almost imperceptibly, which for him was a rather obvious sign of amusement. "Shall we proceed to the actual issues, then?"

Bilbo wasn't sure what he had imagined a council meeting to be like. Long and tedious, perhaps, judging by the way Thorin and Fíli often spoke of it. He wasn't even too surprised to find arguments cropping up, given what he knew of the nature of dwarves; putting a bunch of such stubborn people together and expecting them to reach an agreement without any conflict was a doomed wish from the start. What he hadn't been quite as prepared for, though, was the volume at which these arguments took place. It seemed everyone was determined to get their own viewpoint out, and planned to do so by being the loudest one to offer one, or by being louder than the person they disagreed with. He supposed it was more civilised than actual armed duels, but only just barely. What was more, while Thorin could silence everyone with one well-timed shout, he seemed to prefer not to do that too often, letting the arguments go on for a while before he interfered. Bilbo supposed it was sensible, as at that point they were more likely to agree to whatever Thorin said simply because it was not what that insufferable orc-dropping sitting opposite to them had suggested, but it did get rather taxing on his ears.

At the moment the discussion about the new mine shafts was growing louder, long since past what Bilbo would have considered to be polite tones. Far as he could tell, the council was somewhat unclear on what kind of information was at hand and how reliable it was, which obviously meant everyone presumed their own knowledge to be the only correct kind. Thorin was leaning back in his seat, looking utterly uninterested in anything being said, while Fíli had actually taken out a knife and was cleaning his nails with it. Bilbo would have frowned at him for doing so, knowing better than to openly scold the crown prince in front of the council, but frankly he couldn't blame the lad. The dwarf seated next to him had a bad habit of waving his arms as he talked, and had very nearly hit Fíli in the face at a heated point of the previous argument. Now, the knife seemed to make him keep his distance at least.
Ori was saying something in the background, though Bilbo could not make out the words over the general din. The poor boy had set aside his equipment some time ago; it would have been quite useless for him to try to take any notes when even Bilbo, seated at the table as he was, could not make out more than a word here or there. After another attempt or two at making himself heard, Ori stood up and stepped to Dwalin, speaking to him instead.

Dwalin said something in return, but Bilbo's attempts at reading his lips were distracted by a particularly loud argument right next to him as an elderly dwarf with numerous scars on every visible part of his body declared that plans were for cowards. Before Bilbo or anyone else could even begin to address the flaws of such an approach to mining of all things, though, a loud, sharp crack cut through all the noise, leaving everyone silent for once.

Thorin had half risen from his seat, everyone else looking around for the cause of this disturbance. With a tiny flush, doubtless of embarrassment, Ori lifted one of Dwalin's hammers from where it had just neatly broken the large stone table in half, lifting it over his shoulder with one hand as Bilbo might have done with a nice, light walking stick. "Ah. I do apologise for the interruption, but if I might say something?"

Bilbo rather suspected many of the dwarves around the table would have rather protested at a mere scribe speaking up, but at least none of them were quite so foolish or rash as to say that when said scribe apparently had no more trouble with handling a big war hammer than he would have with a quill. Thorin, though, showed no surprise whatsoever, merely nodding at Ori. "Speak."

"I have been working with Master Bofur to prepare a thorough map of the mines; it's going rather slow, though, for reasons we can't help. The miners are charting everything as they inspect the tunnels and shafts for structural damage, but their numbers are yet few, and most of them are needed to actually work in the secure areas. Furthermore, they are not exactly educated in such tasks, so what notes they take are rather without use for anyone else." The poor lad seemed quite flustered, now, clutching the handle of the hammer as though for comfort. Nobody was interrupting him, though. "We are comparing everything with the old maps, but a lot of the old documents have been destroyed or at least require restoration, and, well, the only trained scribes in the mountain right now are Master Balin and myself, and I'm only a journeyman, still. And, ah, we are rather busy with a lot of other things. So the miners do know what's in the tunnels they are working in, but it's going to take a while to put all that together in a form that would be understandable for anyone who isn't familiar with the miners' script."

"I would be happy to help you with that task," Bilbo said as everyone else still seemed a bit too shocked to respond. "I may not be a Master scribe," had no formal education in the art, in fact, but there was no reason to say that aloud now was there, "but I do think I could be of some help."

"An excellent suggestion, I'm sure." Thorin nodded, as calm as though this had been a perfectly normal, civil discussion that had at no point involved yelling or cracking tables. "This is precisely why I have chosen to leave the decision of primary targets to the discretion of the miners' guild. They are best informed at present, and until we have more of both miners and smiths in the mountain it is of no great urgency to direct them toward some particular vein or another."

"At least you might have taken greater care when assigning the master of the guild," grumbled someone. "I'm sure this Bofur character is a fine dwarf at his craft, but his other qualifications are rather lacking." Bofur was a guildmaster? Since when? Obviously Bilbo would have to scold him for not giving Bilbo the chance to congratulate him on such a matter.

"And what qualifications would he be lacking?" Thorin's eyes rose up high. "I am informed he was a perfectly qualified member of the guild back in Ered Luin, and has showed great proficiency in
directing our yet small number of workers so far."

"Oh, surely he is more than proficient. However, there are other qualities one looks for in a leader," someone else pointed out. "He may be an excellent miner from Ered Luin, but that is yet all he is. He has no claim to a high lineage."

"This is true. Knowing his work is not enough; he has to be able to lead others, and a common dwarf would surely be far more comfortable in a position more suited to his low birth."

Bilbo bristled to hear such talk, especially as it seemed to be echoed around the table. Thorin, however, seemed to take it all in his stride.

"Ah, yes. This is a most sensible point, I agree." Then, before anyone could get too busy patting themselves on the back, Thorin turned toward one of the dwarves. "Master Karhu? I'm sure you'll be happy to step down from your position as Guildmaster."

"What?" The dwarf, a huge thing with arms as big around as Bilbo's entire body and then some, stared at Thorin in confusion. "Why would I do that?"

"Well, it seems our council agrees that the best qualification for a Guildmaster is their high birth, and no other factors ought to be considered. I am a Master blacksmith, as are you; surely you do not claim to have a more noble lineage than mine?"

"No, but —"

"And I recall we were talking of re-establishing the goldsmiths' guild soon enough. With this point brought to my attention, I'm sure we can all agree that prince Fíli is the best choice for the Guildmaster. And for the leatherworkers, there is prince Kíli, and Glóin son of Gróin for the merchants, and quite a few others I could name. Certainly, I would have thought we would all be quite too busy with other duties to bother with such things, but since you all seem to think noble blood is required for the position, it would be utterly irresponsible for me to do otherwise."

"But —" someone started, still, only to be silenced as Thorin brought his fist down on the table.

"Silence! Yes, I have appointed Master Bofur the head of his guild as a reward for his services, and also because I know he is more than capable of performing well in such a position. I reward loyalty and honour and courage, and if you all failed to answer my call, you only have yourselves to blame. Be thankful I consider other things as well, or none of you could hope to attain any such positions in my mountain, for I will not be served by any who are not loyal and none have proved their loyalty more than my Company. Bofur is not capable of performing his duties because he is not a noble? I will see to it that he is appointed Lord before the day is over, and if any of you complains it will be their title that he takes. And if anyone dares to question my appointments for no reason other than lineage being more important than honour and skill and accomplishment, I swear to Mahal, I will name Tauriel of Dale my Head of Guilds, for surely a future princess of Erebor is of far more importance than anyone you could name outside my own household."

This utterly outrageous threat seemed to silence everyone, so much so that the rest of the meeting passed by in relative peace, with Ori looking quite relieved to be back in his corner taking notes. Bilbo, for his part, had very little to say, until the meeting ended and he rushed to catch up with Fíli while Thorin and Balin stayed behind to discuss some further matters with a couple of the least bothersome dwarves.

"Is it always like this?" he hissed to Fíli as he fell into step beside the prince, hurrying his steps to match his long strides.
“This chaotic? Not quite, though it does often get loud. I think they were more confrontational than usual because they were annoyed about your appointment.” Fíli chuckled. "They might actually be relatively calm the next meeting or two. They usually are after Uncle bursts out like this, until they forget again."

“That, um. That thing Ori did, with the hammer. Is that a normal occurrence?” Because if so, he honestly wasn't sure his heart could take too many of these meetings.

“Oh, the bit where he cracked the table?” Fíli's face broke out into a grin. "No, that was very irregular indeed. Don't think I've seen anything like that before, and definitely not from Ori. Dori's going to be so proud when he hears about this."

“Right.” Dwarves. He was never going to understand them. "And that, ah, threat Thorin made?"

"About appointing Tauriel Head of Guilds?” Fíli shrugged. "I doubt it'll come to be, not any time soon, anyway; he's made his point, and they wouldn't dare question it. If anyone was stupid enough to do so, though, I think he'd go through with it. Thorin doesn't make idle threats, and believe me, he'd sooner see Tauriel leading the guilds of Erebor than some Iron Hills puppet."

"I see.” No, he did not, but he could at least imagine. "So Bofur is a Guildmaster, now? Has he given such appointments to many members of the Company?"

"Most of them, I think, either now or as promises of when we have more people." Another shrug. "Bombur's in charge of the kitchens, and that makes him happy enough, and I think Bifur wanted to work with Bofur rather than have some grand position of his own, but pretty much all the rest of us have some title or another. Óin will surely be the Guildmaster of healers, just as Balin will be of the scribes' guild, once we have enough of either to gather an actual guild, and Glóin's set to be royal treasurer as soon as he gets back. Dori's going to lead the dressmakers, and though nobody will admit it I'm pretty sure Nori's the spymaster. Dwalin's the captain of the guards, of course, and as for Ori, well, he's not yet finished his masterpiece and he's already the head scribe to the king. I don't think any of those please the Iron Hills idiots, except perhaps Ori because some of them don't understand just how important a scribe is, but all the others are at least distantly related to us so it's not so easy to make an argument against them. Of course, I think Thorin was actually serious about giving Bofur a noble title of some sort, if only to annoy everyone who would be against it."

"Right.” And he hadn't known about any of this. Well, he had known about Ori, and Bombur, and had known everyone else was busy working on their craft in one manner or another, but he hadn't realised just how grand and important they had become. "I suppose it's just as well that I don't have an actual craft; goodness knows what they'd say if Thorin tried to give some such position to me.” It was obviously scandalous enough that he was part of the council.

Now, Fíli halted, turning to look at him. As Bilbo looked back, confused, Fíli shook his head, smiling. "You actually don't know, do you?"

"Know what?” Yes, definitely confused.

"When you came in, there were two seats left beside Thorin's. And you took the seat that Balin didn't, right? The one next to him, one further from Thorin?"

"Well, obviously." What, should he perhaps have remained standing?

"The seat to the right of Thorin is mine, as his foremost heir. If Kíli were there, he'd be the next one from me, but after that the seats on the right have no particular significance. Balin sits to his left, as his head adviser; if both Thorin and I were away, and Kíli couldn't fill in for whatever reason, Balin
would be the one to lead the meeting." He waited a moment, perhaps for Bilbo to digest this information. "The thing is, on the left hand side, it's not only the first seat that bears meaning."

Bilbo's eyes widened. "You don't mean…"

"Thorin didn't just give you any seat on his council, Master Hobbit, nor was he just placating the idiots when he said he values your advice. You are now second of his advisers, which is no trifling matter, and Thorin is as aware of that as any dwarf present today." Fíli patted him on the shoulder, smiling at his shock. "At least now you can rightfully join Balin in his complaints that Thorin never listens to sense, hmm?"

Well. Clearly Thorin was lacking in sense for doing such a thing in the first place.

Bilbo, meanwhile, needed a big cup of hot tea and a long while of silence, until either his ears stopped ringing or things started making sense.

Dwarves. What could a poor little hobbit do with them?

* *

It was around the third time that Kíli lost hold of one of the strands that Balin sighed, shook his head, and got up from his desk.

"Honestly, laddie, by your age you should know how to do a simple braid."

"It's not my fault my hair's really bad for this." Kíli sighed, dropping his hands as Balin took over, starting by unravelling what little progress he had made. "And I can braid! I put my braids in Tauriel's hair! It's just doing it backwards that's difficult."

"Your hair's not that different from Thorin's or Fíli's, and they manage well enough." Balin shook his head. "And doing it for yourself is just a matter of practice. If you hadn't fought against it for so long, you'd have no trouble now."

"Easy for you to say." Kíli resisted the urge to huff like a child, but he did cross his arms over his chest. "You never wear any braids."

"That is true." Well, at least he had no trouble admitting his hypocrisy. "However, if I were to take to courting someone, or indeed to appearing in public in a more formal role than I do now, I'd make sure to put in the proper braids, in my beard if my hair could not handle them."

"Yeah, well, I've managed well enough until now." Balin himself would have smacked him upside the head a long time ago if it had been all that necessary.

"Your position was quite different before." Balin tsked, tugging at his hair just a bit too hard. "Before, you were the prince to an exiled king, and not a fully grown one at that. Now, you are a grown dwarf expected to represent his kingdom and his line, and it won't do for you to run around as you please."

"Let me guess. I should also try really hard to grow a proper beard?" That certainly seemed to draw more attention than his lack of braids, or at least more comments.

"Don't be ridiculous. There's nothing you can do to help that matter one way or another, whatever some foolish ones might say. Your braids, though, are a matter of will rather than nature, so there you have no excuse."
"It's not like people are going to forget who I am just because I don't have the right braid or whatever." Kíli sighed. "Isn't it enough that I wear the courtship braids?" At least for those nobody was going to make fun of him if Tauriel was the one to weave them in his hair instead of his own hand. Well, except to titter at how sappy he was being, but that was an accusation he did not mind in the slightest.

"When you are out and about? Aye, I suppose so. However, for formal court, you ought to be making more of an effort. And, Maker have mercy, your uncle seems to have decided it's up to me to make you learn." Balin gave another sharp tug, one that Kíli was sure would be blamed on tightening the braid. "Why he thinks it a good use of my time, I'll never understand."

"Uh, because you've been the one to teach us about court etiquette in general?" Which Kíli was doing his best to learn, really he was. Sure, it was sometimes troublesome to remember all the rules and customs and whatnot, but he did try his best to behave as he ought to in formal situations.

He was causing enough conflict as it was by his choice of a partner. He didn't want to cause either Thorin or Fíli any more grief if he could help it.

"Aye, I suppose there is that." Balin chuckled, a faint sound but nevertheless there. "I've got to say, I'm quite pleased with your progress these last few months. Truly, I might have done better to not bother with any instruction before we came to Erebor, seeing how you now seem determined to make up for all the learning you have neglected before."

"Now you just make it sound like I never learnt a thing until we came to the mountain." Which just wasn't true, at all. He'd learnt a lot of things, even some regarding his position as a prince. It just wasn't until recently that he'd found much meaning in following those instructions.

"Ah, but I can only comment on what I see. And if you were acting like a brat before, then I see no reason to lie about that fact."

"Let's be honest, now. I still act like a brat sometimes, I just try not to do it when I'm forced to stand in court for whatever reason." Kíli gave a deep sigh. "I don't envy poor Fíli one bit. I'd go crazy if I had to do his job." It was bad enough handling all his own duties without having to act like a proper prince all that time.

"Perhaps it's for the best that he is the crown prince, then." Balin clicked his tongue. "Your brother is a fine prince, and will make a fine king some day, though I hope that is yet a long time in coming. Though you aren't as bad as I might have feared, seeing you grow up."

"Careful, I might try to twist that into a compliment of some sort."

"It might be one, though a backhanded one, I'll admit that much." Balin's deft fingers finished up the braid, offering it up to him. "Here. I trust you can at least secure it by yourself."

"Are you sure you should be doing this? Surely praising me will just cause me to get a big head." Okay. Securing a braid. He could do this, really he could. Though since apparently leather strips were not suitable for court attire, he'd have to do it with a bead, and doing that neatly was still something he needed to practice — which was undoubtedly why Balin had left it for him to do.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. I'll just have to trust your lady to keep you down to the ground. And in any case, I don't have to worry about ever fitting your head into a crown." Balin stepped away, watching his struggle with the bead with idle interest. "You weren't a week old when I first met you, you know. An awfully small thing, you were, for all that your mother would have skewered me for saying that where she could hear. And I must say, you've grown up a rather fine lad, and if I've had
any hand in how you turned out, then I'll take pride in that little part. For all that you still have a lot to
learn yet, it's all things that anyone can commit to memory, if only they have the right books or
instructors. Etiquette and neat braids and all that is fine enough, and make no mistake, I won't count
myself accomplished until you have it all down without flaw, but what you and your brother do have
is a thousand times more precious to see in a dwarf."

"Let me guess." Kíli offered a faint smile even as he tried his best to slide the bead onto the braid
without leaving any stray strands sticking out every which way. "Loyalty, honour, and a willing
heart?"

"Who, indeed, could ask more than that?" Balin shook his head, a gentle look in his eyes as Kíli
glanced up at him. "I serve Thorin not because of his line or for any shining gem, but because I find
him a king worth following. And if, through some strange whim of time or nature, I would still stand
in these halls when your brother takes his throne with you by his side, it would be naught but an
honour to serve his heirs instead."

"Now that would be weird to see." Kíli shook his head. "I mean, I know that technically I outrank
you and all, but it's kind of hard to get my head around that after a lifetime of getting scolded by you
or Dwalin for whatever I've done wrong."

"Perhaps it's time you get used to it. In these halls there are but two who stand above you, and any
who forget that ought to be put to rights." Balin's lips twitched. "Though perhaps it's best you forget
that every now and then, if only so we have some hope of keeping you in line."

"Didn't you just say I'm not a brat anymore? I'd say I'm being utterly sensible nowadays."

"Aye, of course you are. Running off on your own to dive for scales for your elf, now how could I
ever think you were anything but wise?" The smile lingered, though, marking the words as nothing
but tease.

"At least I know my heart, and can admit as much, and to the flames of the forge with what anyone
else says. Can't say the same for certain others, even ones older than I am."

Balin's eyebrows rose high at that. "And are we talking of someone in specific?"

"I could name more than one, and I believe so could you." As though everyone didn't see it. Well,
everyone close enough to see, in any case. "Honestly, both Thorin and Fíli are running out of
excuses, and yet they both pretend to be blind and deaf. I'm rather tempted to start kicking them both
around until they get their crowned little heads out of their hairy arses. Maybe that's just me thinking
courtship is wonderful because I find I rather enjoy it, but it's getting to be tiring to watch."

"Perhaps they are simply considering things beyond their own desires."

"Oh, so that's it, now? About to lecture me on how I should have considered my position before
entering such a scandalous relationship?" He was getting irrationally irritated now, and he knew it.
Balin had personally defended his choice before the council, and he knew as much, but these were
arguments he heard whispered around him all too often.

"I didn't say their reasons were good, just that they might have them." Balin shook his head.
"Though I do agree, it is beginning to get quite tiresome. I was certain Thorin would give in once he
saw our Master Hobbit was in no hurry to return to the west, anymore, yet he seems determined to
ignore the matter."

"Guess it's useless to hope for Thorin to see sense." Kíli sighed, then gave a small cry of triumph as
he finally got the bead put in properly, nice and neat and secure. "I'd talk to him myself, but I know he'll just deny it all. And I can't even get Fíli to agree with me, because he'll get on the defensive himself."

"Indeed." Balin sighed, though it was with the same slightly indulgent smile he often wore when they engaged in some of their more harmless antics. Kíli might have wondered if he had looked like that when Thorin was silly as a young dwarf, except it was hard to imagine Thorin being silly. Well, not in the way he and Fíli excelled at, in any case. Thorin certainly had his very own brand of ridiculousness that he stuck to with surprising vigour. "Perhaps there is something I could do to speed things along."

"Unlikely, especially since I doubt Bilbo would appreciate getting locked up in a small room until they've sorted things out, and I doubt anything less would do." Kíli let the braid fall from his hands. "So. How many more do I need to wear before I'm presentable?"

Sometimes, just sometimes, it would have been so much easier not to be a prince at all.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Fíli does expect some entertainment when Dáin arrives, but nobody could foresee the less pleasant news he bears. Bilbo, however, has a solution in mind -- even if it is one Thorin isn't entirely happy with.

Of course, announcing their courtship isn't apparently not complicated enough for Bilbo. How else could one explain his even more shocking remark?

Chapter Notes

Of the names in this chapter, Ahjo means "forge" and Murina means "growling" in Finnish.

"That's enough for today, I think." Fíli stepped back, sheathing his knife before wiping sweat off his forehead. "If I'm not mistaken, it's almost dinnertime by now."

"Right." Ori blinked, fumbling his knife away with somewhat less experience than Fíli handled his. That was fine, though; he had learnt taking it out well enough, and as long as he wasn't putting on a show that was the only time where speed and grace would make any difference. "Ah. Thank you for teaching me, again."

"It's the least I can do." Fíli threw him a little grin. "Besides, it's nice to teach someone who actually listens. I tried to train Kíli back when we were younger, but he never quite took to it beyond the very basics."

"I'm not sure if I'm suited to learning more than that, either." Ori seemed a bit flustered. "I just hope you're not wasting your time on me."

"You're already learning faster than most would. If you take after Nori at all, I'll have you throwing knives before the year is out." Fíli chuckled. "Of course, you could just take a leaf out of Dori's book and simply crush anyone in your way with sheer strength. We just need to get you a hammer big enough."

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"When the council table is still cracked down the middle? Not likely." Not when he could still see in his mind's eye the way Ori handled Dwalin's hammer as easily as he might have a quill. "I'm sure I wasn't the only one impressed by that."

"That's not how I want to impress people." Ori sighed, tugging at one of his braids. "If it was, I'd have sought apprenticeship with a warrior, not a scribe."

"No reason you can't be both. Balin's not half bad on the battlefield, after all. But fret not, I know
you'd rather be a scribe and nothing but. Doesn't mean you shouldn't have the skills to survive, anyway." Fíli's lips twitched in a slightly less delighted manner. "I'd hate for someone to target you because you're in Thorin's favour and not as high a noble as they'd prefer you to be."

"I can take care of myself." Which was why Ori looked so awkward and tugged at his sleeves, clearly.

"I know you can. That's why I'm teaching you to use your knife rather than assigning someone to follow you around." Which he could have done, he was the crown prince after all, and he would have been lying if he'd claimed the thought had never crossed his mind. However, he knew well enough how much Ori disliked his brothers' needless protectiveness to understand such security would not be welcome.

"That's, ah. That's good, I suppose." Ori gave him a small smile, and Fíli's chest felt very warm for a moment. "I can't rely on others to keep me safe forever, after all."

"And you don't need to." If only he had a bit more courage to go with his strength. "Say. Are you busy with anything later?"

"Ah, I don't think so. Usually, I'd be working with Master Balin, but he's had very little time for me these past few days." Ori shook his head. "Whenever I see him, he seems to be writing or reading a letter of some sort. I've asked if he'd let me help, but he says it's something he should handle on his own."

"That's probably to do with Dáin's arrival. He'll be here in a couple of days, right?" Under most circumstances he would have been despairing at the idea of a round of trade negotiations, as those were far from his own area of expertise and tended to lead to long arguments over the smallest details, but at least now they were establishing long-term trade with Iron Hills, which meant Dáin would be there the whole time. He had a habit of livening up any conversation.

"That's what I'm assuming, yes. But it does mean he doesn't have need of me tonight."

"Then, may I make a suggestion?" Fíli grinned. "Let's go get a snack from the kitchens, and after that we can step out to Dale. I know it's late, but there's a merchant there who said he might have a fiddle for me if I drop by later, and I definitely won't have time for that once Dáin's folks get here."

"Are you sure that would be all right?" Ori frowned. "I mean, you probably shouldn't be running off on your own so late in the day. You are a prince, after all."

"Which is why I'm asking you to go with me, so obviously I'm not just going off on my own. Please? Kíli's probably over there seeing Tauriel, anyway, so we could drop by to make sure he doesn't forget to get home at a decent hour."

"I suppose that would be all right, then." Ori still seemed a bit hesitant, but at least he was agreeing, now. "So you don't think it'll be too late to speak with the merchant by the time we reach Dale?"

"I know where he's staying, and I think he'll like my gold well enough, regardless of the hour." Fíli grinned. "It's been a while since I had my hands on a proper fiddle, and I'd hate to miss the chance because he left town before I managed to meet him."

"You should have gone to see him instead of coming to train me, then." Did Ori actually sound guilty? Now, that wouldn't do. Fíli was perfectly capable of deciding his own priorities, thank you, and he would not let someone else bear any misplaced guilt over his decisions.

"I'd promised you to be here, though, and I happen to take my word seriously." Fíli offered Ori his
best charming smile, not that it ever seemed to make much of an impression on the scribe, more was the pity. "Shall we, then?"

A fiddle, and the company of his favourite scribe for another moment. With these, he would surely survive even the most boring of trade negotiations.

It wasn't like there was going to be anything else of interest, anyway, unless Dáin said something utterly outrageous.

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There was, Bilbo noted not for the first time, something very cosy about spending his time in Thorin's office late in the evening. Thorin was coming to something of a habit of attending to some paperwork after dinner but before retiring to bed, and Bilbo had likewise made it his habit to accompany him at that time. Most of the time Bilbo did some reading or worked on his own writing, but every now and then Thorin would ask for his opinion about this matter or complain about that particular piece of foolishness. Bilbo listened, of course, he always listened, and gave his input where it was needed and made all the appropriate sounds when it was, strictly speaking, not. It seemed to work well for them both, and to tell the truth he was coming to rather enjoy this little tradition of theirs.

Of course, as luck would have it, the bad news came on one such a moment. Thorin was shifting through his notes, preparing for the negotiations with Iron Hills that were to begin the following day, as there was a knock at the door. Bilbo looked up, expecting perhaps one of the princes coming to distract them — not that they often bothered to knock — but as Thorin grunted an invitation it was instead a white head that peeked in through the opening door.

"My King?" Balin gave a bow, unusually formal. "Lord Dáin of the Iron Hills is here to see you." Behind him Bilbo saw the vaguely familiar form of Dáin. He had seen the lord during the battle, of course, but never actually made his acquaintance; by the time the battle was over, Bilbo had been too injured to leave his bed, and Dáin had long returned to Iron Hills by the time he got back on his feet.

"Do let him in." Thorin stood up from his desk, already halfway across the room as Balin stepped aside to allow the guest in. Bilbo stood up just in time to give a short bow of greeting, himself. "Dáin! I did not expect you until tomorrow for the trade negotiations."

"I know that, and neither does anyone else," Dáin replied, grasping Thorin's hand in a firm grip before banging their foreheads together. Bilbo suppressed a flinch. For all that he knew the hardness of dwarven skulls, that was never going to be easy to see. "I'd much prefer to keep it that way, if I might. Not to say you must keep my presence a secret, but if certain people only find about it tomorrow, that will suit me just fine."

"Oh?" Thorin frowned, his momentary easiness at his cousin's arrival dissipating. "Is something the matter?"

"I know that, and neither does anyone else," Dáin sighed. "If at all possible, I would prefer to speak with you in private." In the background Bilbo noticed Balin bowing as he walked out, then closed the door, doubtless to get Dwalin for some additional security.

"Anything you might say to me will be equally safe with Bilbo, I assure you," Thorin said, a small frown on his face. It was a look Bilbo vaguely recognised as concern, not something Thorin showed so openly very often. "He is my most trusted adviser, as it happens."

"Ah, yes, even in my mountain I have heard quite a few words about your choice of advisers."
Dáin's lips twitched, before he sighed. "Very well. I suppose the wee one will hear soon enough either way, and since I trust him to take your side, it would be good if you were both alike prepared."

"Prepared for what?" Thorin indicated a chair for Dáin to sit, heading back toward his own desk. "Clearly something is afoot."

"You know most of your so-called council would rather see me on the throne." Well, at least Dáin did not pull his punches. Nevertheless, Bilbo made to sit rather quickly. He supposed he might need the little extra support very soon. "It's hardly a secret among my people that the elders would rather see Erebor ruled from Iron Hills than the other way around."

"You know I would not impede upon your own rule." Thorin's frown deepened. "I certainly hope I have not given you another impression."

"Oh, you are not the one at fault, cousin. I know neither of us wants a hand in the other's mountain, it's quite work enough to rule the one. However, not all agree. To that effect, I have heard rumour that your council is about to approach you with a concern of theirs."

"And what is that?" Thorin rounded his desk, taking his seat with a heavy thud. "Do they plan to question my rule?"

"Not your rule as much as your line." Dáin grimaced. "They plan to give their opinion that, as you've taken no wife and have no proper heir, it might be for the best if you did something about that."

"I do have an heir." Thorin's expression darkened. "A fine one at that, who has stood firm in battles dwarrows twice his age have fled from before."

"And you won't find me questioning that. Mahal, I would hardly see any of them daring to question his might, either. However, continuity is always a concern, and it's hardly a secret Fíli has little eye for the lasses."

"It's not exactly a surprise, no." Sure, Bilbo had more direct evidence than most, having explained such things to the young ones, but he also doubted he was the only one to catch the significant gazes from Fíli to a certain little scribe. And in any case, he could only assume young lasses of fine breeding would have approached the prince before; if he turned many down, people would surely talk, if dwarves were the least bit similar to hobbits in that respect.

"Indeed." Dáin lifted an eyebrow. "Were things different, it would hardly be a concern; he is free to love who he likes, as any other dwarf. However, when he is in line for the throne, some will point out he should not be depended upon for the producing of an heir."

"Especially now that it's become clear Kíli is not going to have a proper dwarven child for Fíli to take as his heir." Thorin sighed, then shook his head. "But why would they bring such a matter before me? Surely, if I were to take a wife and have an heir of my direct line, that would only bring Erebor further away from the rule of the Iron Hills."

"Not necessarily." Dáin fell silent for a second, then again grimaced as a look of understanding dawned on Thorin's face. "Indeed."

"I do believe there is something going on here that I might have missed." Bilbo glanced from one dwarf to another. "Anyone care to fill in a stupid little hobbit?"

"It's not a matter of stupidity, but rather knowledge." Thorin sighed. "Dáin here has a very fine son with a very proud name," Dáin scoffed at that, "but he also has a daughter, Ahjo. And as she is unmarried, they might well suggest that I take her as a wife."
"She's already announced that she does not seek love, preferring her forge to such frivolities," Dáin said. "However, while that is more than acceptable, and I'll gladly take the head off any who argue otherwise, some might still insist she should remain open to a political marriage. After all, that would not keep her from her craft, as long as she gave Thorin an heir."

"I would not allow that, though." Thorin took on a deep frown. "I will not be someone's punishment for the crime of being born a noble lady, and it would not be fair for her to be mine. Not meaning to offend, cousin."

"You didn't. It's pretty clear to me that neither she nor you would find any happiness in that union. Tolerance, at best, or even contentment, but it would be less than ideal in any case. Ahjo quite likes her freedom, and I would hate to see you bow to such demands when Fíli is clearly more than enough for your line. His future heir or lack thereof should not be your concern."

"Yet there is little to do about the matter." Thorin sighed. "And they plan to bring this up soon, I presume?"

"I believe so. Before I return to Iron Hills, certainly, for the opportunity of having me take the matter back to my daughter, though I doubt they'll start nagging about it right at the beginning of the negotiations."

"Which gives us some breathing room, but not much." Thorin frowned. "$I could simply refuse such discussion, but it would not do to cause malcontent, when most of my people are still immigrants from Iron Hills. And if I were to seem to agree and then take back my word when the caravans arrive and I can replace all the old idiots with more loyal minds, that could be seen as an insult to your daughter."

"Rest assured that she would much prefer such an insult to a bond she didn't want or ask for, but it would still be far from an ideal solution."

"Ah." Bilbo managed not to startle as both dwarves turned toward him in an instant. "If I may offer a suggestion of some sort?"

"Do speak, Master Hobbit. If you have any suggestion, we would be glad to hear it." Thorin nodded. Bilbo found himself hoping he had just addressed him by his name; it might have made him feel less like he was facing the unswerving gazes of the dwarven council again. This scrutiny, however imagined the malice behind it, did not do much to ease his nerves.

"You said they are planning to raise the subject soon. And if they do, we can be certain they will lead the conversation toward you marrying Lady Ahjo. Is this correct?"

Both dwarves nodded. "In the most polite and refined words, of course, but that is what will happen in such a case."

"And if you were to bring it up first?"

Thorin blinked. "I'm not sure I follow," he admitted. "How would that help?"

"Well, the main problem here is not wanting to involve poor Ahjo in such schemes, right? So, if you were to first offer the suggestion that you might marry, but with another candidate, they could hardly insist upon it being her anyway."

"That might work to spare her, yes," Thorin admitted. "Except you forget there is none I might wish to marry any more than her."
"It doesn't have to be for real, though." Bilbo tried not to squirm under their hard blue gazes. "I'm not saying you should lie to them or anything, just… colour the truth a little, perhaps. Find someone who would agree to marry you for the sake of appearances, then present them as your chosen partner. Given that you managed to get them to accept Tauriel as Kíli's One, the council would hardly dare to contradict you on the matter of your own love."

"And yet there is the matter of finding such a willing partner." Thorin shook his head. "I would not mind for my own sake, I have never had much of a mind to seek my true love, but I would not take such a choice away from someone else. Dwarves marry but once, Master Hobbit, so for any to participate in my scheme would be as good as for them to cast aside any hope of further love. The only ones who might agree to such a thing are some within my Company, at least the only ones who I might trust not to have ulterior motives, but none of them could ever bear me an heir. You are correct in that the council would not question a love match, but I hardly have given any indication of such love toward anyone. If they are thus not convinced, they might protest at the idea of my marrying someone who is neither my One nor capable of giving me an heir."

"Yes, well, I already considered that, too." Bilbo drew a deep breath. The thoughts were running through his head at the speed of a frightened hare, which made it quite the challenge to get them back into something resembling an order. "Say, Thorin. Was Balin indeed correct to think that most dwarves would assume me to be female, unless corrected?"

Thorin blinked, then half rose from his seat. "No! I will not allow you to do such a thing."

"And why not?" Bilbo chose to be defiant instead of hurt. He was sure Thorin didn't mean to insult him. Well, fairly sure, in any case. "If they think me female, there should be no protest they could make, and there is no need for us to correct such assumptions just yet. Besides, not only did we journey together, but we spend a lot of time with each other, and it is hardly a secret you take care to treat me well. You have already put me in a position quite unheard of for anyone but a dwarf. If you were to appear before the council and introduce me as your love match, they should have no protest, save for my not being a dwarf, and hopefully I would be less terrible a choice than an elf."

"I couldn't ask that of you, though." Thorin frowned. "I've already kept you from your home longer than I should have. How could I ask you to stay any longer for my sake?"

"There's not much of a home for me to return to, is there?" Thorin flinched, Bilbo noticed, and almost felt bad for his comment. However, he had to get Thorin to understand. "I don't mind staying, not for the time being. If I change my mind in a few years, well, the council will have changed by then, and besides we can cross that hurdle when we come to it. For now, though, I would not mind standing beside you, unless you would find it disagreeable."

"You remind me of how much you have lost for the sake of my quest and think to convince me to take away even more?"

"What would you take from me? Not my choice, certainly, as I'm offering my help of my own free will. Besides, though I'm not exactly old for a hobbit, I'd long since settled into the life of a bachelor. It's not like I have some pretty hobbit lass pining for me back home, nor do I hold out any hope for one. I think we could be quite content together, you and I, and it's not like our lives would have to change much from what they are already."

Thorin seemed like he was about to protest further, but Dáin nodded slowly. "It might work," he said. "The common people certainly have accepted Master Hobbit well enough. I find it hard to believe they'd have any protest at their beloved king marrying the wee dragonbane. And it would certainly be believable enough that it is a love match between the two of you, if that's how you wish to play it out."
"You don't understand what you are suggesting, Bilbo." And this was when Thorin chose to use his actual name? Really? "If we go before the council and announce this, there will be no backing out of it. A king's courtship is a serious matter, even more so than that of a prince; if it were far enough for me to bring it to my advisers, it would be assumed we are well past any hesitation."

"Well, that's all for the better, then, isn't it?" Bilbo hoped he looked determined enough. "If they think it's serious, nobody should object to us hurrying the wedding along. The next Durin's Day should work fine, don't you think? The caravans will be back by then, and it will tie nicely into the first time dwarves set foot inside Erebor since the worm drove them out. It'll be all nice and symbolic, and remind everyone of just why you're the king. After such celebrations, nobody will dare question the right of your line to sit on the throne."

"You are a devious little creature, Bilbo Baggins." Thorin sighed. "I wish we had more warning, because you truly should think more on this. We should be safe enough tomorrow; it would be unseemly for any side to bring up such big news on the first day of the negotiations. However, the day after that we will tell the council our news, provided you have not changed your mind." His tone rather implied he thought — perhaps even hoped — that Bilbo would.

"Indeed. Better to sleep on such big decisions, after all." Bilbo gave a determined nod, not wanting to leave Thorin any wiggle room to think he was backing out, and then stood. "Now, unless there is anything else requiring immediate attention, I hope you'll excuse me. I'm starting to feel a bit peckish, and I'm rather hoping Bombur will still be around to sneak me a little supper." And perhaps something to stow away for a little midnight snack, just in case. Sometimes he rather missed having his own well-stocked pantry within easy reach.

There was no protest, so Bilbo bid them both good night, then hurried out of the room. As he had suspected, Dwalin stood right outside the door to deter any eavesdroppers; the gaze he gave Bilbo gave no indication of whether he himself had heard what was being said, or what he thought of it all if he had.

It was just as well, really. Bilbo himself could hardly even think at all, after all. The only thing he was certain about was that one way or another, things would get very interesting very soon.

He could only hope it would be for the better.

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"Well, that went about as well as could be expected." Thorin did not even bother to wait until they were in his room to remove his crown, taking it off as soon as the door to the royal apartments had closed after them. "A lot of posturing and pretty speeches, and absolutely nothing accomplished."

"From what you said, though, that was only to be expected." Bilbo seemed more relaxed now that they were out of the council room, not that Thorin could blame him. He was feeling quite tense right now, and he still had much more experience in dealing with such things than Bilbo did.

"Indeed." Thorin focused on taking off his outer robe as he walked to his personal rooms, Bilbo trailing after him. They would have to have a serious conversation soon enough as it was.

"So, tomorrow we're launching our plan?" And of course Bilbo would bring it up first, the stubborn thing. More, he was devious enough to snatch the crown from Thorin's hand and set it aside, robbing him of the chance to dally at least long enough to do so himself.

"If you are still in agreement." Though why he would be, Thorin had not the faintest idea. "I must still beg you to reconsider. For all that I am willing to do much to secure my throne and my kingdom,
I would not see you lose all for my sake."

"Then do not deny me the freedom of my choice." Bilbo gave him an admonishing gaze, the kind very few would have dared direct at the King Under the Mountain. "The offer was mine, and I stand by it. I plan to stay here for the time being in any case, and see very little difference in doing so on my own or as your betrothed. If you would rather not be tied to me, then say so, but do not try to push that decision on me because you cannot bear to admit your resistance."

"No!" What, did Bilbo actually think he would be opposed to such a thing? Of all the beings he could have found himself bound to... "However, it will not be quite the same, however much you might think so. Once we are wed, you would have to take a more active and public role, even compared with what duties you would have merely as a member of the council. Appearing beside me in all formal occasions, for one."

"Good! Then perhaps I can act as a buffer so we do not find ourselves at war with all our neighbours at once simply because you are not best suited to diplomacy." And truly, Thorin should have been offended at that, but all he could feel was a strange warmth at Bilbo including himself in the people of Erebor. "I won't lie, I would be rather happy to retire in the library and spend the rest of my days reading and writing as I please. But I have found that for all that this tendency would have made me an old eccentric in the Shire, here I would only find myself quite lonely. And, wonder of wonders, I find I would rather mind such a fate. You have quite spoilt me, Thorin Oakenshield, making me part of your Company and your family, and if the price of my place there is playing nice with a bunch of obstinate dwarves every now and then, well, I shouldn't imagine that will be much worse than what I might suffer through during a particularly difficult family gathering."

Thorin rather doubted even the worst of hobbit family grudges could compare to the griefs he knew his own people to be capable of, but he found it wiser to stay quiet on that account. Instead, he merely sighed, folding his robe away on the back of his armchair and dropping down. "There is more than that."

"And what could there be? Something worse perhaps than sending me off on my own to face a dragon?"

Thorin winced, he couldn't help it. Indeed, he had already made such terrible demands of his burglar, and Bilbo had followed through on it all. "More practical matters, I am afraid." Well, he supposed there were no two ways about it. "For one thing, the customs of my people rather demand that the marriage be, ah, consummated."

"And you think that would turn me away more than the thought of a dragon? Truly, you seem to have a rather low idea of yourself if that is your main concern." Bilbo lifted an eyebrow his way before he walked over to attend to the fireplace. "Unmarried though I am, I am not altogether stranger to the idea of sex in and of itself, and I'm quite sure I could handle a night in your bed without much trouble. Now, I'm aware I'm probably not the type a dwarf would look for in a partner, but —"

"And I'm what a hobbit would look for, then?" Thorin thought it best to interrupt before Bilbo said something even more outrageous. "I don't know how typical you are of your people, but I find it safe to assume I'm quite different from the average hobbit. I'm hardly something you would desire."

"I've spent quite a while with big, hairy dwarves already. I'm sure I can hold back my revulsion long enough to do the deed." Bilbo shook his head. "I will not change my mind, Thorin, so it's rather useless for you to try to cause me to do so. If this is some misguided attempt at getting out of this without offending me, I promise you, I find it more insulting that you would keep scraping for reasons to scare me off rather than just tell me to forget it."
"I wouldn't!" Mahal, here he was trying to keep the hobbit from being bound to misery and unhappiness, and he got accused of trying to insult him? "I've told you already, I have no opposition to this plan, except in that I would not see you be unhappy for the sake of my relief." He had caused Bilbo more than enough unhappiness already.

"So it's my happiness you are concerned about?"

"Of course." At last, he was getting through somewhere! "I owe you, Master Hobbit, as do all my people. Whatever we can do for the sake of your happiness, it's our very duty."

"So you would do anything for the sake of my happiness?"

"As it is within my power." As he might well have done even if his debt had not been quite so deep, but that was neither here nor there. "Just tell me what it would take."

"I want a garden." Bilbo's response came quick and simple enough to make Thorin blink in surprise. "Nothing quite like the Shire, I know that's not doable in this climate, but I'm rather hopeful there might be some corner somewhere on this mountain where I could grow a few things. A hothouse is probably a bit too much to ask for, but with some good soil and plenty of sun I'm hoping to at least take advantage of what little summer we're going to get around here."

"Consider it done." True, he had no idea of what a garden would require, but he knew the men of Dale had grown some fresh things back before the arrival of Smaug, and there were some herbs and spices the kitchens of Erebor had grown through some trick or another. Someone was sure to part from what knowledge they might have in exchange for gold, and gold he had plenty of. "And anything else?"

Bilbo seemed amused for a fleeting moment, and opened his mouth to say something no doubt, when they were interrupted by the loud sound of someone throwing the door open. Thorin cursed his carelessness, almost reaching for his sword before he realised just who was responsible for the rushed steps filling the room.

"Bilbo!" Kíli very nearly threw Bilbo over with his hug, taking him off his feet and spinning him around. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?" Bilbo seemed a bit out of breath as Kíli set him down, just moments before Thorin was forced to interfere before the silly thing broke their hobbit altogether.

"As though you don't know." Fíli was grinning from ear to ear, though at least he refrained from manhandling the halfling. "Are you really going to marry Uncle Thorin?"

Thorin lifted his eyebrows. "Now, where would you have heard such a thing?" Because he was certain he had not mentioned it to anyone just yet.

Fíli chuckled. "Dáin told me, after you left the meeting." Of course. Dáin wouldn't have resisted the chance to meddle, after all. "He said you were going to surprise everyone, but it would make things easier if at least I was prepared, since it's probably going to cause some chaos."

"I suppose that's true enough." Thorin stood up from his seat, placing his hand on Bilbo's shoulder. "Yes, we are planning to announce our courtship to the council tomorrow."

"Well, it's about damn time." Kíli's grin widened. "The two of you have been dragging your feet about this long enough."

Bilbo seemed a bit flustered. "That's not —" Of course, because this was clearly not the day for
"It's not fair to say that at all, indeed." Dáin laughed as he marched right into Thorin's room, easy as you please. Though then, the door was still wide open after the boys, so Thorin couldn't truly blame him for it, and technically speaking he was family, anyway. "After all, while you may have found your match easily enough, it's the curse of our line not to see what is in front of us."

"Cousin!" Kíli brightened even further. "I'm almost tempted to feel slighted, since you've apparently taken the time to have private chats with both Thorin and Fíli and neglected me entirely!"

"It would be much easier for me to do so if I had seen you during the meeting as well." Dáin shook his head. "So, is it true what I hear about your own romance? Did you really steal an elf right from under Thranduil's nose?"

"That might be precisely what I did, yes." Kíli picked out a courtship braid from his hair, showing it off. "I'm guessing you're not here to tell me off for my disastrous choice?"

"Me? Durin's balls, I'm just relieved to see someone in this family has some semblance of sense! I wasted five years before I dared admit my feelings for my wife, myself; if you managed to avoid that, all I've got to say is congratulations."

"That's good to hear. I'd have hated to fight you over it, and make no mistake, I would have."

"I'd be disappointed indeed if you weren't willing to do that for her." Dáin shook his head. "So, might I meet her some time soon? If our little dragonbane still couldn't get Thorin to see sense for almost a year, I'm rather curious to see how remarkable your elf is to get through that Durin skull so fast."

"Today at dinner, I'm rather hoping." Fíli looked downright mischievous. "After all, I've been told we're to have a fine dinner to celebrate your visit, and it would be downright rude not to introduce you to my brother's betrothed when we have such a perfect opportunity for it."

"Right, don't mind me," Thorin grumbled mostly to himself as Dáin continued talking with Fíli and Kíli, mostly by making fun of his presumed hesitation in his imaginary courtship. He supposed it was for the better, the boys did seem to have it set in their heads that this was some grand romance and Bilbo would doubtless have been disappointed if Thorin had crushed that belief quite so easily, but he wasn't sure there was any need for Dáin to take such great joy in it.

Bilbo stepped to his side, though, looking somewhat amused, and Thorin supposed this was the least he could bear in exchange for Bilbo's aid in his own plight. He'd just have to ignore the jokes at his expense and focus on thinking about how he'd go about making a garden for Bilbo.

After all, he now owed the hobbit courtship gifts on top of everything else.

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Something was going on.

Ori wasn't sure what it was, but from the moment he stepped into the council chamber, he knew there was something in the air. Fíli was there, for one thing, a rare enough occurrence as he did not often arrive until just a moment before the meeting was scheduled to start, while Ori often left himself some time to get his papers and inks in order before everything started. This time, however, the crown prince was already there when Ori arrived, accompanied only by a couple of the more eager council members.
Fíli gave him no indication of what was going on, though, merely nodding at him from his seat with a quick grin, leaving Ori to wonder about his motivations without any proper clues. Then came Balin, stroking his beard and murmuring to himself as he walked in, yet putting on an air of nonchalance as gazes were directed his way. At this point Ori was certain that whatever was going on was not simply some childish whim on part of the prince, yet he still had no choice but to wait for more information.

The chamber filled steadily now that the hour approached, with only two more seats to be filled by the time Dáin sat down in his seat at the other end of the table from Thorin. Bilbo was right behind him, sitting down next to Balin right before Thorin marched in, as majestic as ever.

"Before we get to the matters of trade, there is another issue I would like to make known to you all." Thorin looked around the table, making sure everyone was listening before his continued. "As of today, I would like to announce my courtship of Bilbo, son of Bungo, formerly of the Shire."

Ori squeaked in a rather undignified manner, but he supposed it was all right, given that nobody would hear him anyway over the sudden clamour of voices. Bilbo and Fíli were the only ones who seemed somewhat calm, but then they would have known beforehand. Dáin at least didn't seem too shocked, but he too joined the chorus of shouts and demands for more information.

"Silence!" Thorin slammed his hand down on the table, startling the noisiest dwarves enough to bring some semblance of peace to the chamber. "I did not ask for your opinion on the matter. I have made my decision, and the one I wish to court has agreed to it. Anything the rest of you might say has no bearing on the issue."

One of the older council members straightened himself. Master Murina, as Ori recalled. "We wouldn't dream of contradicting your decision on such a matter," yet Ori rather suspected they would have loved to do just that, "but are you certain of this, Your Majesty? It does seem rather sudden, if you'll forgive me for saying so."

"Nothing sudden about it, I assure you." Thorin lifted his eyebrows, setting both his hands on the table as he leaned forward, a rather intimidating figure if one were to be impressed at such matters. "I may have only known him since last year, but that time has been more than enough to convince me of my own heart. He is mine, and I will have no other."

The fire in Thorin's eyes was fierce enough that Ori was almost surprised that anyone would still dare speak up. Only almost, though. There would always be someone more convinced of their own wisdom than of the clear evidence of what was true. "Even so, what has brought this on all of a sudden? Surely, if it were such a clear case, you would have brought the matter to us all the sooner."

"Things are not quite that simple, I'm afraid." This time it was Bilbo who spoke, looking remarkably calm as he addressed the council. "To tell the truth, our courtship has begun quite some time ago. We merely thought it best to wait until things were somewhat more stable before making it known to everyone."

"Now, I do not know how things are done where you are from, Master Hobbit," and was there ever a snotty tone of voice to this admission, "but the courtship of a dwarf, and particularly a noble one, is a rather complicated matter. Fond feelings alone are not quite enough for a formal courtship."

"Oh, I am aware. The courtship only begins from the exchange of the first gift, as I understand?" Bilbo glanced at Balin, who nodded in confirmation. "As such, Thorin and I have been courting, oh, since before the battle."

"What?" Ori couldn't blame the council members for looking surprised. After all, even Fíli and
Thorin seemed taken aback at this pronouncement.

"On the eve of the battle, Thorin presented me with his provider's gift. While there was some disagreement between us after that, he never asked for his gift back, nor did I ever return it. As such, even during our deepest strife, neither of us would break off our courtship."

"And what would that gift be?" Another sceptical voice. "Again, while I'm sure pretty trinkets would more than suffice for you back home, few things could be precious enough to count as the gift of a king." The dwarf speaking sneered. "Unless, of course, you would like to claim he gifted you with the Arkenstone itself?"

"Not quite, no. However, there was something very near its value that he did give me." Bilbo stood up, now, quickly undoing the ties at the front of his tunic before anyone could react. As he did so, a soft gleam of metal was revealed underneath.

"A shirt of pure mithril," Fíli murmured, a note of awe in his voice. "Indeed, it might very well be the second most valuable object in the entire mountain."

"And this, Thorin gifted to me, even when the lure of gold would not let him part from a single coin otherwise." Bilbo waited another moment before redoing the ties, covering up the mithril mail once again. "Is this, then, proof enough that his courtship of me is not mere whim of the moment?"

"Truly, I can't imagine anyone could deny the weight of this proof." Dáin's face split into a fierce grin. "May I be the first of many to offer my heartfelt congratulations to my good cousin in light of this delightful event?"

"Thank you for your well wishes, cousin." Thorin's hand brushed against Bilbo's, a fleeting touch that caused an inexplicable wave of jealousy within Ori. "We do not plan to make any grand announcements before the caravans arrive and the rest of our people are home at last, but of course you may spread the word as you wish." "Oh, you can be sure everyone in Iron Hills will hear as soon as I get there." Dáin's grin only widened. "And I expect to receive my invitation to the wedding well in time, in turn."

"I would hardly be wed without my family there." Thorin seemed to relax, now, especially as the rest of the council was also forced to offer their congratulations.

"It had better be a grand celebration, in any case," Master Murina grumbled, just loud enough to be heard over the dutiful offers of congratulations. "After all, we're hardly going to be welcoming a new heir to the throne any time soon, with the way things are going, so aside from a coronation that's the best we can hope for for the next century or so."

Ori wasn't sure how many had caught the words, but Bilbo straightened, his ears apparently sharp enough. "Ah, but things might not be quite so hopeless after all," he said, his smile as perfectly polite when he faced the disgruntled dwarf as it was ever so slightly soft as he glanced at Thorin. "After all, we hobbits are a fertile people. Perhaps the Green Lady would smile upon us enough for her to gift us with a little prince or princess, too."

Ori had never seen Thorin look quite so shocked, but then he supposed it didn't matter, either way. After all, it seemed unlikely there was going to be any serious negotiation going on any time soon, judging by the new wave of shouts and loud comments that this suggestion caused.

Even so, he found himself matching the bright smile on Fili's face.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Bilbo explains to Thorin what he meant by his casual suggestion of children, not that his explanation makes things much clearer. Of course, word of this has to get out sooner or later, which draws some unexpected reactions, particularly from Fíli.

Kíli, on the other hand, has better things to worry about -- particularly when something happens that he cannot ignore.

"Well." Bilbo sighed in relief as they made it back to the royal apartments at last. "That went better than I thought it might."

"Indeed. No weapons were drawn; that alone makes it a resounding success." Thorin lifted an eyebrow. "Even if you did insist on making things more difficult than they needed to be."

Bilbo sniffed. "I'm sure I have no idea what you mean. I'm not going to apologise for speaking up, not when it clearly eased things, rather contrary to making them worse."

"Oh, your reveal of the mithril shirt was a good thing, make no mistake, and did well to convince them of the truth of our story." Thorin shook his head. "Which rather makes me wonder why you then thought it necessary to complicate things once again by bringing up the matter of heirs when they were not pressing it."

"Oh, but it was mentioned all the same. Should I perhaps have simply ignored such a remark?"

"Mentioned, yes, but in tones of resignation more than protest. They might not have been happy about the matter, but it was unlikely any of them would have claimed you to be an unsuitable match when you had so cleverly demonstrated that obviously our arrangement was one of love, not convenience. Why, then, would you bring up the matter of heirs, when you know we have no way of following through on such promises?"

"I was hoping to make them somewhat less disgruntled at the affair." Bilbo gave a small shrug. "Besides, I did not promise anything I am not at least willing to attempt."

"I'm not sure if you recall, but unlike my nephews, I am perfectly aware of your gender. Which, when taken in combination with mine, does make your suggestion of natural-born heirs rather impossible."

"That would rather depend on what you define as natural-born." Bilbo sighed, running a hand through his curls, leaving them in a somewhat tousled state that did not exactly make Thorin any calmer. "Say, Thorin. How big would you presume hobbit babies are?"

"What?" Well, that certainly was not something he had expected. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just bear with me, I'll explain soon enough. Now, a guess will be fine. How big?"

"Right." It still made no sense to him, but he supposed he could play along for now. He wasn't too
hopeful on the matter of an explanation, but then he supposed he could forgive Bilbo some eccentricity after such a day.

He might not have known much about hobbits, but he had been there for the birth of both his nephews, had been the first after their father to hold each of them. Even after all these years he still remembered very keenly just how small they had been, how fragile, each easily supported on one of his arms. Even so, even being so very small and light and delicate, they had each put his sister through hours and hours of pain just to bring them into the world. Kíli had been a particularly arduous birth, enough so that they had for a time feared they might lose Dís along with the babe. And yet his sister was big and strong even for a dwarf lady, certainly more so than a hobbit lass might be however round their hips and soft their forms, but if one were to believe Bilbo their families were large and often eagerly expanded.

"This big, perhaps?" He showed the hobbit one cupped hand. It seemed ridiculous, the thought of a child that would fit on the palm of his hand, but then if Bilbo indeed was an average specimen of his species, his hand was rather bigger than the ordinary hobbit hand. Surely for them that would be plenty of a child at once.

"A good guess, I suppose, but no." Before Thorin could get indignant at the impossibility of such a guess, Bilbo set his two hands some ways apart. "This would be closer to the truth."

Thorin couldn't help but stare. The size Bilbo indicated would have been small for a dwarf babe, yes, but not by much. He had seen dwarven children that small before, born before their time or sharing their mother's hunger. For someone Bilbo's size, or even smaller, that seemed rather impossible. "But… how?"

"Remember, when I planned to advise the lads, I asked if dwarves work the same as men?" As Thorin nodded, wordless, Bilbo gave him a faint smile. "That would be because I know that hobbits do not."

"You don't?" Thorin blinked. "But then… how do you have children?"

"In a way I find rather fit for our temperament." Bilbo's lips curled a bit further. "We grow them in our gardens."

Well. It was a good thing they had reached Thorin's rooms, now, as he certainly needed to sit down. Making his way to a chair, he rubbed at his temples in a vain attempt to ward off the headache that he was sure would come in short order. "Explain, please."

"There's a legend that says we are descended from men." Bilbo sat down as well, looking rather calm. "Some time in the past, we grew smaller for some reason none remember anymore. Only, our children did not grow smaller as quickly, and soon enough even our most fertile and rounded lasses could not safely bear children."

Thorin nodded slowly. "That makes sense, if indeed your babes are the size you showed."

"Indeed. So, in some distress, our ancestors turned to the Valar, seeking relief for this. The legend says they were heard by Yavanna, the one who has given us all things green and growing. She then offered us a trade: in exchange for farming the earth and caring for all the things that grow under the ground, she would spare our mothers the pain and danger of childbirth, and instead let us grow our children the same way we do everything else that brings us joy."

"In your gardens."
"Precisely." Bilbo nodded. "There is a spell to it, one that any two parents might employ; I suppose that's why we don't give much consideration to the gender of two people who might be in love. It does involve things I would not have suggested just like that, but since you said we'll need to consummate our union in any case, we might do it in such a manner that would allow us to plant the seed."

"Right." The way Bilbo worded it gave Thorin rather strange mental images, but those were not the most pressing concern right now, surely. "And is that something you would like to do?"

"If you are not opposed." Bilbo shrugged. "I cannot guarantee it will work; I've never heard of anyone attempting it with someone who is not a hobbit. However, if you can give me a garden, and we are to go to bed at least once in any case, we might as well try it. Unless you would rather not, of course."

"I — have not thought on it." He had long since resigned himself to never having children of his own, had contented himself with the excellent heir he had in his nephew. After all, he had no mind for love, and would not take a partner against his heart when it was not necessary. And then, when he had dared think he might have found such contentment, it had seemed but the final seal on the loss of any hope he might have held of ever holding a child of his own.

And now here was Bilbo, telling him it might be possible after all, and Thorin found he was almost afraid to hope too much.

"Well, it's not as though we have to decide on it just yet. Just, you ought to be aware we could at least try, if you so wish." Bilbo paused, a thoughtful look on his face. "Though we might at least think of what we are going to tell the lads if Fíli chooses to question me about my comment."

Right. Because this mad scheme hadn't been complicated enough already.

Nevertheless, Thorin found he could not bring himself to regret any of it.

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It really should not have felt so strange to be seated right next to Thorin.

It wasn't like they hadn't sat close to each other before, after all the time he had spent in Thorin's office or indeed his rooms. They had shared meals before, too, and it would have been just ridiculous for them to be seated far apart if they were each to reach the same food. However, things were different when it was just the two of them, or perhaps one or two others, such as when Balin or Ori joined them in the office or they took a meal with Fíli and Kíli.

This was no late conversation over whatever document Thorin was perusing at the time, though, nor even a casual dinner. He might have been able to convince himself that this was just a regular meal shared with the Company for a change, except Dáin's all too amused face at the other end of the table made that quite impossible. No, this was as formal an affair as could ever be hoped for in an event that involved the entire Company and not many outside it, yet here he was, quite definitely seated to the left of Thorin. Balin had been quite insistent that he be seated there, just as he had been insistent on his idea that even if they were forgoing any grand announcements for the time being, the Company at least should be informed. And the best way to share the joyous news would of course be over a meal.

At the time Bilbo had almost resented Balin for his suggestion, just for a moment. Now he was grateful, though; after the initial round of congratulations most dwarves had turned their attention to their respective meals, allowing Bilbo to breathe. He wasn't sure he could have taken a full
conversation of knowing gazes and meaningful tones from a dozen enthusiastic dwarves. Why exactly was it that everyone seemed to have been convinced of their deep and true love before they had ever claimed such a thing?

He had to think it was a good thing, though he'd be damned if he knew where they had got such ideas. At least nobody would call them out on their lies based on anything any of the Company said.

Thorin at least seemed calm enough, speaking with Tauriel of all people about something concerning Dale while he went on with his meal. He noticed Bilbo looking at him, though, seemed about to speak for a moment, and then only reached out a hand. Before Bilbo realised what he was doing, Thorin had picked up the braid that had fallen to the side of his face, tucking it safely behind his ear, touches gentle as though there had been any truth to what they had told the council.

No, Bilbo was not going to blush at that. He wasn't some tittering young lass, for goodness' sake. All he was going to do was return his focus to his own plate, even if he was increasingly aware of the intricate little braid in his hair, the one with the perfect counterpart almost hidden in Thorin's dark mane.

Courtship braids. Really, this was quite unusual. And yes, he was aware it was proper now that they had informed others of their so-called courtship, had heard more than enough discussion about the significance of it when the matter had first come up regarding Kíli and Tauriel. Far as Bilbo had understood, some dwarves had protested at the idea of dwarven braids woven in the hair of an elf, only for Thorin to put his foot down. It would hardly have been proper for a prince of Durin to court someone and not make his claim known to all, Thorin had said, and he would have no impropriety regarding this courtship. At least this was the version Balin had passed on to Bilbo; now that he had been privy to the council meetings a few times he rather suspected the actual words had been somewhat stronger, and probably shouted as well. Possibly while reaching for Orcrist, if someone did not take his words on their own weight alone.

Thorin probably hadn't realised he was setting a precedent, then. It had been done, though, so here they were with their braids, even if the one in Bilbo's hair was really not much to speak of compared with Thorin's.

His hair would grow, though. And really, it wasn't like his braid was the most improper thing about this so-called courtship of theirs.

"So, I heard something interesting." The sudden voice at his side startled him almost enough to make him drop his cutlery, and only years upon years of experience of sharing meals with most unpredictable relatives saved him. Glancing to his side, he found Nori standing between his seat and Balin's, a smirk on his face.

"Oh?" Thorin lifted his eyebrows, keeping his eyes on the meat he was currently cutting up. Bilbo had to agree with him. The meal was excellent, especially given the rather limited wares Bombur and his helpers had to work with; it would have been a crime to neglect it for no good reason.

"Some members of your darling council were really rather out of sorts. Rather more so than is reasonable just because you finally decided to admit what the rest of us had known for a while." Nori's smirk widened. And there he went again with claiming knowledge of what wasn't even true! As though Thorin could have actually loved Bilbo as anything but a friend.

"Is that so?" Thorin's eyebrows lifted another fraction. "And you just had to find out what it was, didn't you?"

"But naturally." Nori tugged at one of the braids on his beard, looking far too satisfied with himself.
"At first I thought you'd decided to bestow another title upon someone they didn't wish to see with one," Bofur coughed, still not having quite come to terms with his new-found nobility, "or that some of them might actually think a hobbit a stranger choice for a partner than an elf."

"Hey!" Kíli interjected, though he seemed the only one to be of a mind to protest. Even Tauriel merely chuckled and set a hand on his arm.

Thorin finally deigned to actually look at Nori. "And what was your final conclusion?"

"See, I was very cunning and actually asked my brother. You see, since he was there and all." Nori threw poor Ori a grin before turning back to Thorin. "Apparently there was some mention of cute little Durin heirs?"

"But I told you he had to be joking!" Bilbo had to admit he was slightly surprised when Ori actually spoke up, looking indignant. "Clearly he was just trying to unsettle them!"

"Oh?" Dori blinked. "And why do you say that? I'm sure they would make rather lovely children together."

"Sure, except they can't!" Ori looked at Kíli and Fíli for support, receiving firm nods from both princes. "Bilbo told us himself!"

Dwalin snorted. "What, Bilbo's been talking to you about what he gets up to with Thorin?"

Well, clearly this was where Bilbo had to step in. "I think the boys are referring to a little talk we had recently." He took another bite of his food, chewed and swallowed. "Regarding the question of where little dwarves come from, and how I am actually not female."

He really should have expected the various expressions of surprise at this. The loudest voice, however, belonged to Kíli. "See? So it had to be a joke!"

"Now, now. Let's settle down, shall we? Yes, I explained certain little facts to the boys. I also made it clear this applied not only to dwarves, but also to men and elves as well." He waited for Tauriel to nod in confirmation, and for the sharpest minds to have noticed just what he hadn't said. "Hobbits, though, are another matter."

"Right." And why did Nori not look at all surprised? "And what does that mean?"

"In this case? It means there is a remote chance Bilbo and I might be able to produce an heir without either of us bearing and birthing one." And how exactly could Thorin still look so calm about it? "That is, there is a way granted to the hobbits by the Valar we might try, if we so decide, to grow a child in the ground. It is something I might be inclined to try, in any case. There is much in the way of hobbitish things I have denied Bilbo simply by binding him to myself and this mountain; if there is any chance I might give him this, I am certainly willing to try."

Well. That was rather different from what Thorin had said when they had talked about this. As Bilbo glanced at him, though, all he could find was a perfectly calm gaze meeting his. Either Thorin had made up his mind in the few hours since their conversation, or he was pretending to have done so.

"There is no guarantee it will work, though." Bilbo turned back to his food and frowned at the piece of meat in his fork even though it had no particular flaw to it. It was certainly easier to puzzle out than Thorin. "It could be that the ground around here isn't fertile enough, or the climate might be too harsh. It might even be that the Green Lady will not easily share her gifts with others. To my knowledge there is no one who has tried it with anyone but a hobbit before, or indeed so far away from the Shire."
"Eh, I'm sure it'd work. A rocky ground sounds like the perfect place to grow a Durin skull." Dwalin grinned as though he hadn't had claim to the bloodline himself.

"I'm just telling you all not to get your hopes up." Bilbo looked at the two princes, frowning as he could not quite make sense of the look they were both wearing. "Fíli? Kíli? Are you two quite all right?"

"A cousin?" Kíli's voice was surprisingly small. Bilbo wasn't sure he had ever heard the prince so subdued. "We might get a new cousin?"

"A new wee one?" Fíli's words weren't much louder than those of his brother. "A babe, even? From you and Thorin?"

"Not for a while yet, mind. And only if we do try for it, and if the Maker's wife smiles upon us, if the spark makes it out of the forge, and if no worm or war or other terror tears us all apart before then." Thorin's expression didn't change a bit even as he mentioned such terrible things. "If all that goes well, though, then yes, there is a chance you might."

Bilbo had to admit his memories from the end of the battle were spotty at best, but even so, he was inclined to say the boys hadn't been as loud about their joy even then as when they now broke into cheers and seemingly endless chatter and questions.

He could only hope they wouldn't be too badly disappointed.

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There were, Thorin had come to notice, precious few opportunities for a king to truly relax. On an ordinary day he might have managed it at some point, but there was nothing ordinary with hosting his cousin and a band of his companions through the length of trade negotiations. Such worries were over now, though, with agreements sealed for the time being and Dáin off on his merry way back to the Iron Hills, and he could actually take an evening to sit down in his rooms with a book and a pipe.

Well, that, and some good company, made even better by knowing when there was no need to force discussion into the sound of turned pages.

"Are you sure this isn't somehow inappropriate?"

Thorin looked up from the book he had been reading, startled by the question. However, seeing the teasing smile on Bilbo's face that did not speak of a serious inquiry, he snorted. "I wouldn't know what kind of book you have spirited away from the library, so I'm afraid you will have to answer that question yourself."

"No, I meant this." Bilbo gestured with his pipe, pointing at first at himself and then at Thorin. "The two of us, sitting here together, without any chaperon whatsoever."

Thorin couldn't help but lift his eyebrows. "Why, Master Hobbit, are you suggesting we do something inappropriate?" He grinned as a hint of colour rose to Bilbo's cheeks, rather grateful as it saved him from showing a similar reaction at the thoughts that entered his mind.

"Well, obviously not! It's just, from what I've understood, you're taking pains to make sure someone is always at least within easy hearing distance when Kíli is spending time with Tauriel, if not in the same room. You know, because doing otherwise would be improper now that they are courting. Yet nobody seems overly concerned with doing the same for us."

"Ah, right." Thorin took a puff of his own pipe, hand resting on the page of the book he had been
reading. "There are a few reasons for that. For one thing, many more are inclined to oppose their union than who might protest at ours, so I do have to make sure they have no legitimate grounds to do so. For another, we're each the head of our family, so there is no one I might be responsible to for the state of your virtue, or you for mine. My sister, however, might not take well to hearing that I let her awfully impulsive son wander off with his beloved before she's had the chance to even have a proper talk with them both, never mind see them wed."

"I suppose those are both valid reasons." Bilbo nodded, the flush slowly receding from his cheeks. It was almost a pity; it was rather an adorable look on him.

"Indeed." Thorin gave him another grin, a brief one this time. "Besides, I may not understand all the details of your explanation, but from what I gathered, there is no chance I might accidentally put the seed of a baby hobbit in your magical garden while we sit here and read, while things are not quite as simple for my dear nephew."

The flush deepened again, as he might have hoped. However, before Bilbo could come up with a suitably sharp response, there was a knock at the door. Thorin lifted his eyebrows. The number of people who could reach his door unannounced yet felt the need for knocking was not high. "Come in."

He might have expected Balin, or perhaps Dwalin if he had hit his head bad enough lately. The one who entered, though, was Fíli, looking rather grave. Thorin caught Bilbo's gaze from the corner of his eye. He had clearly noticed it, too. Something was amiss here. He set his book aside, sensing this would need his full attention.

"Your Majesty." It wasn't just the quiet approach or serious bearing that was unusual. Fíli was attired with all possible propriety, more so than he bothered for most council meetings or court days, with formal braids in his hair and the best clothes he could manage. "There is a matter of some importance I would discuss with you."

Well. He had no idea what had made Fíli take such a formal approach, but if he was making such a clear effort, Thorin would not be the one to ruin it by questioning him. "I would be glad to hear it, then." Bilbo slid a bookmark between the pages of his own reading and set it aside as well, alert but quiet for now.

"I would bring this matter to my mother, were the situation different. However, as your prince and your foremost heir, I find it my duty to bring it to your knowledge and ask for your approval." The serious look didn't waver, but Fíli's eyes grew somewhat softer as he said, "There is a dwarf I would wish to court."

Thorin was rather proud of himself for not huffing out a, "Finally," at that. Instead, he nodded in acknowledgement. "And you seek my approval?"

Fíli nodded, straightening even further if that were possible. "My heart is set, and I will have no other, because they are the One I was forged for from my start." Well, at least he got that part right. "I would have your blessing, still, if only so none can oppose my choice by claiming I did not follow all propriety."

"And who is this dwarf you wish to bring into our line?" As though he hadn't known already. Anyone who bothered to look was well aware of the answer.

Fíli drew a deep breath as though facing some hardship. "Ori, son of Vuori."

Bilbo gave a small sound that Thorin could only describe as a squeak. He managed to keep his own
reaction to a nod. "I can hardly imagine a braver soul or more loyal heart you would wish to join to yours. You have my approval and my blessing, and any who would disagree can face my blade alongside yours."

"Thank you." At last, Fíli seemed to relax, tension bleeding out of him as a smile curled his lips. "I haven't asked him yet, mind, so I'd appreciate if you kept this to yourself. I'm hoping to do things all proper, so I'm waiting to have my first gift in hand before I speak to him about that."

"So that's why you were whispering with Dáin the day before they left." He had wondered just what Fíli was up to, but he'd had to trust that Dáin would have let him know if it had been something too disastrous. "A wise move, I would say. Dori and Nori will be much more likely to go easy on you if they see you're treating their brother properly."

Fíli snorted. "I think I'll face a threat or a dozen either way, knowing them, and Dori will probably want very thorough negotiations with you regarding the courtship. Assuming Ori even accepts my offer, that is."

"Don't be ridiculous. If even I have noticed the two of you making eyes at each other, trust me, it's not just you who is pining."

"We haven't —" Fíli, being the sensible dwarf he was, did not even try to finish his protest. "Ah. That still doesn't mean he would accept me."

"If he doesn't, he is a fool, and I've never thought him a foolish dwarf. Though then, I never thought you to be one, either, yet it's taken you an awfully long time to come to me with this matter."

"I just wanted things to be all proper." Fíli very nearly squirmed where he stood. "Besides, I thought that if even you found enough sense to finally court Bilbo, I had no excuse at all."

"Yes, well, some of us have to take the adult approach to things. Right, Bilbo?" He paused. It wasn't until now that he realised Bilbo was yet to say anything, a rather worrying frown on his face. "Bilbo? Is something the matter?" He rather doubted Bilbo was opposed to the idea of Fíli courting Ori, but then what was the matter?

"Fíli." Bilbo frowned. "Why exactly did you wait until now?"

"What?" Fíli blinked. "I told you, I want to do things properly, so I had to order my gift. Except I couldn't just write to Iron Hills, Ori is the royal scribe so I couldn't take the chance the response might end up in his hands, so I had to wait for Dáin to visit so I could be sure the message gets through."

"Please. If that were the only problem, you could have approached one of the merchants directly, or sent a raven with a spoken message instead of a letter. And you still showed no indication of doing this when you first heard about our plans, but waited instead." Bilbo paused, the frown on his face deepening. "Fíli, my lad… please don't tell me you were holding back because you thought you might have to produce an heir."

"Now, don't be ridiculous. Fíli wouldn't be that stupid." Except the boy wasn't speaking up. Now, it was Thorin who frowned. "Fíli?"

Fíli would not quite meet his gaze. "You know that even if Kíli managed to have a child, nobody would ever accept a half-elf on the throne. And by the time you came to your senses about Bilbo, we knew that he was male, so that wasn't any help, either. But then you said…"

"Then we said there was a chance we might have a child, and you thought that was your salvation,
because you were no more solely responsible for the continuation of the line." Thorin shook his head. "And why would you be the one responsible for that in the first place, when no one ever said a word to Kíli's choice or my own? Do you really think we would have opposed your love when ours were just as inconvenient?"

"You have named me your heir, though, and it's not Kíli's problem where I find mine. I have no heir to my name, though, so obviously I should be concerned about that." And still the boy would not look him in the eye.

"And yet you missed the part where you are not my direct heir?" He sighed. "Fíli, our people might be decreased, but we are yet to die out. If Kíli's children have pointy ears and I fail to produce any, you have plenty of cousins who are also of Durin's blood. As long as the line survives in even one of us, it hardly matters the connection between one head to bear the crown and the next. If indeed you think Ori your One, then he is a gift from Mahal more precious than any other. If you were to cast that aside for some petty politics, and if I committed the greater crime of allowing that, then we might as well cast open our gates and offer up the throne to any who wish to have it, because that day we will have ceased to be dwarves of any honour or consequence."

"You know it's not that simple." So why did Fíli sound so relieved, now?

"And why not?" Thorin gave a small shrug. "Ori is a fine dwarf. A bit shy, perhaps, and not one to speak his mind easily, but then I rather hope he will have plenty of time to get over that particular failing of his before he is called upon to act as a consort."

"I think we all hope for that." Bilbo offered Fíli a smile. "Well, whatever your reasons were for waiting, I'm glad you've decided to do this at last. I have no doubt that Ori will accept and you two will be very happy together."

"Thank you, Bilbo." Fíli seemed mostly relaxed now. Silly thing.

"Of course, there is one thing that does concern me." Bilbo frowned again, though Thorin got the impression this was not quite as serious as his first point.

"Oh?" Fíli blinked. "And what is that?"

"Have you told Kíli yet? Because he might not be happy to hear that he was not the first to be informed of your plans."

Fíli seemed about to say something, then halted, paled, and turned around. If he had been rather too unusually calm in his arrival, his departure was anything but.

"I feel as though I should apologise." Thorin sighed, shaking his head. "This courtship was not supposed to come with the obligation of dealing with children before we are even wed."

"Now, please. They aren't that bad. If anything, I'd say this rather proves that Fíli is a very responsible young dwarf." Bilbo smiled, reaching for his book again. "Besides, I do recall someone telling me they already considered me family some time ago. You really think I didn't know what that would entail by then?"

This, Thorin found, was not something he could truly contest with any hope of success. Though then, he rather found he did not particularly wish to, either.

Even though all this rather made him feel he had stolen some happiness that was not his by right.

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By the third time Kíli noticed a not so subtle shadow skitter off behind a corner, he sighed and rolled his eyes. "They do realise we know we're being followed, right?"

"I really don't think that is the point, my dear dwarf." Tauriel smiled, appearing unconcerned at their follower. Though then, Kíli suspected she had seen them even more often than he had, and they had yet to travel a long way along the streets of Dale. "It is but one of Bard's children, in any case. I suspect they find it a rather amusing game, following us about like this."

"Because it is not enough for them to listen behind corners when we actually are in their house?" Which was just silly in any case. They could have just as well come sit in the room with them if they were so keen on listening in.

"Oh, but then they are only doing their duty, making sure things stay nice and proper. This, however, is only for their amusement, as we do not need chaperoning while we are in public."

"And they need to make sure we don't duck off into some dark corner where we might not be in public anymore." Kíli rolled his eyes, though he couldn't help but smile. "I suppose it's still better than the ones who follow us around the mountain. At least Bard's children don't make kissy faces at us at every opportunity."

"That is true, yes." Tauriel chuckled. "So, how has your uncle's courtship started off? It must have been a couple of weeks now since I last was in the mountain, what with everyone being busy with the visitors, and that was for the celebration dinner."

"See, here's the strange thing, it's almost like nothing has changed." Kíli shook his head. "Or maybe it's not all that strange, really. It's just, well. They work together a lot now that Thorin put Bilbo on the council, and even when they don't, they spend a lot of time together. They take most of their meals together, or they might just sit together to read or speak or whatever. Which is all very sweet, and I've never seen Thorin spend so much time with someone voluntarily except maybe Dwalin, but still, that's it. I've never seen them kiss, or hold hands, and even when they do touch it's always just barely there. Which made sense when they were still pining or hiding their courtship or however this thing worked for them, but there's no reason for them to act like that now that everyone knows about them."

"Perhaps they simply don't want to make any further display of it. Not everyone shows their love through touches or kisses or such, you realise, particularly not where others might see."

"Then they are fools, all of them." Feeling a bit impish, Kíli took her hand and brought it to his mouth, pressing light kisses upon her knuckles just because he could. And, well, she smiled down at him for it, so clearly she wasn't protesting. "I could not imagine not being close to my beloved at every opportunity."

"I will be sure to inform your beloved if we ever were to meet." She chuckled at his pout, leaning down to kiss his forehead. "Oh, my precious dwarf. If neither of them seems unhappy with the state of things, leave them be. I'm sure they are old enough to know how they wish for their love to be expressed, even if it might not be the same as your preference."

"I suppose." Kíli rubbed the back of his neck. "It's just kind of strange, you know? I know Thorin's not very expressive, but I thought for sure he'd be more open about his affection now that he's wearing Bilbo's braids. He gave Bilbo more touches on the journey here, for goodness' sake! Well, he did once he first admitted to being wrong. And sometimes…" He trailed off, not sure how to finish. He was probably just imagining it all, anyway.

"Yes?" Because of course Tauriel would not let him off that easy. "Sometimes what?"
"Just, a couple of times I could swear I've seen Thorin reaching out to touch Bilbo, only to check himself and draw away again. And, well, who does that? They are courting, it's not like he has to worry about whether it's proper for him to take his hand or touch his braids or whatever. And Bilbo's the same, always staring at Thorin and then looking away when he's noticed. At least he doesn't seem to halt his touches, but even he doesn't give out any more of those than he used to. I'd hoped all that would stop now that they've come to their senses, but they're as bad as Fíli and Ori, if not worse!"

"Ah, yes. How is your brother's romance coming along?" Tauriel smiled, reaching her arm around his shoulder as they continued their walk again. He in turn reached his arm around her waist, ignoring any looks they got from the few passers-by. "And I wouldn't worry about your uncles, really. Whatever their problem is, they will solve it in time."

"I damn well hope so, or my mother will have to whack them both over the head when she arrives." Like she wouldn't have enough to talk about then. "Fíli's at last admitted his feelings, which I guess is a first step. He even asked for Thorin's permission, but he's made us all swear not to speak to Ori before he has his gift in hand. See, apparently it's fine for him not to start with his hand-crafted gift." Not that he was actually bitter over that or something equally ridiculous. He did know their circumstances were vastly different, simply because of the fact that he was courting an elf and Fíli had his eye on a dwarf. "Not that Ori's going to care; I'm pretty sure he'd say the same as you did, that he'd accept even a dirty pebble from Fíli. His brothers would not agree, though, so Fíli has to wait until he has a proper offering."

"Indeed, best make sure his brothers are happy." Tauriel shook her head. "Really, listening to all this makes me quite worried for how your mother will take to me. Your uncle has been difficult enough, and at least I've had some chance to prove myself to him."

"Honestly? I think she's going to love you. Bilbo, too. The three of you and Ori can all band together to force some sense through our thick Durin skulls."

"So your uncle is lacking in sense?" What, no question about him?

"Mom certainly seems to think so. She's complained about needing help with handling him for some time now. There aren't many besides her who are willing to speak up against Thorin, and half the time Dwalin agrees with him and Balin lets him pull rank, so they aren't as much help as you might think." Kíli chuckled. "She's going to adore Bilbo, that's for sure."

"I'm not sure I will be of much help on that front, though. Your uncle would hardly listen to what I have to say unless he were already inclined to agree."

"See, that's why you're going to be responsible for keeping me in line instead." Kíli offered her his best charming smile. "Really, you have the easy job, here. Just keep me from doing something terribly stupid and she will love you forever."

"And that's the easy task?" Tauriel lifted her eyebrows, but the smile curving her lips made it clear she was teasing him.

"Well, obviously. Bilbo and Ori will each have a turn as the royal consort, smoothing over the worst diplomatic turns, and, well, you have met my uncle. And while Fíli is not quite as ornery or stubborn as Thorin is, he also has not yet cast out any chance of gold sickness once and for all."

Tauriel's teasing look vanished in an instant, replaced by a frown. "You think that might be a concern? Your brother falling to the sickness, that is?"
"I'd like to say no, but things aren't that simple." Kíli sighed. It wasn't pleasant to think about, but denial would get him nowhere. "When we first arrived in Erebor, well, it was like Fíli didn't hear a word that Bilbo said. All he could do was follow the glow of gold from deep in the mountain. He hasn't showed any such signs since, even agreed with Thorin when he decided to divide the gold in a more sensible manner than just fourteen equal shares and naught else, but, well. It makes me wonder how he'll act when it's his turn to claim that blasted stone."

"I take it you feel no particular pull towards that yourself?"

"Can't say I do, no." Kíli looked up at her, giving her a grin that was sure to make him look like an idiot, but he couldn't bring himself to care. "I much prefer copper to gold, in any case."

She chuckled and seemed about to say something, then halted. Before Kíli could as much as blink, she had drawn away from him, facing a small alley like one would an enemy. "Show yourself."

For a moment, there was nothing for Kíli to see, and he almost wondered if it might not be possible for Tauriel's sharp ears to have betrayed her for once. Then, slowly but surely, a figure separated itself from the shadowed stones, one that most definitely was not one of Bard's children.

"I never could deceive your ears." The prince of Mirkwood showed his empty hands, as much of a peace offering as could ever be given by someone who was as fast on the draw as Kíli knew him to be. "I'm glad to see you are well, Tauriel."

"You as well, my prince." Tauriel relaxed somewhat, though some of the tension remained still. "What are you doing here? Last I heard, you had disappeared into the forest." If Kíli could hear the hint of hurt in her voice at that, there was no way Legolas could have missed it.

"Why, for the most obvious reason, of course." Whatever it was he considered to be obvious. "I am here to finish the peace negotiations with Erebor on behalf of my father."

Well. Kíli supposed that would be a legitimate reason for him to be in Dale.

Somehow, he doubted Tauriel would request to stay in the mountain for the duration of these negotiations.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Legolas brings good news from Mirkwood, but what he has to say to Tauriel may not be as delightful. Fortunately, Tauriel has made up her mind already.

Meanwhile, Thorin makes plans for Bilbo, and Fili finally goes through with his own little scheme.

Chapter Notes

Of the names in this chapter, Vuori means "mountain" and Tuli means "fire".

Thorin did look very kingly, Bilbo noted, for all that he had only been alerted to the visitor scarce moments before they all gathered in the throne room. He was wearing his better robes, the ones he usually reserved for impressing the council, though then this was an important occasion. Bilbo himself was wearing his best dwarven clothing, standing beside the throne, the first time he did so as Thorin's chosen.

Everyone else was in their best dress too, Fíli and Kíli both decked out in all the braids and clothes and armour that they ought to, with Tauriel as beautiful as ever by the side of her prince even as she looked rather nervous. Bilbo couldn't rightly blame her, not given who was standing before them.

"Hail Thorin, son of Thráin, King Under the Mountain." There was a bow, not terribly deep, but more than enough given the station of their guest. "I bring word from King Thranduil of the Greenwood."

"And the Elvenking sends his own son, I see." Thorin lifted his eyebrows. "Should I be honoured by his choice of messenger, or insulted that he would not come himself?"

Legolas stood calm before them, tall and proud yet not arrogant. "My father is old and set in his ways. I do not think many things would tempt him out of his forest anymore." He shook his head. "I volunteered myself to bear his message, so you would know it comes direct from his lips."

"Indeed." Thorin straightened, just a bit, yet enough to make him all the more majestic. "And what is this message you bring, then? Has he agreed to the terms that his ambassador took to him?"

"He has." Legolas produced a scroll, set with a fine, intricate seal. "Here is a copy, with his own seal and signature, if you would like to see."

Thorin took the scroll and opened it. "This is written in Elvish."

"I suspect it would be." There was no taunt in Legolas's gaze, though, and the way he inclined his head was almost as though an apology. "We do not often have such correspondence with other people." And a last chance to vex Thorin, Bilbo suspected.
"Bilbo." Thorin glanced at him. "You know something of other tongues, I understand. Can you read this?"

"I might make out the general gist of things, yes. However, my knowledge is lacking enough I cannot guarantee to have the details exact."

"It is enough for me to confirm." Before Bilbo could ask what he meant, Thorin turned to look to the other side of his throne. "Tauriel? Will you read out to all just what the Elvenking has agreed to?"

She hesitated barely a moment before stepping out, taking the scroll from Thorin. She waited for Bilbo to step by her side before she read out the text in Westron, pausing every now and then to offer him a chance to catch up. It was, indeed, more or less the terms Thorin had sent out, an agreement of alliance and mutual assistance, complete with the allowance of travel and trade through the forest.

As Tauriel came to the end of the terms, Thorin nodded, taking the scroll back from her. He rolled it back up as Bilbo and Tauriel both stepped back to their own places, then fixed his eyes on Legolas again. "And how likely is he to stay true to any of this?"

There were gasps of shock, at least one Bilbo recognised as Balin from the side, but Legolas did not look surprised at all. "My father is old," he repeated, "and has no mind to leave his forest. He has also seen the folly of war, and lost many great warriors to it. It is my belief that now that he has the starlight gems, he has no desire to reach out beyond our own borders." Both a curse and a blessing, but in peacetime more of the latter.

"And the passage through the forest, which we might need often for both people and goods?"

"He will not stop you." Legolas shook his head. "I have personally instructed our warriors in cleaning out the forest; now that no more evil is creeping up from the south, we hope to have the road safe for travellers soon enough. While my father does not like the idea of outsiders in our forest, he knows that trade and passage are needed for Dale and Erebor to thrive, and it is more to his benefit to keep the road clear so they might stand barrier between him and the orcs of the north." It was a blunt and practical estimate, with no political niceties to disguise it, but then Bilbo suspected that was precisely why Thorin could accept it with an easy nod.

"It's the best I could ever expect, I suppose." Thorin reached the scroll to Balin, who stepped forward to take it, before Thorin stood to his entire majestic height. He was shorter than Legolas, that was clear enough even with his raised throne, but somehow in Bilbo's eyes he seemed to draw taller than he actually was. "I'll consider the agreement finalised, then. Tonight, all of Erebor shall feast to celebrate this. Prince Legolas, you are gladly invited to join us."

"It would be my honour to do so." Another barely polite bow, but again, it was there.

Thorin's majestic bearing stayed through until they had made it back to the chamber he kept near the throne room for preparations and negotiations, with only Bilbo and Fíli trailing along. There something seemed to relax, just a little, and he turned to Bilbo. "We have an agreement."

"So we do." Bilbo found himself smiling. "And we don't have to worry about the caravans having to go around the forest."

"The prince would not lie in front of Tauriel, and if he did, she would know," Fíli mused. "So it seems unless Thranduil is taken by some further madness, we can be secure for now."

"Which is more than I dared hope for." Thorin paused, an almost mischievous look crossing his face, one that rather reminded Bilbo of Kíli. The next moment Bilbo found himself picked up, strong
hands encircling his waist, dangling him in the air and swirling him about. "I have a peace treaty, Bilbo! And by my honour, it will not be dwarves who break it first, not as I live and breathe."

"It did cost us the starlight gems, though." Though Fíli's tone was wry, even he seemed amused by Thorin's burst of delight.

"Gems! We have those a mountain full. Much though it irks me to give the elves a thing, I would bear every last shining stone before Thranduil if that was the price of seeing my people safely returned home." Thorin set Bilbo down, now, though one of his hands remained, which probably was a good thing as Bilbo felt a bit dizzy. "I've had a dragon's hoard in my hands, Fíli, and not once in all my life have I been poorer than I was then. So let Thranduil have his jewels when he has no queen to decorate with them, let the golden floor gleam under dancing feet, and let the dwarves of Erebor come back to warm hearths and full tables rather than empty chambers and glittering piles."

Bilbo gave a breathless laugh. "You can't imagine how glad I am to hear those words from you."

Thorin looked at him, eyes serious yet warm. "I think I know, my hobbit." His hand lifted to toy with Bilbo's hair, fiddling with the braid he found there before falling away again. "There was a time I had lost myself, but I found my way back. Now, I will be all the more careful not to lose sight of what is important."

For some reason Bilbo found a flush rising to his cheeks at the words, which was obviously ridiculous. "Well, we will all be here to remind you, should you forget again."

"I am sure you will." And Thorin smiled, the easy, warm smile he so rarely showed to anyone, without any sign of mockery or affected levity, and Bilbo was sure he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

Oh, this courtship was going to be the end of him.

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"Tauriel." A hand settled on her shoulder. "A moment, if I may?"

Tauriel looked up to find Legolas standing beside her seat. "Certainly."

"Somewhere else, perhaps?" Legolas glanced around at the dwarves gathered around the feast table. At least there wasn't distaste in his eyes, merely a wariness she could not fault him for.

"If you wish." She stood up, halting Kíli with a shake of her head as he made to follow. "I will be back soon." She leaned down to set a kiss on top of his head, a sign both for him and Legolas of where her loyalties lay.

Legolas led her out of the feast hall, hardly the largest space in all of Erebor but impressive enough to house all the dwarves currently living there. He could not seem to find the words at first, leading her further into the mountain. Tauriel almost expected someone to come and stop them, but she supposed even most of the guards were enjoying the feast, leaving them on their own.

They finally came to a small sitting room, by the looks of it not used since before the dragon's reign, and Legolas turned to her at last. "Tauriel," he breathed. "Come away with me."

"I will not." It was that simple, it would always be that simple, because while her heart was yet torn she had made her choice and would not regret it.

"This isn't your place." There was agony in his gaze, a tension she had rarely seen in all their years
together. "You are a flower in the midst of thorns, Tauriel, you cannot think otherwise. They would not even allow you here if the dwarf who has claimed you were not their prince!"

"Perhaps so." Oh, she was under no illusions about that. "However, he is a prince, and I enjoy the protection of his house and line. I am safe here, as I am in Dale, which is good as I do not have elsewhere to go."

"Your home is not here."

"I lost what home I might have had before." She shook her head. "Your father banished me, Legolas, and you know even you cannot change his mind once it is made. For me to return would be to welcome my death, because I doubt he would have mercy on me."

"It is where you belong, though." He reached a hand out to her. She did not take it. "Come with me, Tauriel. I will give you all happiness."

"He would never allow it." She could never bear to go, not anymore.

"My father is mad." Legolas took on a frustrated air, clenching his fist. "For your sake, I would take his throne from him, so none can deny you your rightful place. I would make you my queen, Tauriel, clad in silks and jewels more lovely than anything the dwarves could ever offer you, if only you would come with me."

"So that we might both be miserable together?" Tauriel gave him a sigh. "Legolas, I love you, but I love you like a brother. If you were to study your heart, I'm sure you would find your own love for me to be much the same. Or do you perhaps think I've denied myself, in accepting the courtship of the dwarf? That I stand beside him not of my own will, but because I think myself without options?"

"But what love would you hope to have here?" He sounded almost desperate, now. "The prince will soon tire of you and of whatever rebellion inspired his offer, and you will be cast aside like so much dirt. Or he might hold you close and precious, like a stone or a jewel, only loved for their beauty, and lock you away as dwarves do to their treasures. And even if you do find yourself loved by him, that will pass all too soon, and you'll be a grieving widow left with nothing but your tears."

For all that she knew the first points to be untrue, there was little she could do to argue the last, and for a moment, she was quiet. She ran a hand over her hair, fingertips meeting the braid set there, and remembered the rough, warm fingers that had woven it with such care and hope. "His love for me is like a bonfire, crackling in the night, chasing away the shadows and the cold." She kept her tone quiet, not wanting to fight, not when her heart was so surely set. "I could turn away from it, it is my freedom to do so, but I am sure I would freeze to my very bones, and all else would be dark and shrouded when it is not embraced by his light. I know it won't burn forever, I know it will die and I will be left with embers and fading heat, but I know that when that happens the stars will still be there, and even if I never feel warm again I need but close my eyes to see the flames dancing still."

"It's not a bonfire, it's a candle, struck out by the faintest breeze. And you are not a dancer in the night, but a moth, courting nothing but pain and despair."

Tauriel straightened herself. "Then let me burn in his flame! I would rather go out in a blaze than fade away without ever knowing that light."

"I still cannot change your mind." Legolas did not bother to ask.

"No, you cannot." She reached a hand to touch his shoulder, briefly, her other hand still toying with her courtship braid, drawing strength from that. "I love him, Legolas, as I never have another. I will
stand by him as long as I may, even if it is as the only elf under this cold mountain, even if all others
despise and fear me, because his love is all I need. And if his passing brings me tears and pain, then
so be it, because to be parted from him now would bring them all the same. If my heart breaks, it is
just as well, and perhaps the Valar will permit me to join him in his slumber, and if I prove stronger
than that, I hope I will still have you as a friend, to comfort me when I have naught else left."

This time it was Legolas who was quiet, not quite meeting her eyes. At last he spoke, still not lifting
his gaze from where it had closed on some inconsequential pebble. "You would never lose my
friendship, not as long as I live."

"Then let us part in friendship this time, and not in your sorrow." Tauriel offered him a smile. "My
mind is set, and so is my heart. I appreciate your care and concern, but in this case, they are not
needed."

He sighed, deep and unhappy, but gave a small nod anyway. "If you are certain."

"I promise you." She touched the side of his face, just briefly, then let her hand drop. "Shall we
return?"

"Ah. You go ahead. I will follow soon enough." Perhaps, Tauriel thought, he even would.

For now, though, he stayed behind as she turned away and left the room.

She failed to be surprised as she stepped out and found a dwarf waiting in the hallway, beads in the
dark hair shining in the light of the solitary torch in the small hallway, one hand resting on the hilt of
a blade, nothing hurried or tense about him.

"Your Majesty." She inclined her head ever so slightly. "I trust you have heard all that you wish?"

Thorin easily settled into step with her, not rising to the bait. "I have heard enough." He shrugged. "I
thought it best to get everything with my own ears, rather than let any details be lost on the way."

"Enough to convince you there is no need to run me through with your sword to save your nephew
any further heartbreak?"

Thorin glanced at her, arching an eyebrow. "You think that is why I bear Orcrist?"

"It would seem as good a reason as any."

"You have the protection of my line and the love of my prince. I would cut off my own hand sooner
than bring harm to you." Thorin shook his head. "No, I bear my blade for a much simpler purpose."
Now, she could have sworn his lips twitched into a smirk. "After all, if the princeling tried to take
you away by force, someone would have to hold the line until the guards answered the summons."

"Legolas wouldn't do that." That, at least, she could trust in.

"I am but a simple dwarf. We do not often trust in elves." They walked in silence for a moment,
down one shadowed corridor after another, all near identical to Tauriel's eye yet the dwarf walked
along them without hesitation. They came to a halt at last in front of a door, with the noise of a feast
yet going on behind it, and Thorin turned toward her, a strange look in his eyes.

"Your Majesty?" Something was going on, she knew as much, but couldn't ascertain if it was good
or bad.

"First, when we are not in court, you might as well call me Thorin. You will be part of my family
soon enough, and Mahal knows I've been called worse things by an elf." The king shook his head. "Hold out your hand."

Tauriel did so, though not sure of the purpose. Thorin pressed something in her palm, closing her fingers around it.

"I would have preferred a bead for your hair, but whatever my hobbit may think of my intelligence, I am not yet daft enough to have done anything irreversible before I had the peace agreement with Thranduil's own seal on it. Let's hope, then, that this will do for now." Thorin's lips twitched again, a ghost of a smile. "Perhaps it will even light your way once the bonfires go out."

Hesitant, Tauriel opened her hand again. There was a jewel in it, a necklace of fine yet plain silver, but the chain was of no interest in any case. The pendant on it was a fine cage of metal, a light yet unyielding cobweb that she recognised with a gasp as mithril, no more than a small sliver in all yet precious as anything all the same. The most notable part, though, was the stone suspended within, uncut and untouched, rounded by nothing but years. Its dim surface seemed to shine in the dark, a shimmer of starlight captured within.

She tore her eyes away at last, about to say something, only to find that Thorin was away, the door left ajar in his wake. Light and noise crept into the corridor through it, the sounds of a small but lively dwarven court, waiting for her to join.

Tauriel took the necklace with only slightly trembling hands, undoing the clasp and fastening it again around her neck, the shimmering jewel coming to a rest just below her collarbone. She straightened herself, then, and put a smile on her face before she walked in, preparing for the worry and curiosity of her beloved.

There had been a test tonight, a small voice said in the back of her head, and the test had been passed, yet she could no tell if it had been her who was tested or someone else entirely.

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"Thorin?" Fíli walked into Thorin's rooms, somewhat surprised not to find him in the main room. "Are you here?"

"In here!" The call came from somewhere deeper in the rooms. Well, that was interesting; Thorin was hardly the type to lounge around in his bedroom at daytime.

Following the sound, Fíli found himself in a small corridor with several doors; clearly this had been a family apartment at some point, with more than just the expected bedroom and bathroom back in the private area. Thorin's voice was coming from one of the doors, left slightly ajar and thus easily located.

Stepping into the room, Fíli blinked. It was mostly empty, bare stone surfaces everywhere, with a deep basin in the middle. Thorin was currently kneeling on the bottom of it, wearing nothing but simple trousers and a tunic, studying the floor with a frown. He had even forsaken his boots, bare toes curling against the cold stone.

"There's a bath here?" Because clearly that was what this room was supposed to be. "Any particular reason you're not making use of it?"

"Some of the plumbing doesn't work." Thorin shrugged, not looking up from his study of the stone. "I had someone come over, and it seems the cold water could be routed here, but not hot. Pinpointing and fixing the issue would be more trouble than it's worth even if we had the workers to spare,
particularly since I can just use a tub or the family bath."

"Reasonable enough, I suppose." Fili walked closer, pausing at the edge. "Any particular reason you're down there?"

"Checking the structural integrity." Thorin looked at him at last. "Of course, the rooms were all checked before anyone moved in here, but I'm planning on adding quite a bit more weight in here, and would hate for anything to collapse."

"Right. I'd offer to help, but you probably don't need my aid in that." Thorin's sense for the stone had always been remarkable even among dwarves. Fili was rather convinced this was the only way he could find his way around the mountain so easily, considering how atrocious his sense of direction was the moment he set foot outdoors. "And what exactly are you planning to fill it with? I'm assuming you're not hoping for your private treasure room."

"Mahal forbid I ever sink to that madness again." Thorin ran his bare hand across the stone, slowly, slowly. "No, I was hoping to bring in some dirt."

"You want to fill the bath with dirt." And Thorin had just said he didn't want to sink into madness again.

"Not just the bath, the whole room." Because that was so much more sensible. "I promised Bilbo I would give him a garden, and this seems like the best solution. A foot of soil all across should be plenty for the smaller plants, I'm sure, and with the depth of this he can grow things that need more dirt under them. Not that I claim to know much about such things, but this should be a working solution until he can plan a better one himself."

"Okay, now that makes sense." And of course it would be about Bilbo. "And you think it's actually possible to grow anything but mushrooms underground? I mean, I'm no expert, but I thought you kind of needed sun for it."

"Not necessarily." Thorin nodded toward the miner's crystal he had set on the edge of the basin, giving out a soft light into the room. "Bombur told me they grow herbs in the kitchens using the crystals for light, so clearly it should be suitable for other plants as well."

"Sounds sensible enough for me." Fili watched Thorin moving a bit further along the floor. "So, ah. Balin said you wanted to see me?"

"Right." At last Thorin stood up, dusting off his knees. "I just received a raven from Iron Hills today. Dain wanted you to know that the things you ordered will be on the next trading caravan."

"Already?" He certainly hadn't expected them so soon. "I, ah. That's good."

"Relax." Thorin actually looked amused as he climbed out of the basin, because he was cruel like that. "You don't actually have to present your gift as soon as it arrives here. Not that I'm telling you to wait too long, after all the time you've spent without actually getting anywhere, but you can at least gather your nerves for a day or two."

"As though you have any room to speak." Fili lifted his eyebrows. "And I'll thank you for not commenting on my love life, unless you want me to start asking questions about yours."

"And what ever is there in my relationship that you might want to question?" Thorin picked up the crystal and started walking around the room, slow, measured paces, halting every now and then. Fili did not need to ask to know he was working out the strength of the floor, feet calling out to the stone they were treading.
"What do you feel, for one?" Because that was starting to bother him, just a little. "You care about Bilbo, that much is clear. Love him, even, if I'm not mistaken, and I don't think I am. But you don't really act like it, either of you. Like two dear friends, certainly. Lovers who have finally made their courtship public? Not so much."

"Ah." Thorin paused for a longer while, now. "I'm afraid there are some… complications… in the matter."

"Oh? Such as what?" Because he did need to know. "And don't you dare tell me it wouldn't be appropriate for a king to be so unreserved, because I won't believe that for a second. You've shocked your council enough by now they probably would accept just about anything short of you bedding Bilbo on the council room table."

"Oh, nothing like that." Thorin sighed. "It's merely that I love him more than he loves me."

Fíli waited a moment for Thorin to realise the folly of his words. However, as no such revelation seemed to be forthcoming, he sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. "Right. And how many times did you get hit on the head for you to come up with a delusion that deep?"

"There's no delusion involved, I'm afraid. Clearly, he cares for me enough to stand by me, but that is all." Thorin shook his head. "Perhaps I am selfish, to take advantage of that, but I will not ask for more than he is willing to give."

"Well, now I know for sure you are deluded." Fíli couldn't help but roll his eyes. "I thought the two of you had gotten over your worst problems at least, but clearly there is still some ways to go."

"There was a time I thought he would surely be lost to me forever. To have him here by my side, with my braids in his hair, is more than I could have ever hoped for." Thorin's expression darkened for a moment before it cleared, but only just. "I will not risk losing what I have by pushing for more than I've earned the right to."

"He has forgiven you, you know." Because that was the only reason Fíli could imagine for Thorin to still act like this even after Bilbo had clearly accepted his courtship.

"At least one of us has, then." Thorin paused for another moment, his toes flexing against the dusty stone. "That reminds me, there is something else I was hoping to bring up with you."

"Oh?" Why did he get the feeling he was not going to like this?

"Some time ago, I had Balin draft up a certain document. It is valid as it stands, with witnesses and seals as any would require, but I suspect it might be for the better if more people knew about it."

Thorin looked at him, now, eyes deep with sorrow and determination alike. "It concerns what should be done if I ever fall to the madness again."

Right. He really was not going to like this. "And what would that be?"

"Depends on how deep I have fallen." And how could Thorin speak so calmly of this? "The main point being, though, that if I cannot be contained or cured, and my madness threatens others, I would rather have my life be forfeit than let my sickness take the lives of those I wish to protect."

"Such as Bilbo."

"He would be one of those, yes." Thorin's hand ran down a wall, gentle as a lover's touch against the age-smoothened stone. "Should it come to that, I have made it clear that either Dwalin or Kíli may free me of my madness and be free of any consequence. Cruel, perhaps, to choose those closest to
me, but they are the two I can trust to follow through with it if they must, rather than see me destroy myself.” He paused again. "You were omitted not because I lack the trust in you, but because I do not wish to put you in a situation where any might claim you took advantage of that clause needlessly simply to gain the throne."

"You think I could claim the throne if you died by my hand, whatever the circumstances?" Fíli shook his head in fierce denial. "No, I thank you for leaving me out of such agreements. Though I rather feel I should be angry for dragging my brother into this."

"Well, in any case the judgement will be yours to pass, should it ever come to that, which is why I wanted to make sure you are aware." He sighed, running a hand over his hair. "I hope I do not need to tell you there is no reason for Bilbo to hear about any of this."

"He will not hear it from me, at least." Mostly because he had no doubt that would lead to Bilbo yelling at Thorin for his idiocy and he wanted no part in such a spectacle. "Thank you for telling me, though."

"As I said, should it ever be necessary, you will be the one passing judgement. Better you be aware of the arrangement from the start." Thorin looked him in the eye, and Fíli saw no hesitation there, no regret. "I have risked enough in my madness, Fíli, and almost lost everything to it. That will not happen again, not if I have any choice in the matter."

"Good thing you have people who won't let you do anything quite as foolish." Good thing it would not fall upon Fíli to make that particular call.

He doubted it would come to that ever again, though. Not as long as Thorin had his beloved hobbit who would rather have dirt and soil than all the gold and gems of the mountain, and Thorin had the love to give him just that.

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Something was going on.

Ori knew this without anyone saying anything. He could read it in the line of Bilbo's fingers as they both worked to copy down faded lines onto new paper, the way Bilbo held onto a pen just a bit too tight, yet denied everything with a warm, gentle smile as Ori asked him if everything was all right. The tension remained, though, clear as day, and then Balin came by with some documents he wanted Ori to work on and it was the same with him. Neither of them would say a word, yet clearly some understanding passed between them, in little gazes they thought Ori didn't notice.

People often thought Ori wouldn't notice, thought that his being quiet also meant he didn't see or hear. Of course, nothing could have been farther from the truth. It was so easy to blend into the background and have people speak and act as though he wasn't there; even now as he stood as one of the Company, and sometimes even claimed some respect from a dwarf or two, people did not seem to even remember the scribe stood in the corner, ready to write down all that he saw. Even among friends, as he was now, where he would not be dismissed so easily, they seemed to think he wouldn't catch on to anything as long as they smiled and didn't say anything out loud, even Balin who really ought to have known him better, having been his master for a number of years. As though he would have ever come this far being that oblivious.

Ori had always been small and shy, and despite his strength had little desire to fight or join the other young dwarves in their tumbles. When that was the case, you learnt very early to read the atmosphere and know when to step back and not draw attention. It hadn't been his peers who were
the worst, though; no, the worst of it had always come from the older dwarves, the ones who thought they had any right to criticise their mother, or how many fathers Ori and his brothers happened to share between them. None were so bold as to question their bloodline out loud, at least, not when the house of Durin themselves acknowledged that their mother shared the blood, but the purity of it was the cause of many a malicious whisper. Things got muddled over the years, after all, and few could remember the exact circumstances, but then Ori had never heard of any evidence that they weren’t descended from the wrong side of the sheets, as it were. Not that he cared, not that anyone who mattered cared because blood was blood was blood, but then those who mattered were rarely the ones giving the sharp gazes and sharper words.

So, Ori had grown up hearing all that was said, and knowing when something was not said at all. He was certain it was not insults or doubts that were now hidden from him, but he knew something was going on regardless that he wasn’t privy to. A part of him wanted to push, wanted to question and doubt and find out what was not being said, but he set that part of himself in the background. He knew that Bilbo was a friend, and that Balin trusted him. If the two of them were hiding something from him, then it was something he should not have known about in any case.

His suspicions — if one could call it that when he was really quite certain — were only confirmed when soon after Balin suggested he might be done for the day and head home early. Not that Balin was a terribly strict master, he worked Ori hard but not unreasonably so, but he was also not the type to tell him to abandon his work. That was clearly what he meant now, when Ori had yet things to finish working on. Still, he supposed it was better for him to comply. For all he knew, they might have been about to discuss some secret business of Thorin’s not even he as a scribe was allowed to hear.

Ori did head home, mostly because he could not imagine where else he could have gone at this time. Besides, it was probably best to be somewhere he might be found should there be need of him again; it was early enough in the day that it wouldn't do to simply assume there would be no tasks for him whatsoever. He could take the opportunity to work on his own projects, or perhaps see if Nori had any inkling of what big secret was being hidden from him.

Except that as soon as he walked into their shared apartment, he knew things were off here, too.

For one thing, both Dori and Nori were there despite the hour, where he might have expected them both to be out on some business or another. For another, he clearly saw the tension lining both of their shoulders, which then faded away in a forced manner as they noticed his arrival.

"Ah, Ori." Dori stood up from where he had been staring at a garment without truly working on it, stepping closer to him. "There is something in your room that you might want to see."

"Oh?" Ori studied him closer now, the way Dori was smiling in a genuine manner yet carried a hint of sadness in his eyes. Over Dori’s shoulder he saw Nori sitting in the corner, a knife dancing between his fingers in a familiar sign of nerves. "And what would that be?"

"I'd guess you'll want to go see for yourself." And still nobody would talk to him, though at least they now offered a solution. Getting somewhat impatient with all this, Ori brushed past Dori toward his own room, not even pausing to wonder what he might find behind the door.

Fíli was in his room.

Ori froze in the doorway as he saw this, trying to regain his wits and wondering if perhaps he was seeing things. However, even as he blinked, the sight remained, of Fíli standing in his room in a beautiful tunic that had to be new, with a large, intricate chest on the floor at his feet.
"Ori." Fíli's voice was soft, as though he wasn't sure of his welcome. "I would have a word, if you'd allow."

Ori only managed to nod mutely. Behind him he could hear Nori and Dori creeping closer, but he couldn't have cared less, not now. This — it was almost as though — but it couldn't, could it?

"Ori, son of Vuori, dwarf of Erebor." Fíli seemed to steel himself, taking on a serious expression, feet planted at a precise width and hands held behind his back as though preparing to face judgement. "I, Fíli, son of Dís, daughter of Thráin, and son of Tuli of Ered Luin, heir to the King Under the Mountain, would like to offer you my courtship."

Right. That was. That was clearly the sign that Ori ought to walk over to his bed if only to sit down, because his legs suddenly felt rather unreliable. "You… want to court me?"

"Yes." Fíli nodded, still just as serious. "I would have asked you earlier, but I wanted to have a proper gift in hand, and besides I wanted to clear things with Thorin and your brothers."

Dori and Nori knew. Of course they knew, it wasn't like Fíli could have gotten in past them. Bilbo and Balin must have known, too, they were all in on this, that was why they had been so secretive.

"I am my uncle's heir, and the next in line to the throne." Fíli picked up speed, now, as though willing himself to go through the speech before his nerves failed him. "One day, if I do not meet a worse fate, I will take his throne in his stead. That day the one who has tied their life to mine will sit beside me as the Consort Under the Mountain. That's no easy burden to bear, and I do not offer it lightly. Still, it would ease my mind to know that I might have you by my side when it's my turn to bear the crown."

"But… why me?" He hardly even heard his own words, but Fíli seemed to catch them nevertheless.

"Why? Because you are smart and strong and handsome and kind, and brave and loyal besides, as though all else wasn't enough. Because you make me smile when nothing else can, and make me feel warm when everything seems cold, and because I know you will tell me when I'm wrong and make sure I listen." Fíli's serious look finally softened into a faint smile. "Because you are my One, and the only one I will love. If you turn me down I will still have no other, and I will go to the halls of our ancestors still loving you as I do this day."

It took Ori a moment to find his voice, and a moment yet to find the words. As he did, though, he looked Fíli in the eye, hands clasped in his lap. He would not be afraid, not now, not about this. "…I know you are my One." Had known it for a while, now, for all that he had never been quite able to bring himself to admit it. Now, though, he had to find the words, had to make sure Fíli knew. "I love you, all of you. I loved the young Fíli who made Balin grumble and complain, and I love the proud prince I always knew he would grow into. I love Fíli the goldsmith, who creates such beautiful things, and Fíli the musician who makes me smile, and Fíli the warrior who would not back down an inch. One day, I'm sure, I'll love Fíli, King Under the Mountain, and any who would try to part me from him can speak to the blade of my knife."

He fell silent, then, realising with a dawning horror just what he had said, but Fíli merely smiled. It was a beautiful smile, the kind that made his eyes turn warm and crinkle at the corners, and Ori found himself almost breathless as he looked at it. "Does that mean you accept my offer?"

"Ah." Gather yourself, Ori, you're no stumbling dwarfling anymore. "I think I'm supposed to at least take a look at your gift first." Somehow he managed to give the statement the teasing tone he meant to, at least judging by the way Fíli chuckled.
"Yes, I've been given to understand that's important. And who knows, maybe I've messed this up so badly that you won't want me anymore."

"I really don't think that's going to happen." He paused a bit before opening the chest. The lid was heavy but rose easily enough, with Fili stepping out of the way so he could safely let it fall open.

The chest was full of yarn.

Ori wasn't sure he had ever seen so much yarn at once, certainly not in one heap, all wound on neat balls. They were dyed in bright colours of all shades, spun neat and even, and as he hesitantly touched one with his fingertips it was softer than any wool he had felt before.

"I was going to get you papers and ink, at first, but then I remembered you scribes can be pretty particular about those." Fili sounded almost hesitant. "So I asked Balin, but he said you'd already ordered yourself writing supplies, so I figured there was no point in my doing the same. But I noticed that you keep working on the same kind of wool you had in Ered Luin, even though you could afford better now, and now that I'm talking I realise maybe you like that more and could you please say something?"

Ori contemplated answering him. Then, though, he reached into the chest instead, taking out a small, gilded case. It was finely engraved, with gems and gold decorating every side of it. "What is this?"

Fili smiled. "Why don't you take a look?"

Ori did so, and stared. It was full of knitting needles of various sizes, all impossibly straight and smooth and polished to a shine with sharpened tips, plain metal and colourful wood and aged bone alike. They were so much finer than the ones that had served him so well for years, he was almost afraid to touch them for fear of ruining them.

"I thought of making you some myself, but figured that would be a bad idea. I couldn't resist the urge to make them all pretty with gems and engravings, and you'd probably want something practical that you can use rather than just something pretty to look at."

Ori closed the case, setting it carefully back in the chest. He then walked to Fili, looking up into his eyes, seeing all the worry and hope and impossible love there.

Really, for all that he was shorter, it wasn't all that difficult to lean up for a kiss.

Fili was tense for a moment, then relaxed, and Ori felt arms reaching to close around him as he leaned against Fili's chest. The kiss was warm and slow and simply wonderful, and it could have lasted forever for all he cared except then someone cleared their throat.

"So." Nori was trying to look stern as Ori spun around, but the frown was rather ruined with the way his lips constantly threatened to tug up. "I take it this means the offer has been accepted?"

"Yes." Ori spoke before Fili could have any chance to voice his doubts, the silly thing. "Yes, I've accepted his courtship, and if you even think about hurting him I'll never forgive you."

"Oh, baby brother, you wound me so." Nori lifted his hands as though to show them empty, which meant nothing when one handled a knife as well as he did. "He's been all nice and proper, even made sure we knew when and where he would make his offer so we could be nearby. As long as you are happy and he continues to treat you with respect, I have no quarrel with him."

"Good. Because whatever you may think, I am a grown dwarf, and I can make my own decisions."
"Oh, I know that." Nori's expression seemed almost soft, somehow, for all of a second before he looked over Ori's shoulder at Fíli. "Since your mother isn't here, I expect Dori will want proper negotiations about the terms of the courtship with your uncle once he stops blubbing. I don't think they'll be quite as strict as with Kíli and his elf, since Ori actually isn't hated by half the court, but at the very least I'd expect him to demand that you won't marry until Ori's finished his masterpiece. And no too much romancing in public, either. Should keep things nice and proper, after all."

"Oh, I'm not planning on marrying before I have my Master's braids, don't worry about that." Ori leaned back against Fíli's chest, just because he could. "And anyway, I don't think you have any right to speak about proper courtship."

"And why do you say that?" Nori lifted his eyebrows.

"Because I've more than once seen Dwalin leaving your rooms at quite the odd hours, and if you think Dori won't mind that just because you're not officially courting yet, you have another think coming."

He wasn't sure what was more amusing, the expression on Nori's face or the sound of Dori's voice rising in the room beyond. Really. He would have expected at least his brothers to know by now that he noticed things, even if he didn't often speak of them.

The most important thing, though, was the chuckle that ran through Fíli's chest, that and the arms that reached around him again, just like they should have.

This was all he needed.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The matter of Fili and Ori's courtship is settled, but that doesn't mean everything is just fine. Balin has to fret over his troublesome brother, while Ori is finding all the attention a bit much to bear.

Thorin, however, decides to take a risk with Bilbo.

Bilbo looked up from his book as he heard something crashing against a wall.

A quick glance told him that what had been lost was nothing but a drinking cup, a nice one, but not irreplaceable. The most likely culprit appeared to be Thorin, not that he was paying any attention to what happened, focused as he was in speaking in some very strong tones that probably would have counted as yelling if Bilbo hadn't already been informed this was merely a very important conversation and thus could not, in any way or form, involve yelling. Bilbo would have argued, but he figured it was easier to let them have their fun.

"Is this actually the normal way of doing things among dwarves?"

Ori, seated next to him, did not even look up from what he was knitting. "More or less? I mean, I've never been present before, but you do hear stories."

"And if you live close enough," Fili added with a grin, "you may hear the actual argument."

"But why?" Bilbo sighed and looked over to where he could have sworn Thorin and Dori were about to get at each other's throats, judging by the heated voices, while Nori played with a knife on the opposite side of the room. "I mean, they've all given their blessing to this matter, haven't they? And even if they didn't they couldn't actually stop you from courting. So why are they arguing about every last detail?"

"It's a matter of propriety." Fili shrugged, not appearing too concerned about the rather fierce debate. "It just wouldn't do if it looked like Dori and Nori were eager to get rid of Ori, or for Thorin to make things too easy when it's about the union of his heir. Besides, in the old days this was done so any bad blood between the families could be cleared out through talking instead of fighting." Funny. Bilbo could have sworn this was the fighting part.

"So as the heads of our families, they need to negotiate everything. The details of the courting, the wedding, honors and lineage all need to be settled before our courtship can be made public." A slight flush rose to Ori's cheeks at the idea, though he soon managed to calm himself again. "They wouldn't and couldn't actually stop us from courting if it came down to that, but things are somewhat more proper, so to speak, when everything has been worked out to both of their satisfaction."

"In other words, this is just more dwarven idiocy. I think I get it." No, he did not, but at least he could pretend. "And why is this the first time I hear of this? I mean, this is the third courtship in the family this winter, but I've never heard of such a thing before. I'd hardly think Thorin's own courtship is any less important."
"No, but the circumstances were different." Ori cleared out a knitting needle from his work, pointing at the fighting dwarves with it before moving on in the work. "Thorin is the head of the family, as are you, so your agreeing to the courtship takes the place of the negotiation. If you had any relatives living nearby, he would probably pay them a courtesy visit as a formality, but you don't so that's not an issue."

"And Kíli and Tauriel? I'm quite sure Kíli is far from the head of the family." Rather, Bilbo would have thought both his age and choice of partner would have made Thorin all the more likely to make an issue of it.

"No, but Tauriel has no family to speak in her stead; Kíli said Thorin asked her about that from the start." Right. Bilbo had a vague memory of something like that happening. "Thorin did establish the conditions of the courtship, which can be seen as his side of the matter. In our case, though, Ori still lives with his brothers, and is the youngest in his family besides. It's only natural his brothers would want to handle this properly, and it would be very inappropriate for uncle not to go along with it."

"This seems like rather more than going along with anything." At least there hadn't been any weapons drawn just yet. "And you aren't concerned with what kind of demands they might each make?"

"Why? Our courtship is not in question, all they are figuring out is the details of it." Fíli shrugged. "We know the main demand is that Ori will have to get his Master's braids before we marry, and he agrees with it as well. Really, the worst that could happen is that they decide we should be held to all the same rules of propriety Thorin is demanding of Kíli and Tauriel, and while I'm hoping they won't be quite so strict, even if that did happen we'd have little to complain about."

"They do want us to be happy. If they had any actual opposition, they wouldn't have come to this situation in the first place." Ori smiled as he looked over to where Dori was being louder than Bilbo had ever heard him before. "The actual conditions don't matter much in the end, since the end result has been decided. The main point here is the process itself. If one side just agreed to everything without protest, it could be argued they're pursuing the union purely for political or financial reasons; it's making demands of their own and arguing over the terms that proves they are more concerned with our happiness than just getting us bound together with as little fuss as possible."

"Ah. I suppose that approach is a bit more understandable." Still, it made him want to shake his head, but at least he could understand the sentiment. "So all that yelling and cursing is their way of showing that your families have no ulterior motives?"

"Precisely. It'd be quite a shame for a courtship negotiation to be calm and measured."

"So arranged marriages never happen among dwarves?" That… didn't quite line up with what Dáin had said.

"Oh, they do. Mostly among the upper classes, and only between dwarves who do not feel the pull of their One, or who have lost theirs. Even in those cases, though, it shouldn't be treated as simply a business contract. Even in an arranged marriage you should at least be friends with your spouse, after all, and your family should always want at least that much for you."

"Right." Friends. Bilbo could do that, even if it hurt sometimes to have something so dear so close to him and yet out of his reach. "I suppose I will just thank my luck that things were so simple for me in this matter."

"How do hobbits handle these matters, then?" Ori finally set down his knitting, giving Bilbo a curious gaze. "I mean, when two hobbits decide to court. Are their families involved at all?"
"Well, of course." Not that Bilbo had any first-hand experience of that, but he had seen quite a lot of it from the sidelines. "It's usually pretty obvious when two young ones are planning to court, so their close family will usually try to size up the proposed partner. Go to the same events, perhaps end up in the same tea party, listen to gossip and generally keep an eye on them, to make sure the other hobbit is all nice and proper and not some hooligan." Bilbo snorted. "I doubt I'd have passed the test of most hobbits, being eccentric as I am. Well, the Tooks might not have looked too askance at me, but then I'm a Took from my mother's side, so they only have themselves to blame if I didn't turn out quite proper."

"Aw, don't worry, Uncle Bilbo. We think you're plenty proper." And why did he feel so warm when the lads called him that?

"If the other hobbit isn't quite proper, well, there might be words said in the right ears. Even a threat or two, if there's reason to believe something is seriously wrong, to make sure such an unacceptable suitor doesn't think they are welcome. However, if nobody interferes, the two will eventually start their courtship proper. That doesn't last too long, often just long enough to arrange for the wedding, though that does take the better part of a year for some couples; we hobbits do love any excuse to party, and there is no grander party than a wedding, really." Bilbo smiled, glancing down at his book but not really seeing the words. What he did see before his eyes was the party tree and chains of lanterns strung up everywhere, laughing voices and flower crowns and nothing but happy faces. "Most weddings happen in the spring; that is when the babies are planted, if one wants them to thrive, and most young couples will want to get started on their first as soon as possible. Some years you'll have a wedding every weekend for the first couple of months of the planting season."

"So all weddings take place before the planting?" Fíli gave him a mischievous grin. "Are there no, say, very big babies born very early a few months after the wedding?"

"Not really, no. I've understood that happens among other peoples sometimes, but we hobbits don't really go for that sort of thing." Bilbo chuckled. "Of course, it rather helps that our young ones can bed each other all they want without worrying about such things, so you never see them wed over an accident. To plant a child you need to intend to do so, and while that doesn't strictly speaking require marriage, well, if you can't wait until after the wedding, you're not going to be able to wait the two summers it takes for the baby to grow."

"So there's no negotiation? No conditions once the two have decided?"

"Well, yes and no. There's certainly nothing like this," Bilbo nodded toward the still ongoing argument, and yes, he was going to call it that now, "but it is traditional for the two sets of parents to meet, at the very least, to discuss the matter. Oh, and each of the two hobbits courting should have dinner with the other's immediate family fairly early into the courtship, for a more thorough inspection."

"And if some of the parents disapprove?" Ori frowned, as though he were quite concerned about this.

"Well, once it has gotten to that point, it rarely happens that they cannot accept it at all." Bilbo shrugged. "If there are legitimate grievances, the young one might agree with their family and call off the courtship, and no harm done. If they disagree, well, they may just get married anyway. It causes gossip, of course, but nothing that won't be replaced by something more interesting in a couple of years. We aren't too concerned with such things in general, really. I'm told that when my parents married it caused quite a stir, but aside from some sharper tongues nobody made much of a fuss in public. We're a very proper folk, you see, in that we like to make things appear proper even when they're not, and unless something was truly wrong, most hobbits are more likely to attend the
wedding in their best clothes and with happy smiles and then whisper about it behind closed doors. So much more honorable than causing a scene." Well. Now that he thought about it, perhaps this dwarven habit of airing out all the differences so openly wasn't that bad an idea after all.

"You keep talking about young ones." And of course Ori would have picked up on that, the sharp lad he was. "Do hobbits only court young, then?"

"For the most part, yes. Some select few may find love later on, but most hobbits find the one they are sweet on some time in their tweens and marry soon after they've come of age."

"You're an adult hobbit, though." Why, yes, it was so sweet of Fíli to notice. "You didn't find anyone, then?"

"Not really, no." Had never been too eager to find one, either, aside from some idle dalliances the kind of which everyone had in their youth. "I suppose I just never felt the need. That, or didn't find anyone who would have been worth the fuss. Besides, I come from a good family, by Shire standards in any case. I had my number of offers, but I could never stop wondering if they only approached me to get their hands on my parents' smial, or perhaps to gain a better standing with the Tháin. If they couldn't convince me of their good intentions, I figured, clearly their feelings didn't run deep enough, and I was never fond enough of anyone to convince myself of that goodness."

"It's all for the better, anyway." Fíli grinned, bright and happy. "After all, if you'd been married when we got there, you couldn't court Uncle now and that would be a shame."

Bilbo almost protested, almost said something about how he could have lived his life quite content without Thorin bloody Oakenskull, thank you, perhaps with an added mention of how simple his life had been before a horde of dwarves arrived at his doorsteps with little warning and even less in the way of manners. Before he could get a single word out, though, he was interrupted by the raising crescendo of Thorin's voice as he argued some point or that, eyes blazing as he drew himself to his full majestic height, with Dori not backing away an inch. He might have thought the two stood on a battlefield, so fierce were their expressions, if not for their casual dress and lack of drawn weapons.

This was Thorin, King Under the Mountain, who had faced countless orcs with much the same fervour he now reserved to arguing for the sake of his nephew's happiness, who cursed the very name of elves yet welcomed one as a princess of his line for the sake of another, whose smiles were rare yet warmed him up like the sun, who was stubborn and proud and weak to the gold yet never asked more of anyone than he did of himself. He moved his head, a sharp motion of frustration and annoyance, and even from across the room Bilbo spotted a bead that he knew to be the fastening to a courtship braid, because for all that the dwarf was a pig-headed idiot he was, in a way, Bilbo's pig-headed idiot.

"Yes," he said, as the words he had planned in his head morphed into something quite different by the time they reached his tongue. "Yes, that would be a terrible shame indeed."

And perhaps, he found himself thinking, perhaps it wouldn't be all that wrong to take his happiness from it, after all.

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At this point it was not unusual for Tauriel to be greeted at the gates of Erebor by some dwarf or another. After all, she was rather easily recognisable even from a distance, and the guards at the gates could see her long before she actually reached the mountain, leaving them with plenty of time to send for either Kíli or someone else who could welcome her. At first she had been somewhat wary of her welcome, but she came by often enough that she was now acquainted with most of the dwarves on
the guard roster, and besides Kíli had let her know with not little glee that Dwalin had made it quite
clear to his guards that they were to treat her as was appropriate for a future princess of Erebor or
else. Whether out of respect or fear, they were more or less civil nowadays, and some even appeared
friendly towards her in the brief time she sometimes had to wait until someone appeared to guide her
further into the mountain. Not that she couldn't have made her way to the royal apartments at least on
her own, having gone that way so many times, but there were matters of propriety to consider, and
besides it made the dwarves somewhat more comfortable about her presence if they thought she
would never go wandering off on her own.

This time it was Balin who greeted her right past the gates, looking rather harried but sparing her a
smile as he saw her approach. He barely waited for her greeting before turning to walk back into the
mountain, rightly expecting her to settle into step next to him.

"So," said Tauriel as he said nothing for a moment. "Fíli or Kíli?"

"Hm?" Balin blinked, looking up at her. "What do you mean?"

"Which one is giving you grief? Or is Thorin being particularly unreasonable about something? And
don't try to say it's nothing; you only wear that particular frown when one of the Durin oafs has done
something terrible."

This, at least, drew a chuckle out of him, even as he shook his head. "You are right and wrong both,
lass. Yes, it's the line of Durin that causes me grief, but it's not one of our royal oafs for once."

"Oh?" Tauriel blinked. "Who, then?"

"My brother, as it happens." Balin stroked his beard with another shake of his head. "It turns out he
has been carrying on a rather scandalous dalliance without my knowledge."

"Your brother has? Dwalin?" That did not sound like the Dwalin she knew, not that she could claim
any particular expertise on the matter of his character. "How did that even happen? I'd think I would
have heard of it a long time ago if that were true."

"Seems it involves a particularly stealthy 'Ri, which somewhat explains the secrecy." Balin sighed a
bit. "It came out as Fíli offered his courtship to Ori, of all things. Which was really the best possible
time for it to be revealed, really, as it meant Dori was already of an accepting mind, but that doesn't
mean things went smoothly, not with my oaf of a brother."

"Oh? And how do you plan to proceed on that matter?" She was genuinely curious, not knowing
how dwarves dealt with these things beyond what had come up during her own courtship with Kíli.
That one, as she well knew, was not precisely ordinary.

"Therein lies the problem." Balin rubbed the bridge of his nose. "They are grown dwarves, and it's
not like there's any chance of illegitimate offspring, so under most circumstances I'd be quite happy
to simply look the other way. Dori would be likewise inclined, I think, it's not like he's going to
accuse Dwalin of ruining his brother's honor when the existence of any such honor is somewhat
dubious to begin with, if not for the fact that this is clearly a very bad example to set to young Ori.
Which is even more serious a matter now that he is officially courting, and with the crown prince, no
less. So clearly something must be done, yet it's not like I can make any particular demands when
there is no actual proof of any misconduct."

"That does sound like quite the headache." Tauriel shook her head. "So, since clearly we're not
talking about either Ori or Dori, that would mean he is involved with Nori, right? The one with the
star-shaped hair?"
"Indeed. And because apparently this is not complicated enough otherwise, back in Ered Luin Nori ended up in a cell more than once after Dwalin arrested him for various crimes. So we are rather wondering how any of this happened in the first place, never mind what should follow."

"Love can find its way into the unlikeliest of places, I have found." Such as between an elf and a dwarven prince.

"So I have come to notice, yes." Balin offered her a small smile. "I never felt the desire to seek out love, myself, and I have to say I am grateful for that. Don't take me wrong, I'm sure it's wonderful for you, but to me it hardly seems worth the trouble. I have to say my view might be coloured by all the time I've spent worrying over the love troubles of others, though."

"Cannot say I blame you, for all the scandals we have caused." Even as she spoke, she couldn't help but toy with one of the braids in her hair. Scandalous, perhaps, but precious to her all the same.

"Oh, I'd rather take all the trouble of smoothing ruffled feathers and arguing for their choices than see my king or either of my princes miserable. And make no mistake, miserable they would be if any of them were parted from their chosen one." He touched her hand, a brief, fatherly gesture. She rather felt he might have patted her shoulder if it hadn't been quite so high. "I'm glad they've each overcome their own doubts and fears. I just wish my brother had the sense to be as practical as that."

"So, to put it bluntly, they have been carrying on a love affair?" She was almost afraid she might have been too direct and offended some particular dwarf sensibilities, but Balin merely nodded in response. "But they are not courting?"

"Oh, no. No doubt they both see such things as romantic nonsense. Dwalin has always been somewhat too practical for his own good, while Nori relies on just plain cynicism to make his way in the world."

"Do you think it is merely physical for them, then? Just a way to relieve tension, or whatnot? Or is there something more there that they are simply not voicing?"

"I wish I knew, truly." Again, Balin rubbed his nose. "I can't help but think that if a bedmate were the only reason, there are plenty of less troublesome prospects either of them might have chosen instead. Though then, perhaps they each see it as a challenge, or a kind of mutual contest. I wouldn't presume to know why Dwalin would choose to bed a dwarf he has spent so long chasing about."

"Perhaps that's the very reason, then?" Tauriel lifted her eyebrows. "I do not claim to know much of your situation back in your old home, but from what I have understood, Dwalin's main duty is the safety of the royal family and the organisation of the guards. Why would someone like him end up arresting the same wayward dwarf more than once, never mind several times, unless he was taking some kind of a personal interest in the case?"

Balin looked like he was about to say something, then blinked and paused. "You know, I never really thought to wonder about that. He grumbled about Nori often enough that I just assumed there was some personal grudge involved, but if that were the case, it would have come out more during our journey here, I'm sure."

"Please note that I'm not sure of much of anything in this case; clearly I do not know your brother as well as you do, or indeed more than what little I have managed to glean from our rare meetings and from speaking with Kíli and Fíli. However, if I were presented this scenario without knowing anything about the people in question, my first guess would be that the interest was always there for Dwalin to take such a personal position in the matter, perhaps even speculate as to whether Nori might have gone out of his way to taunt him. And if that were the case, maybe they saw the arrival
here as a chance to cast out their old way of doing things and start with a blank slate, so to speak. After all, people will hardly expect him to throw one of the Company into a cell, now."

"It would certainly make more sense than Dwalin suddenly deciding to fall into bed with someone he actually hated." Balin nodded slowly. "I suppose that is something it might be worthwhile to ask my brother about."

"And how will his answer affect how you proceed?" Why, yes, she actually wanted to know. These dwarves were going to be her family, for better or worse, and it was only right for her to take some interest in what happened to them.

"Well, if there is some actual affection behind this, then I see no reason why he couldn't put his braids in Nori's hair, or why Nori wouldn't accept them." That… seemed a bit ambitious, but then Balin did indeed know his brother better than Tauriel did. "It doesn't mean they have to marry, I certainly wouldn't demand it of them, but it would certainly ease Dori's worries about corrupting poor little Ori."

"There is one other problem I might see if they continue their affair without courtship and it becomes public knowledge." At least she thought it might be a problem, based on what she knew about dwarven customs, but then there was none better than Balin to either confirm her fears or set her at ease.

"Oh?" Balin frowned, bushy eyebrows drawing close together. "And what is that?"

"The reason Thorin insists on chaperons whenever Kíli and I are in private, as I understand, is that if we did not follow all the traditions of propriety there are dwarves who might use that as an excuse to criticise the legitimacy of our courtship." As Balin nodded in confirmation, she drew a deep breath. "More than once, Dwalin or Nori have performed that duty. If it gets out that they are not entirely proper themselves, would that not cast some, ah, doubt on their ability to act responsibly in such a role?"

"That might be a concern, yes." Balin nodded, slow and ponderous. "Not that any number of protests could actually stop your courtship from going through, not when Thorin has given his blessing, but the less trouble there is from anyone, the happier we will all be." Balin shook his head, now. "Well, that's another thing to mention as I speak with my brother. Perhaps his fondness for the princes will spur him to take some action."

"Perhaps." Tauriel's lips twitched. "You might also want to point out that once the caravans arrive, there will surely be many interested suitors looking to catch Nori's attention. I have been told the brothers 'Ri are quite easy on the eyes by dwarven standards, and now is he not only pretty, but also wealthy and much honored by the king, with his brother courted by the crown prince. If Dwalin has not made a claim by then, he may soon have to find a new bedmate when Nori is snatched away."

This startled a laugh out of Balin, loud enough that he threw his head back to guffaw. "Oh, we'll make a proper princess out of you yet, my lass," he announced. "There's no reason for me to worry about what will happen once the mountain fills and the court grows busy. Clearly between Bilbo, yourself and Ori, Thorin and his heirs can simply sit back and watch you speak your way around even the snottiest dwarves. Why, it seems the true weakness of Durin's line is to fall for the ones with sharper wit than their own."

"I grew up in Thranduil's court, remember. Believe me, the elven politics are no less twisted than anything I have heard about the dwarven ways of the same. Worse, even, since we have so much more time to grow our grudges."
"Just do not let Thorin hear that. He would die if he heard there might be anything he and Thranduil have in common."

"My lips are sealed." She gave Balin a grin, then looked up as she heard a familiar voice, and saw Kili rushing towards her. She hurried to meet him, making a startled sound when he picked her up as though she were just a child and not quite clearly taller than he was, twirling her around with so much cheer one might have thought they had been separated for months and months instead of the few days that had passed since her last visit.

Really, it was hard for her to imagine any dwarf of Durin's line could stay reserved about their feelings for long.

*

There was a knock at the door.

This wasn't all that unusual, really, Ori mused as he set aside yet another page in need of drying. He rarely got to enjoy solitude all that long. What was rather out of the ordinary, on the other hand, was the fact that this wasn't immediately followed by someone barging in without waiting for a response. Dori generally thought the appearance of politeness was all that was needed since they were all home, after all, while Nori often didn't even bother with the knocking. Now, though, there was only the knock.

"Come in!" Ori wiped off his pen and set it aside. He had covered more or less every available flat surface in his room with drying pages, so he needed to take a break anyway.

"Ori?" Bilbo opened the door and peeked in before stepping into the room. "I'm sorry, did I interrupt you? I know you rarely get a whole day to yourself."

"Oh, no, I was due for a break anyway." Ori smiled, standing up from his desk. "Can I help you?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you'd accompany me to Dale." Bilbo tossed a coin purse in the air and caught it again. "Thorin shoved this at me and told me to go see the market. I have the sneaking suspicion he is trying to get rid of me for a while, but if he is courteous enough to make up an excuse rather than just tell me to get lost, I suppose I can at the very least play along."

"Thorin did?" Ori wasn't even going to question the assumption of something to hide. It would have been strange if Thorin hadn't had some secrets from Bilbo, considering he hadn't given his craftsman's gift yet and needed to keep it hidden. "I'm surprised he'd want you to go on your own. Ah. Not to say you can't take care of yourself, but Thorin does sometimes get a bit protective."

Bilbo chuckled. "Well, to be fair, he did ask me to take some guards along. I just figured you would be more pleasant company and quite able to provide me with all the safety I need. Though if you are busy, I'm sure I can find someone else." He glanced around at the scattered papers.

"As I said, I need a break in any case. I would be quite happy to come with you." Ori took off his finer mitts, the ones he reserved for writing, and put on a warmer pair. "In fact, I do have some business at the market as well."

"Really? Then we can both do our business at the same time and be twice as efficient." Bilbo smiled. "Anything in particular you're looking for? Unless you're looking for something quite extravagant, I'm sure this purse will pay for both of us easily enough."

"I was actually hoping to find some yarn." Not that he didn't have enough, with the chest sitting still almost full in the corner of his room. Bilbo must have been aware of this, as he gave Ori a dubious
look. "It's, ah. It's going to be for a very specific purpose."

"Oh!" Bilbo's expression cleared, then immediately turned what Ori could only describe as cunning. "So, would I be entirely wrong in assuming it's to do with Fíli's gift?"

"You, ah, wouldn't be very wrong, no." Ori tried to hide the slight flush on his cheeks by turning to grab a cloak; it was still rather chilly outside the mountain, for all that they were all already looking forward to spring. "His gift to me is wonderful, don't take me wrong, but it would be quite inappropriate to make him something from materials he gifted me. Besides, well, I need a lot of yarn in one colour; most likely I'll need to place an order with one of the merchants, unless I'm very lucky and one of them just happens to have what I want."

"It's not entirely impossible. From what I hear, clothing and such supplies are very common in the merchants' wares, especially since Thorin has agreed to use the gold to feed both men and dwarves until the next harvest, so people are using their personal money to purchase other things." Bilbo hummed in thought as they headed out into the corridors of Erebor. "Perhaps I should get some yarn and needles for myself as well, if we can find them. I'm getting somewhat restless with so little to do with my hands, and for all that I do love my pens and papers, there's only so long one can spend on a single task without needing a break."

Ori blinked in surprise. "You can knit, too?"

"Knit and crochet, yes. My parents felt it was quite essential to the proper development of a young gentlehobbit. I'm not very skilled, granted, but I'm at least able to knit up a pair of socks."

"Socks?" That… did hobbits even wear socks? Clearly Bilbo noticed his confusion, as he chuckled. "Yes, well, we don't often need such things, but during cold winters they do come in handy. Our fur only helps so much, and while we have little need for shoes it would be a foolish hobbit indeed who went traipsing out in knee-deep snow without anything to keep his toes warm." He hummed a bit to himself. "I thought I might try and make some for Thorin and the lads. It shouldn't be too difficult an undertaking, really, you dwarves have such narrow little feet."

"I'm sure they would love such a gift." Ori smiled at the thought. "So we'll go looking for merchants with yarn. Is there anything else you require, or should we just go wandering for a bit to give Thorin more time for his secrets?"

"Why, I think that sounds like an excellent plan indeed." Bilbo grinned, hooking an arm through Ori's. "We could even try and see if Bard is available; it has been far too long since I last saw him and his children."

Ori couldn't help but chuckle. "What, do you plan to show off your courtship braids?"

"Well, if I do, that'll make two of us, won't it?"

That comment was quite enough to make Ori smile a bit brighter, his free hand coming up to toy with the new braids in his hair. It was still somewhat hard to believe that he of all people had managed to win Fíli's attention and have his affection returned, that he now had the undeniable proof of that in his braids for all to see if anyone might have thought to question his right to claim the prince as his own. And, yes, he supposed he could very well understand the wish to show that off to anyone who might be around to see. After all, that was the purpose of courtship braids, was it not? They were there to show everyone that he was spoken for at last.

Even so, he wasn't quite prepared for all the attention they did get.
Their walk to Dale was as uneventful as one might have hoped, and the worst they encountered on the streets was having to fight their way along in the busiest parts, a somewhat smallish dwarf and a hobbit being easily overlooked in a crowd of men. As they neared the marketplace, though, there were more dwarves around, and all of a sudden Ori could practically feel the stares. It was just the occasional glance at first, or some individual dwarf taking another look, but by the time they got to the marketplace proper practically everyone was looking at them. Bilbo either didn't care or didn't notice, as he went about browsing the booths and chatting with the salespeople while Ori tried not to be too obviously distressed. Ori was just about to find some excuse to leave while battling his guilt over even thinking of leaving Bilbo on his own when Bilbo steered them both into a nearby inn with the excuse of having spent far too long since his last meal, really now his poor hobbit stomach was eating itself.

Bilbo ordered some food from the innkeeper, a man who seemed to pay him no more attention than he might have to any other dwarf but did seem surprised to see the only hobbit in the area, then joined Ori at a table that thankfully seemed to be dwarf-sized. He patted Ori's hands where he had clasped them tightly together, a sympathetic look on his face, and Ori suddenly realised their coming here might have had more to do with his distress than Bilbo's hunger.

"Sorry. I should have realised earlier that you were uncomfortable."

"No, I'm sorry, I should have spoken up sooner." Ori offered him a wan smile. "Of course, I should have simply not been uncomfortable in the first place, but that's a bit much to ask all at once."

"I'm sure." Bilbo smiled. "I should have thought of this before we even arrived, really. In the mountain it's not such a big deal, I'd imagine, everyone already knows you as the royal scribe and besides you're the least strange of the courtships of the royal family, but these Iron Hill dwarves must find it quite curious indeed."

"Right." Ori sighed, fiddling with one of his braids. The bead on it was finely carved, and together with the braid design made it quite clear to any dwarf with working eyes that he was the chosen of a prince of Durin. As though that hadn't been enough of a curiosity on his own, he was well aware that even his finer clothes were still not quite as fancy as one might have expected from someone in any position to be courting someone that important. At least Bilbo, while clearly a hobbit, was clad in fine clothes with all the right symbols and embroideries. "Does it not bother you? I know they were staring at you, too."

"I'm quite used to such things. I was already considered eccentric before you lot ever arrived at my doorstep; rest assured that I've endured my own share of gazes and whispers back in the Shire." Bilbo shook his head. "I wish I could tell you it will get easier to bear, but there is every chance it might not, and I would rather not promise you something I cannot guarantee. Besides, I rather suspect it's not only the way people look at you that bothers you, but also the attention itself."

"You'd be right." Ori looked down, not quite feeling up to facing Bilbo's sympathetic gaze. "I, ah. I've never been very good at receiving attention. When I was a child, I was rarely noticed by anyone except bigger children who might want to hurt me, or adult dwarves who would whisper nasty things about my mother and my brothers and me. I just, well, learnt to fade into the background, more or less. It's part of why I wanted to be a scribe; nobody ever notices them, really. Even now, when I'm working in court nobody really pays attention to me, not even if I speak up."

"Which is when you have to take up a hammer." Bilbo chuckled, though not in a mocking manner. "Except now you are to marry the crown prince, and that means you can't escape notice forever. Is that going to be a problem?"

"I'd like to say no, but it's not that simple." Ori worried his lip, clasping his hands together on the
table in front of him. "I… it feels like everyone is judging me. Because, well, usually people only notice me when they have something bad to say about me. So now that everyone is staring at me it feels like they're all wondering about how someone as small and stupid and pathetic as me could even think about courting the prince."

"Okay, first, do not call yourself stupid. I will not stand to hear people insulting my friends, thank you." A finger nudged at his chin, just a gentle touch, and as he finally looked up at Bilbo he found the hobbit smiling. "Second, none of that is true. You are intelligent and talented and strong, and if anyone doesn't see it that's their failing, not yours. Besides, you are of Durin's line, are you not? None of those merchants can say the same." Ori made to reply, but Bilbo silenced him with a sharp gesture. "No, don't talk to me about legitimacy or whatever it is you were about to say. The king himself acknowledges your bloodline, and if that is not enough for someone then clearly they would not be convinced even if Mahal himself were to step out of the mountain and confirm it. If someone is that misguided, then clearly they don't deserve your regard."

"It's easy for you to speak. You're the head of your family, not the youngest son of a dead mother who doesn't even know who his father was." No, he didn't care about that, not usually. However, right now it felt like a sharp blow, knowing how many dwarves probably judged his worth and found him wanting.

"Oh, no. I'm just the strange son of the strange lass who then went and died, not that any of the dwarves here are going to care either way. I am a hobbit, and as such, I could never be worthy of their king."

"You faced down a dragon, though, and stole away the Arkenstone." Ori shook his head. "That alone makes you more worthy than any of them."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. The fact remains that they judge me. And, I'm sure, some of them will always judge me, no matter what I do or accomplish. And I can't let that hold me back, not unless I want to spend the rest of my life worrying about what everyone thinks about me. And let me tell you, life is far too short for that."

"How can I just ignore that, though?"

"Why couldn't you? Their opinions don't matter. Fíli loves you, and Thorin has accepted you, and anything anyone else might think is unimportant in the face of that." Bilbo hummed in thought, pausing to thank the waiter who arrived with two bowls of steaming stew and followed up soon afterwards with two tankards of ale. "Say. You love Fíli, don't you?"

Ori nodded. That, at least, he could answer easily. "More than anything." So much that sometimes it made him ache not to be able to see him all the time, to touch him and hold him and never step away from his side.

"You know he will be king one day, though. Even if you somehow managed to avoid all attention until then, it will be impossible when he takes the throne and you become the consort. You understand that, right?"

He nodded again, looking down at his food. "I know that," he murmured. "And — I want to stand by his side, to help him in any way I can, to help him with his duties the way I know you already help Thorin. I just… I'm not sure I can."

"Do you want to leave Fíli, then?" Once again, Bilbo cut him off before he could answer. "Don't answer that, it was entirely rhetorical. However, since I know you will not leave him, that means that your taking on a more public role is not a question of if as much as when. And that, in turn, means
that our only recourse is for you to start training for that role."

"You really think that would help?" It sounded awfully simple, the way Bilbo put it.

"Certainly. From what I have seen of you, your problem is certainly not that you lack social skills as much as confidence. And that, my lad, we can certainly build up simply through experience. The more you take on public tasks and see that you succeed, the easier it will become, but there's nothing saying we can't start with small steps. We can make a trade of it, if you wish. You can instruct me on dwarvish matters, and I will help you when it seems the attention is getting too much for you."

"Like you did now." Ori managed a smile. "You think that would work? That I could learn to do everything that I'm supposed to without getting overwhelmed?"

"I know that you can. And you know why?" As Ori shook his head, Bilbo's smile softened. "Because you are Fili's One. Mahal has made you from your birth to stand by his side, as his consort, and I have been told Mahal makes no mistakes. Clearly, then, you can learn to do everything that Fili needs you to do and more."

"I… thank you. That actually does help." And it did, appealing to the part of him that would not listen to reason, favouring raw emotion instead and burrowing under a mountain of fears and uncertainties.

"I rather hoped it would, yes." Bilbo chuckled. "Now, shall we eat? I did mean it when I said I was hungry."

Ori agreed, focusing on his own food for a while. The stew was not quite as good as Bombur's cooking, but it was warm and filling, all the better for the fact that he was sharing the meal with a friend. After this, he was sure, he would have the strength to go back out to the marketplace at least for long enough to find a merchant he could place his order with before heading back to Erebor to his papers and ink and the silence of his own room. Small steps.

With enough of those, surely he would reach his destination eventually.

* * *

Thorin was not exactly amused to find out that his guards had misplaced Bilbo.

Of course Bilbo was a grown hobbit and could go where he wished, Thorin was not quite stupid enough to claim otherwise, but for the sake of Thorin's peace of mind he would have rather preferred it if Bilbo didn't just wander off without notifying anyone. Never mind all the dangers that he knew to lurk outside the mountain, Erebor itself was vast enough to easily lead a little hobbit lost if he went too far on his own, and while they were working hard on identifying and repairing all the damage caused by Smaug's stay in its halls, many areas were still far from safe even for a dwarf, never mind someone with no semblance of a stone sense. Which meant that when Bilbo was not in his quarters, nor in the library with Ori or down in the kitchens with Bombur or even in Balin's office, Thorin wanted Answers, and soon.

He had just started contemplating the possibility of trying to extend his sense of stone far enough to find the only creature silly enough to walk around the mountain barefoot when one of the guards returned, out of breath in a manner that suggested he had run as fast as he could the whole way. Bilbo had been located, he informed Thorin, quite safe and sound, and could be found in the battlements above the gates. Which was utterly ridiculous, of course, especially since Thorin had heard tell that it was raining outside, but then he doubted the poor dwarf would have been stupid or imaginative enough to lie to him.
It wasn't until he was almost at the gates, having stormed the entire way there in something of a huff, that he realised that for a creature like a hobbit the first spring rain might have been a reason in itself to make his way to the gates.

The damage to the wall had been repaired for the most part, both from back when the dragon had forced his way in and when they had later broken their own fortifications to join the battle. It might not have been the most beautiful dwarven work ever, but at least they now had a wall and a gate and proper battlements above it, and while Thorin quite hoped they wouldn't need to put them to the test any time soon it did make him feel better to know that his small but growing kingdom was secure behind proper gates. It was on top of these new battlements that he spotted Bilbo, standing there heedless of the rain that seemed determined to work its way past the gates and into the mountain itself. Nodding at the fairly miserable dwarves on guard duty, Thorin made to walk up the stairs leading to the top of the battlements.

Bilbo turned to look at him, rain-soaked curls framing his face and sticking to his wet skin, eyes echoing the same smile that curved his lips, and Thorin found his breath abandoning him quite completely. There was nothing, he was certain, that could compare to the sheer beauty of this, not even the purest gleaming gold or most skillfully cut gemstones, not when he was faced with something as brilliant and shining as this.

"Thorin?" Bilbo blinked, and Thorin could have sworn he could see raindrops clinging to his eyelashes even though he could not possibly be close enough to see such detail yet. "Is something wrong?"

"Ah, no." He only just realised he had frozen more or less mid-step on his way to Bilbo's side. Shaking his head, he walked the rest of the way, setting a hand on the battlements. "Sorry, just thought of something, that's all."

"Oh?" Bilbo offered him a smile. "And what is it you would think of so suddenly?"

Thorin really couldn't help himself, the words escaping before he could think twice. "Mostly, I was thinking about the last time you and I were together here." He had avoided the battlements for the most part since his sanity had returned to him, and Bilbo had not found much reason to be there either even after he recovered from his injuries. This was, in fact, the first time they were both on this spot after the rather unfortunate time he had almost destroyed the most brilliant thing in his life.

"Well, aren't you being gloomy." Bilbo chuckled, though, a clear, amused sound that bore no blame or anger. How he could have forgiven him so completely, Thorin could not imagine, though he was really quite grateful for it. "You didn't do it, though."

"No, I didn't, because the wizard stopped me." He would have liked to claim he wouldn't have done so anyway, that his heart would have won over even in his madness, but he remembered enough of the dark depths of the dragon sickness not to make any such boasts. "For that, I will forever be grateful to him."

Something almost resembling a blush appeared on Bilbo's cheeks, and he looked out to the length of a plain that separated them from Dale. "Well, Gandalf did interfere, so really there's nothing to talk about. And in any case, I'm sure the rest would have stopped you if he hadn't. After all, they had already disobeyed you for my sake."

"For which I cannot thank them enough." Thorin sighed, following Bilbo's gaze out toward the city of men. The last remnants of snow were melting quickly in the rain, only the highest peaks retaining their usual covering. "Did I ever tell you how I came out of my madness?"
"I don't think so, no." Bilbo shook his head. "We didn't really get a chance to talk right after the battle, and by the time we did have the time for a proper conversation, well, it just didn't seem right to bring up something like that."

"My Company tried to speak to me, make no mistake." And he had cast them out with threats and insults. "Even Dwalin, I would not listen to. They left me alone as I demanded them to, following the battle while I wallowed in my insanity, more concerned with the glittering gold than the lives of my own kith and kin." His fingers tightened around a rough stone edge, trying to ground himself as the dark memories rose up. "I… I was swallowed, for lack of a better word. All I could think of was the gold, all the gold that surrounded me but could not bring me joy in my madness, and the words of everyone around me. I could hear them, even in my darkest depths, but it wasn't until I had forsaken everyone and everything for the dragon's hoard that I truly realised what a wretch I had become."

"Oh, Thorin." Bilbo's voice was quiet, his hand warm as it settled over Thorin's, a gentle and soothing touch. "I wish I could have been there."

"You were, though." That was something he had not confessed to anyone, not quite so directly. "Your voice was there, your words, the pleas and words you gave me. And while I was faced with a thousand other things, with the disapproval of all those dear to me and the fears of my own making, it was your words that brought me out of it in the end."

"Ah." Bilbo seemed rather flustered for some reason, though Thorin couldn't imagine why. After all, he was only telling the truth. "Surely I'm not the most important one out of all who spoke with you."

"You were, though. You were then, and you are now." A part of him wanted to stop before he went too far, said too much, but a much larger part of him seemed to have decided it was about time for him to come clean. There was no place for it than here, anyway, where he had wronged his precious hobbit the most. Clearly, if this backfired and he was cast aside, it would be nothing but his long-deserved punishment. "Bilbo. There is something I wish to say."

"Then say it." His hobbit was ever so sensible, his expression bemused as Thorin turned to look at him, turning their hands so he was holding onto Bilbo's.

"You were not wrong about the mithril shirt." Not the best start, but he could build on that, surely. "I did not think of it much at the time; I gave it to you because it felt like I should. It wasn't until you spoke up at the council that I realised that, even during my deepest madness, my heart still found a way to make itself heard." He squeezed Bilbo's hand, as gently as he could, not wishing to harm his precious hobbit. "I gave you the most precious thing I had, next to the Arkenstone, and did not think of it twice even as I could not part from a single coin otherwise. I trusted in you above all, even as I doubted my own flesh and blood of the most grave deceptions imaginable. Your voice broke through the madness, spoke louder than all the gold and the ghost of a dragon, reached me even as the gold swallowed me up and made to destroy all that I was."

"Thorin…" Bilbo started, then trailed off. Even so, Thorin touched his lips with a fingertip, not wanting to be interrupted. He wasn't sure he could finish if that happened.

"There was a time when I thought I did not have One, when I thought such things were not important enough for me to concern myself with them. Except then I found someone who made my heart sing even as I dealt out harsh words and harsher deeds, someone I could not ignore no matter how much I tried, who wormed his way into my waking thoughts and my nightly dreams until I found myself dreading the day we were to part." He drew a deep breath. "Bilbo Baggins of the Shire… this is rather late in coming, I fear, and really I have no right to speak of such things after everything I have done and all the ways I have wronged you. Even so, I feel I must say it, because I owe you this and so much more."
Bilbo didn't speak this time, but his eyes did widen just a bit further.

"I love you." There, the worst was over with. "I did not realise it at first, but I love you. I love your loyal heart and your cunning mind, your courage and wit, I love that you would fight for a lost king and speak hard words to a friend in need of them. I may not always be the most skilled at showing my love, but I hope that even when I cause you to huff and despair, you will remember that it was your voice I followed out of the darkest depths of my madness. It was you, and it could only be you, because you are the One I was forged for before I ever drew breath in the deep halls of Erebor, and you will remain in my heart even after my flesh and bone has long since been returned to the stone."

Bilbo stared at him for another moment, still speechless. Then, much to Thorin's horror, he started to blink away what was clearly tears.

"Bilbo?" Okay, he probably sounded a bit panicked now, but he liked to think he had the right. "I'm sorry, I should have never spoken up. That's not something I should be burdening you with, please forget I said anything, I —"

There was a hand in his hair, a small yet nimble one, carding through his mane in a soothing manner until it settled at the back of his neck. As it tugged at him, just a bit, Thorin found himself moving along, allowing his head to be brought down towards Bilbo, Bilbo who still had tears in his eyes but also hadn't drawn away the hand Thorin held in his.

The kiss Bilbo gave him tasted of spring rain and hope, and Thorin was quite sure he forgot to breathe altogether.
Courting now that he knows Thorin loves him is not all that different from before, Bilbo finds, in the best way possible. Ori is not quite as happy as his brothers fight, though, and Dís is just about done with the utter idiocy of her darling brother.

Fíli, however, can't sleep. This hardly eases Thorin's mind.

There was, Bilbo discovered, still enough of a proper Baggins left in him that he almost felt guilty for entering the bath with Thorin.

After the initial awkwardness he had come to think little of sharing the family bath if someone else happened to be there at the same time, or indeed of heading there with the intent of company. It was a fine way to relax, as he had found, and he rather enjoyed seeing the way Thorin was in the water, peaceful and content. Their betrothal had not changed anything, and why would it have? After all, it had merely been an arrangement between friends.

Except now he knew that Thorin loved him, and Thorin knew he felt the same, and Bilbo still couldn't bring himself to feel guilty or even embarrassed about stripping down and stepping down into the warm water in front of the one he was courting.

He supposed it helped that this was not a new thing, in a way. Had this been his first time sharing a bath with Thorin, he was sure his mind would have focused on the nudity, on the closeness of Thorin's skin and the shape of his chest. As it was, though, he had long since come to see the bath as a place to relax and clean, nothing more, and the lack of clothes had more to do with scrubbing his skin than it did with any indecent motivations.

"Look out!"

Of course, it would have been rather difficult to get too carried away when his attention was divided by rather active nephews.

Thorin sighed, and Bilbo could tell he was resisting the urge to roll his eyes as they watched Kíli emerging from the water he had just entered at quite some speed. "One of these days you'll crack your skull. And make no mistake, when that happens, I'll make sure your tomb is carved with the words 'I told him so.'"

"Oh, please. I jumped in feet first, didn't I?" Kíli grinned as he sat down on the bench along the edge near the two of them and started unravelling his braids. He still wore his hair rather plain compared with his uncle and brother, unless some circumstance forced him to stand in court and thus prompted Balin to fuss over him, but he did always make sure that his courtship braids were there, taking pride of place in the otherwise unbound hair.

"This time, yes." Thorin, perhaps inspired by his nephew, gestured for Bilbo to shift closer; when Bilbo did so, nimble fingers slid out the beads in his hair, starting to perform the same task for him. It felt oddly intimate, even more so as he recalled what the princes had said about dwarves not letting just anyone even see their braids unmade, never mind handle them.
"Ah. Fíli's not joining us today?" Bilbo wasn't sure the question was enough to mask the embarrassment that he was trying to fight down, but at least it would distract Kíli, who was the more likely to tease him if he was noticed.

"Nah, he's busy with something. Probably working on his second gift to Ori, if you ask me." Kíli shrugged. "He's been really intense about it, which is a bit weird. I mean, he knows they can't be wed at least until Ori's done with his masterpiece, and that's not going to happen very fast. Not that I don't understand the wish to speed things along, but they are already courting, he can afford to take his time with the second gift."

"Perhaps, but he does not have as much free time as he would like." Thorin reached to set the beads on the edge of the pool, safe from falling into the water where they might have had to search for them somewhere along the rounded bottom of the basin. "Between his duties and wanting to spend some time together with his One and his friends, I can't imagine he has too much free time left. It might not be that he is in any particular hurry, as much as he feels he must make use of every available moment if he wants to ever finish."

"Indeed. It's not like all of us can just send the other one, say, out to Dale for some shopping."
Thorin chuckled at Bilbo's words, denying nothing. "What is he making for Ori? I mean, if you're allowed to tell me." Because obviously Kíli would know.

"Sure, if you can keep the secret. It's only the betrothed who's not supposed to know." Kíli gave him a grin. "He's planning to make Ori a set of pens. Different tips, for drawing and writing and such, and really pretty shafts with gold and gems. Ori's going to be the envy of every scribe once Fíli is done with it."

"It's a fine gift, to be sure. It will showcase both his own craft and his knowledge of his intended." Thorin hummed in thought. "And have you given any thought to what you plan to give Tauriel as your provider's gift?"

"Not really, no. I'd go for pretty clothes, but she's going to need new clothes anyway, so that feels like cheating. Maybe some jewelry? She doesn't wear much of it, sure, but she has been wearing that necklace you gave her. I'd be all jealous if I didn't know where she got it from."

"Yes, about that." Thorin was braiding Bilbo's hair now, his movements firm but not painfully so. "I may have some more of those gems stored away."

Kíli almost choked on a sudden laugh. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Because your uncle is an utterly pig-headed dwarf who will take every opportunity to irritate elves?" Bilbo chuckled at the sound of a grumble behind him. "You know it's true, don't try to deny it."

"I wouldn't dream of it." There was a kiss to his hair, soft and affectionate, and Bilbo was sure he would soon forget to breathe. "In any case, Kíli, unless you have some other plans, I'm thinking of commissioning a diadem worthy of your lady in the starlight. That ought to be enough for your gift, don't you think?"

Bilbo had never seen Kíli's eyes quite so wide. "Are you serious?"

"As serious as I have ever been. She'll need one, anyway, for formal occasions; a princess ought to be dressed as one, and I doubt anything we might find in the treasury would fit her all that well. Really, you have forced my hand by falling for someone so needlessly large."
"Oi, she's just the perfect size." Kíli was grinning, though, a brilliant grin that took off all edge in his words. "Thank you. That's... you can't believe how much that means to me."

"Oh, I think I have some idea." Bilbo saw Thorin reaching past him for one of the beads to fasten the new braid. "I'm sure your brother would offer to make it, if he weren't so busy with his own gift to his intended, and I don't think my skills as a goldsmith are nearly enough for what a gift would require, certainly not to make something that would fit her without needing the actual measurements. We have time, though, to wait for the arrivals from Ered Luin or perhaps more from the Iron Hills; I'll make sure it is ready for her to wear on your wedding day."

That made Bilbo glance over his shoulder as Thorin let go of the braid at last. "Does that mean I'll need a coronet or something for our wedding, too?"

"Well, obviously. You'll be made Consort when we are wed, it would hardly do for you not to be dressed according to your station." Thorin gave him a perfectly innocent look that made Bilbo rather wonder just how much of the princes' personality was reflection of their uncle's own youth. "Do not worry, though, I'm sure we can find something I or one of my siblings wore in our childhood."

Bilbo scoffed, splashing some water in Thorin's direction. "Oh, I don't know. It seems unlikely anything made for your thick dwarven skull would ever fit me properly."

"Ohh, a water fight!" Kíli cried out as Thorin, with all the dignity of a high and mighty king, splashed water right back at him. "Don't worry, Bilbo, I shall defend you against my mountain troll of an uncle!"

It was some time and quite a bit of splashed water later that Bilbo sighed, finally sitting back down at the bench. Kíli had begged off, gathering the clothes he had dropped off on his way to the bath and vanishing from the room. "I'm beginning to see your sister's wisdom in never sharing a bath with the lads."

"It's because Fíli's not here, I think. It's a tad easier when they distract each other." Thorin actually had the gall to look perfectly innocent, as though he hadn't just taken part in the fight like a mischievous little fauntling. "I never did finish putting your braids back in."

"Well, clearly you should do so now, hmm?" Bilbo chuckled. "Though we might follow Kíli's example and get out of the bath. I'm rather starting to feel like a fish, and even with a solid rock bottom under my feet I'm enough of a hobbit yet that all this water is starting to make me feel a bit unnerved."

"Not a bad idea at all." Thorin offered him a smile, another one of those genuine, warm smiles that Bilbo still couldn't quite believe were directed at him. "With a fireplace and a cup of tea, perhaps, to assure you that the water is quite under control? And then, if you are interested, I could teach you about my braids in turn." The last was said with an almost hesitating air, as though expecting Bilbo to turn it down immediately.

Bilbo, who was actually not an idiot, smiled in response. "My dear king, nothing would delight me more."

Which wasn't entirely true, of course, there were a thing or two he could have named that he was fairly sure would have brought him even more delight, but to even contemplate them at this stage would have been far too improper even for a Took, thank you very much.

They'd get there eventually, anyway.
Dori and Nori were fighting.

Much though Ori might have wished otherwise, this was not exactly a unique occurrence. He had grown up in the shadow of such fights, with his pillow pulled tightly around his ears and wishing for sleep that refused to come, quietly pleading for them to stop. He knew now that his brothers had tried to keep it from him, had done their best not to fight in front of him even in their worst times; it was hardly their fault that he had been a light sleeper even as a dwarfling, often startled awake by the raised voices that didn't quite cross the border to yelling, but only just.

The argument had always been the same, back in Ered Luin. Dori had wanted Nori to stop his less than respectable business, while Nori had wanted Dori to leave him be. The tension had always been there, in a couple of sharp words and a pointed look elsewhere on a good day, in hissed insults and hurtful accusations on a bad one. Sometimes, when it was really bad, when Dori had had to bail Nori out of jail once again, they would pull out the worst of their weapons. Dori would make it clear just how disappointed their mother would have been, to see what had become of her son, while Nori would bite back with accusations of how Dori would have been unable to put enough food on the table if Nori hadn't brought in what he could in whatever ways he could. It was hardly too much, Dori had often argued, for him to wish his brother would take on a more honourable profession, while Nori was not above pointing out that Dori was quite willing to ignore the ugly truths when Nori's quick fingers were the only thing keeping Ori from going hungry.

Once, and only once, could Ori remember a mention made of someone's father. He couldn't recall the details, not even whose father had been dragged into the discussion. What he did remember was that Nori had been gone for four months afterwards, a long time for someone who had little work in the villages of men, while Dori had often held him tight while staring into a fading fire.

It should have been a terrible way for a child to grow up, listening to such arguments, yet Ori had never doubted their family or the bonds of it. No matter how terrible the fight, Nori would always come back, with a story and a treat and a smile on his face, and Dori's eyes would be soft as he made dinner and never asked just where Nori had disappeared to.

There hadn't been fights like that since they left Ered Luin, not quite. Certainly, they'd had their squabbles along the road, but then that was just the way of brothers. After reaching Erebor such arguments had stopped almost completely, each of them too busy to bother with such trivial things. Besides, there was hardly any reason for such things now, not when Nori had somehow become a respectable dwarf and Dori had no worry of having to weigh the importance of his morals against full bellies for them all.

As such, while he had expected some tension, Ori was rather surprised to hear the angry voices in the shared area of their rooms.

He'd come home early after the council meeting had wrapped up, dismissed by both Balin and Thorin for the evening. Ori had planned to use this unexpected free time to work on his masterpiece, only to get interrupted by a slamming door and heated voices right outside his room. The door to his room was just slightly ajar, enough so for him to make out the words without having to strain himself.

"I can't believe you would do something so irresponsible!" Dori, of course. Nori had no worries about irresponsibility. "No, wait, yes I can. It's Dwalin whose behaviour I just cannot understand!"

"Oh, right." Nori's voice took on a biting tone. "Because it's such a crazy thing for someone to want me."
"Don't try to twist my words. You know I haven't said anything about that." Ori could hear Dori stomping around with none of his usual grace, making rather an unnecessary amount of noise as he went about preparing tea. He always made tea when Nori got on his nerves, and his hands always, always trembled as he held the cup. "After all the time and effort we've both spent trying to bring Ori up nice and proper, now you do this?"

"Ori was still plenty proper the last time I checked. Me, I don't see how my doings have anything to do with you."

If Ori closed his eyes he could just see Dori drawing up to his full height. "The way you conduct yourself will always reflect on —"

"On my family, yes, I've heard that before." Nori had never thought too much of interrupting someone. "I'm not sure if you've missed it, but we're not exactly poor anymore." Ori knew exactly how Nori looked right now, knew the blazing eyes and the mocking expression, daring Dori to disagree with him when he knew it to be impossible. "We are rich, Dori, rich and honoured and so bloody respectable it makes me want to puke. You could just sit on your fat arse and not do a thing for the rest of your days, and we still wouldn't go hungry for a single day."

"That has nothing to do with —"

"Oh, but it has everything to do with it. This isn't Ered Luin anymore, Dori, we're not begging for scraps anymore. You don't have to make sure we put up a good front so someone with actual money might give you a commission. And yes, I know you are just that bloody proper, but you don't need to worry about us being equally proper anymore."

"I don't have any complaints about Ori's conduct."

"Of course you don't! He did exactly what you always wanted, got his pretty face noticed by someone rich enough to feed and clothe him when you're not around anymore. And don't try to tell me you haven't been waiting for precisely that."

Ori shivered. Was that what his brothers thought of him and Fíli?

"I've never said —"

"That he should try and use his looks to get someone to provide for him? No, you haven't. What you have done is all but pray that he'd get courted out of poverty, and you wouldn't have thought too hard on the match as long as he was getting fed instead of hit." Nori snorted, a cruel little sound. "Because being pretty enough to be noticed worked out so very well for our 'ma."

"Don't you bring Amad into this," Dori hissed. "And as you said, we're not poor anymore. Ori loves Fíli, even I can see that, and he loves him back. That's all this is about."

"So why are you getting on my case? It's unlikely the prat of a prince would take back his suit just because I'm being scandalous with his cousin, so clearly my actions only reflect on myself. And since Dwalin seems to have no complaints about my recent conduct I'd say that's not a worry either."

"Because we are respectable now! If the brother of some poor tailor from a bastard line misbehaved, yes, it might have cost me a commission or two, but it wasn't the end of the world. But now, if you can't follow the basic rules of courtship, people will question Ori's honour as well, and they can't be having such doubts about the future Consort. You can't just think about yourself anymore!"

"I haven't thought of myself since the day our mother died!" Ori wasn't sure he had ever heard Nori so angry. "I'm not sure if you've noticed, but you're not the only big brother here. I've lied and stolen
and cheated and gambled, all so Ori could have food on the table and clothes on his back and the best fucking apprenticeship a scribe could hope for, and for all your complaints you've always been happy to turn a blind eye when I've brought dinner to the table. I've no regrets about any of that, but now he doesn't need me anymore, he doesn't need either of us anymore, and I've earned the right to live my own bloody life without thinking of anyone but myself."

"So this is worth throwing everything away?" Dori's voice was quiet, now, anger ebbing away. "This — this whatever it is you have — this thing that he won't even acknowledge?"

"I'm just as capable of proposing courtship as Dwalin is, thank you. If we're not courting properly yet it's because neither of us has felt the need to do so, not because he's keeping me as a dirty little secret or whatever you think is going on here."

"Well, at this rate, it won't be any kind of secret for much longer."

"Good! Then if there's any shame to be had we can share it between us. I know my heart and mind, I trust him to know his. In any case, if you think this is going to end badly for me, isn't it better if it's just harmless fun? Think of the scandal if I put my braids in his hair and then one of us cast out the other!"

"Or you could just court him like a proper dwarf and become his bonded."

"Well, maybe I don't want that. Maybe all I want is the occasional tumble in the sheets with someone who knows precisely who and what I am and doesn't give a damn. I've little honour left and even less shame, and of all the things I've done in my life I refuse to regret the one that has never brought anyone anything but pleasure."

"And you think nothing of the consequences?"

"What consequences? What's he going to do, leave me to deal with a bastard child? Wouldn't be the first Durin bastard in our esteemed line, and in any case it seems unlikely, particularly since the whole bloody Company probably knows about us by now. It's not like Thorin is going to demand the end of Ori's courtship over something his own dear cousin is involved in, or like Fíli would care even if he did. No, I think the only real consequence here is that you might lose what little control you have over me."

"I only want what's best for you." Dori's voice trembled now.

"Do you really? It rather seems you want what you think is best for me, which, not actually the same thing. Nah, brother mine, it won't go like that anymore. You've spent half your life trying to tell me to keep my hands out of other people's purses; I'd think sticking them down the trousers of one willing dwarf would be quite the improvement." There was a screech, the sound of a heavy old stone chair scratching against the floor. Nori must have been furious to stand up fast enough to move it. "It's pointless to argue, you're convinced of your own truth either way. I'll go see Dwalin, I think, he at least is happy to see me."

"If you step through that door before we're finished, you can find your tea somewhere else."

"Maybe I don't want your stupid tea." The next sound Ori heard was the slam of the door out to the corridors of Erebor.

Ori waited a moment, listening. As there were no other sounds, he pushed the door of his room open, looking out into the shared area. "Dori?"

"Ori?" Dori looked up from where he had slumped into a chair, looking startled. "You — were you
"Ah, yes." Ori worried his lower lip. "I'm sorry, I probably should have let you know, but... there wasn't exactly a good time to interrupt."

"I'm sorry you had to hear that." Dori sighed, closing his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Not the first time I've heard you two fight."

"That doesn't exactly make me feel better about it." Dori shook his head. "You shouldn't have to worry about any such things. You've got your courtship and masterpiece and your work in the court; that's quite enough for one dwarf to concern himself with."

"So I should just ignore it when my brothers fight? You should know that's not going to happen." Ori walked closer, taking a seat close to Dori. "You're all the family I have. Of course I'm going to worry if you two are fighting."

"Oh, Ori." Dori sighed again, even deeper. "We really haven't given you a very good childhood, have we?"

"That's not true." He shook his head. "Even when you two have fought, I've always known you'll both come home in the end. I've never feared you'd leave me alone or wouldn't take care of me. No matter what happens, I've always known I can come to you two and you'll help me. I... I know it can't have been easy, especially with my being as strange as I am."

"You are not strange." At last, Dori looked up at him. "Unusual, perhaps, but that's not the same thing. If anything, you are brave to pursue a path not many would. When you're a miner or a smith, when you have nice broad shoulders and a great big beard, it's easy to find your place in the world. But a mountain full of miners and smiths wouldn't get very far without the scribes and tailors and hunters."

"I suppose," Ori somehow managed a smile. "I guess we're just not a very ordinary family, are we? Me the small and soft scribe and you the tailor with teas and Nori being... Nori."

"True enough." Dori stood up now, getting back to his usual fuss. A way of managing his anxiety, Ori knew that by now, but he wasn't going to call him out on it. "Ah. Would you like some jasmine tea?"

"Yes, please." Ori watched as Dori puttered about, setting some water to boil in the fireplace. Anxious, still, but this would pass.

"I still remember when Nori was born." Dori chuckled, a faint sound but genuine, as he went about finishing the tea preparations that had apparently been interrupted at some point during the argument. "Was quite looking forward to having a sister, since that was what everyone promised me, but of course Nori had to be contrary from the start. He's more like our Amad than I think he realises, you know. She never cared much what everyone else thought, either."

Ori nodded, quiet. He didn't want to interrupt; it was rare enough that either of his brothers talked about their mother. Ori had never known her, had simply gathered some small bits and pieces here and there from what those around him said.

Well. What Dori and Nori said. Everyone else's opinions were quite unnecessary and clearly wrong.

"Though then, I suppose I ought to be happy about that. If she'd courted and married my father, I would not have Nori or you. Nor would she have been very happy, I suspect, from what I know
about each of them."

"Is that why you're so worried about Nori?" Because there was worry there, Ori could tell, not just fussing and a sense of propriety. "Because Amad never found happiness in her companions?"

"Yes and no." A pause, then, filled with the sound of the dainty little tea cups that Dori had somehow found in the depths of the treasury. "I know Dwalin is a honourable dwarf, and would not mistreat Nori the way I know our mother was mistreated. However, I fear this might just be another rebellion for Nori, another thing he's not supposed to do that tempts him because of that. If that is the case, he might end up going deeper than he expects."

"And he might be a bad influence on me." Well, it had to be said.

"I'd like to think you're more sensible than that." Dori snorted. "Even so, I'd better not find any crown princes sneaking out of your room in the middle of the night."

"Well, at least there's no chance of anyone ending up with child even if Fíli and I did get bad influences." Ori flushed as Dori turned a shocked gaze toward him. "Not that we have! Don't look like that. I know better than to follow Nori's example in, well, anything." Not that the thought didn't intrigue him, if he were to be entirely honest, but even so his relationship with Fíli was far too new for that.

"Right." Dori paused, now. "Ah. If I gave you a pouch of Nori's tea leaves, could you get them to Dwalin? I… don't think Nori's going to be back for a few days."

"Of course." Ori nodded. "There's a council meeting tomorrow, he will be there as a guard." He might have liked to be all hopeful and think things would settle by then, but he had heard enough fights to know that this had been a bad one. Dori was right, Nori was not going to return for a little while, not until he had calmed down.

At least now, they knew someone else would be caring for him.

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Thorin, decided Dís, daughter of Thráin son of Thrór, blood to kings and mother to princes, was a stupidhead.

There were a few other words she might have used, some perhaps even more suited for the dignity of a princess. However, she was rather convinced that any such attempts would not have accurately represented the utter idiocy of her beloved older brother.

Well. Thorin was older, in any case.

She was just reading the letter for the second time, trying to find the actual truths hidden between the lengthy passages of distraction, when Glóin walked in. He had insisted that she ought to have a tent every night, due to her station, and she hadn't really been able to argue against it when setting up camp took such a long time anyway, what with all the families and the sheer size of the caravan. Of course, this had translated into something more suited for a receiving room than a mere nightly shelter, but she supposed she could allow for a little bit of luxury at last. After all, they were no longer mere beggars searching for their fortune.

"My lady." Glóin gave a small nod, glancing from the raven eating next to her to the letter in her hands. "I did hear you had received some correspondence from the mountain."

"Oh, yes. My brother continues to astound me, that's for sure." Dís rolled her eyes. "Apparently both
my boys are courting, now, and it's clear he thinks that providing me with details about this new courtship will distract me from the lack of information concerning Kíli's. I now know quite a lot about Fíli's intended, including his family line and his many deeds on the journey, yet I have not been trusted with as much as the name of Kíli's chosen.

"Journey? So he did finally approach wee Ori, then?" At Dís's sharp glance, Glóin shrugged. "It's a mere guess, my lady. There was nothing going on when I left, but I did notice a few gazes that were warmer than one might have expected. If he's taken to courting one of the Company, it would have to be Ori, I'm sure."

"That is what Thorin tells me, yes." Her eyes swept over the words. So much to say and yet so little substance. "And what of Kíli's choice? You refused to tell me anything before, saying you didn't know for certain, but surely you have some kind of suspicion?"

"Aye, I could make guesses. It's nothing much, though, mostly second-hand gossip from what my brother told me of what transpired in Laketown after we left." Glóin shook his head. "I left the mountain soon after the battle, so there's little I can tell you with any certainty."

"Little is not the same as none."

"Merely going by the circumstances, my lady." Glóin's lips twitched. "You mentioned you don't know as much as the name of Kíli's intended. I'd wager, then, that the name alone would tell you quite a bit."

"And you, I suspect, have a name in mind?" And what exactly could be so tied to a name that it alone would reveal whatever Thorin was hiding from her?

Glóin hesitated, now, that much she could see. "It is but a guess, mind, from what I heard from my brother. It could just be a chance, just the lad babbling on in his fever, nothing more."

"Well, my brother is not offering me even that much, so I would be glad to hear of any guess you might make. It does tear at a mother's heart, not to know how her sons are faring." That was a low blow, truly, knowing how deeply Glóin felt the bond to his own son, but she was not above some light manipulation.

"Apparently, when he was feverish with poison, there was one he asked after. Wondered aloud if she could ever love him, as it were." She. Not one of the Company, then, they were all male far as Dís had been informed. "Never even realised the one he asked after was right next to him, either. I've heard it was pretty words, though, more so than Kíli usually tends toward, begging your pardon, so I wonder if there wasn't more to it than just the poison in his veins."

"And you still have not given me a name, either." She wasn't even sure if she should be more amused or irritated.

"Tauriel." The word was out quick as though Glóin were afraid it might burn his tongue. "Tauriel. That's the name of the lass he spoke for."

"That's not a dwarven name." Nor, she suspected, one fit for a daughter of men.

"It wouldn't be." Glóin shook his head. "She's one of Thranduil's elves. Fought alongside us in the battle, or so I hear. Keen eye with a bow, that one, and not a bad hand with a blade either."

"So you are saying my son is courting an elf."

"As I said, it's just a guess. Would explain why Thorin is so tight-lipped about it, though."
"It would indeed." Dís hummed to herself. "And I don't suppose you can explain why he now tells me he has confessed his love to the halfling, when he told me some time ago that they had taken to courting."

Glóin's sigh was deep and heavy. "I'd say I trust him to have his reasons, but this is Thorin we're speaking of. I can't say it surprises me to hear of such confessions, I rather suspected there would be more than the high regard for a friend in his treatment of Bilbo once the madness cleared, but why that would not have preceded the courtship offer or its acceptance, I cannot imagine."

"He's going to have plenty to explain once I get there, that's for sure." She reached a finger to pet the head of the raven, then glanced at Glóin. "Say. Does your son have the knack for them?"

"The ravens? Oh, aye." Glóin's chest puffed with pride, but then that always happened when the topic turned to his beloved star. "Near thought it lost to our line already, but he's spoken with a few of them clear enough. Not that it surprises me, mind; I cannot well imagine there's much of anything that Gimli could not charm with his words."

"He does have a clever tongue, yes." Which rather made her think in this case. "Would you protest if I were to give him a task soon enough? It's rather important, and I think him well suited, but he is young yet and I would not send him off without your agreement."

"I think that would be very good, my lady." Glóin nodded. "He's still a mite upset over not being allowed on the Quest, I suspect, and a mission of his own might mollify that. And if you think he's ready for the task, whatever it is, then I'll trust your judgement on that."

"Thank you for your trust in me, cousin." Dís smiled a bit. "It seems Thorin has negotiated for our passage through Mirkwood as part of the peace terms, but I feel it would yet be wise to send someone ahead to warn them of our approach. Short of going myself, I suspect Gimli is our best bet of handling that without any further conflict; while I have all the faith in your abilities otherwise, you'll forgive me if I say diplomacy is not your best skill."

"Not with elves it's not. But you're right, my lad ought to be better in that regard." Glóin sighed again. "Though if they insult his mother again as they did before, the pointy-eared bastards, I do not believe he will stay his axe."

"Of course not. However, until such a thing happens, I'd prefer to keep things at least reasonably civil with our neighbours." She paused, glancing down at the letter. "Particularly if I'm to soon call one of them my daughter."

Oh, yes. There were some long, intense talks to be had once she reached the mountain. Most importantly, Thorin would learn just how terrible an idea it was to keep tiny little details such as her future daughter-in-law's race secret from her.

How exactly was she supposed to be planning a wedding if she didn't even know what type of a gown would suit Kíli's intended best?

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Erebor was silent at night.

Of course, a mountain this size never truly slept, for all that it was still quite empty. There was always someone in the kitchens, a guard patrolling this hallway or that, a miner late in returning from
a day's work because it was ever so difficult to leave a rich vein for the night. They all passed him without much of a pause, a quick bow before they resumed their own journeys down the hallways. They never surprised him, not this late, not when there were so few of them about he could track all the dwarves close to him by the feel of the stone under his feet.

He should have been in bed at this hour, of course, knew that Bilbo at least would have told him off with some viciousness if he'd known, probably Balin as well. They would have reminded him of his duties, how he couldn't afford to nod off in the middle of a meeting, and while nobody would have actually forced him into bed — not as long as Dís was still on the way, as she would have held no compunctions about doing precisely that — their disapproval would have probably turned his way back to his rooms at least. Not that any of them would be up at such an unsociable hour, of course.

All the better. He had no particular desire to try and explain the terror of waking up in cold sweat and trying, trying so very hard not to remember the gold floor stretching to impossible distance around his feet, the sound of coin hitting coin that seemed amplified thousandfold, the terrified face of Bilbo as he looked at Thorin with fear.

No, tonight was not the time for sleep for him.

He hadn't paid much attention to where he was headed, tracing familiar paths around the long-lost home that he was slowly making his once again. He came to a halt at last, standing in front of the heavy doors to the throne room, a hand settling on one of them. There was no guard by the doors, not this late at night, there being little inside that anyone might have thought to steal. Anything that a dwarf might have even dreamed of stealing, anyway.

Why, then, could he all but feel the pulse of someone nearby thrumming through the cold stone?

He pushed one half of the heavy doors open, quiet in the darkened space. The throne room was deep inside the mountain, with little natural light reaching it even in the middle of the day. Now, late in the hour and empty of purpose, it was lit by nothing but a single fire near the throne, almost reduced to embers. That was yet enough light for him to see the solitary figure seated at the steps of the dais, alone in the darkness.

It was quite enough light to see the golden hair falling over hunched shoulders, a lonely flicker of light reflecting off the circlet he had set on the steps beside him.

"Fíli?" Thorin's own steps seemed impossibly loud as he walked down towards the throne. "What are you doing here?"

"Hm?" Fíli didn't seem to notice him at first, only turning to look at him when he was almost at the foot of the dais, hair gleaming in the dying firelight. "Uncle. I found I couldn't sleep."

"We are the same, then." He came to a halt, looking up at the throne. It seemed rather dark and imposing in the shadows, only the pale glow of the Arkenstone setting it aside from some hulking monster in the darkness. Even with his dwarven eyes he could only barely make out the actual shape of it against the depth of the cavern around them. "And you came here, I see."

"I've been in my thoughts." Fíli followed his gaze to the throne. Not that he wouldn't know it, in quite some detail; Fíli was there every time Thorin held court, after all, standing at his right hand as his heir should.

"And heavy thoughts they must be, for you to contemplate them in such a place." Thorin glanced down at the discarded circlet. "Are your duties coming to be too much to bear?"
"What? No!" The answer was so earnest, so without hesitation, that Thorin had to believe it. "I mean, it's more than I thought beforehand, but it's not more than I can handle. Just… takes some getting used to, I guess."

"Are you sure?" Thorin frowned. "I know there's a lot of things going on for you right now, what with Ori's gift and all. I'm sure we could lighten your duties for a time to give you some breathing room; it will be much harder to do so once the bulk of our people have returned to the mountain."

It was hardly a secret now that Fíli spent most of his free time working on his gift. Thorin had not thought much of it at first, content as he was that the lad was not shirking his duties, until something Bilbo had said had given him pause. Bilbo had mentioned he hadn't seen hide nor hair of Fíli outside council meetings for a couple of weeks, now, aside from some rare occasions when he stood beside Thorin on a court day. Devotion was one thing, and Thorin knew something of that now that he had his own lovely hobbit to consider, but this was bordering on obsession, and that was not something he wished to encourage, knowing the weakness of his line for such things.

"I'm sure." Fíli gave a firm nod. "I — I need to do this, Uncle. Need to show him what he's worth. I'd dress him in gold and silver and jewels if he'd let me, but I know he won't, so my gift needs to be perfect to show my regard for him."

"Right." He could understand that wish, certainly, knew all too well his own burning instinct to see Bilbo clad in gems and precious metals of all kinds, only barely held back by the knowledge that his hobbit probably wouldn't have appreciated such gestures any more than Ori would have. "Even so, you shouldn't let it consume you so entirely that you don't find the time to actually court him."

"I do spend time with Ori." This time the answer was a bit too fast, a bit too eager to convince him.

"Perhaps do that a bit more, then. I suspect he is in need of company, judging by how much time he spends with Bilbo nowadays, particularly as his brothers are still fighting." Oh, he was not entirely clueless to the social tensions within the Company just because he chose not to get involved in them most of the time.

"I know, I know." Fíli shook his head, a tired little gesture that hinted at more than mere lack of sleep. "I just — I need to get this perfect, Uncle. There's no way I can present him with anything less."

"You know, I rather suspect Ori finds you more important than any gift you could ever offer to him." Thorin reached a hand to touch his shoulder. "Fíli. You know that if you have any concerns, you can talk to me, right?"

"Yeah, I know." So why did he not sound convinced?

"Or Balin, or even Dwalin. Bilbo, perhaps, I'm sure he could offer some sound advice." While Thorin himself just had no idea what he ought to say to his heir sitting in the darkness.

"I'll keep that in mind." Thorin fancied he could still hear some doubt in his voice.

"And do try to get some sleep. It's another long day tomorrow." He stepped away, now, turning to face away from the throne. This was a familiar sight, now, the stretch of the walkway before the throne, an old memory of his younger days and a much fresher one now that he was the one bearing the crown. Not the raven crown, still, he wasn't sure he could ever bear to take that upon his brow again, but a crown nevertheless, one much heavier than its actual weight.

Well. Perhaps he should not have wondered just why Fíli found it hard to sleep.
His steps echoed in the empty cavern as he walked out again, leaving Fíli in the glow of the dying fire and the soulless shine of the Arkenstone.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Dwalin just can't seem to understand how very much Nori can't just go back to Dori. Also, he seems to be serious, which is not what Nori wants. At all. Ever. He's only staying here because it's less annoying than making up with Dori. Absolutely.

Thorin, fortunately, is a bit better about this whole romance thing, and Bilbo seems receptive to his second gift. Clearly things are looking up for the line of Durin.

And then Ori makes the mistake of finally visiting Fíli's rooms.

Chapter Notes

Of the names in this chapter, Sora is Finnish for "gravel".

There's FANART for this chapter now! See the perfect art of Dwalin and Nori by asparklethatisblue here. (NOTE: contains naked dwarf butt/chest.)

Please note that this chapter contains an instance of gold madness induced violence. While it's nothing worse than what we see in canon, here it happens in the context of an established relationship, so I figured it deserved an extra warning. Please read accordingly.

It had taken a long time for Nori to get to the point where he could simply walk into Dwalin's rooms without feeling like he ought to have been sneaking about instead.

Not that there was much to sneak about in, mind. The set of rooms Dwalin had claimed for himself was fairly utilitarian, with a simple front room, a bedroom, and a bathroom with a tub and a privy. Walking inside Nori spotted a pair of boots discarded on the floor. Knowing Dwalin as he did, this was enough of an indication of where the warrior could be found; he only took off his boots to go to bed or the bath, and it was not nearly late enough for bed yet.

He closed the door behind himself and began to strip as he walked, dropping his belt, gloves and surcoat before he had even made it across the front room. The tunic fell down to the floor next, and for just a moment he paused, staring at it. Dori had made it for him, as he indeed had made most of Nori's clothes, and it wasn't that different from what he had worn back in Ered Luin. It was loose to the point of almost ill-fitting, excellent for hiding all manner of things, and only the fine fabric and lack of holes and darning gave any indication it wasn't something he had owned for years. He'd been wearing the same style pretty much ever since he had grown to his full form, and it had always, always been made by Dori.

He let his undershirt fall in the same pile just to make a point.

He was lightly dressed, as was suitable for a mountain in peacetime, so there wasn't much more he
had to discard. His boots came next, then his trousers and breeches, the last layer of fabric joining the
pile after only a bit of hesitation. He didn’t like this much, being so bare and vulnerable, but then
Dwalin had seen him without a stitch on him before and didn’t seem much inclined to use that to
some nefarious advantage.

It was suitable, somehow, that it was Dwalin who had spent years upon years trying to find him that
would now have no trouble seeing him for who he really was.

Nori walked into the bathroom, indeed finding Dwalin lying in the tub, facing away from the door.
He walked closer, letting his fingertips dance along the muscled shoulders as he went around the end
of the tub. "You really should be more careful," he murmured. "Anyone could come in and attack
you."

Dwalin hummed, not opening his eyes. "I knew from the footsteps it was you," he said, a good-
natured grumble Nori was still not quite used to after years of being Dwalin's favourite target for
enraged yelling. "And if you wanted me dead, you'd have long since slit my throat in bed."

"And yet you choose to share it with me." Nori climbed into the tub. It was quite large, certain-
ly enough for two dwarves at once, yet for some reason he found himself sliding rather close to Dwalin
in the warm water. "Why, if I didn't know better, I might think you have a death wish of some sort,
Master Dwalin."

"Figure if the dragon and all the orcs of Gundabad didn't finish me off, you're not going to manage."

"Now, see, here's where a more socially adept person would have said being with me is worth the
risk." The water was still hot; Dwalin must have only gone into the bath a little before Nori arrived.

"What do I care? I've got you for that kind of thing, I'll be trusting my axes for niceties." Dwalin
opened one eye to peer at him. "Long day?"

"Aren't they all?" He sank against the edge of the tub, hand seeking Dwalin's body under the water
without much intent to excite, just wanting to be close for a little while. "Feel like curling up under a
rock and sleeping for a week, but no such luck, time waits for no dwarf. You?"

"Been better." Dwalin rolled his head, stretching his neck. "Had a training session with princelings,
can't let them get entirely soft. Kíli was fine enough, mind; I think he trains with Tauriel when they
get the chance."

"Does that mean Fíli was not?" Not that it would surprise him much; the crown prince hadn't had
much time for sparring as of late, unless one counted the knife lessons Ori probably thought nobody
knew about, and those didn't do much to hone his skills further as he focused on teaching the basics.

"He was passable enough." Which was high praise from Dwalin, mind. "Pretty irritable, though.
Think he'd have bitten a chunk out of me if he'd had the chance."

"Yeah, he's been in a bit of a mood." Nori sighed, letting his head fall back. "I blame that idiot
Master Sora who claimed scribes aren't pulling their weight in the mountain."

Dwalin snorted. "He's damn lucky only Thorin yelled at him for that; I was sure Bilbo would draw
his blade any moment. Something tells me he's not going to sit on the council for long once the
caravans arrive."

"He's certainly on my list of people to drop off." Why, of course he had a list of recommendations
for suitable and unsuitable council members. He was the spymaster, it was part of his job to judge
people. "Not just because he insulted my brother's profession, mind. We've three scribes in the
mountain right now, and the only one who isn't set to become Consort at some point in time is the
left-hand adviser to the current king. Any dwarf stupid enough to insult them all in the presence of
the scribes themselves and two of their intendeds is hardly smart enough that I'd trust them with the
government of my mountain."

"I'd say not to forget me, but Balin is well capable of fighting his own battles." Dwalin paused.
"Speaking of brothers, how long has it been since you've seen yours? And I mean an actual meeting,
not just spying on them from afar."

Nori suppressed a sigh. Of course Dwalin would choose to talk about the one thing he didn't wish to
talk about. "I saw Ori just yesterday." The truth, but not the one he had wanted. "He's quite busy
with the library and Thorin's errands, poor thing, and his prince clearly isn't giving him enough
attention. Not that Ori will complain, the little idiot. Never knew how to take his dues, that one."

Dwalin hummed, a low sound that was almost a growl. "And Dori?"

"What of him?"

"Don't take me for a fool. How long has it been since you saw him last?"

"Ah." He could have lied, of course, he made a living with lies. However, he had the creeping
suspicion that Dwalin would have known it for a lie. Which was a terrible thought in itself, and really
it should have sent him fleeing before he was utterly ruined, but instead he just found himself sinking
deeper into the water. "Three weeks now."

"So not since the fight, then."

"Haven't seen any particular reason to."

"Well, my bed hasn't gotten any smaller, so it's not like I particularly care one way or another." Dwalin
paused, weighing his words no doubt. For such a rash one he could sometimes be
annoyingly careful with what he said. "Thorin placed a commission with Dori, you know. Asked
him to make Ori a set of clothes suitable for him to wear when he's introduced to princess Dís, and
then to Erebor as Fíli's intended on Durin's Day."

"Did he, now." Nori kept his voice carefully calm. "A bit early, isn't he?"

"He wants to make sure it's finished in time, I suppose." Dwalin gave a shrug that had nothing casual
about it. "Dori mentioned he might have to find an embroiderer good enough for the job, though. Is
why I asked, is all, as I was rather under the impression you were the best one he knew."

"I know my way around a needle and thread, yes." Had quick fingers and clever hands, for all that it
was not always mere needlework that he used them for. "If you're hoping that'll be enough for me to
forgive him, though, you'd be mistaken."

"I'd like to think I know you better." Dwalin sighed. "Balin's getting on my case about you."

"Let me guess. We should be all respectable and court each other and keep our hands to ourselves?"
Nori rolled his eyes. "I won't take advice from someone who's never bedded anyone in his life. What
does he know? Mahal made him not to want any of it, least he could do is leave us to our fun."

"He seems convinced you've somehow tempted me to the wrong path. I told him I do what I do out
of my own will, and I find I'm rather set on having you. If he's to change that, he's got a battle and a
half ahead. A Durin mind is not easily swayed."
Nori snorted. "Aye, I know. Heads of stone everywhere, you and your cousins all. Couldn't change you with a pickax, never mind my wily words."

"I will not offer you my courtship." And for all that Nori had always told him he didn't want that, didn't want anything to tie him down, those words stung. It was a sharp, sudden pain that seemed to pierce his very core, leaving him almost gasping for breath until Dwalin went on. "I will not offer it, because I will not be the one to tie you down. If you were to offer me yours, I would accept it; I'm a Durin through and through, hewn from stone as my ancestors, and not much will turn me from my course once it has been set. But you, you're molten iron, dangerous and wild, and for all that I might yet be burned I will not be the one to force your shape."

"Careful." Nori swallowed. All of a sudden words were not so easy in coming. "I'll soon think you're serious."

"You think I'm not?" Dwalin reached out a hand, surprisingly gentle as it traced the edge of his beard. "You think I'd lie with just anyone? I've had bedmates before, aye, but none more than a night. When I first took you to bed I'd made my choice; when I did it the second time I knew it was never choice at all. If that's too much for you I still can't take it back."

He should have left, then and there, should have told Dwalin that wasn't what he'd signed up for, wasn't what he'd wanted. Except he, too, had made his choices, his choice to take the risk, the choice to come back. The choice to see Dwalin as a place of respite after he fled from his brothers.

"I don't exactly bare myself for a lot of people." He hadn't come to Dwalin's bed utterly without experience, of course, but most of that had been little more than feverish fumbling in the dark, no names, no attachment. Anything beyond that had been unthinkable, attachments nothing but a weakness to be exploited. Yet here he was sharing a bath without even trying to turn it into something lewd, unarmored and with nothing to hide, and he hadn't hesitated a bit until Dwalin had started to speak of such ridiculous things.

"I know you don't." A solemn response, with a small nod. "And I'm glad you trust me."

"I don't —" Nori started, but he couldn't even deny it. Yes, he trusted Dwalin, or he wouldn't have been here, in his bath, in his rooms, in his life. He trusted Dwalin, even though he wasn't supposed to, and for all that Dwalin might talk of his changing mind he didn't foresee that changing very easily. "Well, yes, but I'll be damned if I know why."

Dwalin chuckled. "I'll take what I can get." He wrapped one of Nori's braids around his hand and tugged, not hard enough to hurt, just enough to tempt him forward. He leaned in, then, feeling the warmth of Dwalin's breath on his face, the rough lips against his, the broad, strong chest against which to rest.

He wasn't sure where he was going to end up, but for now, he was quite content with how things were.

*  

The library was mostly quiet as Thorin entered it.

He wasn't terribly surprised to see the large space mostly deserted. There was little enough to do around here until they had more scribes at hand; aside from the old maps, there wasn't really much around here that was immediately useful. Some dwarves had looked around for reading material during the long winter evenings, no doubt, but with their numbers still so small that still wouldn't have brought much traffic. Right now the only sign of life he found was the sight of candlelight deep
in the large space and the sound of two voices in quiet conversation.

At least he wouldn't have to seek very long for his targets.

Thorin reached an open area at the back of the library, coming to a halt. Someone had found and carried in a couple of tables, setting them in the middle of an empty space between tall shelves. Maps were spread across every available surface, from old, dusty scrolls to more recent doodles drawn on scraps of paper salvaged from here and there. Candles littered the area, all set carefully away from the many flammable objects, lighting up the little cavern that had been claimed by two focused creatures in the middle of it all.

He leaned against a nearby bookshelf for a moment, just watching. Neither Bilbo nor Ori seemed to have noticed his approach, deep in conversation about the map they were studying. It wasn't until Bilbo reached for a pen, doubtless to make some mark on the map, that he noticed their company.

"Thorin!" Bilbo looked surprised, but pleasantly so. "I'm sorry, did you need something?" His expression turned worried at once. "We didn't forget about dinnertime again, did we?"

Thorin couldn't help but chuckle. "My dear hobbit, it still astounds me you've managed to do that even once. No, it's not time for dinner yet, but I was rather hoping to steal you away nevertheless." He glanced at Ori. "Ori? I'm sorry, did you need Bilbo still?"

"No, we're finished with the necessary work for today." He could see the 'Your Majesty' about to escape, but Ori bit it back just in time. Good. Thorin wouldn't listen to such words in private from his nephew's intended. "Ah. You won't be needing me, I assume?"

"Not this time, no." Thorin's lips twitched. "This is not for official business, so there's no need for a scribe, and I do believe I'm quite sufficient witness to my own virtue and honour in the private matters."

Bilbo snorted, a little sound that should not have seemed so very endearing, as he made to blow out a few of the candles. "You mean, there isn't anyone high enough in the hierarchy to question it." He was smiling, though, so clearly he couldn't be too offended about anything. "I'm sorry to be abandoning you like this, Ori. We can continue tomorrow, I hope?"

"Why, I couldn't possibly fault you for going with your beloved. It's about time I get back to my own projects, anyway." Ori smiled as he gathered up a few scattered pages, but Thorin rather fancied he could see some tension in the set of his jaw. "Go on, I'll clean up here. Shouldn't keep the king waiting, hmm?"

"Oh, I don't know. It might teach him a thing or two about patience." Nevertheless, Bilbo walked over to Thorin's side, setting a hand on his arm, and the easy warmth in that gesture set Thorin's heart running like a hare. Really, he couldn't imagine how he had managed to go so long without letting his hobbit know the true extent of his regard for him. "Until tomorrow, then."

"Of course." Ori stayed behind as they turned to go, fussing around putting out the candles and collecting documents in a way that rather reminded Thorin of his oldest brother.

It wasn't until the doors of the library had closed behind them that he turned towards Bilbo. He'd covered Bilbo's hand on his arm with his own without truly thinking about it, but then, he liked to think he had the right. "What's bothering him?"

"You noticed?" Bilbo's eyebrows lifted.

"I am a king, Bilbo, and was raised to be such. While I admit diplomacy may not be my strongest
point, I do at least have plenty of experience in telling when someone is trying to appear more
collected than they actually are."

"You would be right, there." Bilbo sighed. "He does put on a cheerful face, but that can only work
so far. It's, well, it's a combination of various things, I suppose. Fíli, for one thing." Thorin frowned,
drawing another sigh from Bilbo. "I'm sure you've noticed, but he... hasn't exactly been sociable
lately. Apparently, this extends to Ori, too. I've tried to hint that he's busy working on the gift — I
presumed that wouldn't be giving anything away — but it still can't be easy not to have much time
with your intended mere weeks after you've started courting."

"I suppose it wouldn't be." Thorin's frown deepened. "I did tell Fíli not too long ago that he should
be spending more time with Ori. Clearly he hasn't taken my advice."

"Indeed not." Bilbo shook his head. "That alone would be bearable, I think, it's not like Ori doesn't
have plenty to busy himself with outside his official tasks. However, his brothers are still fighting
from what I understand, and besides that there have been... rumours. Well, not really rumours, more
just things people are saying, but still. Ori hears a lot more than people think, and some of these
dwarves aren't even trying to hide it from him."

"Oh? Is this another gripe against scribes?" Because Thorin was quite willing to impress the
importance of the craft on a few more thick skulls if need be. "Or is it the opposite, and they object to
his station? Because I'm quite prepared to follow through with my threat of setting Tauriel as the
Head of Guilds just to make a point, even though I suspect she would be tempted to gut me with a
rusty knife for making her deal with that many idiots."

"Tauriel wouldn't kill you. That would put Fíli on the throne, and I'm not sure she thinks Kíli's quite
ready to be the first in line just yet." Bilbo leaned closer to him as they walked along the hallways,
just for a moment, but the increased closeness made Thorin feel warm inside. "No, not quite, though
it's similar. Apparently there are some who think he's not good enough to be courting a Durin."

"Are you joking?" Surely he had to be. "I'd expect criticism over my choice, Kíli's certainly, but
what opposition would they possibly have to Ori? That he's not noble enough?"

"Some do bring that up, though not many. About Tauriel and myself being stranger choices, though,
that's the problem." Bilbo ran his free hand through his curls, leaving them in a somewhat tousled
state that had Thorin's hands itching to fix them for him, just for an excuse to trace Bilbo's little braids
with his fingertips. "You and Kíli both have made clearly unsuitable matches. Even if I managed to
follow through on my promise, or Kíli and Tauriel were blessed with children of their own, nobody
would be in much of a hurry to put the half-dwarves on the throne. Fíli, though, is sensible enough to
fall for a dwarf, and then he chooses one who cannot gift him with heirs."

"This madness again?" He thought they'd handled such grumblings when it came to himself. "And
Ori listens to them?"

"Not really, much to my relief. For all his shyness, it seems that if there's one thing he is certain of,
it's his bond with Fíli. However, even if he knows to disregard such whispers, something he would
usually dismiss without much thought can get rather stressful when it comes on top of all the other
problems in his life."

"I'd imagine so, yes." And yet there was little he could do unless he heard of such whispers. Trying
to make some sort of a declaration without open provocation would only seem overly defencive.
"Let us hope the other matters resolve themselves soon, then. I'd ask Dwalin to try and interfere in
the argument between brothers, but even if I convinced him to take action I fear that would only
make matters worse."
"You're probably right. I could make some little mentions about how miserable Ori seems to be; if anything can nudge Nori towards reconciliation, it's that." And this? This was why he loved his hobbit so. Well, part of the reason, anyway. "So. When are you going to tell me why you needed me?"

"It just so happens there is something I wish to show you." Something that he could only hope would be to Bilbo's liking.

Perhaps Bilbo caught onto some tension in his voice, but there were no more questions the rest of the way. They walked around in silence, hands still clasped over Thorin's arm as they made their way toward the new royal wing of the mountain. He would have to make some effort to mark it as such, Thorin mused as they neared their quarters. Dís would let her displeasure be known if he didn't at least have a seal over the door to the family area by the time she arrived. He didn't think she would grieve over the lack of opulence and blatant riches, not after spending so long barely scraping by and trying to keep her sons fed at least, but she had her pride just as he did and would not have it offended.

Bilbo did not even hesitate as Thorin led them from the common area into his own rooms, steps easy as he walked in. Thorin set a hand on his back to guide him, craving the touch now that he finally allowed himself to show his affections so openly.

He brought Bilbo to the centre of his receiving area before stepping away, heading to the small table where he now had a large box set next to his usual little container of pipeweed. Picking up the box, he carried it over to Bilbo and offered it to him.

"Bilbo Baggins, son of Bungo, of the Shire." He looked Bilbo in the eye, forcing himself to stay calm and steady, not to turn away in this moment. "I would present to you my second gift, a work of my own making, to show both my craft and my regard for you." It was no proper proposal of courtship, that was for sure, and for a brief moment he couldn't help but wonder if Bilbo felt slighted, having never received the precise words from him. Bilbo, however, did not seem burdened with any such doubts, instead stepping forward and opening the lid of the box.

A small gasp escaped Bilbo as he looked inside. Carefully, he picked up one of the objects within. "These are…"

"Gardening tools." Thorin nodded, watching Bilbo inspect the small trowel in his hands. "Yes. I had Nori find someone in Dale who could tell me what pieces you would most likely require. He seemed far too amused with that particular assignment, but I hope I've at least covered the necessities. If any are missing, tell me and I will add them; I would have you have everything you require."

"And you made all these?"

"With my own two hands, yes, as a dwarf should with his courting gift." He gave a grave nod. "It's not my area of expertise — I am much better acquainted with the make of blades and other weapons — but there is no shame in learning new sides to your craft. And besides, my mother used to say it's much better for a courting gift to present some challenge."

"Oh, these are beautiful." Thorin released a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding as Bilbo turned the trowel in his hands. "What is this?"

"That? That's my mark." Thorin looked at the seal Bilbo's fingers were tracing, set where the handle met the head of the tool. A circle of seven stars surrounded a single oak leaf, one of the stars slightly larger than the rest. "Not my seal as a king, just the maker's mark of Thorin Oakenshield, a dwarven smith."
"There's nothing 'just' about this." Bilbo's expression was somehow soft as he looked at the seal. "The seven stars are for the seven lines of dwarves, right?"

"Aye. If I'd wanted a more complicated mark, I might have added Durin's crown, but this is simple enough." He tried not to tense up as Bilbo then continued to turn the tool over in his hands, pausing as he noticed another seal, this one set at the end of the handle.

"And this one?" Bilbo's voice was quiet as he inspected the second mark. The same seven stars, surrounding the outline of a white flower.

"It's, ah." Now Thorin hesitated, not sure how he would be received. "It's, well... I was hoping it could become your seal." He steeled himself for the potential bad reaction. "I know it is presumptuous of me, we are not even wed yet, but I thought —"

"Please, do not work yourself up to a state." Bilbo interrupted him with a hand on his arm. "If anything, I'm honoured that you would think of something like this. Besides," and now, his soft expression made way for a warm smile, "if you think you're going to get out of this mess without marrying me, you've got another think coming."

Again, Thorin found it easier to breathe. "The flower is one that grows here in the mountains," he explained. "We call it the noble-white, and it's said to be a symbol of purity and daring, as it's white as the snow and often hard to reach. I thought it would be perfect for the one who found our treasure and brought light back to my heart."

"Oh, Thorin." Bilbo's eyes were misting over, now, but Thorin tried to convince himself it was a good thing, it had to be a good thing. "You really think too highly of me."

"Never." Thorin would have reached to touch the side of his face except he was still holding the box with the rest of the tool set. "If you'd allow, I'll commission a seal ring for you with this mark. You ought to have one anyway, to mark the maps and documents you've been copying."

"Ah, that's really not necessary."

"Of course it is." Thorin frowned. "They are works of your craft, they ought to be marked as yours. That is only right."

"If you say so." Bilbo set the trowel back in the box, running a fingertip along its handle one last time. "Thank you, though. This is a wonderful gift."

"So you accept?" Because he did need to hear it.

"Of course I do." Bilbo smiled at him again. "I can't wait to find somewhere to use them."

"Ah, yes, about that." Thorin stepped back to set the box back on the side table, then came closer again, offering Bilbo a hand. "Follow me?"

Bilbo took his hand without question, though he did lift his eyebrows as Thorin made to guide him further into his rooms. "Should I be concerned for my virtue?" His tone was light and teasing, though, and Thorin chuckled.

"No more than usual, I assure you. My bedroom can wait." Not that he wouldn't have loved to have his hobbit there, spread over his sheets and furs, naked and wanting — but he was getting quite ahead of himself. "There is another part to the gift, so to speak."

He guided Bilbo to the door hiding his little project, opening it before them. He let Bilbo step inside
first and followed right after him, waiting for a reaction.

The door had changed somewhat from when he first discovered it. For one thing, it was entirely covered in a thick layer of soil and dirt, a couple of steps from the door leading up to the new ground level. Four thin metal poles marked an area at the centre of the room, each holding a glowing crystal at the top. A small metal basin was set to the back wall. Bilbo looked around, his eyes wide. "This is…"

"I promised you a garden, I believe." Thorin clasped his hands behind his back, partly to keep himself from fidgeting. Kings did not fidget, even when they were nervous. "Ah. This used to be a bathing room, but the plumbing's broken, so don't worry, I didn't destroy anything to make this. The dirt's about a foot deep all around, except in the middle, where the old wash basin used to be; the crystals mark that area, it should be deep enough for larger plants. I did have someone come and connect the cold water lines to the basin over there, so you won't have to carry water from elsewhere."

"I see." He couldn't read anything from Bilbo's voice. "And the crystals?"

"Usually they're used by miners. They'll need charging in the sunlight at some intervals, but I'm hoping they'll be adequate. According to Bombur they've used similar ones to grow herbs in the kitchens, so it should work for your garden as well."

"You made me a garden." Bilbo's voice still didn't betray any particular emotion. "You built me a garden inside a mountain."

"I did." Thorin clasped his hands even more tightly together. "I'm hoping it is adequate for now. When we clear more of the mountain, I'll see if there are any terraces that might give out to the open, but those would likely have no protection from the harsh winters. So while this is small, at least you'll know no frost or wind will get to anything growing here."

Bilbo turned towards him, now. Before Thorin could wonder too much about what he was thinking, two small hands grasped on the front of his shirt, tugging him down.

Well. Either Bilbo liked it, or he had decided kisses were an adequate punishment for a grave failing. He was going to hope for the first one, or his personal conduct would become quite impossible with such encouragement for misdeeds.

By the time Bilbo broke off, even Thorin was starting to feel a bit breathless. "I love it," Bilbo gasped, leaning against Thorin's chest, prompting him to reach arms around his hobbit mostly on instinct. "It's more than I could have even imagined. Yes, it's smaller than I might have had back in the Shire, but it's more than enough for all my favourites. And," he added, sounding almost apprehensive except why would Bilbo feel like that at all, "it should also do well for growing a child."

"Only if you want to, mind." He let one hand slide up to Bilbo's hair, toying with one of his courtship braids. "I certainly do not mind the idea of having children with you, my love, but only if that is your wish as well. This has not changed."

"And I think I still want to try at least." Bilbo smiled, soft for a second, before his expression turned sly. "Of course, I can't help but notice that this garden just happens to be located within your rooms."

"If you're implying I'm trying to encourage your continued presence in my personal space, I cannot say you are entirely wrong." Thorin chuckled. "You know, if you wish, we could always knock an opening between our quarters; your rooms are next to mine, after all. As long as we make sure it's..."
between the reception rooms it shouldn't be too indecent, either, just a bit more convenient."

"That might not be a bad idea. Except, of course, that there might not be need for such a connection for very long."

"Oh, I was rather thinking you'd keep your set of rooms after we marry. We're not exactly lacking space, there's a set of rooms for Dís and another for Tauriel and space for both Fíli's and Kíli's rooms to be expanded once they marry, so there's no reason for you to give them up. Besides, I know myself well enough to suspect you will yet appreciate the chance to have some space solely to yourself."

"I think I'm supposed to disagree, but that would be dishonest." Bilbo didn't make to draw away, though, rather pressing even closer to Thorin. "A part of me almost wants to start working on this right away, but I know I should first figure out where to find some seeds and seedlings and find out what's available in the first place."

"If there's anything you need that I can provide…"

"I'll let you know, yes, yes." Bilbo hummed briefly, a happy little sound that made Thorin's heart swell in size. "So. While I'd be quite content to just stand here and dig my feet into the dirt for another hour or four, what do you say we go and relax in front of the fireplace until dinner? Proper or not, I find I have a sudden need to curl up by your side. Probably involving a great deal of kisses."

"My dear Bilbo," Thorin set his hands on Bilbo's hips and picked him up, to the laughed protests of the other, "it would be quite my pleasure."

Of course, by the end of it Bilbo ended up curled in Thorin's lap more than anything, but he did fit there so very perfectly, warm and soft and solid in Thorin's arms while he hummed the words to an old song. Nobody was there to see, either, so clearly they couldn't scandalise anyone, not even when one of Bilbo's hands found its way under Thorin's tunic. Nothing further than that, though, not yet, because for all that Thorin was well aware of the burning need within him Bilbo deserved more consideration than that, particularly after how he had treated him. They would do this properly, and for all the kisses and touches he would not actually bed Bilbo until they were wed before Mahal and his people.

Oh, Durin's hammer, the day they were wed could not come soon enough.

At least, until then, he could rest easy knowing they had all won their happiness.

*

"Fíli?"

Ori stood in the doorway, unsure of whether he should go inside. The door had not been locked, had been a bit ajar in fact; he hardly would have come even this far otherwise, not without invitation. Now, though, he was standing at the threshold, and still wasn't entirely sure of his welcome.

Steeling himself, he stepped in, closing the door behind himself.

It wasn't the first time he was here, of course. He'd come to pass messages sometimes, when they weren't courting yet, and visited for his own reasons now that they were a couple of times. He hadn't been here for a couple of weeks, now, though, hadn't seen Fíli at all for several days, and he was beginning to worry.

"Fíli?" There was no response, but at least he could hear some rustling from further inside. So he was
at least in here, then. "Ah, I hope I'm not interrupting anything. It's just, I haven't seen you since the last council meeting, and Kíli couldn't say much about you either, and I couldn't help but worry a bit."

"I've been busy." The words were muffled, coming from behind the door he knew to head to Fíli's bedroom.

"I know you have." He glanced around the room. It was in its usual semi-messy state; Fíli didn't actually make that much of a mess, really, he just had a bad habit of setting things down wherever he happened to be standing when he didn't need them anymore, so they ended up at random surfaces instead of their actual places. His fiddle lay on a nearby table, the bow for it on the mantle of the fireplace, assorted knives and other small weapons littered around along with little hammers and other tools Ori recognised as being part of a goldsmith's arsenal. "You've been working so hard lately, even Thorin thinks you should take a break sometimes."

"I'll take one when I need it." Fíli finally stepped out of the bedroom, looking so tired Ori couldn't help but wonder if he had actually been sleeping when he came in. The shirt and tunic Fíli wore were not rumpled, though, so he tried not to feel too guilty over mere assumptions. "Don't tell me he sent you here to lecture me."

"Nobody sent me, I came here on my own." Ori resisted the urge to worry his lip, instead standing straighter. He had every right to be here; all he was doing was checking in on his intended after they had not seen each other for days. And it was a good thing he had, too; the exhaustion in Fíli's eyes could surely not be all due to a missed night or even two. "You look tired."

"I'm fine." Fíli frowned, an annoyed look crossing his face before it was gone again. "Uncle and Bilbo just fuss needlessly. They can't seem to remember I'm not some little dwarfling anymore."

"I'm sure they just want what's best for you." Hey, it was what he kept telling himself about his brothers. "I know what you mean, though, Dori can fret a lot sometimes."

"He does, doesn't he?" Fíli's expression softened somewhat, now. "I kind of understand that, though. If I was responsible for something that pretty, I'd be quite tempted to just lock you in a vault, safe from any harm."

Ori flushed, averting his gaze. As he did so, his eyes caught on something shiny and gleaming on the floor.

"Ah! You seem to have dropped something." He crouched down to pick up the small object. It was a simple jewelled hair bead, the gold and intricately cut gemstones far too precious for even Fíli the crown prince to have worn such a thing on a daily basis back in Ered Luin, yet here in Erebor with their shares of the hoard even Ori himself had a couple of golden beads in his hair as he went about his day. Granted, they were on his courtship braids, as Dori insisted it would have been quite unseemly for him to mark the courtship of a prince with anything less, but they were still gold and they were his. This, however, was much more intricate than the plain pieces he wore, with engravings and tiny little jewels arranged in patterns. "Oh, that's pretty. Did you make this yourself?"

Ori looked up and frowned. Fíli had suddenly grown very still, eyes fixed on him. He might have been tempted to think that a good thing, except he was fairly sure this gaze was not good, not good at all. This was a glare, the kind Fíli reserved only for enemies, fierce and dangerous.

"Fíli?" Ori was somewhat surprised he could find any voice right now with the weight of the glare upon him.
"Thief." The word was spat more than said, with the kind of tone that suggested he might as well have called Ori an orc instead. "How dare you walk in here to steal from me!"

"I haven't stolen anything!" Why would Fíli even think that? It was utterly ridiculous! "I just picked up a bead that had fallen to the floor, that's all!"

"Liar!" And all of a sudden there was a knife, a knife in Fíli's hand and then coming towards him, and it was only by pure trained reflex that Ori managed to snap out his own from its hiding place as there was no time for thinking. Fíli seemed intent on attacking him, no jest or play fight or even training exercise about it, but an attack on an enemy he intended to take down.

"Help!" It was hardly becoming of a dwarf, to call for aid like this, but he was not a fighter, for all that he had joined the battlefield. Fíli, on the other hand, was an accomplished warrior, one of Dwalin's best pupils if there ever was one, and while the madness that clouded his eyes did seem to have made some difference in his skills he couldn't count on it to last. "Please, someone, help!"

It was no use, of course, it wasn't like anyone would hear him and come to his aid. He could barely hold back the attack, and that was only because he had spent so many hours doing just that, blocking each swipe of Fíli's knife with his own. He could only keep it up for so long, though, sooner or later he would tire or make a mistake or Fíli would simply change the pattern enough that he couldn't respond to it fast enough, and when that happened he would be lost. There was no sense he could appeal to in Fíli's gaze, no recognition beyond rage at a perceived slight.

Fíli's blade cut at his side, drawing blood and making him gasp in pain. The prince crowed in delight even as Ori managed to force him to take a step back, a mad gleam in his eyes. "You'll be rewarded as a thief should!" he announced, lifting his knife with the hint of blood on the blade. "You'll pay in blood for what you've taken!"

"I haven't taken anything!" He'd been forced back against a wall, now, with nowhere to go. He might have tried fleeing to the side, made for the exit, but he didn't want to expose his back even for the length of time it might have taken for him to get the door open. For all that Fíli seemed more uncoordinated than usual, his movements oddly sluggish as he was driven by his madness, Ori wasn't stupid enough to dismiss his skills with a knife just like that.

"You lie!" Fíli's words were a roar as he rushed forward again, his knife brandished for a strike. Ori just managed to dodge to the side, grasping a heavy candlestick from a table nearby. It was awkward to hold and didn't make much of a weapon at all, but then he didn't want to fight Fíli in the first place; all he wanted was to escape the situation as unscathed as possible. "You've come to steal my treasure!"

"I've got my own!" He flung the candlestick, narrowly missing Fíli's head. Instead, it hit a polished silver mirror hung on the opposite wall, ringing loud in the enclosed space. Ori felt a fleeting moment of regret for the unshapely dent that now marked the previously smooth surface, but he had no time for such concerns as Fíli seemed still intent on skewering him with the blasted knife. "I don't want anything to do with your stupid treasure!"

"Everyone wants more of it!" For all that his movements were uncoordinated and far from his best form, Fíli was still herding Ori towards a corner, away from the door. This couldn't go on for long. Fíli had a great advantage in that Ori didn't want to actually hurt him, not any more than he had to, while Fíli seemed to have no such compunctions at the moment. His only hope was an escape, except that was still a risky venture, one that grew more so with every step he took away from the door.

His only hope was a distraction, something that might hold Fíli back long enough for him to make it
to the door and outside. Something that could hold him back, but not do too much damage, except clearly he was not getting out of this without one of them getting hurt.

With a deep breath, Ori shifted his grip on the knife, then flung it out through the air. It wasn’t something he had much practice in, nor was the knife too well balanced for such pursuits, but between Nori and Fíli he had picked up a trick or two. All he needed was to hit something that wouldn’t be fatal yet would stop Fíli for long enough for him to make his escape.

Except it didn’t. The knife did hit Fíli, cutting deep into his arm, but that didn’t seem to stop him. He just rushed forward with even more rage, now, raising his knife to strike at Ori. Ori, who was now unarmed and all but helpless.

The door burst open just as Fíli made to attack him, two dark-haired figures rushing in. One of them tackled Fíli down, the other stepping between him and Ori, arms spread in a protective gesture. It took a moment for Ori’s shocked mind to even register that the one shielding him was none other than Kíli, while the one wrestling Fíli to the ground was the King Under the Mountain himself.

"He — he attacked me." Ori swallowed, suddenly realising just what the situation must have looked like, especially now that he’d actually put the knife into Fíli. "I didn't do anything, I swear, I just picked up a bead and he called me a thief and —" He couldn't go on, not like this, not when he felt like he was about to burst into tears any moment now.

"Oh, we believe you." Kíli's voice appeared calm on the surface, but Ori could detect an undercurrent of tension, of fear, even. "You'd never hurt him if you could help it, I know that much. Come on, let's get you out of here; Bilbo will be back with Dwalin soon enough. Uncle can handle Fíli until then."

"You — how did you know?" They must have known something was going on, if they'd sent for reinforcements.

"We knew little, but feared the worst." Kíli nudged his arm, gentle yet insistent, still keeping himself between Ori and the two wrestling on the ground. "We were in my rooms, the three of us, they wanted my opinion on — it's not important, anyway, we heard yelling. Couldn't make out the words, but then there was a crash of some sort, seemed clear enough there was an emergency."

"I — that must have been the mirror, then." So at least it hadn't been entirely useless.

"Aye, I suppose so. So the two of us came here in case we were needed, while Bilbo went looking for Dwalin in case he was. Good thing, too, Uncle can hold Fíli down on his own but restraining him will be another matter."

Ori swallowed, hardly even noticing his feet carrying him out of the room under Kíli's guidance. "But — why would he —" He knew, deep down he knew, but he didn’t dare voice it in case that was what made it true.

"It's the sickness." A dark whisper, with the weight of many sorrows. "I'd suspected — suspected but not known, or I would have done something earlier. He's been so focused on your gift, like a soul possessed, and then there's all those hours in the throne room, with that blasted stone…"

"Could it really do… this?"

"You saw how it changed Uncle." Kíli shook his head, still shielding Ori even as they reached the door. By now Ori was starting to suspect his actions had as much to do with keeping Ori from seeing too much as they did with keeping him safe from any further attacks. "Who's to say what else it can
do?"

Ori found no response to that, allowing himself to be led out into the common area of the apartments.
Once there he leaned against the nearest wall, shaky legs only barely holding him up. Then he heard
a cry from within, a loud, almost animal-like cry of fury, and they failed him at last, sending him
sliding down to the floor.

"Ori?" Kíli's voice, coming from somewhere close by yet seeming more distant than ever. "Ori —
Mahal's beard, Ori, you're bleeding, let me see that —"

Ori didn't hear much further, couldn't tell one word from another, mutely allowing Kíli to handle him
to look at his wound and press warm hands over it. He couldn't care, not now, couldn't care or listen
or even think, not with the sounds still coming from Fíli's room.

All he could do was hide his face in his hands and weep.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

After the incident with Fíli, there are consequences. Thorin has to pass a sentence, after which he takes care of the most likely cause. Of course, the nobles aren't happy about this, but thankfully the line of Durin will not budge, nor will those they would call their own.

Ori, however, still has more misfortune to come.

Chapter Notes

Of the names in this chapter, Vuori means "mountain" in Finnish, Kaivur is shortened from kaivuri, or "digger", while Sora means "gravel".

The throne was not exactly the height of comfort, yet Thorin was sure it had never been quite so hard and cold as he sat down now, looking at the gathered Company. Well, most of the Company, anyway. Dwalin was still in the royal quarters, keeping an eye on Fíli, who was not fit to appear himself.

It wasn't the raven crown he had set upon his head, yet at this moment the light circlet he had chosen as his own felt heavier than all the stone of the mountain itself.

"We are gathered here," he said, his voice grave and low yet carrying far in the silence of the throne room, "for the trial of Fíli, son of Dís, a prince of Erebor." He paused, gathering himself. "It is our custom that the accused may give his own side in the proceedings. However, both myself and Balin son of Fundin have tried to speak with him, yet it appears he is lost too deep in madness to give a coherent account of anything. As such, Kíli, son of Dís, his brother and one of the witnesses has agreed to stand here in his stead, to ensure that the proceedings are just."

Kíli stepped up now as Thorin gestured to him, looking even paler than he had been right after the battle. "The accusation is one of assault, intended to be deadly." He closed his eyes for a brief moment as though the words pained him to say. Thorin found himself quite in agreement. "I have no defence to present in his stead, save that of being driven by madness."

Oh, Thorin knew well enough how far that madness could drive a dwarf. This was not the time for such dark thoughts, though, not when he had a duty to perform.

It was, however, somewhat easier to go on as Bilbo set a hand on his arm where he stood by the side of the throne.

"Before us stands Ori, son of Vuori, the victim of this crime." So pale and so very small, yet he stood on his own, not allowing his brothers to do more than stand by his side. "He is a dwarf of Erebor, and more, he is under the protection of the House of Durin, making the crime even more grave indeed. From what we can tell, from his account and the words of the accused, he was attacked with
intent to kill, having offered no insult or other reason that might have provoked such an act. Any injury he dealt was in his own defence. As such, it is his right to demand punishment for the accused, within reason and the laws of Erebor."

Ori nodded, quiet for now. He did not quite meet Thorin's gaze.

Thorin drew a deep breath. "As no life or honour was lost, Mahal be praised, I would not see him lose his beard or his life over what he did in madness, nor would I give an indefinite sentence when we do not know if the madness will pass." Please, Mahal, let it pass. "Anything short of that is within your right to ask, be it compensation or punishment." Though he suspected that whatever it was, Fíli would not think it adequate if — when, he had to think it when — he came back to his right mind.

Thorin certainly did not think anything would have been sufficient punishment for his own crimes.

Ori seemed to hesitate a moment, but in the end he lifted his gaze to Thorin. "I don't want him punished for what the sickness has done." His voice was quiet, but carried well enough over the silence. "All I ask that he won't approach me until the madness is well and truly gone."

Thorin nodded slowly. "A reasonable request, and one we will certainly honour. He is clearly not fit for his duties at the moment, so that will not pose a problem, either." His gaze shifted a bit, and caught Dori nodding in response. "And what of your courtship?"

Now, Ori straightened himself, a look of determination on his face. "I have accepted the courtship of Fíli the Golden, son of Dís and prince of Erebor. I hardly see how the actions of some miserable creature would reflect on that in any way."

"So be it." Thorin looked at the rest of the gathered Company, each in turn. "As there is no demand for punishment, my verdict shall be thus: Fíli, son of Dís is to be confined to his rooms, with no access to weapons or gold and jewels of any kind, until such a time that his madness is gone or some further incident forces us to reconsider his sentence. May Mahal be so kind that this time might be short." He glanced at Kíli. "Do you have any objection to this?"

Kíli shook his head, eyes downcast. "The verdict is just and, I fear, necessary."

"So be it." Thorin stood from his throne, now, closing his eyes for a moment. Usually when he was seated here Fíli would be to his right, bright and smiling as ever, Fíli the Golden his precious heir. "You all stand witness to this accusation and this sentence," he said as he finally could face the Company again. "For the sake of peace in the mountain, given his position, I must ask that you speak of this to no one. As I have found you all to be dwarves of great honour and loyalty, however, I trust that you will aid me in making sure that the sentence is carried out to its end."

This got him nothing but serious nods. They all understood the importance of secrecy here. Thorin's position was not quite so strong that he could afford any doubts about the stability of his line, not yet. Even so, he could not let this go unpunished. He owed that much to Ori.

He owed that much to Fíli, who surely would have wanted this had he been in his right mind.

As everyone started to disperse, Thorin took a few fast steps to catch up with the brothers Ri, still huddled together near the throne. At least their argument seemed to have been forgotten for the moment in favour of rallying in Ori's defence.

"Ori." The young dwarf turned, still looking pale as a ghost. "I have one more question, if you would answer me."

"What is it?" His hands were worrying the sleeves of his shirt, eyes not quite meeting Thorin's.
"There were only two weapons that were drawn at the scene." Many more present, of course, he doubted Fíli even bathed without a blade or two on his person, but only two that had taken part in this fight. "However, both of them bore Fíli's seal." Ori's fists clenched even tighter. There was something to this, then. "You'll forgive me if I don't think you wrested one from him during the fight."

"He gave it to me." There was a slight tremble in his voice. "After I told you about Kíli searching for the dragon scales, he — he threatened me. When I explained myself, though, he apologised, and gave me the knife and taught me to use it so I could defend myself." Ori shook his head, his eyes full of sorrow. "He said I was to use it if anyone threatened me again — especially him. I never thought…"

"I know you didn't." Thorin nodded. "Do you want me to bring the knife back to you? Or would you prefer I make you a new one? Perhaps one better suited to being thrown."

"I — I wouldn't want to be such trouble." And yet the way he wouldn't meet Thorin's eyes did not exactly speak of one eager to have his weapon back.

"If it were trouble I would not have offered." Thorin shook his head. "I make a habit of taking a moment by the forges every now and then, and now that I have finished my gift to Bilbo I find myself without much to do. As it is in my power, I would see my family properly armed." Because Ori was part of that, now, he was Fíli's One after all, even if Fíli could not recall it right now.

"Then — I would not refuse such a gift." That was probably the best he was going to get in this matter, so Thorin was not going to push any further. He merely watched as Ori left with his brothers, most of the Company already disappeared. He was left standing alone in the end, even Kíli gone by now to see his brother no doubt, yet Thorin's thoughts would not leave him be.

"Thorin?" The small hand on his arm startled him, the approach silent enough he wasn't sure he would have noticed it even if he hadn't been deep in thought.

"Bilbo." He turned to the hobbit with a faint attempt at a smile. "You are as light on your feet as ever."

"It's the one thing I can do." Bilbo eyed him closely. "Are you quite all right?"

"All right? No, not at all. Perhaps I will be, though, given enough time." He turned and offered Bilbo his arm, which was taken without hesitation. At least one thing in his life was yet to bring him grief. "I find I must apologise to you, my beloved."

"Hm?" Bilbo blinked, surprised by the comment. "What are you apologising for, now?"

"I never gave you the same chance for recourse." Thorin shook his head. "Of everyone, I treated you the worst in my madness, yet you were never offered the chance to see me punished."

"I wouldn't have taken the chance, had it been offered." Bilbo's eyes were bright and sincere; clearly he meant what he said. "I took the Arkenstone to Bard knowing that you would be angry, and I do not blame you for what you did while still afflicted with the sickness. You have apologised to me, and I have forgiven you; that is all I could need or ask. Please, do not doubt my forgiveness."

"Even so. It must seem unfair to you, that this situation is treated so differently." "Not at all. The situation is different in many ways, so it would be strange to react to them the same." Bilbo leaned a bit closer to him. "In any case, I think it's much more important that Ori's grievances are addressed."
Thorin frowned, now. "That is not true. The injury and threat to you was as great or greater, and I won't allow —"

"You misunderstand me, my friend." Bilbo shook his head, not appearing to think much about interrupting Thorin. "I'm not saying that there was no wrong done to me, or that I'm less entitled to justice if there was. However, as I said, the situation is quite different. Really, I would have been quite cross if you had not treated this incident seriously, because I don't think an apology will suffice this time."

"What are the differences, then?" Thorin paused. "And no, I won't accept an answer of how your actions provoked my ire. That does not excuse my blindness, certainly not after how long I had been mistreating you all."

"You were not my king, though, and Erebor was not my home." A statement that would have been so much more painful if it hadn't been in the past tense. As it stood, though, Thorin chose to take a hopeful view on it. "If you had not apologised, or if I had felt I was still under some threat, I would have been quite free to leave and never look back. For Ori, that would mean leaving behind his new home and his family. He needs to know that an unfair injury towards him will be judged and dealt with accordingly, even if the offender is royalty, or indeed his betrothed." Bilbo paused, and Thorin fancied he saw a shiver take over the little creature. "Especially if it is his betrothed."

Thorin thought about this for a moment, then sighed. "You are right, of course, as you so often are in these matters. He leaned in for a light kiss, because at last, he was allowed. "Whatever did I do without you all those years?"

"Yelled at everyone until you had your way, no doubt." Bilbo managed a smile, somehow, though it was rather faint. "Now, let us go. It's getting late, and I have been given to understand even kings require sleep sometimes. Especially if you plan to deal with the repercussions of this tomorrow."

"Aye, that is true." He gave a deep sigh. "I would sorely love to have your company to ease my dreams, but I doubt I could stay as honourable as you deserve were you to be within reach."

"It is not so long until Durin's day, my friend." Not so long! It felt rather like forever. "And if that seems too long to you, think of how long you are making Kíli wait for his beloved."

"You are rather the unfair creature. Truly, I have no idea why I love you at all." Yet he did, with all his heart and body and soul, loved him so very fiercely he could scarcely say how he had managed to live without him at all. And yet he had raised his hand against this amazing creature, had tried to take his life of all things.

He was rather sure he deserved no forgiveness, yet he would be doing his best to earn what he had already been given, every single day for the rest of his hopefully long life.

Perhaps, in time, it would ease the weight of his crimes at least a bit.

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For all that Thorin’s office was not far from the royal quarters, Kíli still felt rather uncomfortable going so far from his brother right now.

He’d barely left his brother's side since the incident, only leaving his rooms briefly when it had been insisted he should sleep. Not that Fíli seemed to care either way, with the way he kept cursing at him and demanding to be let go. He’d even tried to command him, reminding Kíli that he was the crown prince and thus outranked him, like he had never done before except in jest.
As though Kíli would relent that easily. He still regretted not speaking up against Thorin with more force; there was no way he was going to give in to his brother.

Fíli would not forgive him if he did.

He'd been summoned, though, with a very serious Dori taking his place as a guard, and Kíli hadn't found any way to protest. It wasn't like Dori couldn't stop Fíli from leaving if he had to, and Kíli hoped he at least had enough love for Ori to want to keep Fíli in one piece. So here he was, behind the door of Thorin's office, wondering what he was needed for.

With a deep breath, he opened the door and went inside.

Thorin, he had expected, perhaps Balin or Bilbo with him, but he was somewhat surprised to find Dwalin and Bifur there as well. They all seemed tense, not that he could blame them after the events of the day before. Bilbo didn't look like he had slept at all, and a small, traitorous part of Kíli tried to argue this was obviously unfair when he had been forced to sleep at least a few hours.

"Ah, there you are." Thorin straightened, motioning for him to close the door behind himself. "I suppose we can start now, since all of us are here."

"Aye, we can, when you feel like telling us what we are doing." So even Balin hadn't been informed beyond being summoned. That was interesting.

"Kíli, son of Dís, second of my heirs," Thorin said, wearing a look of utmost seriousness. "Dwalin, son of Fundin, closest of my friends and most trusted of my guard. You both know me and my mind, do you not?"

Kíli nodded, wordless, seeing Dwalin do the same. Whatever was going on, this was not the time for questions.

Thorin's expression turned even more serious, if that was even possible. "And you both know, I trust, how I am in madness."

This time he hesitated before nodding, but did so anyway, the pause more due to the terror of that memory than actual uncertainty. Oh, yes, he had seen Thorin in the worst depths of his gold sickness, had seen the mad gleam in his eyes that could not be abated by words or touches.

It was the same look he saw in his brother's eyes now, and it made his heart weep.

"You two, then, will bear witness that I make this decision with a sound mind and a whole soul, as I suspect many will question the truth of that." Now Kíli certainly had questions, but Thorin had already turned toward the other two dwarves in the chamber. "Balin, son of Fundin, and Bifur, son of Kaivur, you are both dwarves of Erebor, of good standing and much respect. Between the two of you, there is as much knowledge of the deep chambers of the mountain and the darkened mines alike, such as could not be found in any other two dwarves who yet live and stand under the mountain today. Is this not true?"

Balin stroked his beard, seeming a bit flustered at the flattery. Kíli hadn't ever seen him quite like that before, both pleased and suspicious. "Aye, you might say so, though that is because our numbers are diminished." Bifur, for his part, merely nodded and grunted.

"To the two of you, then, I give a task of utmost importance. None outside this room may ever know of it, not the details of it, not even that the two of you were the ones to accomplish it. I trust you will use your combined knowledge to your advantage and accomplish this mission as none other can."
Balin nodded, still looking a bit suspicious. "We are at your service, my king."

"Bilbo." The hobbit stepped forward, looking somewhat nervous, and reached out a small pouch. It did not seem too important or noteworthy, just a basic bag of plain leather, yet Bilbo was staring at it as though it were a den of snakes. "This," Thorin gestured toward the pouch, not touching it, "is your mission. Take it and hide it. I will leave the place to your discretion; in fact, I implore you that you will not tell me of your decision, nor anyone else. Go anywhere in Erebor, high or low, and place it somewhere it will not be found by the curious or the cunning. Tell none of its place, breathe of it to no living soul, and take that knowledge with you to the Halls of Ancestors when the time comes for you to return to the stone."

Balin's brows furrowed, his hand hovering near the offered pouch. "Thorin. Is this what I think it is?"

"That would depend on what you think, old friend." Thorin's expression did not change a bit.

Balin drew a sharp breath through his teeth. "Are you actually telling us to go and hide away the Arkenstone?"

Kíli's eyes widened in shock, and he heard a gasp from Dwalin of all people, one that he could only echo as Thorin nodded, calm as ever. "That I am."

"I'm assuming this has to do with the lad and his predicament." Fíli's madness, nobody quite said, though the words were loud enough in the air. "Are you sure, though? After all the trouble we went to in order to get it back. Or, rather," Balin gave a sharp glance to the halfling, "all the trouble Bilbo went to."

"I am sure." Thorin's nod was firm and decisive. "That stone and its lure has tempted too many of my line. Even now we do not know when Fíli will recover, or if indeed it is possible; we know that for some the sickness lingers without ever being healed." That couldn't happen, not to Fíli. Kíli could not bear it. "If giving it away will save a single soul of my line, if indeed it is the stone that tempts the weakness in our blood, then I will not see it for a moment longer. I'd take a smithy hammer to it myself if I thought it might break, but my fear is its lure would halt my hand before I could shatter it."

"And the seven families?" At last Balin's hand closed on the pouch, though he still would not take it from Bilbo. "You know they have sworn their loyalty to the stone and not the line."

"What, then, is their loyalty truly worth?" Thorin shook his head. "They have followed Durin's Folk before the stone; they will do so again if the call is dire enough. And even if that were not true, if they would all forsake us for this, I say all the better. Better for us to have our sole mountain, our people and home and no other, than for all the lines of Mahal's children to unite behind a mad king ruled by a shiny stone."

The words Thorin spoke were unthinkable, bordering on sacrilege, yet Balin only nodded. "And you trust me with this task? You know I have Durin's blood in me, just as you do. If you cannot bring yourself to break it, how could I hide it away?"

"That is why I have chosen your companion as I have." Thorin nodded at Bifur. "He does not bear our weakness, yet knows the danger of it well enough. I trust you and your loyalty, my friend, but if you will not trust yourself, then trust in his guidance to give you that peace." Bifur grunted again, an affirmative sound, looking serious as only someone with an axe through his skull could.

"Very well." And at last Balin took the pouch, hiding it within his sleeves. "I warn you, my friend, that this is your last chance to tell me otherwise. Once we step out of this chamber, I will not give
you this stone back, nor reveal its location no matter what you do. You are quite right, I suspect; one sane king is of more use to the mountain than all seven lines led in madness. If you let me take the Arkenstone, you will never set eye upon it again."

"So be it." Thorin didn't even flinch. "I have seen the madness it brings, old friend, have thought I would never climb up from its depths again. I've seen that same madness drive my grandfather to wither and die in soul long before his body, have found both myself and my sister-son raising our hands against the most precious thing there is, the other half of our souls." He drew Bilbo closer, apparently without even thinking, though the hobbit leaned into his side easily enough. "I will not spend my life fearing when it might retake me, or see it claim any others of my line. There is light in the house of Durin at last, I have a home and hope and heir alike, and I will not see all that brought to naught for the sake of a shimmering stone."

Balin nodded, slow and sure. "Now there is one who I can follow," he said, almost to himself. "There is one I can call king." With that he bowed, low and true, then turned to leave the chamber, Bifur right at his heels.

Kíli kept watching Thorin for any sign of hesitation, any wavering of his determination, yet Thorin remained still, not betraying any distress as he watched the Arkenstone being carried away. If anything he seemed relieved as Bifur closed the door after him and Balin, tension leaving his body.

"You did it," Bilbo murmured, grasping Thorin's hand and intertwining their fingers. "You actually did it."

"I had to." If Thorin had drawn Bilbo closer before, now he all but crushed him against his chest, an arm tightly around him while his other hand remained in Bilbo's. "I've already failed Fíli. I can't let that stone bring any more misfortune upon my line."

"The lad will recover, I'm sure." Dwalin spoke up at last, arms crossed over his chest. "You did, after all."

"And yet I still fear the return of the madness." Thorin sighed, then glanced at Kíli. "Kíli. I have a task for you as well, though I think you will not like it."

Kíli stood up straighter. "What is it?"

"I need you to take on your brother's duties." Thorin lifted a hand as he started to protest, interrupting him. "Only until he has recovered, mind, I am not replacing him over this incident. I know you would rather be by his side, but there are other concerns besides his comfort. Any trustworthy dwarf can keep an eye on him, but only you can stand with me where he should."

"Do I have to?" He almost felt like a whining child, but then he supposed this situation was not casting any of them in the best light. "There's no point to my just being there and nodding along, I don't know enough to be of much help."

"Perhaps so, but people are already going to be wondering about Fíli's absence, particularly as it coincides with my decision about the Arkenstone. If it's only him that is missing, we can pass it off as a passing illness; if you are nowhere to be found either, it is not so easily explained."

"Fíli needs me."

"I'm sorry to say this, but at the moment he needs nothing we are willing to give him." Thorin sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You ought to be taking a more regular seat on the council anyway; not every time, not unless that is your wish, but more often than you do now. When the
large caravans arrive I will need all the help I can get at least until I've managed to establish a new, more reliable council. I hope this could have come up under better circumstances, but at the moment there is little we can do to help the situation."

"Please, Kíli." Bilbo's eyes were soft as he turned to look at Kíli as well. "You will help Fíli more by helping us keep the rumours at bay than you would by staying with him. I know all this is difficult to bear, and you may think you should be the one bearing the brunt of his madness, but Thorin is right. Others can stay with him, but only you can do this for him."

Kíli cast for something to say, some way to convince them they were wrong, yet could find nothing. His mind knew it was all sensible enough, for all that his heart couldn't quite agree. At last, he sighed. "Only until he has recovered. I won't have anyone saying that I'm looking to take his place."

"Of course not." Thorin let go of Bilbo at last, stepping closer to set his hand on Kíli's shoulders. "I know it can't be easy, but you need to stay strong now. You are the only one who can do this for your brother right now."

Kíli hung his head, not quite sure he could meet Thorin's gaze head on. "I'm not sure I'm strong enough."

"Oh, Kíli, you're the strongest of us." Thorin's hand brushed against his hair, just like it had when he was but a little dwarfling, without a care in the world or a bit of sense. "Of all of us, you're the only one who has not heeded the call of the gold."

He tried to respond, to say something, anything, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, he found himself sagging against Thorin's shoulder as tears finally broke free after far too long of having held back his pain and fear and guilt.

Thorin's arms were steady around him, never wavering, and Kíli supposed he could trust in that at least even if everything else seemed to be crumbling down.

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Bifur was standing in front a barred door, spear in hand.

This alone would have been quite enough to give Tauriel pause as she was led into the royal quarters by a very quiet Óin. The fact that she knew this door to lead into Fíli's quarters was even more disquieting. She knew something wasn't right in the mountain, of course, had been told as much by a very grave Nori who had showed up in Dale with a few ominous words and disappeared right after, but this was worse than she had expected. She was rather hoping Kíli could give her some more information.

"Kíli?" She knocked on the door of Kíli's rooms, Óin hovering close enough behind to keep things nice and proper but not quite intruding. "Kíli, are you there?"

"Tauriel?" Kíli sounded tired, though it could have been because his voice was muffled by the door. "Come in, my love."

With this permission, Tauriel opened the door and stepped into Kíli's rooms. She spotted him at once, standing near the fireplace and adjusting his clothes. Rather remarkable clothes, too, as she noted; he was dressed in his formal court clothes, the intricately braided head crowned by the silver circlet she had only seen him wear twice before, when they had together welcomed the messenger from Thranduil's realm and again when Legolas had brought the final agreement. With fine beads braided into his hair and a silver cuff trailing the curve of one of his ears, Kíli was dressed for the court.
And Fíli’s door was barred.

"Beloved." Kíli turned to her with a smile, yet his face was pale behind the dusting of a beard that marked his cheeks. "I'm glad as ever to see you. For your sake I wish you'd come at a better time, but I fear I rather need you now."

"I heard from Nori a couple of days ago that something was amiss, but had other commitments and could not make it any sooner." She walked closer, leaning in for a quick kiss heedless of the still lingering presence of Óin in the doorway. "What is going on? Why is Bifur guarding Fíli's door? Is he in danger?"

"More like he is the danger." Kíli sighed, taking her hand and entwining their fingers in an almost unconscious gesture. She saw him hesitate before he lifted his gaze to meet hers. "Fíli was taken over by the gold madness."

"No." She hadn't seen Thorin in its depths, had only heard what Kíli told her of it, but that was enough to fill her with dread. "How did he…"

"Who knows? Our line bears the weakness, that is clear enough, and he's devoted himself to gold and gems in excess as of late, crafting Ori's gift as he has. And when he wasn't doing that he was standing beside Thorin's throne and the thrice cursed Arkenstone." He shook his head. "At least that is gone now."

"It is?" Tauriel lifted her eyebrows. Even she knew how precious a treasure it was to the dwarves.

"Aye, it is. Thorin had it hidden even from him, so it would not be found again. Yesterday was our first court day since, and while nobody asked about it, I'd wager nobody heard a word that was said, they were too busy staring at the bare throne." Kíli sighed. "Today is the first council meeting, and I can guarantee they won't stay their tongues there."

"And is this why you are all dressed up?" Not that she was complaining. He looked awfully regal like this, for all that she loved him just the same when he was nothing but a messy little archer with windswept hair and a ready smile.

"Aye. Thorin's made it my duty to stand in Fíli's place for now. We're hoping the madness will pass, so for now we claim he has merely taken ill and I am filling in for now." His hand squeezed hers. "I'm… not looking forward to this meeting."

"I would think not." She paused, then came to a quick decision. "The outfit I've worn to the court. Is it in my rooms yet?"

Kíli blinked in surprise at the question. "It should be, for all I know. Why do you ask?"

"How many would protest if I were to come with you? Not taking a seat, of course, I know I have not been granted the right, but I could stand beside Dwalin. We could perhaps say I am looking to be your guard some day." She offered him a faint smile, hoping to reassure him. "It's only, you rather look like you could use the support."

"Well, I'm sure Uncle would have nothing against it, and really at that point nobody else can do a thing. Not that they'll probably even notice you, given how furious they will be about the stone." Kíli's lips twitched a bit, as though he wasn't sure he dared to smile just yet. "Are you sure, though? The meetings are tedious at best, and I suspect this time we won't even have that particular relief."

"My darling, I grew up in Thranduil's court. No irate dwarf will scare me away." Tauriel managed a chuckle. "Besides, while you will not be king, I'm not quite so delusional as to think I will be able to
avoid politics entirely when we marry."

"It would be a great relief to know you are there, even though we won't be able to converse." Kíli's hand came up to touch the side of her face. "There is yet a moment before Thorin is ready. Think you can make yourself presentable soon enough?" There was a teasing tone to his voice that lifted her heart. If he could manage a jest, even a slight one, clearly not all hope was lost.

"I am an elf, my darling dwarf. You ought to know I could appear without a stitch of clothing and still be more regal than any of you." She waited a beat, until a blush rose to his face, then chuckled and leaned for a kiss on his forehead. "Worry not, though, I shall save such sights only for you."

Perhaps she couldn't entirely distract him from his sorrows, but she could damn well try.

She indeed had just enough time to change into the blue velvet outfit that had been prepared for her, the jacket long and full enough to almost pass for a dress yet a more practical set of a tunic and trousers underneath. No doubt she would be wearing dresses and robes at some point, she rather doubted she would get through the life of a princess of Erebor in one single outfit, but for now her dear dwarves had considered her comfort and ease and she was grateful for that. Though as Kíli had said, she rather doubted anyone would pay much attention to her beyond some initial glares.

She made sure to wear her starlight pendant on top of her clothes, just to make a point. It was not Kíli alone who allowed her presence in the mountain.

"Ready to make an appearance.

As Kíli had suspected, Thorin had no objection to her presence, merely nodding as she trailed behind her princely dwarf. She couldn't help but notice a certain change in the way Kíli carried himself. As they left the royal chambers, he was quiet and serious, quite unlike his usual self. Right before they reached the council chamber, though, he squared his shoulders and lifted his head, all signs of worry and grief leaving him. A small smile curled his lips, confident though not overly so, and as he walked into the chamber before her he was neither the mischievous archer she had fallen for nor the grieved brother that made her heart ache, but a prince of Erebor, shining and sure and beautiful.

It was a good thing indeed she was already in love quite irrevocably, because it would have been a most inopportune time to realise such affections.

She indeed received a few glares and even questions as she walked in and settled beside a grave Dwalin and a very fidgety Ori, but then Thorin entered and all attention was on him. Tauriel settled into the easy stance of an experienced guard, preparing herself for a long time standing at the ready. The clamouring went on for a moment longer, then fell into a tense silence as Thorin stood up.

"Let's not waste time on pleasantries, when it's clear what you all wish to address first of all."
Thorin's gaze swept along the entire long table. Only Balin and Bilbo on his left and Kíli on his right held onto any semblance of calmness. "Yes, the Arkenstone is gone. No, it will not be returning."

"And why is it gone?" grumbled one of the older dwarves around the table. "Has another thief decided to turn it over to some faithless tree-shaggers?" This earned Tauriel a glare, which she took without flinching. It was hardly a surprise that most of them would dislike her race, and after Thranduil's actions she could not quite blame them for it.

"It is gone because I removed it, of my own volition and free will, and returned it to the mountain." As this brought on more shouts and growls, Thorin waited a moment before striking his hand down
"Silence! I could not return it if I wished to, not that I do. As King Under the Mountain it is my right to do as I wish with the Arkenstone, and this is my decision."

"You'd give up the King's Jewel?" someone demanded. "Do you give up the right to rule as well?"

"Durin's line has ruled his folk long before we ever unearthed the jewel. Or was Durin himself unfit to rule for not having found the stone?" Thorin shook his head. "I saw my grandfather bewitched by the gem, saw its brilliance call the displeasure of our neighbours and the terror of the north. Thrór would have died in dragonfire before he let it go. When we took back Erebor and the stone, we were faced with a battle more terrible than I ever wished to see again. Clearly, then, it brings nothing but misfortune upon my realm, and any loyalty sworn to it is false promises at best. What is worth an oath of loyalty if it's to a shining stone and not the blood of Durin? Better it be returned to the mountain, where it never should have been taken from."

"You cannot expect us to accept this!" One of the dwarves shot to his feet. "We've gone along while you break our traditions and sully our line, but this is going too far! If you cast out the stone, we have no reason to follow you!"

In an instant, Thorin's sword was out of its sheath, Orcrist gleaming in torchlight as it pointed at the offending dwarf. It was too far to reach, but the sentiment was clear. As he spoke, his voice was quiet, yet it was easy to hear in the complete silence that had fallen. "I led our people ever since the disappearance of my father, carved our path through the lands of men and made us a home in Thorin's Halls. I took a company of but thirteen besides myself, outwitted a dragon and claimed back the mountain. I fought in the Battle of Five Armies and emerged victorious, with orcs and goblins alike purged from our lands. And yet I will not ask you to follow me, for I do not believe in forced loyalty. If you do not find me worthy of your faith without some stone that has worth only in our greed for it, then I do not need your obedience."

Kíli stood now, never wavering, taller than his uncle yet managing to appear his shadow rather than overpower him. "Erebor welcomes any and all who swear fealty to her king. This, we have told you." His hand did not go anywhere near the sword at his belt, yet the threat was clear in the calm, measured tones he used. "Those who do not believe him worthy of such an oath, or do not agree with our ways, are free to leave the mountain. The line of Durin will not force obedience, not when a willing heart is worth a hundred false ones."

Thorin lowered his sword now, though he did not put it away. Voices were raised again, more urgent now, and more dwarves were shooting up to their feet. The king listened to this for a moment, then looked to the side. His eyes flitted over Tauriel, then Dwalin, and stopped on Ori. Tauriel wasn't sure what passed between them, but saw Thorin giving a small nod.

Ori, appearing quite calm aside from a small tremor of his hands, set aside his equipment, stood up, and took a large hammer Dwalin offered him. Tauriel was somewhat surprised to realise the small dwarf handled the heavy weapon with ease, walking to the council table. With one last glance at Thorin, and a nod in response, he swung the hammer between two council members, causing the table to crack with a loud sound.

"Thank you." Thorin nodded at Ori, then turned to the startled council members. "Now that I have your attention, it seems clear there is no use in continuing this meeting any further. We will reconvene in two days' time, at which time I expect to only see those who are willing to serve me without any shiny stones. If any feel otherwise, I'm sure Dáin will be happy to benefit from your wisdom and guidance once again." He paused, making a show of sliding his sword back into its sheath, slow and gleaming. "I certainly hope so, as you will not be welcome in my halls again if you would follow a gem rather than King Under the Mountain."
This caused more protest, but the king did not seem to care. He waited until both Balin and Bilbo had stood up beside him and Kili, then turned to sweep out of the room, listening to none of the objections. Ori and Dwalin followed, the hammer back with its rightful owner, with Tauriel walking after the rest of them. Glancing back at the chaos emerging, she couldn't help but notice that the crack Ori had put into the table was not the first one.

Well. Perhaps elven politics were not quite comparable after all.

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The library was quiet this time of the day.

Of course, this didn't say much, as if Bilbo were to be entirely honest there was hardly a time when the library weren't somewhat quiet. However, there were busy moments sometimes, with himself and Ori and Balin all rushing about to get everything sorted out on one of the rare moments they all had the time to spare at the same time. Now there were just two of them, with Balin busy helping Thorin keep the peace with his disgruntled council. What was more, there was none of their usual easy chat, a silent tension filling the air. Bilbo had tried to ease Ori into speaking, of course, had tried to to keep the conversation going on his own, but in the end he had faded into silence under the weight of Ori's sorrow.

Not that Ori was showing it much, mind. It was clear enough since Bilbo knew to look for it, but he doubted any outsider would have seen it, at least nothing more than some worry that was to be expected when his betrothed appeared ill. It made Bilbo wonder, wonder and worry, about how much Ori tended to hide his true feelings. As Ori didn't seem to want to talk about it right now, though, he resigned himself to simply being there, ready for conversation if and when Ori wanted it.

It was all he could do right now, anyway. He certainly couldn't offer any meaningful aid to Fili in this situation.

He was in the back of the library, copying out a section of an old map, when he heard noise from the front of the library. Someone had walked in, several someones judging by the sounds. Bilbo wondered if he ought to have gone to help, but figured Ori would probably be able to help them better than he could have.

Except then the voices were raised, and Bilbo peeked past the shelves to find Ori surrounded by several irate dwarves.

He recognised most of them by sight, though couldn't have hoped to recall most of their names. One was a member of the council, Master Sora as he recalled, the one who had been so dismissive of scribes. There were four of them in all, each looking as though they considered themselves very important as they surrounded poor Ori.

Ori, however, did not seem to pay much attention. He rather calmly finished reading a page of the book he had set on a book stand before looking up at the other dwarves. "Can I help you somehow?"

"Oh, yes." Master Sora sneered. "I'm sure you'd help us all an awful lot by just leaving the mountain."

"I'm not sure why you think so." Ori's voice was quiet, barely audible to Bilbo where he hid, but at least he wasn't backing down. "The king certainly seems to find my presence useful."

"That's just because you've blinded the prince." Another one of the dwarves, now, stepping forward.
"Just because you've got a pretty face you think you're good enough to be standing beside the throne some day."

"I will, though." Ori still wouldn't back down, and Bilbo felt a kind of quiet pride. "I have accepted Fili's courtship, and he is the foremost heir of Thorin's line. As he was the one to ask me, and his uncle has given his blessing, it certainly seems Durin's line wants me to stand there."

"They'll come to their senses soon enough." Sora got closer as well, and Bilbo started to weigh his options. There was a back door to the library, not too far from where he was; he'd probably be much more help going for the guards than trying to get involved. He didn't even have his sword, hadn't thought it necessary in the mountain. "That must be why the prince's fallen ill. Mahal's giving him the chance to get his head clear of your charms."

That was clearly the wrong thing to say, as Ori stiffened. "I think it would be the best for you to leave." His attention, however, was on Master Sora, and not on one of the other dwarves who was drawing closer from the side. Bilbo noticed too late the flash of a knife, crying out a warning that was barely enough for Ori to step to the side and send everyone else moving.

Bilbo stopped thinking, running towards the side door. He could hear the sounds of a scuffle behind him, but didn't dare to turn to look. Unarmed and alone, his best hope of helping Ori was to find reinforcements. He was under no illusions that these dwarves would have listened to him just because he was Thorin's intended, not after that particular exchange.

Thankfully he didn't have to search for long, soon running into a couple of dwarves in guard uniforms. Dwalin was terribly picky about his guards, Bilbo knew that much, and would not have chosen anyone he did not find entirely reliable, originating from Iron Hills or not. These were thus loyal dwarves, and sensible ones too, enough so that when the consort-to-be called for help they didn't stop to ask for questions, following him without hesitation back the way he'd come from.

Bilbo led them to the main doors of the library now, dread filling him as he heard only silence from within. He made to rush inside but was pushed back by the guards who insisted on going first. It was probably sensible, seeing how he was still unarmed, but he still followed them in as soon as he could, fearing what they would find.

What they did find was Ori on his knees on the floor, surrounded by four fallen dwarves. At least one of them was not going to be getting up again, judging by the way his hard dwarven skull had caved in, while another was trapped under the heavy stone book stand Ori had been using, the other two sprawled on the floor in various states of injury. Bilbo breathed a sigh of relief, only to frown as he noticed Ori's shoulders trembling.

"Ori?" He rushed forward, trusting the guards to take care of the two dwarves who might in theory try to get up. "Ori, are you all right? Are you hurt? I'm sorry, I tried to get help as fast as I could —"

Ori shook his head, eyes downcast. Something about that gesture seemed wrong, though Bilbo couldn't quite put a finger on it.

He knelt in front of the young dwarf and set his hands on Ori's shoulders, careful not to startle him. "Should we get you to a healer? Or should I ask Óin to come here? Please, Ori, say something…"

This time there was a sound, though it was more of a muffled sob than anything. Then Ori lifted his gaze, tears on his face, and with a startle Bilbo realised his face wasn't framed by two neat plaits as usual.

"They took my braids, Bilbo," Ori moaned, voice full of tears and despair. "They had a knife and
they attacked my hair and they took my braids!"

This was, Bilbo knew, a Bad Thing. To attack a dwarf's hair and beard was a crime of similar severity as going for their life, he had been told as much. What was worse, he could now see that not all of Ori's braids were lost, though he didn't have that many. His scribe's plait was still there, the one marking him as a journeyman, even the one that declared him to be under the protection of Durin's line.

However, the braids declaring his courtship of Fíli had been cut off, leaving only lonely short tufts of hair behind where they should have been.

Wordlessly, Bilbo reached his arms around the still trembling Ori, and swore to any Valar who might have mattered that the idiots would pay for this.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Once again, Thorin presides over a trial, this time with far less mercy. Fíli does not take the news well, though at least some good seems to come of the entire ordeal as he sends Kíli on a mission for important supplies.

Ori is relieved to see his gift, though not as much as Fíli is to leave his rooms at last.

Chapter Notes

If you missed it, there's a picture in chapter 12 now of Tauriel and Kíli's court outfits.
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The throne room, Bilbo noted as he stood beside Thorin's throne, was as full as it ever was these days. Word got around fast when there weren't too many of them, and the word of such a trial had tempted along everyone who possibly could abandon their duties for a moment. The company was there almost in its current entirety, save for Fíli and Bofur, who was currently on guard duty.

Fíli should have been there, by all rights. However, right now they could not trust him not to be the greatest danger to poor Ori.

Thorin's expression didn't change much as he listed those accused, three dwarves who were each held by two sturdy guards; Thorin was clearly not going to take his chances with people who had already proved themselves beyond honour or reason. The fourth would not stand trial. As Bilbo had suspected, he had lost his life to Ori's defence.

Bilbo was almost surprised at how satisfied he was with that.

"The charge is one of assault, with the intent of insult and stealing honour." Thorin's voice was still calm and steady, yet there was a sharp edge to it as he glanced aside to where Ori stood. Bilbo was almost amazed that he could still stand in the room, though then he did have Dori and Nori on either side of him. Ori wasn't looking at anyone, his head mostly hidden beneath a soft, knitted cowl.
"They were seen to attack the victim quite unprovoked, four to one, after which they cut off his courtship braids."

A horrified gasp flew through the audience, and Bilbo looked over at Ori. He seemed to shrink back even more, hands hidden within his sleeves. He'd told Thorin before the trial that he did not wish to speak more than he had to, not that Bilbo blamed him. It had to be hard enough for him to stand here again, now with even more attention on him.

Besides, there was only one punishment that would suffice, anyway, seeing how they had indeed succeeded to some extent.

"Courtship braids are some of our most sacred braids. Once they have been given, not even the one
who gave them may take them away." Well, that was new. Bilbo had known no outsider could take 
them away, but not even the suitor? "And yet you would take a blade to the courtship braids of 
another dwarf. What do you have to say for yourselves?"

"He shouldn't have had them in the first place," Master Sora ground out, glowering at Thorin. 
Apparently he was the spokesperson here, as indeed he had been the leader in the attack, the other 
dwarves being some lower class thugs without nearly as much clout. "This entire affair is just 
shameful!"

"Shameful indeed. Truly, I do not think there are many things you might have done that could have 
been more shameful, save for try to steal his virtue, and you are lucky indeed you had not tried to do 
so. Had you laid a finger upon my sister-son's intended with such vile intentions in mind, I'd have 
already sliced open your worthless sacs and fed what little resides within to the carrion crows." Ori 
made a small sound at the implication, leaning towards his brothers, and Bilbo almost reached for 
Thorin to make him stop but held himself back. Surely Thorin had already noticed.

"He has no honour," Sora spat. "If he were a proper dwarf, no harm would have ever come to him."

"Oh, yes. You bring four trained warriors against one unarmed scribe, now there is an honourable 
tale for the winter nights." Thorin tilted his head, just enough to look the slightest bit mocking. "And 
even higher honour, I'm sure, is the fact that he yet took down three of you and sent the fourth to the 
Halls before help arrived."

"That is his story. You have no cause to think we attacked him first, anyway, save for what lies your 
halfling whore has fed you."

"Enough!" Thorin stood to his feet, now, fingertips on the armsrests of the throne. He looked more 
majestic now than Bilbo had perhaps ever seen him, righteous fury in his eyes and the long lines of 
kings at his back. "You wanted to bring shame? You've succeeded, and threefold at that! You bring 
shame upon yourselves, for such a cowardly attack! You bring shame upon me, to have thought 
even for a moment that I would not punish an attack upon one I have taken under the protection of 
my line! And worst of all," Thorin's voice dipped dangerously low, yet carried clearly in the absolute 
silence of the throne room, "you bring shame upon Mahal, to try to part that which He has forged as 
one."

"This cannot be Mahal's will!" cried out one of Sora's thugs. "He would never allow this to happen!"

Thorin was quiet for a beat, two. "I have seen before dwarves question the word of their prince," he 
then said, slow and measured. "I have even seen those who would question the will of their king. 
Yet this has to be the first time I see a dwarf stand before me and profess to know the mind of Mahal 
better than His deeds will show us."

"So you truly think this is what Mahal wants?" Sora glared at Ori, then Bilbo, and finally over to 
where Kíli and Tauriel stood, so silent Bilbo could hardly believe they were even there, given how 
many times he had been sure Kíli would jump forward any moment now. "This — this farce that will 
end up destroying Durin's line through tainted bloodlines and lack of heirs?"

"Unlike you, I do not claim to know the true will of Mahal. All I know is that my heart has been 
given and I could not reclaim it if I wanted to, any more than my sister-sons could reclaim theirs." 
Thorin shook his head. "A dwarf loves but once, and that love is, so we believe, a gift from Mahal 
himself. My heirs are old enough to know their minds and hearts. And yet even if that were not true, 
even if I did not approve of this match, even if he did not bear the braids of my prince and the 
protection of my line in his hair, Ori son of Vuori is a dwarf of Erebor and you have attacked him in 
a most honourless manner."
"We only did what you had no courage to!"

"You did what none but he had the right to." Thorin straightened himself, and Bilbo had never seen him look quite so much like a king. "You've declared your crimes and ill intention to all the gathered court, offer no defence save for that which harms your case further. Clearly, then, it's the time for your sentence." His eyes were cold, and Bilbo almost shivered, even though he knew this was not the cold of madness. "I find all three accused guilty. For their crimes against the laws of Erebor, and their transgressions towards the royal line, they are to be shorn and shaved and then cast out to find such a place that would welcome their kind, for the gates of Erebor shall be closed to them now and evermore."

This caused a stir in the audience and loud cries from the accused, and for all that he tried to be proper Bilbo couldn't help but feel a shiver of satisfaction run down his spine. He knew this was the ultimate punishment by dwarven law, that Thorin would have been more merciful to ask for their heads, yet he couldn't help but think these dwarves deserved every bit of it and more.

"Your families may join you if they will, go on their own way, or remain here if they swear loyalty to me. Know, though, that for your crimes none of them will have my trust or that of my line again." Thorin glanced at Sora in particular, who Bilbo knew had been grooming his son for a position in the court. "The sentence is to be carried out immediately, so that all may see their shame."

"My king." Kíli stepped forward now, voice calm but fury broiling in his dark eyes as he gave a nod to Thorin — not a full bow, not by a prince of Erebor simply wishing to speak in his own court, and did he ever look every bit the prince. "By custom, my brother would have claim to take part in this, as it is his intended who stands aggrieved. As he is too unwell to stand in court today, however, I offer his knives and my own hands, so that he in that at least can be present in seeing that justice is done." He produced a few knives from his sleeves, with an ease more reminiscent of his brother's quick fingers, each bearing a familiar mark on the pommel.

"I accept this claim." Thorin nodded. "Who else, then, will stand forward to carry out the sentence?"

Bilbo had heard of this part, had been quickly briefed by Balin beforehand — after all, they had known from the start what the sentence would be, what it had to be for so grievous a crime. By dwarven law the family of the victim had the right to give out what punishment the court sentenced, if they so wished. It was to no one's surprise as Dori and Nori stepped forward, each with barely constrained rage in their eyes.

"And I as well." Bilbo barely realised he had spoken before he had already stepped forward, settling next to Kíli. All eyes were on him, now, including Thorin's, though they at least showed nothing but grim satisfaction.

"And by what claim do you do so?" He knew Thorin wasn't questioning him, not really, Thorin knew perfectly well why he was doing this, but it had to be said out loud for all to hear.

Balin had been all too happy to explain this as well, when he had asked.

"Their crime was also against the house of Durin and the throne. However, I would not see my king sully his hands in dealing with such scum, and prince Kíli already stands in place of his brother. If the court would allow, then, I would stand for the royal house, as I bear the beads and braids and have been called family by the princes." He paused, then added, with just a hint of satisfaction, "Besides, I find myself quite experienced in the matter of cutting hair."

This drew shocked sounds from most of the audience, which, really. The statement was innocuous enough, had been meant as such — he was no expert, but he had trimmed the occasional cousin's or
nephew's unruly curls often enough — but he knew perfectly well how that sounded to dwarves. He could see it in the brief glimmer of amusement in Thorin's eyes as he nodded.

"A valid claim, and one I can but accept." Thorin sat back down in his throne, now, slamming his palm against the arm of the throne. "Let it begin!"

The dwarves tried to struggle, of course, would not resign so easily, but the guards were strong and Dori's hands even stronger where need be. Kíli was almost suspiciously deft in the matter of shaving beards, leaving each of them as bare as his own face, while Bilbo, Nori and Dori found themselves dealing with a head full of hair each. Bilbo had handled dwarven hair before, sometimes, had been allowed the privilege of starting to learn the various braids Thorin might wear as the occasion demanded it, but it still slightly surprised him just how very much there was of it. Certainly too much for his little hands to hold all of it, and he was only too glad when Kíli, done with his task of removing three rather showy beards, stepped up to him to help him gather all the hair he was cutting off the head of one violently cursing dwarf.

"It is done, then." Thorin nodded in satisfaction once three beards and three heads of hair had been removed. "Ori, son of Vuori, the one who is most the victim of this crime. What's to be done with these?"

Ori did not step back, though Bilbo could tell he wanted to, particularly now that all the eyes were on him. He couldn't help but admire his courage, really, going through something like this twice and yet standing steady. "Burn it all," Ori said, his voice quiet but firm. "They deserve nothing better."

This caused another outcry from the prisoners but a nod from Thorin. Ori could have claimed the beards as trophies, which would have been humiliation enough; to have them burned was as good as declaring their honour was worth so little, he did not want to acknowledge it had ever existed.

Thorin motioned to Dwalin, who had stood by the side all this time, keeping an eye on the prisoners. "Have all this taken to the forges, make sure not a single whisker remains," Thorin said, voice cool. "Then give them what provisions they are entitled to and see them cast out before sunset. I will not tolerate such worthless scum in my kingdom."

"Aye, your Majesty." Dwalin made a sharp gesture, and a guard stepped forward with a bag, gathering all the hair and beards into it like so much trash. Then he marched off, barking orders here and there as the prisoners were dragged out of court.

Bilbo glanced at Thorin, curious to see how he reacted to all this as the audience broke out in murmurs, Dori and Nori quickly whisking their brother out through the side entrance. Thorin met his gaze with a nod, one that Bilbo returned as he stepped back to his place beside the throne while Thorin announced the session concluded. He had no regrets about what he had done, felt no pity for those who had more than earned their punishment.

Nobody was allowed to harm his family and get away with it.

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Bofur did not ask questions as Kíli arrived, still in his court clothes and barely holding back his rage. His eyes did flicker toward Kíli's sleeves, where some stray hairs might have lingered, but it was only with a silent glimmer of satisfaction.

"I would see my brother." Kíli did not bother to make it a request.

"As you wish." Bofur went to open the makeshift bar that closed Fíli's door nowadays. "He's been in
a mighty foul mood today, mind, shouting insults of all kinds at the door. Never thought a prince would know words that terrible, but there you have it."

Kíli couldn't help but snort. "It's you who's taught him half those words, anyway, so let's not play innocent. Well, you or older members of Durin's line, you know how Dwalin gets when he's angry."

"Oh, do I ever." Bofur flashed him a grin, though it wasn't a very amused one. "Best of luck to you, then, my prince, in trying to speak sense to him."

"I don't need luck." If this didn't work, he wasn't sure anything would.

Mahal, please let this work.

Fíli's rooms were trashed as he walked in, not that he was too surprised to see it. It seemed everything had been thrown about in a fit of fury, even the sturdy dwarven furniture bearing marks of his brother's ire. In the middle of all this sat Fíli, his hair a mess and his eyes dark as he looked up at Kíli, not bothering to get up from where he was huddled on the floor.

"What do you want?" Sharp words in a sharp tone, more so than he could remember ever hearing from his brother, not even when they had been upset with each other. Though then, he wasn't entirely convinced this creature had anything in common with his older brother.

"To talk." Kíli tightened his fist around the one thing he hoped might be able to break through the madness that clouded his brother's eyes. He'd been hesitant to ask for it, but it had been granted easily enough when he had explained himself. He could only hope he wouldn't cause too much disappointment. "About Ori."

"I don't want to hear it." Fíli's tone was cold but his eyes were even worse. "I want nothing to do with that accursed thief." It physically pained Kíli to hear his brother say such things about the one he knew Fíli loved above anything else, but as much as he would have liked to flee the room, he couldn't. Not now.

"You'll be glad to see this, then." He threw the object in his fist in front of Fíli, watching the braid uncurl on the floor. It looked so terribly lonely and forgotten, lying on the floor, a twist of copper fastened by a golden bead.

Fíli's eyes widened, though whether in recognition or something more, Kíli couldn't tell. "Is that…"

"One of his courtship braids, aye." And it hurt, it hurt so much to even look at it, the forlorn little braid all alone on the cold stone. Almost as much as it hurt to see the madness in his brother's eyes.

Fíli didn't look at him, now, eyes fixed on the braid. He scrambled up to his feet and took a step forward, then another, until finally he fell to his knees, reaching out a trembling hand that would not quite touch it. "It's… why would he…" Fíli's voice trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

"It wasn't Ori, for what it's worth." Kíli's hands clenched into fists. "He still seems to have some hope for you, though I'll be damned if I know why. No, some bastards just decided he wasn't good enough to be courting you and decided to prove it. They cornered him in the library and attacked him, outnumbered and unarmed, and cut them right off his head."

"Is he…" There was no coldness in Fíli's voice, now, nothing but distress and hoarse pleas.

"Distressed and shocked, as you'd expect, but otherwise he's unharmed. Took down the lot of them with nothing but a book stand, as it happens, before Bilbo could return to him with guards." He almost stopped there, but decided to push on. "He wouldn't take back his knife, you know, not after
he'd hurt you with it. Uncle promised him a new one, but hasn't had the time to work on it yet." His
gaze flickered to Fíli's arm, still bandaged tightly. He would recover, or so Óin promised, but it
would be a while before it could bear the strain of his usual training, never mind more. For a hasty
throw, Ori hadn't done badly.

"His braids," Fíli murmured, still not quite touching it. "They cut off his braids…"

Kíli couldn't truly blame Fíli for his distress, not really. Courtship braids were a special thing, even he
knew that despite his young years, and not easily removed once given; even while unravelled, they
were still there, just waiting to be braided in again for all to see. There were two ways to actually
take them out, one besides turning them into marriage braids instead.

Had it been Ori's own hand that had cut them out, it would have meant an irrevocable end to their
courting.

"Uncle asked him, you know," Kíli said, his voice soft. "About whether he wanted to reconsider
your courtship after the attack. He said that the actions of someone so wretched had nothing to do
with his courtship with prince Fíli." He shook his head. "I suppose you're lucky that he loves you
enough to realise it wasn't truly you who hurt him."

"It was, though." Fíli wouldn't meet his gaze, his voice low and rough. "I may wish otherwise, but it
was me. I was the one who raised my hand against him for some imaginary crime. For that, I cannot
expect forgiveness."

"He doesn't hate you, you know. Don't think he ever could. He's utterly convinced you'll come back
to yourself and back to him soon enough."

"I — I have to." Fíli shook his head. "I should have been there. Should have protected him, should
have punished those who hurt him…"

"They've been punished well enough. One lost his life in Ori's hands, the other three were shaved
and cast out." Kíli paused. "I offered your knives for the task. Uncle was all too happy to accept."

"Thank you. I — truly, thank you." Fíli got up to his feet again, his movements slow and halted, but
as he looked at Kíli there was a clarity in his eyes that he had not seen there for a long time. "I know
I have no right to ask this, brother, not after how I've acted… but will you help me make this right?"

It had never been so easy to agree to anything. "In any way I can."

"Right." Fíli drew a deep breath. "I'm going to need my tools, and a few things from the treasury."

Kíli frowned. For all that Fíli seemed better now, this didn't sound good. "You know I can't do that," he said. "Uncle has specifically forbidden you from having access to any gold or gems."

"And I'm not asking for any of that." Fíli shook his head. "Please, Kíli. I'm not asking for more than
you can give me, but I need you to help me. How else am I supposed to show that I've truly come
back to my senses?"

There was a logic in that, Kíli couldn't deny it. He nodded, slow and hesitant, but sincere. "Tell me
what you need."

It was about time he got his brother back.

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Ori was still shaking.

He tried to hide it, of course, not wanting to worry his brothers more than he already did, and for the most part he managed. However, he could not still his hands enough to work on his writing, had tried it for only a moment before he had ruined a page with ink blotches and wavering lines. He'd taken out some knitting instead, grasping the needles much tighter than he ought to have, hoping he wouldn't ruin his tension entirely or even snap the needles.

Of course, it would all have been easier if his brothers hadn't watched him quite so closely.

"Stop that." His own voice was soft, yet it almost startled him to hear it in the silence broken only by the crackling of a fire in the fireplace.

Fire. Just like the one he'd had those beards cast into. He knew the symbolism for that, of course, knew that to older dwarves this was a declaration he did not acknowledge his attackers had ever had any honor for him to claim, but that was not why he had done so. No, he simply could not look at those things, couldn't bear any more reminders. It was bad enough moving his head and feeling how it was all different.

He'd tried to tell himself he was being silly, that just because old customs called this one of the most heinous crimes didn't mean he had to feel it as such. Oh, it had certainly been intended as such, as good as a declaration that his attackers did not consider him worthy of even the most basic respect, but he could have chosen to rise above such pains. It was just hair, after all, it would grow back, and as everyone seemed fond of reminding him, his honor was not diminished by what had been done to him against his will. And really, it wasn't about that. It wasn't about the hair, it wasn't about the honor, it wasn't even about the reminder that some would despise him so, not after he had spent a lifetime being told he was not quite good enough or strong enough or worthy enough.

No, it was about those braids, the ones that had been put into his hair by Fíli. He had not woven them in with his own hand this time, far too busy as of late to make the time, but even if Ori was the one to braid them in again after a bath it was still Fíli who had first put them in there. Fíli, with a brilliant grin and a few stolen kisses, with nimble fingers and the softest touch, had given him those braids to show all that Ori belonged to him and he to Ori. Even while Fíli seemed too mad to know him truly, even while the prince was locked away in his chambers because they could not trust what he would do if released, Ori still had those braids to remind him that there was a different person in there, a prince who loved him above anything else and would never have raised his hand against him.

Now, he did not have that reminder.

"Stop what?" Dori frowned as he looked over to Ori. "Stop working?" He indicated the garment he was working on, Nori bent over another piece of fabric. They didn't have to do such things, anymore, could have contented themselves in their tasks of a Guildmaster and the king's spymaster, or even spent the rest of their lives lounging in luxury, but they were dwarves through and through. None of them could sit idle for too long, no matter how much Nori might have sighed for an easier life.

"You know what." Ori lowered his knitting, looking from one older brother to another. "Stop looking at me like I'm going to fall apart any moment."

"Well, we're still not sure you won't." This earned Nori a sharp glare from Dori, but he ignored it with the studied practice of one who had done so his entire life. "Don't take me wrong, you're doing damn well considering everything that's happened, but frankly you're being almost too calm about all this. Nobody would blame you if you were more upset than this."
"I am upset, though." Ori looked down at his knitting. "I've just… cried until I can't cry anymore, I suppose. And with everything that's going on, and with Fíli, I couldn't even show it to anyone, I just had to do my job. Balin did tell me I could take time off if I needed, even then," he hasted to add when Dori's face darkened. "It was just easier for me to handle all this when I could just focus on my work, even if I was constantly reminded that Fíli wasn't there." He'd asked for some time off, now, not quite ready to face the court or the council just yet. Though then, he wasn't sure Bilbo would have allowed him to even try. He'd seemed almost as upset as his brothers were.

It was comforting, in a way, to know that someone cared about him so much.

"Even so." Dori sighed. "I know you don't want to show weakness, Ori, and I'm proud of you for doing so well in hiding it. But… you do know you don't have to hide such things from us, right? We are your family, we won't think any worse of you if you're shaken or afraid. Nobody in the Company would, I don't think."

"I know that." Ori managed something that might have passed for a smile. "And I'm grateful for that, really I am. I… I'm not sure I could have gotten through this without everyone's support."

"As long as you remember that." Dori returned his smile with a faint one of his own, and seemed about to say something when there was a knock at the door. He frowned a bit and turned towards the door. It was late for a visitor to come by, especially unannounced. "Come in."

The door was opened slowly, and Kíli stepped in, ducking his head a bit in the low doorway. He'd changed out of his court clothes, which wasn't much of a wonder considering how much time had passed, and in his hands he was carrying a small box. The prince gave brief nods to Dori and Nori, then turned to Ori.

"Ori, son of Vuori," he said, something oddly serious in his eyes even though his lips seemed to curl into a smile, a look Ori hadn't seen on him for days. Not the actual smile, anyway, just the fake one he put on for the court. "I've been asked to deliver a gift to you."

"A gift?" Ori frowned, setting his knitting down in his lap. "What kind of a gift?"

"I think you'll see it well enough when you open it." Kíli offered the box to him, and Ori reached toward it, slightly wary for all that he knew Kíli wouldn't have played some trick on him, not at this time.

Ori opened the box and gasped. Within lay two braids, each woven from thin strands of copper wire instead of hair, the intricate weave neat and even. Courtship braids, he noted, each one attached from their top to a simple clasp he could use to fasten them to his hair. The truly fascinating part, however, were the beads used to fasten the bottom of the braids, white gold with the mark of Durin set in them in tiny yet perfectly cut sapphires.

It was not the same bead he had found on Fíli's floor, but the similarity made him swallow nevertheless.

He looked up at Kíli, unable to voice his question. He supposed it was clear enough on his face, anyway, as Kíli merely nodded.

"Fíli sends these with his regards." There was some tension in his frame, still, in the way he stood, but his eyes and voice were soft. "He hopes they will serve you well until he can put your rightful braids back in your hair with his own hands."

"These… these are beautiful." Ori finally found his voice, lifting one of the braids out of the box. It
was fine enough a weave that it bent easily in his hands, falling almost like an actual braid would have.

"It's an old tradition, or so I've heard." Somewhat to Ori's surprise, it was Nori who spoke, not Dori, busyng himself with his embroidery as though to pretend he was not actually speaking. "In the old times warriors would make braids out of metal for their partners to wear when they went to war. 'Course, this was back before it was considered proper for a dwarf to redo the courting braids in their own hair, so it was a right honorable thing to do if you had a lover of any sort who wasn't joining you in battle."

"However, that is only if it's made by their own hands." Dori frowned, stepping closer for a look. "I thought the king forbade any access to precious things."

"True enough. However, the sentence was against gold and gems." Kíli's hands held onto the box tight enough his knuckles paled. "He asked for copper wire, naught else, and I brought him that, figured it wasn't precious enough to tempt his madness. The clasps are from his own hair, some of the few he was allowed to keep when we emptied his chambers of anything precious."

"And the beads?" Dori walked to them to take a closer look. "Those are expensive to be sure, and very fine work. More, they're clearly placed into the weave; there's no way you set those in afterwards. Why would he have something like that at hand?"

"He had them hidden. Well, not hidden as much as we didn't think to look for them, since they were not among the ones he wears himself." Kíli shook his head, his eyes softening as he met Ori's gaze. "Those… those were our father's beads from when our mother courted him. Mother gave them to Fíli when he came of age so he could pass them on to his intended. I think he was planning to save them for your marriage braids, but I suppose he thought this important enough not to wait any longer."

"He…" Ori drew a deep breath, unable to speak just yet. As he tried again, he was more successful, though his voice was still quiet. "He is better, then?"

"Seems to be. He snapped out of it when he heard you'd been attacked. His eyes are clear and he speaks with reason, and it seems close enough to how Uncle was when he came out of his madness." Kíli smiled, now, careful but genuine. "I spoke with Uncle while Fíli was working on these, and he came to see him. They both agreed it's best if he stays confined for another day or two, to make sure the madness is truly gone, now that we don't have a pressing need such as war requiring him to return to his duties immediately. Besides that, though, Uncle has no problem with releasing him; he agrees with me that Fíli's mind seems clear."

"This couldn't have hurt, either," Dori mused. "If he gave away these beads of his own will, clearly the madness has let go of his mind."

"That's what I thought, too." Kíli looked at Ori again with a gentle smile. "He said he won't approach you yet, not until you do so first. I don't think he quite believed me when I told him you don't hate him."

"I'll have to tell him that myself, then." Ori turned the braid over in his hands, studying the clasp, before he very carefully fastened it into his hair, followed by its pair. They weren't quite like the real thing, the weight and balance was different, but it was still a great comfort to have them back.

Made for his hair by Fíli's own hand.

He finally burst into tears, now, and really it was just embarrassing that this would be what broke him, but none of those gathered around him seemed to blame him for it, anyway.
Fíli hadn't entered Erebor with as much trepidation as he now felt looking at the door out of his own chambers.

He was presentable now, had been made so by Bilbo and Kíli's combined efforts. He'd been dragged to bath and scrubbed like a disgruntled dwarfling, Bilbo setting out appropriate clothes while Kíli had combed and braided his hair. It had felt strange, to have his little brother weaving in even the more complicated designs when Kíli had only been capable of the simpler ones before, but they had seemed good enough when Fíli had checked himself in the mirror — the new one, brought in just this morning.

There had been some hesitation in Kíli's eyes as he had handed Fíli some simple golden beads for his hair. Not as much, though, as Fíli had felt while weaving in his courtship braids, the only ones that weren't appropriate for Kíli to do in his stead.

Now, though, his hair was done and his clothes were clean, and the only mar in his appearance was his pale and thin face — his appetite had not exactly been the best in the last few days. His head felt clear, though, more so than it had in ages, and he might have almost felt calm if he hadn't been so apprehensive about what he was going to face on the other side of the door. Like, say, most of his kith and kin.

There was no putting it off forever, though, and besides Bilbo and Kíli were looking at him expectantly, so at long last he drew a deep breath and opened the door. It opened easily enough, not barred anymore, and with another breath he stepped out into the entrance hall of the royal chambers. The Company was there.

Nearly enough, anyway, taking into account that Glóin was on the way back with the caravan from Ered Luin, though then Tauriel seemed to be filling in for him, hovering about the edge of the group. Everyone else was there, though, some still giving him wary glances, while others such as Bofur greeted him with broad smiles — and how could Bofur smile at him like that, even now, when he had not three full days ago been shouting the worst abuse he could conceive of through the door at him? Bofur was smiling, though, and so was Bombur and even Thorin, and at any other time he might have made a beeline for his uncle but right now he couldn't.

Not when he saw Ori.

Ori was standing at the back of the group, his brothers lingering close. He was wearing new clothes, some part of Fíli's mind noted, a mixture of various blues in soft fabrics. His overcoat was embroidered in royal symbols, not the proper seal of Durin that Fíli might have worn to court nor the simple raven of Erebor that decorated Tauriel's dwarven gear, but something in between, a raven set under a seven-pointed crown in as bold a declaration as was appropriate until they were properly wed.

And he was wearing his braids. Not just his scribe's braid or battle braids or any number of others he would have had the right to wear, he was wearing the braids Fíli had made for him, the courting braids clasped with the beads his father had worn.

*The scribe's new clothes*
Fíli strode towards him, intent on drawing him into his arms, but a few steps away his courage left him and he was left standing in silence.

"Fíli." Ori's voice was quiet, but then it wasn't like anyone else was even trying to speak, now. "You're better."

"I am, yes." He floundered, hoping for something intelligent to say. "You have new clothes." So much for that, then.

"I do, yes." Ori picked at the hem of his sleeve, looking a bit abashed. "They were supposed to be done for Durin's Day, but my brothers decided I needed something to cheer me up so they hurried it along."

"You look wonderful." And he did, but also pale and tired, and Fíli had never hated himself quite so much as he did right now. "Ori, I… I wanted to say…"

"Fíli." And all of a sudden Ori stepped forward and drew him into his arms, and that wasn't how this was supposed to go, this was all wrong, except all he could do was drop his head down onto Ori's shoulder and cling to him, struggling to breathe. "It's all right, Fíli."

"It's not, though," he murmured, voice low and muffled by the way he had his face pressed against Ori's shoulder. "None of this is all right. I hurt you, I'm supposed to keep you safe like I would my most precious treasure and instead I hurt you…"

"Fíli, look at me." It took him a moment and Ori's hand tugging at his hair, but finally he managed to lift his head, looking Ori in the eye. He was vaguely aware of the rest of the Company around them, but none of them mattered, not when he was looking at Ori. His Ori. "Fíli, will you listen to me?"

He nodded, wordless. Of course he would, he would do anything Ori asked, now or ever more.

"I have not forgiven you." Before he could flinch away, though, Ori went on. "That is because there is nothing to forgive. What you did you did in madness, and not in full understanding; as long as the madness is gone, I have no reason to fear you."

"You should, though." Fíli closed his eyes. "You should fear me, hate me, even. I did what a dwarf never should and raised my hand against the One I should cherish and protect above all else."

"And so you did." Ori's hand touched his arm, the wounded one, with the care and gentleness one might have reserved for a babe. "You gave me a blade and you gave me lessons, so that I might protect myself. It was you who protected me until help arrived."

"Without me you wouldn't have needed help or protection at all." He opened his eyes again, looking at Ori. His wonderful, beautiful Ori, who for all his dwarven ways was sometimes far too forgiving.

"Tell me, Fíli. If I were to attack you in madness, would you hate me for it?" There was something almost like amusement in Ori's eyes, for all that his smile was still soft. "Let's ignore for the moment that my skills would not leave a scratch on you if you were in your right mind."

"You wouldn't," Fíli breathed. "Not you." The mere thought was too absurd to contemplate.

"And why not? I am of Durin's line as well, for all that my bloodline is weak and insignificant in comparison to yours. I felt the pull of the gold as well when we first arrived in Erebor, and for all that I'm yet to fall prey to it I know the weakness in my blood well enough. If that did happen, if I did fall to madness and tried to hurt you, would you hate me for it?"
"I could never hate you." Fíli's hands tightened where he was still holding onto Ori's clothes. "You are my One. I could sooner hate the blood in my veins than ever you." Already hated himself more than he ever could hate Ori.

"Then please, believe me when I say I could not hate you." Ori ran a hand along the side of his face. "I hate the sickness, for what it made you do, for stealing away the dwarf I love. You, I could never hate. You are the other half of my heart, Fíli son of Dís, and if you have any more doubts you'd do well to remember that I do not take well to people telling me who I can or cannot love."

"Aye, 'tis true," said Nori with something almost approaching amusement in his voice, and with a startle Fíli remembered they were still surrounded by the rest of the Company. "A right little spitfire, that one is, won't even listen to his beloved brothers. If he won't hear Dori or me, you've got no hope of telling him who he should and shouldn't love."

"Indeed you don't." Ori leaned closer for a kiss, just a quick one that had his cheeks pinked as he drew away. "Well, then. I've been told Bombur has prepared a feast for the Company in celebration of your recovery, and you certainly look like you need a bite or two to eat. Perhaps we should do that, then, and let the others also see that you are all right, not just me?"

"I guess that's only fair." Fíli managed a faint smile, now. "Am I allowed to sit next to you, or will your brothers cut off important bits of my anatomy if I do?"

"Oh, I wouldn't know about that," Ori said, stepping back only to take Fíli's hand in his. "What I do know is that I will sit next to my intended, and if anyone thinks they're going to stop me they've got another think coming, that's for sure."

And really, that was all he could ask for, all he could need as long as Ori continued to look at him like that.

If he tried long enough, and hard enough, he might even deserve that gaze again.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Fíli still has his doubts and fears, but Thorin is happy to discuss them with him. Of course, others will talk as well, but fortunately the Spymaster has an ear out for such things.

Elsewhere, Gimli has a mission to accomplish... if Glóin lets him go.

Chapter Notes

If you're interested, I've posted the first chapter of Stealing Touches (And Hearts), a sidefic to this story focusing on the development of the Dwalin/Nori relationship. It will contain some spoilers about certain character aspects, though. If you'd rather wait for those to show up in this story, just ignore the sidestory for now; I'll post another note here once the spoilery parts have shown up here.

Ori was beautiful.

Of course, this was hardly a surprise to Fíli; he had known this for years, decades even, before he had truly understood beauty beyond gleaming metal and shining stones. He wasn't the only one, either. The beauty of the Ri brothers was something nobody would try to deny, even those who looked down on them for their illegitimate birth or Nori's less than respectable activities; they were sturdy dwarves, with big strong noses and gleaming braids and coarse beards, so very unlike the tall frames and unruly manes and fragile faces of the line of Durin. From his first whiskers it had been clear that Ori would more than match the family fame, and for all that he might never be quite the perfect beauty that Dori represented with his steady build and complicated plaits he had more than lived up to the promise nevertheless.

Fíli knew all of this, of course, and knew how well it was known to the others. He had spent a long time watching and wondering, hoping beyond hope nobody else thought to claim that beauty before he had the chance to do so, before he had more to offer than empty promises of a future kingdom and the burdens of leadership. He knew Ori could have had just about anyone he wanted, for all that some still grumbled about his background, and knew just as keenly that most of those who might have claimed him would not have loved him as he deserved, would not have seen the sharp mind and calm heart and brave soul that were even more beautiful than the fair face.

For all that, though, for all the time he had spent watching Ori from afar and from close by, he had never seen him more beautiful than he was now.

It was subtle changes, ones he wasn't sure most people would have caught. Fíli himself had almost not noticed it at first, too focused on not showing any weakness or giving away the truth behind his long absence to suspicious council members. After a few days, however, when he finally relaxed enough not to worry too much about every gesture he made or every word he said, he found his eyes
wandering during a particularly unruly argument and got his breath stolen away.

Ori was at his usual seat next to Dwalin, far enough down the room that Fíli could see him by turning only his head for all that Ori was placed by the wall behind him. He was wearing his new tunic and overcoat, the symbols embroidered along the hem hidden by the small lectern that held his tools, yet the soft fabrics and shades of blue made him appear more more richly dressed than most of council members with their garish colours and heavy embroideries made for the sake of having some. As he moved his head, the braids on either side of his face swayed, the lights in the council room catching on the copper and making it glint and gleam. What most caught his attention, however, was the change in Ori's posture. From his long years of watching Ori, Fíli knew he often tried to seem as small as he could without even thinking of it, head slightly down and shoulders hunched as though thinking it might ward off any malicious gaze. Now, though, he was seated straight and proper, head inclined only just enough for him to look down at his notes, the end of the quill tapping against his lips as he waited for the argument to die down enough that there might be some sensible words to write down.

After a moment, the fingers of his free hand rose to touch the braid by the side of his face, a slow, soft caress as though to draw some strength from it. Fíli swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

A small sound drew his attention even over the general din of the dissatisfied council. He turned his head back in a rush to find Bilbo looking at him from the other side of the table with a small, soft smile. Balin next to him seemed to be very studiously not looking at Fíli at all, though he also had a smile playing at his lips. As his gaze slid further along he found Thorin lifting his eyebrows at him, but even the king's face held a hint of softness before it steeled again as he rose to address the gathered council to bring them to heel again.

As the meeting finished with very little accomplished, Fíli rushed out of his seat, walking over to Ori. The scribe was busy gathering his papers and tools, but gave Fíli a smile as he saw him approach.

"Yes, my prince?" Even his voice, while quiet, was less hesitant than before, almost as though it had been just the two of them and not surely half the council watching them with sharp eyes in the wake of the recent incident.

"I, ah." And when had Fíli ever been this lost for words? "I was wondering if you had time tomorrow. I was thinking of visiting the market in Dale after the court day, and was hoping to have you for company." It held no consideration or plan, but it seemed a fine idea either way now that he thought of it. He rather suspected he would need both the break from the mountain and Ori's company after what was to be his first day standing in court again after his recovery.

To his relief, Ori smiled and nodded. "I do have some duties to attend to, but they should be done with soon after the court is over with for the day." It was, after all, the one time Ori was not required to attend Thorin in his duties except on special occasions; outside of an actual trial there was little work for a scribe during general court, and what few occasions might have come along were just as well handled by Balin who was there anyway as part of his work as Thorin's chief adviser.

"You will accompany me, then?" Fíli couldn't help a small smile. He had rather missed the chance to spend time with Ori without any distractions. During his growing madness he had cared little for it, pouring his love into the gift to be made, but now that he was in his right mind again he rather ached at not having Ori all to himself more often.

"It would be my pleasure." Ori's face flushed as Fíli sneaked to take his hand and press a kiss against his knuckles. "Now, I think the King may want your attention."

"Very well. Until tomorrow, then." Fíli gave one last, quick bow, flashed a grin at an unimpressed Dwalin and then turned towards the rest of the room. Some council members were looking at them
with expressions ranging from unease to grudging acceptance, but Fíli paid them little mind. All he cared about was Thorin, standing proud and tall and obviously waiting for him, only taking the time to nod at Bilbo with a small smile as the hobbit touched his arm before leaving the room with Balin.

"Fíli." Thorin nodded, expression calm but a hint of softness around his eyes as Fíli drew near. "Walk with me?" It was a request, fair enough, the tone and expression making this clear, but Fíli knew better than to refuse anyway. He nodded, settling into a step beside his uncle as they left the council room, waiting until they were clear of the worst of prying ears before he spoke.

"Ori seems… changed." He gave a small shrug as Thorin glanced at him. "I mean. It's not a bad thing, not at all. He just seems, well, more confident? You know he still hesitates about a lot of things, but I could see none of that today."

"Aye, I've noticed the same." Thorin gave him a solemn nod. "If one could truly say anything good might come from a mess such as this, that would be the thing. I spoke with Bilbo about it, and he believes it's the power of suggestion. With you… indisposed, Ori had to appear as though nothing was the matter beyond a passing illness, lest anyone suspect there was more at play. I'm not sure how many were convinced, but it seems Ori at least grew more confident of his own calm."

"Right." Fíli frowned. "And after the second attack?" He wouldn't have blamed Ori for retreating back into his shell after such an incident, doubted anyone would. There were few enough ways he might have been more grievously wronged, and strong and proud dwarves had lost their will over less than that before.

"We worried after that, I'll grant you that. He requested time away from his duties, and was granted as much; he was shaken enough I was almost surprised he managed to appear at the trial." Again, Thorin did not say, but Fíli heard it well enough anyway, his heart clenching in his chest. "Then, however, he received your braids, and soon after that the clothes his brothers had been working on at my request. It seemed to chase away the worst of his despair, though I was still somewhat concerned for a time."

"You're not concerned anymore, though."

"No, I'm not. I knew he was a strong one, just never realised just quite how strong." Thorin shook his head. "Bilbo thinks it's because, well, the worst has happened. There are doubtless many things he has been nervous about, particularly in terms of what others think of him. Now, however, he has been attacked over such vile thoughts. Not only was he able to defend himself against further injury, but those who wronged him were punished, and even some dwarves who weren't overly fond of him before have taken his side in the matter. So now, the worst has happened, and he finds he can not only survive it, but come out stronger on the other side. Of course that would give him more confidence."

"It's good to see, whatever the reason." Fíli managed a smile. "I've always known he's clever and brave, once he gets over the worst of his shyness. I'm glad he's finally starting to show it to everyone else, too."

"Indeed. Now we just need to get him to actually speak up every now and then." Thorin paused for a moment, though he continued walking as before. "And you? How are you faring? I'm afraid we haven't had the chance to speak as much as we should have these past few days."

"I'm… getting better." It was the best he could say, in any case. This was a wound that wouldn't heal so easily; indeed, he was not sure if it would ever truly scar over. "Sometimes I almost think I'm fine. Then some stray thought comes, or I see a glinting gem that's particularly beautiful, and suddenly it feels as though I should hide away or I'll slide right back in."
Thorin gave a slow nod. "I would tell you it gets easier, but I'm afraid it really doesn't, just less frequent. I still have to check myself at times, when it seems some unfortunate thought gets too close to those I've shaken myself free from."

"Do you have dreams?" Fíli wasn't sure he dared to voice his question, not quite, but he needed to know. "About what you did? What… you could have done?"

"Aye, on occasion. Not as many as I did right after the battle, when sometimes I woke up with a scream every night, but even so I have them still. I'll see the battlefield strewn with my kith and kin when I cared not to come to their aid, or myself holed up with cold and dead gold while the blood of my line soaks the slopes of the mountain." A shadowed expression crossed Thorin's face, darker than Fíli could remember ever seeing on him before. "Sometimes… sometimes I dream that Gandalf could not stay my hand. That I cast my very heart and soul from the battlements to the stones below, never to be recovered."

"How do you stand it?" Fíli touched his own arm, now, where a bandage was still firmly wrapped around it underneath his clothes, covering the wound that had stalled him just enough to keep him from committing the most grievous crime. He did not speak of his own dreams, the screaming, crying nightmares where Thorin and Kíli were too late to stop him, where his first strike dealt more than a mere scratch. Thorin, he suspected, did not need to be told of such. "How can you still get up in the morning and do your duty when you know what you almost did?"

"I like to think of them as a reminder, such as I need any." Thorin's voice was quiet and soft, only just carrying over the sound of their footsteps. "I hope that if I but remember the pain of those visions, if I can hold on to the grief they would bring, that pain will hold me back if I ever come close to falling to madness again."

"Right." Fíli swallowed. "I feel like I'm being torn apart. On one hand, I want to be close to Ori, to make up for the ways I hurt him, to make sure he's happy and healthy and protected… yet on the other hand, I can't help but wonder if he'd be better off without me."

"That is, I'm afraid, a choice that is his to make, not yours. All we can do is try to make sure they will not regret it." They walked in silence for a moment. "You have noticed, I'm sure, that some council members are missing."

"Aye, and not only Sora. I've meant to ask you about it, but wasn't sure I'd like to hear the answer." Had had quite enough on his plate just trying to act normal.

"It's because of the Arkenstone." Thorin touched his shoulder briefly. "I know you've been told already I had it taken away; what happened to it since, I am not certain, though I can only hope it's hidden away never to be found. Of course, this did not meet much approval with the council."

"Of course." Not that Fíli could blame them, not entirely. He knew well enough the lure of the shining gem, and even if it hadn't sunk its claws quite as deep into others as it had in Thorin and himself, he knew it was an object of wonder to any dwarf who saw it. And that was without the vows that had been sworn upon it.

"Kíli and I told them that if any of them were unwilling to follow me for giving away the stone, they were free to leave the mountain. This quieted most of the grumbles, but some were actually adamant enough to head back to Iron Hills." Thorin's lips twitched. "Funny thing, they were all on my list of people to be replaced anyway once the bulk of our people return, as either I or Nori had marked them as being of dubious loyalty."

"Good riddance, then." Fíli nodded. "You're not afraid this displeasure might spread?"
"A few months ago, I might have been. Now I am not quite as concerned. Those returning are slow in coming, yet we have more arrivals each week, dwarves who have peddled their trade on the road or in the cities of men coming back to their homes. Those who return now care for nothing but the retaking of the mountain; were there to be a more serious grievance against law or custom, I might worry for the stability, but few who are not nobles will care much for what the king does with the king's jewel. At least I do not think this will cause enough unrest to change anything major before Dís arrives with the main caravans."

"If you are sure." He knew enough of the matters of ruling to understand it was a constant balancing act, that for all his birthright and accomplishments Thorin still needed the support of his council if not their full acceptance of each of his deeds. However, he also knew that the balance became a bit easier to hold with each dwarf who arrived in the mountain and gladly swore loyalty to the king, that even an unpopular choice could be carried through if questioning it was not worth losing the king's favour. Thorin had made clear this was not a decision he would back down on, and the majority of the council had decided it was not important enough a matter for them to oppose him.

They walked in silence again, until they came across a door Fíli knew well enough. The guard posted at the door gave them little notice, a short bow as the king and crown prince walked into the throne room, the one place in the mountain that was theirs by right. Even now Thorin was silent, until the door had fallen firmly shut behind them and they were some ways into the cavernous hall.

"I am thinking of a new throne, once we have the workers to set to it." This made Fíli glance at him in some surprise, but Thorin ignored the look. "There is no gem wondrous enough to take the place of the Arkenstone, so I will not even try to replace it. I might leave it be as a reminder, to myself and those around me both, but for all that I hope I never quite forget the terror of the depths of my madness it is not something to be building a kingdom upon. The mountain needs her king, and a steady king at that; I'd rather not take a throne built to enshrine the madness and folly of our line."

"It's not a bad thought." Fíli found his steps slowing down as they neared the unadorned throne, but Thorin either didn't notice or didn't draw attention to it. "Hire a few stone workers from Iron Hills, perhaps, to get started on the design, and when mother arrives you'll have enough skilled hands to have it done by Durin's Day."

"That's what I have thought. I'll need to hire a goldsmith, in any case, to make a crown for Bilbo; that is not a matter I wish to leave for the last moment, and I'm sure Dáin will have a few skilled dwarves for me to borrow for a while." Thorin glanced at Fíli. "Balin wants to make a big production of it all. There's the wedding, of course, with Bilbo crowned as my consort, and the remembrance of the battle; however, he also wants a proper coronation, with myself crowned as king and you and Kíli as princes."

Now, Fíli frowned. "We already had you crowned, though. Before Dáin even left the first time, so he could swear his fealty to you." A minor detail, but an important one. The Iron Hills were their own realm, and stronger in numbers even back when Erebor had been teeming with life; even so, they were founded by a younger line, and thus Dáin was the Lord of Iron Hills to Thorin's King Under the Mountain. Dáin himself seemed to have little mind to such details, any more than Thorin would have presumed to hold or demand actual power over his cousin's people, but there were those who found this a particularly chafing matter.

"We did. However, the ceremony was small, and while it was as valid as any it is not what a people returning from exile needs." Thorin shook his head, a stray braid falling over his shoulder. "Balin thinks repeating the ceremony with more pomp and circumstance, and allowing you and your brother the same honour, would be precisely what our people need to confirm their faith in the new kingdom. And I have to say, I do not disagree. To have a crown upon my head is all well and good,
but I'm not much of a king yet with my people yet lingering on the road."

"So you'll have a new crown and a throne and a consort and heirs all, presented to our people with all the glory and gleam we can muster." Fíli nodded. "Not a bad thought, I don't think. We'll have to invite others, too, from all kingdoms who possibly might send someone, to make it clear to all that Erebor is a living mountain again. That will invite more trade as well, when there's more than just rumours of our realm rebuilt."

"You're thinking well, my lad. Yes, we will show all what the dwarves of Erebor can do, and start our rule with as much prosperity as we hope to have going on." Thorin's lips twitched into a small smile. "I was thinking of two other thrones, one by each side for my consort and my heir. I've seen well enough how misguided I may be, and it is not my wish to rule this realm on my own. Even if you may not always be seated there, I at least want all to see that you each have a place at my hand."

"Even if I may not be the best choice?"

At last, Thorin came to a halt, turning to face him head on. "Fíli, you are my chosen heir," he said, a heavy hand landing on Fíli's shoulder. "Not just because you were raised so, not just because you are my sister's eldest son, but because I know you to be a dwarf of integrity and trust you will grow into wisdom as well. If I doubted you for your gold sickness, I'd have to cast out my own crown as well; indeed, I find my faith in you only grown for the fact that you fought the madness and triumphed over it, rather than diminished. I've no doubts about my choice in naming you my heir, and indeed, even if the Valar were to bless me with a child of my own, the seat at my right would still be rightfully yours."

Fíli sought the words to respond, but found them all stuck in his throat. At last, he managed to make some sound at last, for all that it was little more than a whisper. "You spoke to me once, about a document you had written. "Of what should be done if you were to fall in madness again, and couldn't be brought out of it.""

"I did." Thorin's hand remained, heavy and warm.

"I want one made for myself as well." He closed his eyes. "Ori already had to wound me to escape from my madness. I know you found no fault in his actions, and I know Kili would not either, but I..." He trailed off, trying to find the words. "If, Mahal forbid, it were to happen again, I want to make sure he would not be punished for doing what he had to." He swallowed. "I want to make sure my madness will not hurt anyone after I am free of it."

Thorin was quiet for a moment before squeezing his shoulder. "That, we can certainly do." His voice was low, soothing, as though Fíli were again a mere dwarfling quaking after a nightmare. It was close enough, anyway. "Anything you need to find some peace."

"I'm not sure I can, anymore," Fíli murmured. It weighed on him too much, the realisation of what he had tried to do, of how low he had fallen. "Not yet, at least."

"It will become easier in time." He was drawn into a hug, now, strong arms reaching around him, and Fíli went easily enough, leaning against his uncle's strong chest. "That, I promise." It was, as Fíli knew with a sting to his heart, the only promise he could make on the matter.

For now, it would have to do.

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Bofur sighed a bit as he settled into a chair in the corner, pulling his ale closer to himself. He was
tired, as might only be expected after spending the last couple of days exploring new mines. Really,
the sensible approach would have been to head home to have a bath and some sleep, but at the
moment what he really needed was a bit of ale and the lazy chatter of a small tavern around him.
This was familiar, reminding him of life back in Ered Luin, when he'd head out for a drink with the
other miners after a long and hard day of work. Even if nothing else was really the same.

It wasn't a bad place, the tavern. It was busier now than it had been when it was first established,
with more dwarves arriving in Erebor at a slow but steady trickle, and it was certainly the easier
option when faced with the possibility of walking over to Dale just to get a drink. The owner, a
plucky young dwarf from Dáin's army who had started the place by putting together her meagre
savings and the gold Thorin had paid her in compensation for the eye she had lost in the Battle of
Five Armies, was kept busy enough that she had hired a couple of helpers, young men from Dale
who were quite happy to make the hike to and from Dale and duck at low doorways in exchange for
the coin she paid reliably and on time. Bofur knew well enough how rare and precious a job like that
was when there was little work to be had, and for all that Dale was building up fast and well it had to
be a dream come true for young ones who had grown up under the rule of the Master of Laketown.

Really, he couldn't wait to see how the town and mountain both would fare in a few years. By then
trade should be running in earnest, and the mountain would be nice and full again. They'd need quite
a few taverns more at that point, though Bofur doubted he'd be easily tempted anywhere else. He
rather liked the atmosphere, and besides the seat was becoming familiar.

A tankard was set down on the table in front of him, startling him out of his thoughts. A familiar face
grinned at him under a ratty hood. "Mind if I sit down here, Yer Lordship?"

"Knock yourself out." Bofur waved a hand at another seat, prompting Nori to flop down with all the
lack of grace one might expect of someone in such dusty, worn clothes. Bofur certainly knew the
attitude well enough, the bone-deep weariness of a good day's work, for all that his own clothes were
now somewhat finer fabrics underneath the dust. "That is, if you promise not to call me that again."

"Oh?" Nori smirked before taking a gulp of his own ale. He really looked quite different, for all that
his disguise wasn't too complicated. A bit of dirt on his face, old clothes and a hood, hair flattened
and posture slumped just enough not to draw too much attention. "Would be right dishonourable of
me to do so, Yer Lordship."

Bofur groaned. "We both know damn well I've only got a title because Thorin wanted to annoy his
council." Why he had to do it at Bofur's expense, he had no idea, but Bombur had been so very
excited at the news and Bifur's eyes had been shining with proud tears, so really he couldn't have
refused even if he really wanted to. "Could have picked someone else, really. I've no idea how to act
like a nob."

"You and me both, my friend." Nori sighed. "It's unfair, really. I can blend in where I need to, even
when it involves the high and mighty, but really I shouldn't have to. Doesn't come natural to me, not
at all."

"You at least are of Durin's line." Bofur snorted. "Would've thought that sort of thing would be in
your blood or some such."

"Oh, sure, our bastard bloodline is all the rage now." Nori rolled his eyes. "Dori handles it well
enough now that we're allowed to take actual pride in our blood, makes me almost afraid for any
more tailors and dressmakers who might show up and end up under his iron fist. And Ori, well, he's
taken to it all like a duck to water, following the king about like that's what he's actually supposed to
do. Me, though? Nah. I'm much more comfortable in the shadows."
"Or in a tavern trying to pass for a miner." Bofur lifted an eyebrow. "Can't see how you're fooling anyone, really. One would think a face like yours isn't easily forgotten."

"Careful, I'll think you're getting overly complimenting."

"What, like your virtue would be in danger from someone commenting on your pretty face?"

"Alas, my virtue's well and truly spoken for, and I doubt you'd want to challenge Dwalin for it." Nori gave an exaggerated sigh. "Had to reach a compromise of sorts, you see, with Balin and Dori and the other fusspots. So we admit we're a thing, if nothing else, and they stop pushing for us to be nice and proper and formal and settle for knowing we won't either be running around with our pants around our ankles."

"To think I'd see the day the notorious Nori settles down in at least one aspect." Bofur grinned as Nori gave him a half-hearted glare. "So what's it like, being a dwarf spoken for?"

"Not as bad as you'd think, actually. If nothing else, Dwalin knows how to handle his war hammer." Nori smirked at his expression. "Oh, come on, let's not be prudish. I've heard your stories, remember, even the ones you wouldn't tell near the young ones for fear of Dori or Thorin taking something hard and heavy to your privates for corrupting them. Most unbecoming for a lord, really."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't a lord then, now was I?"

"True enough, true enough." Nori nodded sagely. "So how's your life, being actual nobility with a title and everything? Feel the pressure of your duties yet?"

"Still feels a bit unbelievable, to be honest." Bofur shrugged. "I joined to get free ale, really, not because of some lofty goals. Well, that and to look after Bombur. A big brother's got to do what a big brother's got to do." For all that he hadn't been actually bigger than Bombur for a long time. "I'd have been perfectly happy not to worry about coin for the rest of my life so I could focus on mining and making toys. Would've been nice, you know, being able to give toys to the little ones and never take coin for it. And now suddenly I've got to give orders and instructions and make mining plans and all that, like I'm actually qualified."

"Thorin seems to think you are, and since he's the one wearing the crown, don't see how we're to disagree with him. Besides, better you than one of those types who's never swung a pickax and thinks he knows better than anyone just because he can recite his fathers back farther than the average dwarf."

"Suppose so." He sighed. "Really, I'm happy that Thorin's trusting me. And you're right, it's much better than taking orders from someone who doesn't know the first thing about what we're doing. But it still feels strange, you know? I never thought I'd be anywhere I'd be giving orders, save for maybe a couple of other miners if I lucked on a really good position somehow; I sure didn't expect to ever be the one drafting maps and directing mining teams, and all that with some rookie always bobbing down and calling me all sort of high and mighty names as though I don't get my hands dirty with all the rest of them."

"I know the feeling." Nori saluted him with his tankard. "At least I get to dress up like the common dwarf every now and then. You can't just leave your title at the door."

"Wish I could." Bofur snorted. "Not like your situation is that much better. Just wait till your little brother's actually wed to a prince."

"I'm rather avoiding thinking about it, thanks." Nori grimaced a bit. "Still can't quite believe he's a
grown dwarf, sometimes, but so they keep telling me. And, well, I suppose if he's got to take with someone, it should at least be someone who can take care of him."

"Yeah, well, not like you can get on his case for falling for a full-on Durin, anyway." Bofur grinned at the glare that was directed his way. "So is that why I find you here? Trying to escape the respectable side of life for a bit?"

"That, and listening to gossip. Not that there seems to be much tonight, been quiet." Nori shook his head, taking a gulp of his ale. "You heard anything interesting?"

"Not as much as I'd like. I try to make people relax around me, makes me feel less awkward, but they still get careful sometimes about what they say, particularly when it comes to the rest of the Company." He paused, not sure how to voice this so that Nori wouldn't get all protective. Bofur knew the feeling, he really did, but he was also less likely to channel his brotherly instincts into physical harm against anyone. "I've heard a few things lately, though. About Fíli."

"Figures." Nori nodded, looking grim for a moment before he relaxed a bit. "He disappeared suddenly and without explanation, and was obviously worn when he came back. Of course people would talk."

"Exactly." Bofur shook his head. "There's, well, there's a few different rumours going around. Some have even tried to ask me, but all I've said is that he was unwell and is now recovering." He gave a wry chuckle. "Also, I might be a bit slower to remind everyone to get back to work when they're passing on the more harmless theories."

"Knew I could count on you." Nori's lips tugged into a smirk. "Care to share these theories they're throwing around? I've heard a few, but it's always better to have many sources."

"Oh, you know. Some are dangerously close, those who have heard of Thorin's madness, especially given that the king doesn't really deny it. That was the worst when Fíli was still away; now that he's returned to duty the rumour's dying somewhat. Few of them believe he could have recovered already, it seems, so they'll rather think it was just some passing sickness."

"Well, it's not every day that we luck out because people think the situation should be worse than it is." Nori snorted. "I'd have thought that Thorin getting rid of the Arkenstone would feed that rumour still, though."

"Oh, it does. But not many know that the stone makes the madness worse, remember, certainly not when Thorin's ruled under it without any apparent trouble. Some do say it's just plain cursed, though, either from the start or from spending so long in the dragon's claws. Say that's what made Fíli fall ill, and why Thorin got rid of it."

"That's not a bad one, really. Makes people less disgruntled about losing the symbol, and offers an explanation for Fíli's absence. Will have to see if I can encourage that one with a few well-placed words here and there." Nori nodded sagely. "And the rest? Anything more interesting than just a bad spring cold?"

"I've heard a couple saying Fíli was injured in a fight for Ori's honour, but that hasn't really gotten anywhere. Guess people figured there'd have to be a second party to that fight. Some are suggesting that would've been Sora and his thugs, but usually someone's sensible enough to point out Thorin probably would have wanted someone punished for injuring his heir badly enough for him to be unable to attend his duties for so long."

"Well, you know. Some might argue he's trying to hide it to save Fíli's reputation as a fighter and
took the attack on Ori as an opportunity to have his revenge without arousing suspicion."

"If that was the case, you'd think Sora would have spoken up when he realised he was lost." Bofur snorted. "Even so, that's not even the most ridiculous one I've heard."

"Oh?" Nori's eyebrows rose high, braids and all. "So what's this even more interesting rumour you have for me? Speak, my good lord, I need to know these things to do my job."

"This one I've only heard when people are really quite tired or in their cups, mind, a bit of fun, that's all." Bofur scratched the back of his head, then adjusted his hat. Nori's gaze on him felt really intense all of a sudden, and he had to do his best not to squirm like a dwarfling caught with his hand in a pie. "Just. I don't think anyone's really quite serious about all this, but, you know. There's talk, there always is."

"Right. Out with it."

"Some say Fíli's actually a princess and not prince and it's been hidden so people wouldn't question him as an heir to the throne. Or, well, her, I guess." As Nori's eyebrows rose even higher, Bofur hurried to continue. "And, well, that he and Ori hadn't been entirely proper and all. In the matters of courtship, that is. And if those two were true, then his sudden absence would be because he's taken with a child and had bad sickness as a result."

Nori stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Oh, that's a good one," he guffawed. "Aye, seems clear that would originate with the Iron Hills dwarves, they don't know Dís after all. Any dwarf who's grown up under Thorin's rule would know she'd damn well raise a daughter as a daughter, and that Thorin wouldn't care a bit either way when naming his heir."

"I told you it's ridiculous." Bofur shook his head with a chuckle, then frowned as he went to drink more of his ale and found the tankard empty. "They'll figure out it's a load of orc dung soon enough, when he doesn't start to grow larger with this miracle child."

"Aye, that'll sort itself out." Nori snorted. "Though do tell me, how do people react to that rumour? I'm curious, now."

"Mostly? They seem to think it'd be a blessing from Mahal if the royal line was bearing children, actually. Seems a good sign to me, that, especially if our esteemed king does plan to try for babes with Bilbo's hobbit magic."

"Aye, it is that." Nori emptied the rest of his own drink, then stood from his seat. "I think I owe you a drink for that, my friend. And once I've got you that, you can tell me what else your miner folk say about my darling baby brother, whether or not it involves his beloved prince."

"Seems fair enough a trade for me." Hey, he'd done worse things for free ale.

At least passing rumours to the Spymaster seemed unlikely to land him with another unwanted title.

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"Da, you'll really have to let go soon, you know." Gimli was trying not to sound too exasperated, really he was, but his father was making it quite tricky. This was the second time Glóin had let go of him only to latch onto him again, as though he couldn't bear the thought of seeing him go. "There's little point in making me ride out ahead if I don't actually leave before the rest of the caravan."

"Are you quite sure you should be going alone?" Glóin at least drew back enough to simply rest his hands on Gimli's shoulders, tears glimmering in his eyes for all that he clearly tried to hide them. "I
could come with you, you know. Ride out together, like father and son. There's no need for you to be facing those blasted elves all on your own!"

"I've already told you, I'll be fine. I'll have a raven with me so you'll know if anything happens. Besides, Lady Dís and Amad need you here with them. Can't very well have us both riding out to have fun while leaving the two of them with a whole huge caravan to deal with." Besides, he really doubted it would be a good idea for Glóin to come along in any case. He loved his father, really he did, and Glóin was an honourable dwarf and an excellent father and husband, but a diplomat he was not. Gimli had heard the story of the horrific insults against himself and his mother often enough to know that Glóin would not be a friend of the elves of Mirkwood any time soon.

"But there might still be orcs around, or goblins! Or that bear man, I still don't think he's all that trustworthy, really. Oh, what will I do if you're hurt somehow, my gem? What if you get lost, or hungry? I can't bear for you to be without me!" And again he was drawn into a desperate embrace with some more wailing and tears.

Gimli was tempted to grumble something about how his father might have wanted to let him come along on the Quest, then, but that would have accomplished nothing at best, and at worst it might have inspired Glóin to suddenly decide he was still too young to go anywhere out of his parents' sight. He settled for sharing an exasperated glance with his mother and the princess over Glóin's shoulder before patting his father on the shoulder as best as he could.

"I promise I won't get into a fight I cannot win. You lot already took care of most of the orcs and goblins, remember? And I promise I won't go into the forest on my own. If no elves show up, I'll wait for you. I've got plenty of rations, too, and if all else fails I'll head back and meet with you again. There's no cause for you to worry about me, honest."

"A father always worries, though," Glóin sobbed. "What if those pointy-eared bastards try to imprison you as well? Or do something worse?"

"Then they are even more stupid than I knew them to be, to invite diplomatic incident like that. You'll know if I've entered the forest, and our treaties say I've every right to do so, anyway, even if I were not on a task from Lady Dís. For Thranduil to forget that would be the height of folly when he wants Erebor to stand between him and the rest of the world to the east and north."

"Gimli is right in any case, darling," his mother finally spoke up. "You'll have to let him go ahead, or there's no point in him going at all. You've given him an axe and packed his pony yourself. There's nothing more for you to do but let go. He's more than capable of handling himself."

"I — you're right, of course." Even so, Glóin let out another sniffle as he finally let Gimli go entirely. "You take care of yourself, you hear? Or else I'll be truly upset!"

"I promise I will, Da. Wouldn't want to make you upset, after all." Gimli nodded at his mother, who had already embraced him earlier and reminded him not to behave like a barbarian, and gave a short bow to Lady Dís. "Amad, my Lady. I will see you in Erebor."

"Indeed you will." Dís smiled at him. "Now go, before your father changes his mind yet again."

"Aye, I will." Gimli chuckled, then stepped out of his father's reach to mount his pony, already laden with supplies. Lady Dís nodded at the raven sitting at her shoulder, and it flew over to him, sitting down and settling for a nap. Gimli waved his hand in farewell to his family, then spurred his pony on, leading them toward the edge of the camp where families and solitary dwarves alike were packing up their things for another day on the road. His pony perhaps wasn't that much faster than they could travel, not with the weight of his supplies and the difficult road, but he could set up and
take down camp much faster than a full caravan, giving him more hours in the day to do his travel. He’d reach Mirkwood well before the rest, have a few words with the elves, then arrive in Erebor in time to notify the king of the approaching caravan.

Really, it wasn't nearly as exciting as his father was making it out to be. He knew Glóin and his group hadn't faced any significant danger on their way to Ered Luin, certainly nothing that a sturdy dwarf with a skilled axe couldn't face on his own, and for his young age Gimli knew he wasn't a bad hand at a weapon. Truly, he rather feared the greatest danger he would be facing on the road was being bored out of his mind.

Honestly. What kind of excitement could a dwarf possibly face in Mirkwood, of all places?
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Bilbo and Tauriel are about to learn new things, which may be useful in diplomacy. Thorin, on the other hand, spends time with a fellow king, though this may indirectly lead to him getting scolded by Bilbo.

Of course, nothing good can follow from an elven prince meeting a dwarven lordling...

"So." Bilbo settled down in a seat, looking across at Balin. Tauriel tried to relax in her own seat, doing her best not to think of how much the situation resembled the time she'd been confined the two while Kíli was missing. "You wanted to see us?"

"Aye, that I did." Balin nodded. "Thank you both for coming; I know there are plenty of other things you could be doing besides listening to an old dwarf."

"I do not think you would summon us without a good reason." Balin had actually sent word to Dale asking for her presence. She had to say she appreciated the gesture of making it a separate meeting, rather than having been dragged away when she was in the mountain to meet Kíli.

"I do hope this will turn out to be a good reason." Balin stroked his beard as though in thought. "I have been asked by Thorin to begin your lessons."

"Our lessons?" Bilbo glanced at Tauriel, mirroring the puzzlement that surely showed on her face as well. "Lessons in what? And begin? I mean, you have been teaching me a great many things already, though I'll admit very little of it has been formal instruction."

"Indeed." Tauriel frowned. "I'll admit I am still far from an expert in the dwarven ways, but I'd like to think I have learnt something at least of your customs by now." Of things such as the meanings of braids, for example.

"Aye, that is true. However, I'm about to teach you something that is much more important than the correct way to bow or address someone in Westron." Tauriel did not miss the somewhat unnecessary addition. Judging by the sharp breath she heard from Bilbo, he hadn't, either. "Now, it's time the two of you start learning Khuzdul."

"Khuzdul?" Bilbo echoed. "Are you sure? I thought that was forbidden to others. Some of the dwarves certainly seem upset that I've picked up what few words I have."

"And it is, by custom and law both. Indeed, if you were betrothed to anyone but the king and his prince, I would not think of teaching you before you are wed to them, however fond I am of you both. However, considering the positions you are to take, and the fact you are both considered dwarf-friends by the court of Erebor, Thorin has given me the permission to teach you."

"I know I would be happy to learn it, if I am allowed." She knew a word or two, those that she had picked up from Kíli and his family, but she did wish to learn more, if only to understand what Kíli sometimes told her when he wished to be teasing and switched to Khuzdul, knowing she would not know more than an endearment or two.
Then there was the hope of understanding all those murmurs that weren’t quite quiet enough to be
whispers, boldly exchanged within sight of her in the confidence she would not understand the
insults offered.

"The same goes for me." Bilbo nodded. "I have wondered, sometimes, how you view your
language; from what I understand all dwarves speak it, yet you often do not speak it even when none
but dwarves are present. I know I’ve more than once come to a conversation that was going on in
Westron before I ever stepped into the room."

"Our language is sacred to us, as you may know, because it was taught to our forefathers by Mahal
himself. This is why we are wary about speaking much of it around outsiders." Balin shook his head.
"Among some of our clans they only speak Khuzdul among themselves, that is true. However, we
have spent a long time in exile, and have been forced to keep our own language to our homes and
caves while we speak Westron elsewhere. As a result, we may use either language when speaking
with each other."

"That does seem understandable." Tauriel nodded. "I have heard some dwarves do not speak much
of Westron, yet among your people few seem to have that problem."

"Indeed. Necessity has led us to master both languages, though we still view Khuzdul as the more
important one." Balin gave them a deep frown. "As you learn it, we will expect you to keep to the
same customs, not to teach it to those who do not have the right."

"We would not betray your trust." Not when she knew just how fragile it had to be.

"Aye, I’ve faith in you two." Balin’s look softened just a bit. "We’ll start with the spoken language, as
that will be more useful by far; in time, I expect you won’t have trouble learning to read and write as
well. I will be responsible for your formal instruction, when I have the time, but I’m sure any of the
Company will be glad to aid you as well if you want the practice."

"Right." Bilbo nodded. "I'm assuming we shouldn't speak of this outside the Company, though?"

"Not just yet, no." This drew a chuckle from Balin. "After you're wed, you won't have to hide a
thing; you'll be legally dwarves when that happens, and none can deny your right to learn then.
Before then, though, it's best if we keep things under the wraps, for all that the king has given his
blessing and permission."

"So you are saying I am allowed to learn your language, yet until Kíli and I are wed, no dwarf
outside the Company will have any idea I might understand their words?" Tauriel found her lips
quirking into a smile. "Why, Master Balin, you drive a hard bargain, but I suppose I am forced to
accept."

"I rather thought you might see the advantage in it." Balin smiled in return. "Shall we begin, then?"

It was not an easy lesson by any means, for all that Balin kept his lesson quite basic. Nothing Tauriel
knew of other languages could come to her aid, Khuzdul being quite different from any of them.
When at last Balin announced they were done for the day, she felt drained in a way she hadn't in a
long time, new words and structures buzzing about her head like restless bees.

"There's one more thing before I let you both go, though." Tauriel rather heroically bit back a groan.
"Ori has agreed to write down some learning aids for you when he has the time, lists of useful words
and the like. It might take him a while because he is quite busy already, but I have no doubt he will
come through. In return, however, he has made a request I suspect only the two of you can fulfil,
though Tauriel the most."
"Of course," Bilbo said without hesitation, and Tauriel found herself nodding along. "We'd be glad to repay his help. What is it he wants?"

Balin sighed as though all the sorrows of the world were upon his shoulders. "Apparently, he wishes to learn to speak and write Elvish."

Tauriel couldn't help but laugh at the sorrowful look on Balin's face. The request wasn't that much of a surprise; Ori had been curious about aspects of elven culture before, so it would follow that a scribe with such interests would like to learn the language as well. "Oh, I'd be glad to help. We elves are not quite so jealous of our tongue, after all."

"Perhaps we should have some meetings now and then," Bilbo suggested. "You can speak Khuzdul, Ori Elvish, and I both of those as my skill allows, and we can correct each other."

"That sounds quite sensible, yes." Tauriel's lips curved a bit. "After all, it seems more than prudent that the next two Consorts be able to communicate with our neighbours without needing a translator."

"Indeed." Bilbo returned her smile. "After all, we can hardly count on our dear Durins to handle diplomatic matters with elves."

"I ought to be offended on my cousins' behalf, yet all I can do is agree." Balin sighed, shaking his head. "Our line makes for strong leaders, not so much in the way of diplomats. I have some hope for a couple of the younger ones, but not as much as I'd like to."

"Oh, I don't know. Kíli has a way with words, I would say." Tauriel couldn't help but smile at the memory of his sweet words to her even in his fever.

"Oh, the lad has a tongue on him, that's for sure. Now perhaps one day he'll grow up enough to know when to use it and how." Balin gave another long-suffering sigh that might have been more convincing if he also hadn't been wearing an utterly fond smile. "Indeed, I'm glad I'll have the two of you and young Ori on my side, or I'd count our very king and princes the greatest threats to the stability of Erebor this day."

"You are exaggerating, my friend." Bilbo chuckled, a hand coming up to touch one of his courtship braids. "They come only barely second after the general stubbornness of dwarves."

Balin muttered something in Khuzdul, words they had not yet learnt, and judging by the tone Tauriel assumed they would not be a part of any polite lesson. Then, this simply meant she would have to find someone else willing to teach her such words.

They would probably prove very useful for dealing with dwarves.

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The unfortunate truth was, Thorin did not often have the time to concern himself with the world outside his gates.

It wasn't that he sought to isolate Erebor like Thranduil did his woods, for all that this often was the dwarven way. He remembered the old days of alliances and trade, knew that his realm would not get far without the support of those around them. Far from disapproving, he was glad to know that his people, few as they were yet, often travelled the short walk to Dale for trade or work, was rather hoping they would have the men of Dale coming up to the mountain once they had more of their own wares to offer for trade. No, Thorin had no intention of separating Erebor from the rest of the world, he simply had little time to go out and see it for himself.
It really shouldn't have taken so much of his time, as he sometimes found himself thinking with some regret, but the work of a king was seldom done. When he wasn't required for a council meeting or open court, he was often inspecting some area of the mountain or simply buried in paperwork. When he did have the time to breathe, he often chose to spend it with his family or simply rest in his quarters rather than go out of the mountain.

This didn't mean he was entirely ignorant of what was happening outside. He did know the battlefield had been cleared over the winter, and that the people of Dale were busily reclaiming all fertile land around the city for growing crops, an ambition that he certainly supported. He'd seen proof of such the few times he had ventured to the gate, had heard Bilbo speaking of their efforts and his attempts to help them with his knowledge of the hobbit ways of farming. The truth was, however, that Thorin could not recall the last time he had actually walked outside the mountain; it had been weeks, certainly, if not months.

As such, it was with some trepidation that he followed the urging from a rather too amused Nori and went outside.

It was a lovely day, warm and sunny, and Thorin was quite happy the day had no formal occasions that would have demanded his robes or cloak; a light tunic and trousers with a shirt were quite adequate to keep him warm, and any more would have proved stifling in the sun. Not that he would have needed to venture far. While the sun shone bright over the new fields and he could see a few people working there, the important event seemed to be set up right before his gates.

There was a stretch of untouched land before the gates; it had been agreed between Thorin and Bard it would only be courteous not to reach the fields right up to the moat even though they counted themselves as allies and the fields would benefit both realms in kind. It had been left as it was once the remains of the battle had been cleaned out, rocks and stone littering soil so thin it would hardly have been worth the effort of trying to work on anyway. Half of this bare area was now occupied, with humans and dwarves alike, with the other left bare and apparently the centre of attention.

Well, bare aside from the archery targets set some ways away.

It was almost amusing how easily he managed to make his way through the crowd without gaining attention when he wasn't wearing a crown. Indeed, he had to squeeze his way through some denser parts instead of having everyone step out of the way. However, it seemed the people of Dale were at least courteous enough to let the dwarves claim the front of the crowd instead of being stuck behind the taller human forms, so eventually he came up to one of the three people standing a bit further from the crowd.

"King Bard." Thorin inclined his head, resisting the urge to smile as the man seemed slightly startled by his appearance. "I hadn't realised you were taking the chance to further corrupt the young of my realm."

"No corruption going on here, oh King Under the Mountain, just a friendly competition." Bard waved a hand to where Kili and Tauriel were currently stood side by side, speaking to each other even as they eyed the targets at the end of the makeshift range. "In fact, I do believe it's your future consort who set this up."

"Bilbo did?" Thorin lifted his eyebrows, looking over to where Bard was pointing. Indeed, Bilbo was standing there with Bard's children, apparently deep in conversation with the younger girl. It made Thorin feel rather warm inside to see such a thing. "This does seem rather well organised for a spur of the moment thing."

"It's all Kili's fault, really." Fili came up to Bard's other side, now, a small smirk on his face. "He
often practises with Tauriel, and he's been wanting to try his skill against Bard for a while now. So since Bard was going to be here anyway to look at the fields, Bilbo had someone set up targets."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me at all?" Thorin's lips twitched. "And if this is to be such a competition, why are you not taking part, Bowman?"

"Oh, I plan to, once these two get their own matter settled." Bard chuckled. "Though his aim is not contested, there was some disagreement on whether prince Kíli could shoot as fast and accurate as an elf. Apparently the solution to this is to have them both shoot the same number of arrows and then see which one finishes faster and with the better shots."

"Seems reasonable enough." Thorin nodded. "And after that you'll each test your aim?"

"Indeed. I rather fear I will lose, as I have not dedicated myself to the bow with quite the same fervour, nor have I had as many years to practice."

"Even if you never hit another target in your life, I suspect you'll yet be known as the Bowman."

"It does only take one good hit, doesn't it?" Bard eyed him. "And you, King Thorin? Will you join our contest?"

"You must be joking." Thorin snorted. "I mean no offence to your choice of weapon, but bow is not exactly my forte."

"Really?" There as an almost teasing tone to Bard's voice. "Last we spoke of the matter you seemed convinced you could put an arrow through my forehead. Or Thranduil's, I wasn't entirely clear on your actual target."

"Why, obviously I would have claimed to have aimed at whoever one I hit." It was a sign of great recovery that he could now speak of such things. "In seriousness, I have some rudimentary skill; it was me who taught Kíli the basics, as his father could not." It had been his duty, after all, and Tuli had been the one to teach him.

"I have to say it surprised me somewhat. I was under the impression not many dwarves take up archery."

"It's rare enough, yes. We mostly prefer to fight at close range. Even Kíli is skilled enough with a sword, though he has dedicated himself to the bow." Thorin shook his head. "Even I resisted the idea at first when my brother-in-law offered to teach me; he was a hunter, and a good one at that. I'm glad he taught me, though, so I could instruct his sons in his place. Not that Fíli took to it anyway."

"I figure I make up for it by knowing my way around the rest of the armoury." Fíli grinned. "I'd show you my skill at throwing axes, but I'm afraid I've managed to injure my better arm." He touched the arm in question, the injury hidden beneath his clothes. Thorin had to be impressed at his ability to refer to it in such light tones, knowing that the physical pain had been the least of the injury.

"Would it be too forward to ask why it is so rare?" Bard lifted his eyebrows. "Is it simply because elves favour bows?"

"Oh, there is that in part, and some don't think it's dwarven enough, not getting within arm's reach of your target." Fíli's grin widened further. "Mostly, though, it's the beards. Would be right painful to get a bowstring tangled there, you see."

"Ah, yes. I can see how that would be an issue." Bard glanced at each of them in turn, then at the gathered dwarves, most of whom sported far more impressive beards. "Prince Kíli does not seem to
have that problem, though."

"Kíli is yet young." And determined. "Their father never grew much in the way of a beard, either; I suppose Kíli hopes to emulate him, for all that he does not even remember his face."

"While I note your beard is not quite as short as it used to be, King Under the Mountain."

"Aye, it's growing well enough." Thorin stroked his beard. It was rather unimpressive yet, but it was indeed growing. "I kept mine short in grief for our lost home; now that we have reclaimed it, it's about time I bring some pride to the name of the Longbeard clan."

"I'm sure it will be quite the sight soon enough." Bard looked over to where Kíli and Tauriel were now arguing over the results. "Well, it does seem as though our competition is about to start. If you will not join us, perhaps you'd at least like to be the judge of our skills?"

"You expect me to be impartial when judging my own sister-son against a man and an elf?"

"I expect you to take enough pride in his abilities not to insult him by cheating."

"A good point." And an astute one for a man. "Very well. I'll do that, if you grant me a favour in turn."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"Join us for dinner with your family? Not an official visit, that is; merely a meeting with food and words. Only it occurs to me we have yet to converse other than over a negotiation table since the battle, and I would wish to know better the man who has come to rule the land before my gates. And in any case, I suspect Bilbo would enjoy the chance to speak some more with someone who is not a dwarf."

"Well, I would hate to leave the poor thing so deprived." Bard's lips twitched. "Very well. My family and I would love to test dwarven hospitality, though I hope you'll allow us to return the favour once our own accommodations are in somewhat better state of repair."

"Oh, certainly. As long as you promise us a more dignified entrance this time."

Bard chuckled, now, but he was clearly laughing with Thorin, not at him. That was, he decided, quite agreeable. "I think we can arrange for something better this time."

Fíli sidled closer as Bard stepped up to join the two other archers. "So if Bard is coming with his whole family, Tauriel probably will be there, too." He nudged Thorin. "Does that mean I get to bring Ori as well?"

"That would only be fair, I suppose." Thorin shrugged. "You might want to ask Dori as well. I suspect he'd like to be there to keep an eye on his brother, for all that the two of you will hardly be alone."

"Got it." Fíli grinned. "I should probably also alert the kitchens that there will be quite a few extra mouths joining us for dinner."

"That would seem like a wise course of action, yes." Thorin himself had no time for carrying such messages; he had to set himself in a better position to see the contestants, which just so happened to bring him closer to where Bilbo was standing. It was a hardship to be sure, but somehow he would persevere.
And if half the dwarves in the mountain and quite a few of the men of Dale saw him wrap his arms around his beloved hobbit and rest his chin on top of Bilbo's head, well, there was nothing shameful about being in love, even if one happened to also be a king.

* 

"So, how goes the rebuilding?" Bilbo leaned closer to Thorin, rather enjoying the strong arm around his shoulders while he clutched a hot cup of tea. "The last time I was in Dale I saw someone working on an actual roof, I believe."

"It's going well enough, I would say." Bard looked fairly relaxed; a good dinner could do that, and the one they had just finished had been excellent. He even managed not to look too terribly awkward in the dwarf-sized seat he had claimed in Thorin's sitting room, giving the occasional glance toward the fireplace where Kíli was amusing Tilda and Bain with some rather imaginative tales complete with shadow puppets while Tauriel shook her head in fond amusement. "We're focusing more on farming and fishing right now, to build up our stocks, as well as inspecting the buildings that are not yet in use to see what can be salvaged. Once harvest is over with, we plan to get to work in earnest to build proper roofs instead of the makeshift structures we're making do with."

"You know, we are expecting the main caravan before the summer is out." Thorin was relaxed as well, nursing a mug of ale, letting his gaze sweep over the room on occasion. Not that there was much to keep an eye on, really. Bard clearly had his eye on the young ones, and while Fíli and Ori were busy murmuring to each other they were well in sight of Dori, who was discussing teas with Sigrid just far enough to give the courting couple some privacy while not giving them too much of it. "I'm sure there are carpenters and stonemasons who wouldn't mind the work, and they won't be lost from your workforce on the more immediate concerns."

"Really?" Bard blinked. "I would have thought you would need all the workers to yourself, especially with so many people coming in. I'm already beyond grateful for the help you gave in preparing ourselves for the first winter."

"There's plenty of work to do, yes, and there will be for years to come. However, we can make do as long as we have structurally sound caves and caverns to clean out, while your need is far more immediate. Some will still want to stay in the mountain, but I have no doubt there'll be many eager dwarves ready to work in the city as well."

"Besides, you have a lot of children among your people," Bilbo pointed out. "After the battle finding adequate shelter in the ruins was the safest and fastest way to get everyone indoors. Now that we have more time to work and more of the mountain has been cleared, I suspect most dwarves would rather open our very caves and caverns rather than see children face another winter without proper shelter."

Thorin drew Bilbo just a bit closer, a fond gesture Bilbo now knew to be the result of his having included himself with the dwarves in his statement. Apparently something about that appealed to Thorin's more possessive side. "Bilbo is right. Providing for the children will always be a priority for any honourable dwarf, even if they are not of our own race."

"That's certainly a honourable goal." Bard nodded. "Very well. I would welcome any help you can provide, though I'd like to consult with you to make sure I pay the workers similar wages to what they would receive in the mountain. I want to reward them fairly, but I also don't want to upset the balance by paying them too much more, either."

"A man who is sensible with gold? To think I would see the day." Thorin snorted, though he sobered up somewhat when Bilbo gave him a subtle elbow to the side. "We'll certainly have to
discuss that at a closer date. So far I've made sure to pay everyone reasonable wages and compensations, enough to make it worth their while to work in Erebor and not elsewhere yet not so much so that gold would lose its value in the local market."

"I can see how that would be a problem with all your treasure, yes." Bard's lips twitched. "Though now I am curious. Whose part in the hoard has paid for our rebuilding? I know Master Baggins claimed the Arkenstone as his share, but clearly the gold to redeem it back has to have been someone else's."

"Yes, well, about that." Bilbo took a sip of his tea, mostly to hide his grin. "From what I understand, the original plan was indeed to divide the treasure in fourteen parts; Thorin planned to pay for the re-establishing of Erebor out of his own share." Which in itself was so utterly selfless and Thorin while also being so stupidly dwarvish that the mere idea made him want to give a fond sigh. "However, when we got into the mountain and saw the actual hoard, they soon realised they'd spend the rest of their lives just counting out their fourteenth share. And while all dwarves do appreciate a bit of gold and gems, unless they are gold mad there comes a point where some more of it just doesn't add to the enjoyment."

"Once the battle was over, we held basic negotiation about the sharing of the treasure." Thorin shrugged. "Thing is, our actual contracts stated that the share was up to a fourteenth part, not necessarily all of it. As such, they all agreed to an arrangement where I gave them all a rather hefty sum, along with the authority to withdraw more from the royal treasury as they may need it, while everything that yet remains in the treasure room is mine to use for the kingdom as I see fit."

"And they all agreed to that?" Bard's eyebrows rose high. "I'm finding it hard to believe any thirteen creatures could agree not to take what they have been promised when it comes to gold and precious things."

"Well, as Bilbo said, just dividing the exact parts would have taken too long to be in any way practical. Perhaps my madness startled them, I don't know; most of the company share the weakness of my blood in some part, after all, and I've been told my sickness was not pleasant to witness." Thorin's gaze flickered toward Fíli for just a moment, perhaps reminded of his own time of seeing the same from the outside. "In any case, none of them will ever want for anything again, I have everything I need to bring my kingdom back to its old glory, and the contracts have been fulfilled to the letter."

"And we are not left without our share either." Bard gave a brief salute with his own ale, still mostly untouched. "I suppose in the end I have to be glad that you went into the mountain. For all that the destruction was terrible, I can't help but think this is better for my people than even longer spent under the Master's rule."

"Except it wouldn't have been just that," Bilbo pointed out, his voice quiet. "There's every chance Azog would have come regardless, to make sure Thorin's line was wiped out. There's no telling what they would have done to Laketown simply because they could."

"In any case, the destruction would have been beyond any measure if the dragon had not been slain." Thorin inclined his head. "For that, we all owe a great debt to you."

"I only did what I had to."

"Oh, I know you did. And that is what makes it so extraordinary, for the only reason you had to do so was because you told yourself as much." Thorin took a small sip of his drink. "It's certainly no wonder your people look to you as their leader."
"I sometimes wish they didn't." Bard sighed. "The only reason I've yet to tell them to look elsewhere for a leader is because I know the ones most eager to seize power are always those least suited for it. However hard it may be for me, I'd rather suffer that hardship than have my children live another day under the rule of someone like the Master was."

"Ah, yes. Your children seem to be adjusting remarkably well, if I may say so." Bilbo smiled, looking over to where Bain and Tilda were both giggling at whatever story Kíli was busy spinning for them. "They must be very proud of you."

"Perhaps more than I deserve." Bard gave them a rueful smile. "For all that I know they are better off now, never having to fear another hungry night again, I cannot help but think if it were not better for them if I was just another man among many, still."

"What do you mean?" Bilbo frowned. "If you fear for their future, please don't. Bain seems a fine young man, and I'm certain he'll do well if he is to follow you one day."

"It's not Bain I'm worried about." Bard gave a small shrug. "There was a time when I worried my daughters might not be able to marry who they wished because I was out of favour with the Master and few would risk such a connection. Now I find myself wondering if they might be denied that choice because I am so very favoured, instead."

"I see." Thorin nodded. "Talk of political unions?"

"Yes. None right in front of me, of course, but I know there are whispers. Sigrid is not a child anymore, and there are those who think I should have her married to strengthen an alliance. I would never wish it, but sooner or later someone is going to suggest it. And, well, Sigrid has always been so dutiful, I know she would agree no matter what her heart says."

"Well, that problem is easily enough solved." Bilbo shook his head, smiling a bit as Bard gave him a puzzled glance. "I'm assuming the alliance they wish to strengthen is that with Erebor. If that is the case, you are simply to tell them dwarves only marry out of love."

Bard looked even more surprised. "Is that true?"

"Aye." Thorin gave a weighty nod. "For us, the love we are granted by Mahal is sacred, and we only marry once. As such, to force anyone to marry anyone but their beloved would be sacrilege."

"The only time dwarves would consider such a union is between two who do not seek love, from what I have understood." Bilbo glanced at Thorin, sharing a secret little smile. "But then, that is mere details and certainly not something the people of Dale ought to know. Just tell them it's against the dwarven ways, and to even suggest it would probably be taken as an insult."

"I'll certainly keep that in mind." Bard shook his head. "I've considered telling them that if anyone is to marry for the good of Dale, it ought to be me. I've found and lost one love, and cannot hope to find another so great; it would be no loss for me to tie myself to someone for nothing but politics, but I won't deny any of my children the chance to find the same happiness."

"Why, Master Bowman, you almost sound like a dwarf."

Bard snorted. "From you, Master Oakenshield, I take that as a compliment." He sipped at his drink, then hummed in thought. "What did you mean, those that do not seek love? Do you mean that arranged marriages would happen only between dwarves who agree to them?"

"It's somewhat more complicated, I think. From what I have been told, dwarves look at love a bit differently from other races." Bilbo glanced at Thorin. "Do correct me if I'm wrong, here. As I
understand, dwarves believe there's a special One for each of them, if they just look. They can't know who that One is, not even their sex, and that's why most dwarves may be attracted to either sex?"

Thorin nodded. "True. Some of us do have a preference, but it's somewhat rare. How soon we find our One varies, though; some will show interest in many before their heart is set, while some of us will only ever have eyes for one person." At this, he leaned in to kiss Bilbo's temple, because he loved being ridiculous and embarrassing Bilbo.

Bilbo cleared his throat, trying to will his blush away. "Anyway! There are also those who have no interest in any of that. They decide their craft or work is more important than any love, and will only pursue that. Now, there are people in every race who may not find their match or do not think it's worth the trouble, but among dwarves it's not an oddity or a quirk of circumstance, it's just the way some of them are made."

"I see. And is that very common, then?"

"Somewhat. You won't find one in every family, but they're common enough." Thorin shrugged. "We had three in our company of thirteen dwarves, I believe. That's a bit high, but not unheard of."

"Three?" Bilbo frowned. "I knew of Balin, and I'm guessing Óin is another, but who's the third?"

"Why, Dori, of course." Thorin nodded to where Dori and Sigrid were now apparently discussing some piece of fabric they were inspecting together. "I do not make it my business to pry into what has nothing to do with me, but when someone with as many suitors as he has announces he won't have any of them, the word will get around."

"Well, that does make sense." Bilbo drank some more of his tea. It was almost out; he really needed to get more. "I do recall hearing they're considered very beautiful, the brothers 'Ri."

"Ah, yes, I guess the hobbit standards would differ from the dwarven ones." Thorin chuckled. "Lucky me, I suppose, or you would never have looked at me twice."

"And what does that mean?" Bard looked amused. "Are you telling me you are not a prime specimen of dwarven standards, Master Oakenshield?"

Thorin made to answer, only to be beaten to it by a cheerful voice. "Oh, Uncle is absolutely hideous, that he is." Kíli grinned from where he stood behind Thorin, crouching down to rest his head on top of his uncle's. "I'm even worse, of course, so I shouldn't speak much, all tall and narrow and without even a proper beard. Really, I think Mahal gave us Ones outside our race just because no dwarf would have us."

"Oh, please. Many a dwarf would have either of us, though none because they find our faces pleasing. It's a wonder how much ugliness one may be forgiven simply by bearing a crown and having a share in a treasure hoard." Thorin snorted. "Is your story over with, or did you appear here simply to take the opportunity to insult me without my being able to disagree?"

"Well, the story's over, and the little lady's rather sleepy." Kíli straightened again, nodding toward Tauriel, who was holding the dozing Tilda in her arms. "Figured we'd point out it's getting late."

"Ah, right. Should have realised it was getting to a late hour." Thorin frowned as Bard set his drink aside to stand up and take his daughter. "My apologies for keeping you so late. I can arrange for a cart to take you back to Dale immediately."

"Of course, you could just stay, but I'm afraid we don't have much in the way of guest
accommodations." Bilbo shook his head. "Certainly nothing suitable for your station." And oh, all this hurt his hobbit sensibilities so very much.

"Master Baggins, a year ago my station was so lowly, I was lucky to have a blanket for my bed." Bard shifted Tilda on one arm, setting his other hand on top of Bain's head. The boy was blinking sleep away though he tried to seem otherwise. "I would say I would be grateful for whatever you can offer, but I'd hate to trouble you any further."

"Nonsense! It's all our fault, anyway, not letting you go right after dinner. And I promise, even though they have been made for dwarves, the beds in the royal quarters should be quite big enough for you." Bilbo set his cup aside and shot up to his feet, mentally taking stock of his available resources. "Kíli, you won't mind sharing with your brother for the night, will you? Bard and Bain should both fit just fine in your bed, and I do believe your rooms are in better order than Fíli's. No need for anyone to know just why Fíli's were still looking somewhat, well, torn apart. "Tauriel, dear, I hope you won't mind sharing with Sigrid and Tilda?"

"That would be quite agreeable."

"Excellent. Now, Dori, Ori?" The others were gathering around as well, seeing that things were starting to wrap up. "Since you'll probably see someone on your way back to your rooms, could you please send word to the kitchens that we'll still have guests for breakfast? And Thorin?"

"Yes, dearest?" Thorin managed a hint of a smile, though it somewhat clashed with the struck expression in his eyes that he often got when Bilbo started organising anything. Honestly. This might not have been Bilbo's house, precisely, but he still felt responsible for their guests; of course he would see to things.

"You make sure guest quarters are on top of the list as soon as we've the workers to spare. I will not have something this shameful happen again if I can help it. Why, my mother will soon climb back out of her grave and march all the way from the Shire just to slap me around the ears for not being prepared for overnight guests."

"As you wish, beloved." Thorin stood as well, snatching Bilbo's hand before he could prepare himself and bringing it up to his lips for a quick kiss. "I wouldn't dream of forcing you to betray your hobbitish sensibilities ever again."

"You'd better keep that in mind." Bilbo sniffed a bit, though he was fighting a smile. "You're lucky you dwarves apparently prefer beds big enough to get lost in when you have the chance."

Thorin's lips twitched into something rather too smug for his own good. "I could make a comment on that, but for the sake of young ears, I shall refrain." He squeezed Bilbo's hand once more before letting go. "Now, this? This is precisely why I need a consort."

"There are a number of things I could say in response to that, but I shall refrain as well." Bilbo chuckled. "Now, let's see about getting everyone settled for the night, shall we?"

This, he could do. Joking with Thorin, seeing to the needs of guests who might well become friends, making sure all the young couples ended up in their own beds — not that he was particularly fussed about the last point, but he was not in the Shire and these were not hobbits. All this, he could do, and so much easier than wading through the murky waters of dwarven politics. Even that, though, he would conquer, for Thorin's sake if nothing else.

After all, clearly Thorin did need a consort, and Bilbo would shave his feet before he saw anyone else taking that job.
There was a dwarf at the edge of the forest.

A small part of Legolas almost resented the dwarf simply for daring to show up. He had taken to patrolling this area specifically so he wouldn't have to encounter others for a while. They had managed to clear out spider nests from the vicinity of the road, and with Dol Guldur cleansed were making headway into driving the evil further and further south now that the source was wiped clean, but even as spring gave way to early summer few creatures dared brave the elven road yet. Legolas had taken to the area after his last visit to Erebor, only making the occasional visit closer to his father's palace to turn in reports, and the silence and solitude were slowly starting to heal the ache within him at the thought of losing Tauriel.

Except now there was a dwarf standing at the edge of the forest, bellowing out every now and then for someone to come to meet him.

Legolas wasn't entirely sure how long the dwarf had been there when he first heard him, nor how long he planned to remain. As he spent half a day observing the dwarf from the shelter of the forest it became clear he had developed a routine already, though whether this was due to planning or time wasn't clear. There was a pile of packs serving as a makeshift camp set up just outside the forest's entrance, with a sturdy little pony grazing without much of a worry and a raven that often sat next to the dwarf while he lingered at his camp, whittling at small pieces of wood to pass the time. Every now and then he would stand up, walk to the entrance of the forest, and shout out a request for someone to come meet him.

At last Legolas decided to abide him, dropping out of a tree right in front of him. The dwarf did a good job of covering up his surprise, only taking a small step back.

"You wanted to see an elf." Legolas made sure to keep his hands away from his weapons. No need to antagonise anyone just yet. "Here you have one. What brings you to Greenwood, Master Dwarf?"

The dwarf straightened himself, rather giving Legolas the impression of one preparing for battle. He was a young one, Legolas noted, far as he could tell with dwarves, with a short beard of deep red and the usual sturdy set of his people. "I am Gimli, son of Glóin, at your service," the dwarf said with a stiff little bow. "I have been sent by my cousin Lady Dís, daughter of Thráin, sister to Thorin, King Under the Mountain."

"I am Legolas, of the Greenwood guard." Gimli. The name called a memory to Legolas's mind, almost forgotten, of a small picture and harsh words. He could see the resemblance now, though the creature before him was somewhat older than the one he had seen drawn inside the locket. Certainly no mutated goblin, for all that he was short and hairy, though Legolas found the insults weren't quite as easy to come to his tongue now that he was faced with the actual target of them. "And on what task have you been sent to Greenwood, Gimli son of Glóin?"

"My cousin is on her way with a caravan of our people, all immigrants from Ered Luin to the re-established Erebor." The dwarf shifted, taking a balanced stance, still looking somewhat wary. "She has sent me ahead to make your people aware of their approach."

"If they wish to pass through the forest, they have that right." Legolas had himself paid witness to that. "It's detailed in our treaties with Erebor."

"Aye, we are aware of that." Of course they were. "However, my lady felt it would be only polite to let you know of our arrival, lest you be needlessly worried about the apparent invasion of dwarves. Besides," and now Gimli's voice took on a more serious tone, for all that he had already been rather
measured before, "we have workers more than warriors, families with their children, and even a few expectant mothers with us. We would be grateful for a guide or two to bring us through the forest, lest some of us be led astray from the path."

That was certainly a worry, for all that the spiders had been wiped out from near the path and the air of the forest had begun to clear. "And you will have them, I will see to that." Legolas paused. "What is your plan now that you have delivered your message, Master Dwarf?"

Gimli gave a small shrug. "I have not been instructed beyond this point, Master Elf."

"Then I can suggest to you two alternatives." Really, what he wanted to do was disappear back in the forest, but this dwarf had said he was cousin to Thorin and his sister. If that was true, he could certainly answer a question or two. "You could return to your cousin, to let her know the message has been received. Or you could come with me to the Elvenking's palace, to see the word delivered yourself, and afterwards we can see you escorted to Erebor to bring the word of their approach in person."

The dwarf seemed to hesitate for all of a moment. "I'd like to go with you, if we can stay to the path," he said. "My pony's served me well on the ride here, and I'd hate to abandon her to the beasts at this point."

"That we can certainly do." Not like they would save any time cutting through the forest if he had to deal with a dwarf lumbering along in the undergrowth. "I will wait for you to gather your things."

The dwarf was surprisingly quick about it, getting the packs secured on his pony, though he opted to take her reins and walk with her rather than mount her. The raven flew up to him, perching on his shoulder. For a moment Legolas could have sworn they were murmuring to each other, and he was struck with a memory of his father mentioning the dwarves of Erebor speaking with ravens; a moment later the bird flew off, and the dwarf came up to Legolas, leading his slightly nervous pony. "I'm ready to go."

"Let us go, then." Legolas nodded. "Your bird friend will not accompany us?"

"Ah, no. She's not overly fond of the trees, and would avoid the forest as long as she can."

"Why did you have her with you, then? To keep you company?" It was perhaps a bit sharper than was perfectly polite, but then he still had little reason to be overly fond of dwarves.

Gimli, however, seemed to take no open offence, though Legolas fancied he saw his eyes narrow; that might have simply been a reaction to their entering the dim forest, or displeasure at his words, Legolas could not know. "Oh, aye. They're not the best of conversationalists, but better than talking to oneself."

"So is it to return to your cousin now?"

"Indeed." Gimli stroked his beard with the hand that wasn't leading his pony. "She'll tell them that I have entered the woods with an elf called Legolas, so if I do not arrive before them, they'll know who to turn to for their enquiries."

This was all said with a calm tone, with a hint of hidden steel; a warning that was not told as such, rather unlike what he had come to expect from dwarves. Not delivered until they were under the canopy of trees, either, with the bird out of sight and likely flying fast out of range, lest a treacherous hand try to fell it from the sky.

Someone in the line of Durin was a sharp one, and Legolas found himself wondering if it was the
"I'm sure such enquiries will not be necessary." Unless his father had decided it was not only orcs who weren't worth keeping his word, something Legolas rather hoped was not true. "The path is clear enough if one keeps an eye on it, so I'm sure we won't be waylaid from it."

"I hope so indeed. As little time under the trees as possible would be ideal." Gimli made a thoughtful noise. "So tell me, Legolas of Greenwood. Are you named after the prince, or the prince after you, or am I truly face to face with the one who would insult my mother?"

Legolas resisted the urge to sigh. Of course that would be the part of the tale the dwarves carried on. "You're more concerned with that than with my father imprisoning yours?"

"I figure you won't try to repeat that, unless your father's truly hoping for a war. Insults, though, are easier to cast anew, and I'd truly hate to blunt a perfectly good axe on a royal skull."

Now, he did actually sigh. "I shall apologise to your mother, were I ever to meet her. And I suppose I should apologise to you as well." Though it probably wasn't wise, he couldn't resist the slight jab. "I've seen plenty of goblins since then, and none of them were quite as hairy as you."

To his great surprise, this inspired the dwarf to laugh. "I should hope not! I've a fine beard for one so young, everyone tells me that. It's the Longbeard blood in me, I suspect." Again, he stroked his beard as though it were a source of great pride. For a dwarf, Legolas supposed, it probably was. "So tell me, Legolas of the Greenwood, because you probably would know this better. Is it true my princely cousin has set his eyes on an elf?"

The mention stung, of course it did, but not quite as badly as it might have some months ago. "If you mean prince Kíli, it is indeed true. They are courting, and Thorin himself has acknowledged her as a future princess of Erebor."

"Well! Kíli's always been a strange one, but never thought he'd go quite that far. But then, if they're happy, it's not my place to pry." Gimli still looked amused, though. "Though since we have a ways to go before I'm to meet the Elvenking, perhaps you could entertain me with some more tales of the strange courtship? My father has told me of the quest and battles well enough, but all he could offer on the matter of Kíli's love was rumours and guesswork."

Well. It was almost the very reason why he had invited the dwarf to go with him, and if he couldn't bear to speak of Tauriel, then he shouldn't have been hoping to hear of the other side of the matter either. "I suppose there is a thing or two I could share," he allowed, making a great show of considering the request at length. "Though only if you tell me about prince Kíli in return. Tauriel is a dear friend, you see, and I would know what kind of a dwarf she has given the gift of her heart."

"For that, I am not sure our journey will be long enough," Gimli said, an amused glint in his eyes. "But I will start from the most important matters, I suppose."

Gimli, Legolas found as they travelled on, had little trouble with talking to an elf. He still wasn't hurried in his words, and sometimes lapsed into silence as though to better consider what he was to say next, but Legolas got the feeling this was a quirk of his character rather than any particular mistrust. Sometimes he did get a sharp glance as the tales made a mention of Gimli's parents, and he supposed he deserved such, but all in all Gimli was rather more open than he would have expected any dwarf to be around an elf, unless their name was Kíli and their mind addled with idle thoughts of romance. If anything, he got the feeling Gimli was more wary of the surrounding trees than he was of Legolas, for all that the trees were still and steady and not actually armed.
Dwarves. Legolas was certain he would never come to understand them.

But then, why would he have even wanted to?
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Bilbo finally gets to start on his garden, and has a conversation with Fíli. Legolas is worried about how Gimli will react to Thranduil and Thranduil to Gimli; after all, if his father wages war against Erebor, he won’t see Tauriel again any time soon. Tauriel, for her own part, has quite enough worries in presenting her gift to Kíli.

Chapter Notes

Do check out the wonderful fanart asparklethatisblue drew of the Dwalin/Nori bath scene in chapter 11! Nori’s expression at the end is simply perfect. Also the cutest Fíli/Ori smooches with bonus interrupting Nori.

It had been a long time since Bilbo had properly had his hands in the dirt.

Of course, had he actually made the mistake of uttering this observation anywhere near his dwarves, they would have been quite happy to point out that he often had dirt on his hands, now don't be ashamed Bilbo, it's only natural when you live in a mountain. It seemed a common trait of dwarves to have a mind too literal for their own good. Not that hobbits were too bent for flights of fancy, but at least hobbits knew the difference between good and bad dirt, and that either kind required a good washing before eating.

This was good earth, soft and rich, enough so that he rather wondered where Thorin had found it, how far it had travelled over the desolated land to end up in his garden. It was good to work with, would only need minimal help to get his garden going. Now that he'd had the word out in Dale about his need for seeds and seedlings he might find there, and secured a promise from some of his friends to take him out in the mountains to look for others, he could get around to designing and preparing his garden.

He already had a plan in mind, having sketched it out on scraps of spare paper and parchment over and over again. There would be herbs and vegetables and teas, just a little of each but all fresh and nice, and Bilbo thought he might even try out some tomatoes though they would hardly be as good as his pride and joy back in the Shire. In the middle, where the soil was deepest and the light from the crystals the most constant, he would leave a bare patch for a rather different kind of harvest. Not that there wasn’t plenty enough time for him to grow something there before Durin's Day arrived again, but even a longtime bachelor like himself knew most hobbit gardens had a special spot set aside for the children, and though he doubted that was the deciding factor he was not going to take any risks. It was strange enough a thing to attempt, in any case, and he would not make it more complicated by parting from the tradition any more.

A part of him wished he'd had his parents around, to ask them how they had grown him, why he'd been left an only child with most other families growing larger all the time. His mother would have approved of Thorin, he was sure, at least after she had spent a moment or two speaking some sense
into the stubborn dwarf, while his father would have quietly wished he had paired himself with a more reliable hobbit partner instead. In the end, though, they would have both been happy for him, and offered to babysit whenever needed, really now Bilbo you've waited long enough to make us grandparents now at least let us hold the little ones every now and then.

But then, if his parents had still been alive, he probably wouldn't have been here in the first place. It would not have been quite so easy to run off with a company of dwarves if he had someone missing him, and while his mother might have been persuaded to join in his father never would have left the Shire, certainly not for something as silly as an adventure. And, well, for all that Bungo Baggins had been the truly proper one in the family, Bilbo doubted even Gandalf would have been foolish enough to try to steal his only son away from his side. Even if he had left, even if Bungo had waved him off like he had Belladonna when she went on one of her walking holidays, it wasn't like Bilbo could have stayed, not with his family still in the Shire.

Now his family was here, all tall and burly and hairy every last one of them, and he wouldn't have changed it for all the gold in the dragon hoard and the Arkenstone besides. He did miss Bag End sometimes, of course, missed his armchair and his fireplace and books and everything, but on the balance he would rather have his dwarves than his things.

"Bilbo?"

Had he been standing up, he might have jumped in fright at the sudden words. As he was kneeling on the ground, though, he merely started, then turned to look at his visitor. "Fíli! What are you doing here?" He realised a bit belatedly that this might have sounded like an accusation, when it was by no means one; it wasn't like this was some secret place or a forbidden area. However, well, it was part of Thorin's rooms, so he doubted the prince would have wandered there by chance.

"Looking for you, actually." Fíli took up the couple of steps from the door, looking around with curious eyes. "I asked Uncle where you might be, and he told me to look here if you weren't in the library or your own rooms. I did wonder just how he had tempted you into his rooms while he isn't even here." He waggled his eyebrows with a teasing grin, and Bilbo snorted.

"Oh, you! Don't you start teasing me like that, unless you want me to actually tell you what Thorin might do to tempt me." He glanced at Fíli, taking the opportunity to look him over for a chance. Fíli was more or less back to his old schedule, so Bilbo saw him more days than not, but that also meant the situations Bilbo usually saw him were ones where he could not show any weakness. Bilbo looked at him from head to toe, now, looking for any signs of fake cheer or hidden exhaustion. To his relief Fíli seemed to indeed be doing better. For all that there was still a hint of tiredness about his eyes, it was not as bad as just a few days before, and his smile seemed genuine enough. "Not that he would, the thoroughly honourable dwarf that he is."

"And is that a note of disappointment I hear there?" Fíli's voice was light, still a bit teasing, but not mocking in the least. "Don't tell me you want him to be less than honourable, hmm?"

"Well, yes and no." As Fíli gave him a slightly puzzled glance, he shrugged. "If Thorin wishes to wait until we are properly wed, then wait I will, and it's no hardship for me. However, if he were to approach me now with a mind for more than kisses and chaste touches, I would not turn him away. We hobbits are not quite as concerned with the rules of propriety in courtship as you dwarves seem to be, certainly not when the couple is already betrothed; as long as nothing improper happens in public, nobody's going to concern themselves with what goes on behind closed doors. Well, unless someone's heart gets broken, and in that case it hardly makes much of a difference whether they shared a bed before that."

"That seems a sensible approach." Fíli nodded. "I might like that better than the dwarven way, but it
is what it is. I won't lie, sometimes I'd like nothing rather than to take Ori to bed and show him just how much I love him, but I won't, not until we're wed. My consort will be under enough scrutiny as it is, and he's heard enough ill words about his mother in his life; I won't let anyone have any reason to doubt his honour if I can help it."

"Right." Bilbo frowned in thought, busying himself with the soil for now. "I, ah. I heard their mother was unwed?" That, and a couple of other rumours, but it wasn't his place to pry, really.

"Aye, but it's more complicated than that." Fíli moved closer to take a look at what he was doing. "I don't know the details myself, just what I've heard from others and a little of what Ori has told me. It seems they all had different fathers, and all different sorts. Dori knows his, but won't talk about him; Ori has no idea what he's done to earn such hatred, but neither Dori nor Nori will talk about him. Nori has no clue about his, and if their mother even knew, I have no idea."

"That… certainly seems complicated." And would explain why people would whisper about their mother, even though it should have been nobody else's business in the slightest. "And Ori?" Ori had mentioned he didn't know his father, but the way Fíli spoke of the matter made him suspect there was more to it.

"Ori doesn't know, but his brothers do." At Bilbo's surprised gaze, Fíli gave him a shrug. "They've promised to tell him when he's older, though why they're waiting, he doesn't know. Apparently he was a decent dwarf, though, so at least it's nothing bad."

"Well, that's good to hear at least." Bilbo shook his head. "That just wouldn't happen in the Shire. Well, once in a blue moon you'll have a baby growing in someone's garden even though there's only one parent in the house; however, that only really happens when someone's been widowed early, and usually everyone knows who helped them with the planting."

"So you do actually grow them in the gardens? It's just, I wasn't sure if you were joking with Kíli or not, and I know Uncle said hobbits grow babies in the ground but that could have just been Thorin being Thorin."

Bilbo chuckled. "Yes, we do. It's part of why I'm working here now, besides just enjoying the work, for all that we won't get to planting until after the wedding. One can't grow a child in dead ground; you need a living garden to have any hope of the seed taking root."

"So you're really doing it, then? You and Thorin are going to try for a child?" Fíli was not doing a very good job of hiding his curiosity, but then Bilbo supposed it could be forgiven in this instance.

"It seems to be what we have agreed on, yes." Bilbo smiled to himself at the thought. "There's no guarantee it'll work, of course, but we're going to try at the very least."

"I hope it works, then." Fíli chuckled. "He may not look like it, but Uncle Thorin is really great with children. He pretty much raised Kíli and me with our mother after our father died, it's about time he gets some dwarflings of his own. And now he won't even have to worry about being able to feed them and keep them safe."

"I have to say, I'd rather like to see Thorin with a little one, myself." He had to agree with Fíli; he was certain Thorin would be a wonderful father, just from seeing the way he handled his nephews, and the way his eyes softened ever so slightly the few times he had seen him around Bard's little ones. "Ah. Not that I'm not enjoying our little chat, but did you have a reason to seek me out?"

"Oh, right!" Fíli blinked. "Ori sent me to you. He asked me to tell you he got the things you wanted and he can bring them by your rooms tonight, if you want."
"Oh, that's just splendid!" Bilbo couldn't help but smile. "Thank you, I've been waiting for this news."

"So am I allowed to be curious enough to ask exactly what you've been waiting for?" Fíli grinned. "I promise I can keep a secret."

"I'm not entirely sure I can trust that promise." Now it was his turn to tease. "Actually, it's some materials for my gift to Thorin. I've been working on it for a little while now, and I have to hurry up if I want to present him with the finished product before our wedding."

"Oh, yes, better not dally with that." Fíli's grin dimmed a bit, though it did not disappear entirely. "I'm lucky I have more time than that. My arm can't take smithing yet, so until it's properly healed I can only do design for Ori's gift."

"Oh?" Bilbo frowned. "I thought you were getting along quite well on that. You were making him pens, weren't you?"

"I, ah, I changed my mind." Fíli sighed. "I do plan to finish those eventually and give them to him, but not as my courtship gift. It's… I don't think it's a good idea for me to be working on gold and gems just yet. And, well, working on it so hard is probably part of why I got so consumed before. I can't risk that happening again, so I'll wait until I'm certain my head is entirely clear."

"That seems a wise decision." Bilbo stood up, now, so he could reach his hand to touch Fíli's shoulder. "Ori will wait for you, you know. Both for your gift and for you to feel better. He would never want you to push yourself because of him."

"I know. And I'm trying to take it easy. It's just… I want to make it all up to him, you know? The way I treated him and hurt him. And I know he'll wait for me, but he shouldn't have to. Not after everything I've already put him through."

Bilbo hummed to himself in thought. "Perhaps I could weigh in here a bit? You know, as someone who has gone through much the same, though I was not yet courting Thorin at the time." As Fíli nodded, without words, Bilbo squeezed his shoulder gently. "I have forgiven Thorin. It's clear enough that he was not himself while afflicted with the gold madness. I will keep an eye on any such signs in the future, make no mistake, and I will step in if it seems he is slipping again, but I do not wish to punish him for what the madness drove him to do, nor do I want to see him punish himself."

He offered Fíli a small smile. "I'm sure Ori feels much the same. I'm not going to tell you to forget about what you did, because I doubt you could even if you tried, but do try to move past it. I'm sure Ori is much more concerned with seeing you happy again than he is with you making amends for something he has already forgiven."

"…I'll try." Fíli sighed. "That's really all I can promise, I'm afraid."

"That is all you need to do." Bilbo smiled, then leaned down to dust off his knees. These weren't his best clothes; rather, he had gotten himself an outfit just for gardening, not wanting to get his fine clothes dirty while puttering about. Besides, this was the most hobbit-like he had felt since arriving in Erebor. While he did appreciate the clothes he had been given, and even preferred the long trousers in the sometimes drafty mountain, it would have felt quite strange to be poking about in his garden while wearing dwarven garb. "It's certainly all Ori would ever ask of you."

"I'm just afraid it's not enough." Fíli shook his head. "It's just… Ori's so pretty and smart, and now that he has gold he could have more or less anyone he wanted. What can I offer to someone like that? My being good at fighting is hardly going to please him when I've used it against him. Besides that, all I have is the promise of a throne he doesn't even want."
Bilbo sighed. He loved his dwarves, really he did, but sometimes they could be so very frustrating. "I know you want to do everything you can for Ori, and don't get me wrong, that's a good thing. You want to make him happy, and that's a good thing as well. However, there is one thing you should keep in mind, which it seems to me you dwarves tend to forget sometimes."

"Oh?" Fíli frowned. "And what's that?"

"You are Ori's One." He resisted the urge to smile as Fíli's eyes widened a bit. "That's right. I know he is yours, and I know you would never forget that. But it seems you do sometimes forget that he seems quite clear on the fact that you are his One in turn." He tutted a bit. "It doesn't matter if he could have someone else, because there is only one dwarf he could ever want. And if I know Ori at all — as I'd like to think I do — he wouldn't take kindly to anyone badmouthing his One, even if the person doing so is the crown prince himself." He set his hands on his hips to emphasise this point. "So do be quiet about how you're not good enough, unless you want me to let Ori know that you're questioning his taste."

Fíli managed a small chuckle, now. "I suppose I've no choice there." He tilted his head, and though a shadow still lingered in his eyes, his smile seemed to be returning. "How about we go and see if we can coax Uncle out of the forges for now? It's getting near dinnertime, and I know you'd hate for him to miss it."

"It's good to see how well you understand the hobbit heart." Bilbo quickly gathered his tools into a neat pile near the door. "Shall we, then? You'll have to show the way, I'm afraid, I'm still not quite sure how to make my way to the forges from here."

Fíli gave him an exaggerated bow. "Just follow me, Master Hobbit, and we'll find your very own dwarf in no time."

Oh, yes. This was so much better than anything he might have left behind in Hobbiton. And he hadn't even put a single seed in the ground yet.

* *

To be honest, Legolas was not entirely certain which one of them was more worried as he brought Gimli into his father's palace.

To be sure, Gimli gave their surroundings and the approaching elves wary glances, but no more than he had the trees marking their way through the forest. If anything, he seemed to relax ever so slightly when the heavy doors closed behind them, leaving them in the halls of the Elvenking. Though then, that probably made sense. It had to be the first time the dwarf was surrounded by stone since he had left his home mountain what had to be months before. It might have seemed strange, that a dwarf would find any comfort in the realm of elves, but then Gimli did not seem as marked by hatred and mistrust as the last company of dwarves to have entered these halls.

Legolas, on the other hand, found himself growing ever more wary of what would soon happen. Not because he thought Gimli would misbehave, not really; in the short time they had spent together, he had already come to notice that the young dwarf was rather too clever and too considering of his words to cause strife on purpose, for all that he could be somewhat boisterous and short of temper when the mood struck him. No, he did not fear Gimli would start trouble, not unless he was provoked.

Ah, but therein lay his problem.
Legolas was all too aware his father was anything but perfect, and if anything the events surrounding the dwarves’ quest for the mountain had only made this fact all the clearer. He did not think Thranduil would try to breach the terms of the peace treaty, not when he was so very pleased with the gold and gems that had bought that peace, but he also would not have put it past his father to acknowledge that treaty with words snide and insulting enough to bring out the famous dwarven ire. And if that happened, he wasn’t sure where things would end.

Legolas did not particularly think King Thorin would think kindly of his young cousin getting thrown into a cell, particularly when he had figured out Gimli was still rather young for a dwarf, not even quite yet of age. Yet there was no way he could convey this to his father without causing an incident with his own words.

Perhaps he should have thought of this before he had decided to complicate matters simply for the sake of hearing more about the dwarf who had stolen his dear friend's heart. Even if Gimli had indeed told him rather entertaining tales about the young prince in question.

The word had preceded them from the gates, and Legolas found his father already waiting, along with assorted members of the court milling about, all curious to see this dwarf the crown prince himself had chosen to bring before the king. Thranduil motioned for Legolas to step aside, settling his eyes on Gimli.

"Dwarf. I am told you bear a message to me."

Gimli straightened, his feet steady a shoulder width apart as though he had grown from the stone floor itself. "Hail Thranduil Elvenking, Lord of the Woodland Realm!" Well, at least he hadn't forgotten his manners. "I am Gimli, son of Glóin, son of Gróin, of Durin's line, at your service." He bowed, a fluid and practised gesture that managed to be proud more than humble. "I am sent by my cousin, Lady Dís of Ered Luin and Erebor, sister to Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain."

Thranduil's eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly, though Legolas wasn't sure what he was reacting to, the royal connection or the simple fact of a dwarf being in possession of some manners. "And what word do you bring, then, Gimli son of Glóin?"

"My cousin approaches with a caravan set out from Ered Luin, not the only one but sure to be the largest of such in the coming years. I was sent on ahead while we were crossing the Misty Mountains, so I expect they will approach shortly. We have been assured the treaty between our peoples will grant them safe passage through your realm, yet Lady Dís thought it best I ride ahead to inform you of their approach, as well as to request some guides along the road, if you could spare them."

"That can be arranged." Well. Legolas supposed that was easy enough for Thranduil to promise; he was not the one who would have to organise it all, he could just sit and send others out. "Say, Master Dwarf. I have been told you arrived here with my son."

Gimli's eyes flickered towards Legolas for a moment before returning to Thranduil. "Aye, that is true. He answered my call at the edge of the forest and was kind enough to let me accompany him here."

"In that case, I imagine you have seen quite a bit of my realm." Thranduil inclined his head ever so slightly. "Do tell me, Master Dwarf — what do you think of what you saw?"

It was a trap, that much was clear. Legolas found himself stiffening, awaiting the disaster that was sure to strike in just a few words, and he could feel the tension spreading throughout the court. Surely they could not expect a dwarf to answer such a question in any way that would not offend the
"Elvenking?"

Gimli paused, no doubt considering this question very carefully. As he spoke, it was in unhurried, measured tones as though a river slow in its flow, sluggish in appearance but inevitable in its destination. "I have seen trees, Your Majesty," he said, ignoring the hint of a smirk that twisted Thranduil's lips at such an obviously empty statement. "More trees than in all my years before, and truly, I dare say more than I ever will again, lest I pass through the woods another time. I have seen trees older than any being I ever thought to lay eyes upon, solid and unmoving as the stone itself, yet as flickering and swift as a shadow in the night. I have smelled air as stale as that at the bottom of a cave newly opened, untouched and forgotten for hundreds of years, yet a breeze through dead branches brings no freshness, only the whisper of leaves long since fallen, like a distant crowd passed just out of sight of this world."

Legolas held his breath, not daring to interrupt, only silently watching his father for his reaction at such descriptions. It seemed everyone else was of a similar mind, the entire court hushed as Gimli drew breath.

"Yet I have also seen life, a sapling newly sprouted in a spot where the sun has broken through, a vine crawling over broken stone, for there is nothing in this world our hands may build that the earth itself cannot reclaim in time." Gimli stroked his short beard, eyes somewhere far off as though he could see the forest itself beyond the cold walls of Thranduil's throne room. "I have seen animals, a deer escaping through a clearing where I'm told spiders once held their nest, birds building their nests out of the dead leaves and twigs to raise their young on the very bones of the forest. I have seen greenness so deep it is like the brightest emeralds, have seen a ray of sun so bright I might well imagine a beam of pure gold in its place, a pond so deep and clear I feel I might gaze into it and see the very forging of the world in its depths. I have seen your palace, too, oh Elvenking, of stone arches and deep vaults formed as much by time and patience as by hand and tool, and to see it stirs an ache deep in my chest that I cannot right describe, for a home I have never known but only been promised."

Another breath, still without any haste or hurry, and Legolas saw his father transfixed in place. "It is a terrible place, your realm, for it fills me with terror to know there are things so deep and eternal that are not wrought of stone and iron. Yet it also fills me with hope and wonder, to see something that appears as dead as a mountain yet is only asleep, and is now sure to awaken as the air begins to clear, like some magnificent beast lumbering out of its cave to once again stand proud and strong in the open air."

Gimli paused again, then seemed to come back to himself, his eyes once again turning to Thranduil. "You have a mighty realm indeed, o Thranduil Elvenking," he said, with another short bow. "But then, I know little of such things, for I am but a dwarf and our knowledge of woodlands is never your equal, even if I were much older than my young years."

For a moment, Thranduil was silent, along with the rest of the court. When he spoke at last it was to continued silence. "It has been long since I have heard such words spoken of my lands," he said. "Indeed, I am wont to believe I have never heard such language from the tongue of a dwarf. It is good to see not all of Durin's folk is as rash and rough as those I have dealt with as of late, though I find myself wondering why a dwarf would waste such words upon elves."

Gimli lifted his eyebrows. "We are allies, or so I have been led to believe. It would be most improper for me not to represent myself and my line with all the courtesy and skill I am capable of."

"Yet even when we have been allies in the past, few of your race have walked into my halls with as little worry or wariness as you seem to bear."
Gimli gave a small shrug. "I am a child of exile, born after the sack of Erebor, and had hardly set my eyes upon an elf before this journey. I have heard many a tale of elves, to be sure, few of them flattering, but when I was chosen for this task my cousin the Lady Dís asked me to keep an open mind. So far I have received no ill treatment in your realm, despite my father's tales, and I would hate to bring dishonour to my cousin by being the one to break the courtesy of these proceedings."

"Wise words, once again." Thranduil inclined his head. "It is strange, to find myself holding hope for the future of the dwarven race. Yet if your generation might show some small measure of wisdom along with the pride and rage of your forefathers, perhaps the future of the line of Durin is not entirely lost yet."

Gimli tensed at that, enough so that Legolas was sure he would have noticed it even if he hadn't spent most of their journey through the forest following the dwarf's reactions to the things he said. Even so, he managed to remain calm, only tension around his eyes betraying that he might have taken offence at Thranduil's words. "King Thorin has done well for my people. We were exiled, with no friend in the world, yet he forged us a new home in Thorin's Halls in Ered Luin, and while he could have rested there safe in his accomplishment, he instead chose to risk his very life to bring us back to our former glory. He is a brave warrior and a great leader, and all the dwarves who follow him do so gladly and with willing hearts." He stroked his beard again. "Perhaps he is not the most diplomatic of people, but he is the king we have needed during his rule. It is my hope, as I am sure it is the hope of most of my people, that Prince Fíli will make his rule in a more peaceful and prosperous time, and for that it is my delight to say he is kinder of word and brighter of nature than his uncle. Different times call for different kings, and if they are not all alike that only allows us to better adapt to the changing world."

A clear slight, if one were to take it as such, on the long lives of elves and the long rule of their leaders, suggesting this left them unable to adapt. Legolas might have even taken offence to it himself, yet he found himself agreeing, knowing all too well how his father was set in his ways and growing more so all the time. Yet it was no direct insult, hidden behind cleverly crafted words, all but impossible to address without also acknowledging the similarly hidden insult that had sparked it.

If before he had been afraid to breathe, now he was certain his heart stopped for a moment.

Thranduil narrowed his eyes, clearly catching on to the same thing Legolas had. Then, however, his eyes relaxed, and to his shock Legolas saw a hint of a smirk curling his lips. "I am indeed curious to see how this new generation forms, if you are any example of it." He clapped his hands, breaking the spell-like stillness that had fallen over the court. "Well, then! Are you to leave our company now that your message has been received, Master Dwarf? Or would you prefer to stay to join your kin as they pass through?"

If Gimli was relieved, he hid it well. Legolas found it hard to imagine he wouldn't be, not if he was half as clever as his silver tongue suggested. "Your son told me I might have an escort out of the woods, so I can reach Erebor ahead of the rest and tell the King of their approach. Not that your palace is not magnificent to behold, Your Majesty, but it yet pales next to the tales of Erebor that I have heard all my life, and I would see how these stone arches compare with those forged and formed by my old kin to shelter their children and children's children."

"Then an escort you shall have, first thing tomorrow," Thranduil decided, and that was that. "Tonight, you shall be our guest, for your mountain hosted my son well when he visited them on my behalf and I would do no less for the representative of Erebor." Well. At least something good might come of the rivalry, if his father was indeed determined not to be outdone in terms of hospitality.

"I look forward to that." Gimli inclined his head with a satisfied rumble. "And I'm sure you can
sample the true hospitality of dwarves yourself soon enough."

"Oh?" Thranduil's eyebrows rose. "And do you think King Thorin will have cause to invite me to his mountain?" His voice rather suggested otherwise.

"But of course." Gimli sounded almost cheerful, not teasing or taunting. "After all, it would be quite unseemly for him to celebrate his upcoming wedding without extending an invitation to our closest allies."

Thranduil may have been perfectly composed on the outside, but Legolas knew his father well enough to tell he was startled by this thought. Well, that was what he got for ignoring everything outside his own borders; anyone who spent the briefest moment in Erebor would be quite well aware of the warm relationship between Thorin and his hobbit. Really, this rather made him wonder if his father was even aware of where Tauriel was nowadays, never mind what she was up to.

Which reminded him to make sure he was one of those escorting Gimli out of the woods the following day. There were yet many questions he could ask about Kíli and his worthiness as Tauriel's chosen.

Perhaps, even, he might see Tauriel himself.

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Tauriel was growing nervous as more time passed with no sign of any dwarves appearing.

She knew Thorin would do as promised; if he wanted to hinder her, he might have as easily not allowed her here at all. Even so, she couldn't help but feel relieved as she finally heard footsteps beyond the door of Thorin's small private study.

"So what is it you wanted me to see?" Kíli's voice, curious and unsuspecting, made her heart skip a beat.

"Why don't you go in and find out?" Thorin spoke this time, calm and assured. "It will be much quicker than convincing me to talk."

"Well, if you want to be difficult." Now, the door was opened, and Kíli stepped into the room, looking around before his eyes landed on Tauriel. "Tauriel?" He stopped, surprised enough not to even notice Thorin reaching for the door until it shut behind him.

"Don't worry, I'm sure he'll stay within earshot," she said as she saw Kíli's eyes twitch toward the door that Thorin was left behind. "I have no intention of sullying your precious honour."

Kíli grinned, and really, why did she fancy herself in love with this ridiculous creature? "Why, perhaps I would prefer to be sullied by you."

"That will have to wait, my love." She stepped away from him, toward the small desk Thorin kept in his rooms. There was a wrapped package upon it, tied up with three lengths of string. "I actually had a purpose to my request of your presence."

Kíli's eyes widened, realisation dawning. "Do you mean…"

She nodded, trying not to feel too nervous. "I would give you my return gift, if you will accept it."

"I accept it. Now can we kiss?"
Tauriel was quite sure she heard Thorin hiding his face in his hands behind the door. "I know I am but an elf, but I was yet hoping you would at least respect me enough to let me do this properly." Not that she suspected him of any failing beyond being overly eager, but she did want him to take this seriously.

"Right." Kíli straightened, eyes sharp. "I'm sorry, I'm listening."

Tauriel drew a deep breath. "I have asked many people about the dwarven courting customs. Your cousin Balin was particularly helpful, as was your uncle." Which had been a slight surprise, as she had expected him to be more reluctant about the matter, but then it seemed Thorin's main concern from the start had been to see them doing everything in a proper manner rather than the shape of her ears. Well, once he had accepted the inevitability of the match, at least. "I was told the courting gift is made to show three things. One, the skill of my hands, so you will know I am worthy and capable. Two, that I have devotion enough to spend the time to make the gift by my own hand. Three, that I have enough knowledge and understanding of you to truly claim to love you, as evidenced by my choice of the gift."

Kíli nodded, rocking on his feet, clearly impatient. "Aye, that's all true."

"I want to show you all those." She let her hand rest on the wrapped gift. "I want to show you my skill, because I am not a dwarf yet you love me regardless, and I want all to see that you were right in seeing worth in an elf." She opened the first tie around the package. "I want to show you my devotion, in the time I have spent on this, for while my kin may frown on the shortness of mortal love, every breath I draw with you is more precious than all my centuries." This time, the second tie. "And I want to show you my knowledge of you, so that you may know I am ever watching you, because seeing you brings me joy like nothing else." The last tie came undone under her fingers, and she drew the wrappings away to reveal her gift in full at last.

Kíli gasped, stepping forward to look at the displayed gift, a fine recurve bow similar to his old one in shape and size. She had used the finest woods from Mirkwood and bones from its majestic deer, mimicking the layered structure of Kíli's old bow with the metal parts replaced by horn and bone in her inability to shape cold metal. It was quite different from the elven longbows, which was all she had made with her own hands before, but Bard had been quite happy to share with her the knowledge of men in this matter. Every piece was her own work, though, as custom dictated, from the markings around the tips to the fine red bowstring.

"This is…" Kíli ran his fingers along the string, wondering.

"It is my own hair." As there was no immediate reaction, she allowed herself a small smile. "Of course, this means you will have to stay with me if you wish for it to be restrung in time."

"Oh, Tauriel." All of a sudden she found her arms full of warm dwarf. "This is perfect. You — you don't know how much this means to me. Just, that you'd think this an appropriate gift for me…"

"Let me guess." She offered him a smile, though as soon as he stepped away from her his eyes were back on the bow. "Dwarves would prefer for you to devote yourself to another weapon?"

"Most of them would." At last Kíli picked up the bow, testing his grip on it. "Too bad for them my family backed me up, and none would argue with Thorin, not after he even convinced Dwalin."

"Thorin agreed with your choice?" That surprised her somewhat. "I mean, I know he appreciates your skill now, but I would have expected him to be reluctant at first."

"No, Thorin's the one who taught me the basics." Kíli shook his head. "From what I hear, he had the
reluctant part quickly intimidated out of him when my mother first started courting; my father was a hunter, and a fine bowman from what I hear. He taught Thorin to shoot once they were over their first animosity, and probably would have taught us, except he died when I was too young to even remember him."

"So Thorin passed that on to you." She supposed it made sense, in a way. The matter of lineage would explain how someone as proud as Thorin Oakenshield would overlook the stain of a weapon so often considered elvish in nature.

"Aye, and when he could teach me no more, he got me an instructor, a man who helped me improve until I could practice on my own."

"Thorin said the only shameful weapon is one you wield without the proper respect. As long as you put effort into your training and take pride in your choice of weapon, pride is all it should give you in return."

"Those are wise words." She stepped closer, running her fingertips along the stubbled cheek. Kíli leaned into the touch, and not for the first time she wondered if this would always be or if he would eventually grow a beard like those of his kin. "So does this mean you accept?"

"Of course!" His slightly pensive look made way for a bright grin. "I can't wait to get to test this. This will probably shoot even better than my old one."

"That is certainly my hope. I would hate to present you with something that would be of no use." She smiled at him, oddly relieved even though clearly he had never even considered rejecting her gift. "A fine Bowman needs a fine bow."

"And I could ask for no finer." Kíli's grin widened. "Now I get to touch your hair every time I draw my bow."

"You have my permission to touch my hair whenever you like, on my head or otherwise."

This startled a laugh out of Kíli. "You know, there are dwarves who would find that quite scandalous to hear."

"No more, I'm sure, than most elves would find the idea of allowing a dwarf's hands anywhere near my hair. And yet you braid it so well." Though the important part were the two courting braids on either side of her head, one to show that she had accepted an offer of courtship and the other to signify which dwarf held her heart.

"Still rubbish at doing my own, though." Kíli grinned. "Good thing I'll have help on our wedding day, so you won't have to be embarrassed by taking an unkempt dwarf as your husband."

"That is a long way in coming, though, which I suppose is a good thing. It took me long enough to learn the courtship braids properly, I need all the practice I can get if I am to make your marriage braids in front of everyone." Not that she hadn't known how to braid hair before ending up with a dwarven lover, but a simple plait to keep hair out of her eyes was a far cry from the intricate designs dwarves used to pass messages through their hair and beards.

"Plenty of time for that." Kíli grinned, setting the bow back on the desk as though it were something incredibly precious and fragile. "And I think now we really should kiss so Uncle can finally open the door and shake his head while hiding his grin."

And really, what could she do to such a request but comply?
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Gimli and Legolas arrive in Erebor with exciting news, while Bilbo has plans for the wedding that Thorin may or may not agree with. Meanwhile, both Balin and Dori receive somewhat unexpected guests in their offices, though for rather different reasons.

Chapter Notes

Of the names in this chapter, Vati means "bowl" or "basin" in Finnish.

The closer they got to the gates of Erebor, the less certain Legolas got.

He had led the group of elves escorting Gimli out of the woods, as planned, and left the rest to stay in Dale while they made the final ride out to the mountain. Nobody protested, of course; the other elves had been strictly polite, but made no attempt at getting to know Gimli. The two of them had mostly been left to speak among themselves, while the rest of their entourage followed in silence or exchanged the occasional word with each other. However, as the short ride through what had been a battlefield and now was worked over to grow crops instead of bodies drew to its end, Legolas found himself hesitating.

"What's the matter, elf?" As Gimli spoke up, Legolas realised he had brought his horse to a halt. "We're close, I'll grant you, but the gates are some ways off, still."

"Ah." Legolas straightened himself, trying to look as nonchalant as he could. "I was just thinking you can probably make the rest of the way yourself." They certainly were close enough; he could already see the guards speaking among themselves about the approaching figures.

"Now why would I do that?" Gimli frowned. "Would seem right impolite to me, to make you ride out with me like that yet turn you away within sight of the gates."

"Perhaps, but it would be less impolite than for me to impose myself where I am not welcome."

"Nonsense!" Gimli snorted as though he had just heard something utterly ridiculous. "You've brought me all the way through Mirkwood and then here, when you were under no obligation to do so. None of my kin would turn you away, and if they tried I'd set them straight."

"It might not be them I am worried about, though I am hardly the most welcome guest in the mountain." Tauriel was in Erebor for the day, as he had learnt when they stopped in Dale. Though he did hope she still counted him as a friend, he was not quite so hopeful as to think she might have forgotten about his pleas for her to abandon her beloved.

"So, what, you think your friend might turn you away?" And blast the dwarf and his sharp eyes, though then Legolas could only blame himself and his careless words. After all, if it wasn't dwarves he worried about, that left few enough possibilities. "I won't believe that, not until I see it happen."
"She is your friend, is she not? She would hardly turn from you in such a manner."

"Perhaps there is more to the matter than you are aware of." He had hardly shared every detail with the dwarf, for all that they had spoken quite a bit.

"Like the fact that you might have held some hope for her yourself?" Legolas's surprise must have shown on his face, as Gimli snorted again and shook his head. "Oh, you're not quite as smart as you'd like to think, son of Thranduil. It's not that strange of a friend to worry that the beloved of a friend might not bring them happiness enough, but at times it has seemed you've tried to find some fault with Kíli, and been disappointed not to hear of something unfortunate enough. That's the thought of a rival, not one merely concerned."

"Then you can see why I might fear she will not wish me to come just yet."

"Aye, perhaps. And yet that is precisely why I think you ought to." Gimli rode up to the side of his horse, peering up from the much lesser height of his own mount. "Seems to me your questions are born of love, not malice and jealousy. For all that you might have fancied yourself to love her more than one would a friend, you would rather see her happy with another than deny her that happiness for the sake of keeping her to yourself."

"I tried to get her to leave him."

"Oh, no doubt you did. After all, how could she find happiness with a mere dwarf?" At least Gimli did not seem too insulted by the thought. "Even so, I believe you only did so by words and not by force or coercion. Not to say I know you terribly well yet, but you do not strike me as one low enough to try to force the choice of one you profess to love."

"I never could." No matter how it tore at his heart to see her tied to one who would only bring her to tears in the end. "Only, I do not wish to see her fade when his years run out all too soon."

"I thought that to be the case." Gimli gave a sage nod that was rather out of place in someone as young as he had to be, not that Legolas was much of an expert in telling the age of a dwarf. "And that, princeling, is why you ought to come with me and meet her in the mountain. If you stay away and tell yourself it's what she would want of you, you will still have your doubts, and all you can recall is when you asked her to come with you and she turned away."

"And what will I accomplish by coming with you?" Besides annoying some dwarves, of course, which might have been enough of a reason under any other circumstances.

"Why, two things in total, as it happens." Gimli chuckled, stroking his short though thick beard. "One, you will once again see that she is happy here with the prince. I trust that she is, in any case, as my cousin will surely do everything in his power to make her so if I know him at all. And two, you will show to her that she is more important to you than your dislike of dwarves, which I believe you will want to do if you wish to have any hope of keeping your friendship with her."

"And you are an expert in such matters, I'm sure." The comment came out more snide than he had meant for it to, but Gimli appeared rather unaffected.

"Oh, hardly. I'm young yet, and never fancied myself in love, never mind wishing to court them. However, I have those I call friends, and find myself invested in their happiness." Now, Gimli gave him a sly glance, the likes of which he would not have expected the dwarf to be capable of, the way he seemed to wear his heart on his sleeve. "Why else do you think I would be so happy to trade tales of Kíli for those of Tauriel?"
Legolas snorted, unable to help himself. "Why, aren't you a sly one, Master Dwarf? Using me to ascertain her suitableness for your friend even as I sought to do the same." He shook his head. "Very well, then. I shall accompany you, and trust your word on my welcome. If I am turned away, then, by your kin or Tauriel herself, I will be sure to remind you on how wrong you were on the matter."

"And when you are not, you can bear witness to my kin that I did not, in fact, insult the Elvenking to his face." Gimli paused. "Well. Not in too direct a manner, at least."

"And why would you want that? I would imagine they would be delighted to hear of your sly words to my father." Legolas found he could not even fault them for it overly much.

"Perhaps so, under most circumstances. When most of our people are on the other side of the woods, seeking passage? I doubt the king would be too pleased with me were I to risk your father's wrath in such a manner."

"Good thing, then, that your cousin Lady Dís clearly knew who to send in her stead." He had no doubt that his father might have made things difficult if he found himself disrespected or insulted in too bad a manner, treaty or no. "Shall we see, then, which one of us is correct?"

"Indeed." Gimli's lips twitched. "Especially since I've already brought you to the gates."

Gimli, Legolas realised, was correct. Without even thinking, he had spurred his horse on to match the other's calm little pony, closing the rest of the distance to the mountain. Not taking any notice of his surprise, Gimli dismounted and walked up to the guards standing at the gates.

"Hail! I'd like to speak with one of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield, if they can be sent for."

"They're all busy, most likely, but we can see if they'll speak with you." The guard was definitely frowning at Legolas, even though he spoke to Gimli. "And who is it that seeks to speak with the King's Company?"

"I am Gimli, son of Glóin."

That certainly gained the attention of the guards. A few words were exchanged, and though Legolas's ears might have caught the low voices, he could not make much sense of the Khuzdul. Then, one of the guards scurried away into the depths of the mountain. "Just a moment," another one assured Gimli. "Someone will arrive to welcome you soon." He paused, glancing at Legolas. "And the elf?"

"He's with me." Gimli's tone left no question about the matter, firm and unbudging. Legolas was almost surprised to hear him speak in such a tone to someone who was clearly older than him. But then, he supposed a cousin to the king, however distant, would be sure of his welcome no matter what his company. And indeed, this seemed to suffice for the guard, though he still gave Legolas the occasional glance as though to make sure he hadn't suddenly started doing anything terrible.

They didn't have to wait for too long. Soon the guard who had hurried away returned, bringing with him a vaguely familiar dwarf. The identity of the white-haired dwarf became clear soon, though, as he grasped Gimli's shoulders before bashing his forehead against the young dwarf's in a way that made Legolas cringe. Though then, he had heard of how Lord Dáin had used his head as a weapon during the battle, so clearly dwarven skulls were as thick as some insults might have implied.

"Nephew!" the old dwarf bellowed, surely louder than was entirely necessary. "We didn't expect you until the caravan!"

"Yes, well, I was sent ahead." Gimli's voice was also louder, and for a moment Legolas thought he
was merely mimicking the old dwarf, perhaps to mock him in some subtle manner, but then he spotted the horn the old dwarf was holding. So there was an actual reason for the volume. "Lady Dís sent me to speak with the Elvenking, and from there I came here directly."

"You spoke with Thranduil?" Here Legolas was again the target of suspicious glares, as though he was about to summon a cell from nothing. Not that he could blame them, really. He couldn't claim to recall every dwarven face, but if this was indeed Gimli's uncle, he was also one of those who had been imprisoned in Mirkwood.

"That he did," Legolas said, intent on inserting himself in the conversation in some small manner. "I dare say he made rather an impression on my father, in fact. Never before have I heard him commend a dwarf on their talent for words." Or for much of anything, really, but that was beside the point.

Gimli flushed at this, a rather fascinating sight as his skin reddened beneath his beard. The older dwarf, though, guffawed with laughter. "Aye, he's good at that, isn't he? Barely ever shuts up, really, though he's a good lad otherwise." The gaze he now gave Legolas was slightly less suspicious though still on this side of wariness. "I thought you looked familiar. So what brings you here, princeling? More messages from your father?"

"Actually, he is here on my account," Gimli said before Legolas had a chance to respond. "He escorted me through Mirkwood and then here, and made sure I was hale and happy the whole way. In fact," he added in the manner of a loud whisper that is intended to convey an attitude rather than conceal the words, "there may have been some boasting, regarding how well I was hosted in Elvenking's court. I suppose the poor thing has to be forgiven, really. It wasn't too bad, as far as feasts go, so someone who has never seen true dwarven hospitality might well be fooled into thinking it's the best that can be expected."

Legolas certainly remembered no such boasts, but he was not about to interfere as the old dwarf's face took on a speculative expression. "Is that so, now?" he grumbled. "Well, we'll see about that! Bombur's sure to put together a small feast in your honour, now, and I rather dare the princeling to claim he's tasted better!"

And that, it seemed, was that. Without any further preamble Legolas was ushered into the mountain along with the dwarves, his horse taken to hand with the same care that Gimli's pony received, and any dwarf who seemed about to question him was sent skittering by the old dwarf's glare. Clearly, Legolas mused, his father was not the only one who could be motivated by the perceived rivalry between their realms.

Really, he should have been more concerned about this, but right now it was working to his advantage, so who was he to protest?

*  

Kili, Tauriel decided as she frowned down at the papers in front of her, had damn well better appreciate what she was doing for him.

Not that this was a terrible task, really, nor was she only doing it for his sake; she had plenty of reason to learn Khuzdul of her own volition. However, after spending hours going over words and phrases and a writing system that very nearly caused her a headache just from the sight of it, all the while trying to hold a conversation in three different languages of which she only properly spoke two, it was easy to forget that this was anything but a way for the dwarves to make her suffer.

The conversation had come to a lull for now, in any case, and she was rather hoping they would
break for dinner soon. She had spent most of the day in the mountain and had not spent nearly as much of it with Kíli as she would have liked to. At least during dinnertime, nobody would criticise her for wishing to spend a moment with her intended and none else. Well. Her intended and the obligatory chaperon.

"You seem to have knitted a lot while we have been talking." She nodded towards the deep blue fabric that was forming at Ori's needles. She'd gone for Westron, but then, she supposed the day's lesson was well and truly over with by now. Surely she was not the only one exhausted by what they had already done. "May I ask what you are making?"

"Ah. It's going to be a cape, actually." Ori flushed a bit at the sudden attention, but managed to keep it under wraps for the most part. Good. He would have to get used to attention eventually, from rather more intimidating sources than her. "For Fíli."

"Your courting gift?" As he nodded, Tauriel blinked. "And you're not afraid he might walk in and see it?" That was a thing, right? They had been so very careful about not letting her get any indication of Kíli's gift beforehand.

Ori snorted, not a very delicate sound from someone she was used to thinking of as a rather well-mannered dwarf. "It's the very reason why I'm working on it here in Thorin's office, actually. This is just about the only place in the whole mountain where I can more or less trust Fíli to knock before he storms in."

"Should I worry that this count apparently does not include your bedroom?" Thorin did not look up from the documents he was going through at his desk, but clearly he had been listening.

This time it took a moment longer for Ori to fight down his blush, but his voice was steady enough as he spoke, never dropping a stitch. "That doesn't count, since he's not going to come there either way, he fears Dori too much for that. But I can't very well close myself in my room all day long until I'm done, so I've got to get in working time where I can find it."

"That sounds utterly sensible." Bilbo gave a serious nod. "Goodness knows I have trouble finding the time and place to work on mine, and I'm on a much shorter timeline."

"Not true." And still Thorin would not look at them, even as his lips tugged up into a ghost of a smile. "I do not enter your rooms, knocking or not. While I admit there could be more time, finding a place to make something out of my sight should not be a problem."

"No, you don't. And yet you find ways to monopolise my time, one way or another." Bilbo echoed his smile, though. "Ah, that reminds me. Can the ravens carry messages to people who are not dwarves?"

"Well, certainly." Now Thorin did finally look up, blinking at Bilbo. "I imagine it would not be any different from bearing a message to dwarves who cannot speak with them. Why so? Do you perhaps wish to send a letter to your relatives in the Shire? You only need to say so, Balin or myself can instruct the ravens easily enough."

"That's actually not what I was thinking of, though I suppose a message to my relatives would not be amiss." Bilbo shook his head. "No, actually I was thinking about the invitations to the festivities. You know, since it's actually a rather grand deal, a coronation and a royal wedding all in the same."

"Isn't it a bit early yet?" Thorin's eyes returned to the papers, and Tauriel wasn't sure if his frown was inspired by whatever he was reading or the conversation at hand. "We have several months to go, yet."
"Well, yes, but that's a frighteningly short time for those who might have to make travel arrangements." Bilbo lifted his eyebrows. "You do realise, I hope, that you can't get away with simply inviting Dáin, Bard and Thranduil."

"I was rather hoping to get away with just Dáin and the Bowman, but I suppose you do have a point." Thorin sighed. "So who else do you propose to invite?"

"Why, everyone who matters, of course, which is why we need the time. I figure if the ravens can make the flight as quick as they did to the Shire, that should leave enough time for even the further away guests, should they choose to attend." Bilbo shook his head. "We'll have to send word to the other dwarven realms, of course, and Gondor and Rohan as well. Lord Elrond, of course, and I was rather hoping to invite the Lady Galadriel as well."

"Elrond and Galadriel? One elf is not enough for you, then?" Did Tauriel suddenly not count? She supposed it was a good sign, really, that Thorin would not take her into account when arguing against the inclusion of her kinsmen.

"They are rulers in their own right, it's only polite. Besides, Elrond's help was rather invaluable to us on the way, and from what Gandalf told me the Lady of Lórien had a big part in purifying Dol Guldur, which has a direct effect on the safety of not only our future trade routes but Erebor itself as well."

"Do you actually think any of them would even come?" Thorin sighed. "I would be surprised if they had any interest in attending a dwarven celebration. I rather doubt even the other dwarven lords will come, save for Dáin and perhaps some delegates sent in place of the more important people; they will be busy with their own Durin's day festivities."

"Probably not, no. However, inviting them is still important. We need to cultivate good relations with all the important realms, and not inviting them, or leaving it until so late that not even Rohan's best horses could make the trek, would not be a good start to that." Bilbo rolled his eyes. "It's not like you'll have to do a thing, anyway, save for placing your seal on the messages. I was thinking of working with Balin to get the wording right, and perhaps Ori and Tauriel would like to help as well?" He smiled at them both, now. "Not only am I sure Tauriel would be a great help in addressing the elves, but the next time we'll need to do something similar will probably be for one of their weddings."

"I would be glad to help, though I'll admit I have little experience in the matter of diplomatic correspondence." It was easy enough for Tauriel to smile, with a warm feeling spreading through her at the thought of her wedding.

"I suppose we all do, but that's why we need to learn, isn't it?" Bilbo gave a snort of laughter. "It's not like we can count on our respective spouses to do that."

"Oh, I don't know," Tauriel chuckled even as Ori tried to suppress a scandalised laugh. "Kíli can be downright charming when he wants to, and he seems to have little trouble communicating with other races."

"Yes, I think we can all see that." Despite his wry tone, Tauriel was certain Thorin was amused as well. "I could say something about this terrible slander against my character, but clearly that would be a lost battle in such company."

Bilbo seemed about to say something in response, an amused smile on his face, as the door suddenly burst open. Ori reflexively hid his knitting work from sight of the door, but this was a false alarm, as the one who rushed in was not the golden-haired prince but rather his younger brother. Kíli only
barely gave Tauriel his usual brilliant grin before turning to his uncle.

"Thorin, you've got to come! Hurry, everyone else's going already!"

"Come where?" Thorin frowned. "I'd ask if there's been an orc sighting, but I rather hope you wouldn't be quite this eager about it."

"No, it's much better!" Kíli's grin almost split his face. "It's Gimli!"

This drew an immediate reaction from everyone. Even Tauriel, who had only heard the name on occasion, found herself sitting up straighter, while Ori and Thorin both perked up at once. Bilbo, too, blinked at Kíli in surprise.

"Gimli? You mean Glóin's son?"

"Exactly!" Kíli was all but bouncing on his feet. "I haven't seen him yet, I came straight here when I heard, but apparently he showed up on the gates with an elf and Óin already went to see him and you've got to come!"

"Peace, my love. You'll soon fall over in your keenness." Not that it didn't make Tauriel smile to see him so enthusiastic. "Wasn't he supposed to arrive with the caravan? I'm assuming he didn't arrive with one, since I doubt you'd have just forgotten to mention that."

"Not that I hear of. Which is why we should go speak with him now, right?" Kíli gave an excited grin. "Come on, you've all been holed up here for hours."

"I suppose he's right." Thorin gave an exaggerated sigh as he stood up from his desk. "In any case, if Gimli is here, the rest cannot be too far behind. We should hear what he can tell us about their approach."

Tauriel was going to join the group anyway, but Kíli made sure of this by hooking his arm through hers. Tauriel could just see old dwarves shaking their heads at such indecency, but then they were walking with Thorin and Bilbo, so surely they could not have had better chaperons. Ori excused himself to take his work to his room, while the rest of them headed for the gates.

It was easy enough to see where Gimli was, having not come far from the gates until he had no doubt been stopped by warm welcomes. Half the Company seemed to be there by now, surrounding a young dwarf with red hair and beard — at least Tauriel assumed he was young. His beard was still short, though that alone was no absolute evidence when Thorin was right there next to them, and his face had the same smooth skin and lack of weathering that was obvious in those she knew to be the youngest members of the Company. However, she paid little attention to the dwarf for now, even as Kíli rushed away from her with a joyous greeting at his cousin. Her attention was on the other, much taller figure standing some ways apart from the gaggle of dwarves.

"Legolas." He looked much as he had the last time they met, a small smile curling his lips as he saw her. "I did not expect to see you here."

"Whereas I was rather hoping to meet you." His smile grew more obvious. "How have you been, my friend?"

"Happy and healthy." Which was what he really wanted to know, in any case. "So you arrived here with young Gimli?"

"That I did. I met him on the western edge of the forest, where he sought to speak with our people, and brought him here by way of my father's court. We had a few others with us when leaving
Mirkwood, but I left them in Dale."

"And why exactly would you concern yourself with the escorting of a dwarf?" That just made no sense. "Certainly others could have made the journey as well, even if you wanted to make sure he arrived in the mountain."

"Why, to get an excuse to see you, of course." There was a hint of something almost like playfulness in his voice, something that she hadn't heard in ages now, certainly not since before their days had been filled with fighting spiders and watching their forest be taken over by a sickly gloom even at the very gates of Thranduil's palace. She had missed it, had missed his easy smile and carefree nature, and was glad to see it returning. "Of course, it helped that I soon figured out this dwarf could tell me a tale or two about your precious prince."

"Oh?" She lifted her eyebrows. "And why exactly would you wish to know more about Kíli?"

"For one thing, I wanted to make sure he would truly make you happy for what little time he is allowed." The smile faltered, but then returned. "Luckily, I have been assured that he will do so to the utmost of his ability. Apparently dwarves do not falter much once their heart has been set."

"I have been told the same." She was glad he could see it now, too. "I am happy, Legolas, truly. I will not say I do not miss the woods sometimes, but I would not trade the most ancient of trees for one of his bright smiles."

"So I am starting to see." Legolas's lips twitched again. "Of course, I also wanted to make sure you had advance warning of the approach of the caravan, considering they are led by the mother of your intended."

"Oh, sweet mercy." She had not even thought of that. Well, to be precise, she had thought of it, but preferred not to. It had been hard enough to win the acceptance of the Company, who at least had witnessed first hand her help in healing Kíli and fighting the battle. She did not want to even imagine what it would take to win the acceptance of Kíli's mother. "It's too late for me to flee, isn't it?"

"Rather so, I fear." Legolas did not seem overly sympathetic, the traitor. "Though then, I'm not sure you have anything to worry about."

Now, wasn't that an interesting statement. "Oh? And what makes you think that?"

"Think about it, my friend." Legolas offered her a grin, the first she had seen from him in quite a while. "This is a dwarf who, instead of sending someone old and experienced and impressive, sent off a young dwarf with few prejudices and a silver tongue to meet with my father. No, Tauriel, you should not worry about this meeting; rather, you ought to look forward to meeting your greatest ally in this mountain you are to call home."

And that, well, she supposed that did make some sense. Even so, she couldn't help but feel the slightest bit anxious, which wasn't helped much by Gimli's announcement that Lady Dís would send ample warning of their approach as soon as the caravan cleared the eastern edge of Mirkwood. She was not quite sure that a matter of days would be enough warning at all.

Then, however, Kíli took her hand to introduce her to his young cousin, and Gimli greeted her with nothing but curiosity and good cheer, and she started to wonder if perhaps the Lady Dís wasn't more like her open-hearted son than her suspicious brother.

She certainly had to hope so, or she might end up in rather the difficult situation.
Balin really should have been more surprised to find someone in his office when he walked in.

For one thing, his office was locked. It didn't have a hidden door, not like the side entrance to the mountain had been, but it had a solid door that was rather untouched by the years and a firm lock to which he carried the only key on his belt. The room was supposed to be secure, he had chosen it for that precise quality. It had to be secure or he couldn't in good conscience keep the various official documents there. Thorin's office was likewise locked when it wasn't in use, and any confidential documents were supposed to be inside one of the two rooms at all times, except if they were being transported between the two or needed somewhere else such as the council room. Only Thorin or Balin himself were supposed to be here unaccompanied, and even Thorin couldn't do that without getting the key from him first.

In short, as he had just arrived with his key, there shouldn't have been a living soul in his office. And yet, he couldn't find much surprise within him as he walked in only to see Nori seated quite comfortably at his desk — no, on his desk, seated right there on the corner, his legs hanging over the edge as he flipped through some documents.

Balin sighed, closing the door behind himself. "I'm not even going to ask just how you got in here."

"Good, because I wasn't planning on telling you." Nori dropped the documents he had been reading back on the desk. "Don't worry, I won't be taking up your time. Was just checking on the list of recent arrivals; there'll be plenty enough names to go over once the caravan arrives so I wanted to be caught up for that."

"You could just ask for a copy of the records, you know." He wasn't questioning Nori's wish to see the names, no. It was clear enough how it would be easier to scan the new arrivals for any known troublemakers from their names than trying to see every new face in person.

"Well, yes I could, but that wouldn't be nearly as much fun. Need to keep in practice, you see, and I have rather limited opportunities to do so now that I'm supposed to be a law-abiding dwarf and all."

Balin snorted, carrying the documents he had in hand to the desk. "One could say something about the legality of breaking into a locked office with several extremely sensitive documents."

"Oh, sure. Except if there's anything in this mountain that I'm not supposed to see, it's more or less my job to get my hands on it." Nori dug out a knife from somewhere, as though sitting with his hands unoccupied was an unnatural state. Though then, from what he had seen, that was rather accurate. Nori was never quite still, working on something with his hands if he wasn't on the move himself. Dwalin had made some idle comment about how it helped Nori keep his thoughts in order, and while Balin himself focused best without any disturbances, he knew it wasn't the same for everyone.

"Ah, yes. I suppose there's every possibility I might be scheming behind Thorin's back." Which they both knew to be utterly ridiculous, but then so was Nori's argument in the first place. "And what reason do you have for still being here?"

"What do you mean?" Nori lifted his eyebrows, which was more of a production than it might have been for most people. Balin wasn't going to be distracted.

"You know perfectly well what I mean. If you had wanted to, you could have been here and away with me none the wiser. The only reason why you'd still be here when I arrive is because you wished to be. So, out with it."

"Hm." Nori toyed with his knife for another moment. "You have no complaints about the current
state of my relationship with your brother."

"Trust me, if I had protests, you would be aware." Which wasn't to say he might not wish for things to be different, if only for their own sake, but then he knew his protests at being called an old romantic fool had little weight behind it.

"Why, though?"

Balin blinked. "Why what?"

"Why are you being so supportive?" Nori shook his head. "I know, I know, you want your brother to be happy and all that. Even so, you aren't making that many demands of us, even when we're clearly being inappropriate if anyone liked to argue so. I can't quite grasp why you would be so accepting of my fear of commitment when it could reflect badly on you."

"There was every chance we might die on the journey." He wasn't stupid enough to deny that, however much faith he had in Thorin; after all, a part of him would have been quite content to stay back in the Blue Mountains. "Seems to me you've both already given more than enough for the line of Durin."

"I wasn't entirely selfless in taking part, you know." Nori snorted. "I had quite the heavy list of sins to erase."

"Oh, I am aware. I did draft most of the contracts, after all." He remembered Nori's, as he did the others, remembered the promise of total clemency for any crimes committed prior to the quest, as well as the clauses dictating his right to privacy and safety from the other members of the Company, insofar as the former could be guaranteed on the road. He couldn't exactly blame Nori for having been cautious in negotiating his terms, considering all the times he and Dwalin had clashed in the past.

"It all seems more than I should expect to have, is all."

"And why is that?" Now Balin was the one asking for clarification. "I can't speak for my brother in such a matter, but I know that whatever he has told you of his heart, he has been sincere. And I have too much to do to concern myself too much with what adult dwarves do with each other, as long as you aren't looking to cause a scandal on purpose."

"Yes, I know. It's just…" Nori trailed off, not quite looking hesitant — Dori wasn't sure he knew how — but considering his words, at least.

"Yes?" A gentle prompt, rather than a prod. He knew better than to rush such a matter.

"I'm a bastard." Balin made to speak up, but fell silent as Nori lifted his hand. "I know, I know, you don't care about that. I know my line through my mother and that's enough, for all that one could say about the purity of that particular bloodline." Nori shook his head. "No, the point is, I only share a mother with each of my brothers. I've no idea how many lovers she took in all, but clearly she had at least three, and the only one of them who might have had some chance of making her happy up and died before he could do anything of consequence. Well, more consequence than gifting us with Ori."

Balin nodded, frowning a bit. "And you think that would matter?" Hadn't they just established that Balin held no particular concern for Nori's parentage, and Nori was aware of this?

"It matters to me." There was an odd look in Nori's eyes, as though he were revealing something of great importance. And truly, he was, for someone who never allowed himself to appear vulnerable. "My mother was a good dwarf, far better than I could ever hope to be. And yet, she got mistreated
and abandoned time after time. Seems unlikely to me I should expect anything better of my own fate."

"Dwalin would not leave you." And if Nori thought he would, well, Balin would have some serious words for his brother about the proper way to treat his partner, courting or not.

"Oh, I know he won't, he's too much of a stone-headed Durin to even think about that. Just makes me wonder what else is going to go wrong, because surely something will, right? It's not like I could actually be happy. That's just not how the world works."

"Well, I cannot say I am in any way an expert in these matters. I have never felt the wish for another, not for bed or for company. However, it seems to me some of that happiness at least would depend on how much you yourself work for it." He paused, not sure if he should say the following thing. "Perhaps, even, your mother has now found her happiness as well." He might have not known much, but he did know Vuori had died bringing Ori into the world. And, well, Nori had just mentioned her best hope of happiness had passed without leaving them more than little Ori.

It was the stuff legends were born from, lovers reunited in the Halls of Ancestors.

"I'd damn well hope so, after all the time she spent looking for it." Nori finally hopped off his desk, knife disappearing to wherever it had come from in the first place. "Won't be keeping you any longer. I'm getting quite enough of this sentimentality thing for now."

"As you wish." Balin paused. "You know you could discuss all this with Dwalin as well."

"Oh, I'm sure I could. Might even do it some day, just to see the look on his face for trying to do this emotions thing. In that at least, we are evenly matched." Which was not true at all, Dwalin was quite capable of speaking his heart when he was wont to do so, but then Balin suspected Nori knew that perfectly well already.

As he started looking through the papers he had brought with him, the office now free of any intruders, he found a page he had not put there himself. It wasn't much, just a few lines about some dwarven merchant who seemed to give favourable treatment to those who had come from Iron Hills as opposed to those who returned to Erebor from other parts, but it was precious information all the same. Something like this had to get snipped in the bud, lest any rifts be born in the growing population of the mountain before they had even settled in properly. This, as Balin well knew, was why the spymaster was as precious to the king as the Captain of the Guards, if not more so.

He also had no doubt that any matters which would be better handled by way of a blade than words would be well and swiftly dealt with long before they ever reached his desk, by one of them if not the other. Not that there was much difference to be made, really, not when they shared a bed most nights.

Even if it hadn't been his brother's happiness in balance, he would have been a fool indeed to try to interfere in the matter.

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A knock brought Dori out of his state of concentration just as he was finishing up a seam. Not that he needed silence to work, he never would have been able to keep food on the table for his brothers if he'd had to wait for them to be quiet, but it was a change from the previous state of things to be sure. He had claimed an area of the mountain as the headquarters of the guild, had brought in some stoneworkers to make sure it was safe before he hired a few aspiring young people from Dale to help him clean it out and then stocked the place with threads and fabrics from the merchants. He had few
enough hands to look after right now, most of the current inhabitants of the mountain were from Iron
Hills and were mostly either soldiers or those concerned with construction, but he knew there would
be a veritable flood of tailors and seamstresses coming along with Dís, as well as plenty of work for
them all. Those who did not have their own capital to start with or clients who brought their own
materials could begin by working with the guild materials, then pay back from their fees. For now,
though, it was just him sitting in silence in the corner he liked to call his office, with a single candle
and his water sphere to keep him company.

Except now, someone was knocking.

"Come in!" He set his work down, though not aside. He'd decide on that once he knew who wanted
to see him and why.

"Ah, I hope I'm not intruding or anything." Bofur opened the door, grinning as he peered in. "Wow,
this place looks nice. All ready for the new arrivals, then?"

"I do hope so." Dori smiled, waving his hand. "Come inside, sit. I'll get us a little more light." It was
fine to work with, had been for all his life, but a single candle and a fading fire at the side of the room
were hardly enough when he had a visitor. He'd have to check that he had plenty of candles and
lamps in store for when they had more people in the little guild hall.

"Don't bother on my account, I've barely got out of the mines." Bofur grinned as he came up to a
seat close to Dori's table. "Would have thought you'd want a bit more light for working, though."

"Well, my little friend helps with that." He tapped his fingers against the sphere, though only gently.
"It gathers the light from the candle enough to work by. It was invaluable when the one candle was
all I could afford, and even now it seems quite needless to burn more when I'm just sitting here on
my own."

"Aye, I know how that can be." And he did, of that Dori was sure. Bofur's family had probably
known poverty even worse than his, for all that neither of them would ever have to fear such a thing
ever again. "I've seen those things before, but never figured out just what they were for. Thought
they were just supposed to be pretty."

"No, it's for quite practical purposes. It's also the reason why most goldsmiths and tailors use candles,
the light from crystals isn't as easily focused." Dori shook his head. "But I'm sure you didn't come
here to discuss my choice of lighting devices. Is there something I can help you with?"

"I was rather hoping so, yes." Bofur scratched at his beard as though embarrassed about the request
he was about to make. "Ah, when you get more workers here, I thought you could get one of them
to do a commission for me?"

"Why, certainly. What is it you want made?" This was peculiar. Not the request, of course, it was all
part and parcel of his position to match the clients with the guild members unless and until he set
someone to do so in his stead, but the way Bofur reacted about it was anything but expected. Surely
there should have been no reason for him to seem so abashed about a rather standard request.

"A coat." Bofur shook his head. "Not just any coat, though. It's... well." He toyed with one of his
braid, seeming a bit agitated. "So, you know how Bombur and Bifur are all proud about the lord
thing, even though we all know it's just Thorin's way of annoying the actual nob? Well, they seem
to think I should show my position, such as it is, at least when I'm in court and such. And the best
way to do that, since I don't much care for too much posturing, would be a nice coat. Something
well-made but practical, and with the family crest on it."
Dori chuckled. "I'll make the coat myself, my friend. Now, don't protest," he hasted to say. "It's not that much work for me, and I do need something to keep my hands busy. As for the crest, that's another matter. I'd ask Nori, but he's busy enough that he won't commit to anything with a schedule, only made an exception for Ori's new clothes and even that was only just. There are a few women in Dale I can pay to do it, though, if we don't get good enough embroiderers with the caravan. Either way, I'll have it made for you well in time for Durin's Day, so you can wear it for the festivities."

Bofur wasn't his closest friend, his sense of humour and loud manner often clashing with Dori's own sensibilities, but he was one of the Company nevertheless and Dori would not let him down.

"That would be great if you could do that." Bofur grinned. "Ah, right, the crest. It's nothing that special, of course, not an official coat of arms or anything, just a symbol my grandpa made for his maker's mark that got passed down to his sons and then to us. Doesn't get used much nowadays, it's not like we've got a lot of official things to draw it on, and when Bifur or I make something nice enough to mark our maker's marks are modified. Think last time it got used was when Bombur made marriage beads for Vati."

"All the more reason for you to wear it now, then." Dori himself had never given much thought to such things. They were entitled to wear the crest of Durin if they so wished, Ori at least was going to do so when he took more part in court if Dori had any say in it, but for himself it had never been that important. Laying a claim to it, however justified, might have seemed like a bid to gain favour that they had not earned, and Dori's pride would not allow that. He was never going to court anyone, either, not unless something truly extraordinary happened, so what mark his line bore had no personal importance for him. "I will need a picture, or at least a description."

"Figured you might." Bofur dug out a folded piece of paper, spreading it out on the table. Even in the light of a single candle Dori could see the bold, dark lines, drawn by a hand that was perhaps not too used to creating art but knew what it wanted to portray. There was a mattock crossed with a pickax, and beneath them both a whittling knife with a few flakes of wood, a simple design well suited for a line of miners and woodworkers. "Is this good enough? I'm no artist, but I've seen it often enough."

"This will be quite enough." It was vaguely familiar, though then that was not such a surprise. Few crests were entirely unique. "Do you have any preferences for colours?"

"Anything goes. We're not exactly important enough to have family colours or anything." "Well, you're going to, once you show up in public with this coat." These things were important, especially when there was nobility involved. It was no coincidence that Thorin and his heirs wore dark blue more often than not, or that it was the colour their mates would inevitably be clad for important occasions. A part of him wanted to make that all that Ori wore, just to make a point, with enough light blues thrown into the mix not to get too scandalous until the wedding at least. He knew that was a fool's errand, though, and not one he particularly wished to force. He already knew that on his wedding day, of all days, Ori would want some hint of their mother's dusty purple as well, would never let go of that even when he was wed to the golden prince.

"I'll let you pick for me, then." Bofur shrugged. "Just nothing too fancy, I'll feel strange enough if anyone's actually looking at me."

"Don't worry, I can do subtle." A rich brown for the coat, perhaps, with the crest in a grey so light it appeared silver. It would all be familiar enough for Bofur, yet quite different from his usual muted colours.

"Thank you for that, then." Bofur grinned. "So. You want the payment up front, or afterwards when you know how much time and materials it takes?"
"After will be fine." It wasn't like either of them was hurting for money, and if Dori did the sewing himself and paid for the embroidery to be done by someone else it wasn't strictly speaking guild work. "Perhaps by then I'll find some favour I'd rather trade with you for it."

"As you wish." Bofur's grin didn't fade as he stood again and bowed. "Thanks again. Also, a little bird told me that if you'd like some pastries, you can always stop by our rooms later. Bombur's getting quite worked up about Vati's arrival, he can't seem to stop baking."

"I will keep that in mind." A pastry or two did sound like a splendid idea. "Good luck getting your plans together for the caravan's arrival. I'd imagine you will be a lot busier than I could ever hope to be, organising everyone."

"Mahal, that I will." Bofur gave a deep sigh. "I keep hoping that one day I'll wake up and find that all this has been some strange dream and all I need to worry about is where I next point my own mattock." He was still grinning, though, so clearly he was not entirely serious, giving Dori a cheerful wave as he walked out again.

Dori, on the other hand, got right back to work. There was a lot for his hands to do before the caravan arrived, and more yet once it did. More materials to secure, rules to plan, things to clear with the Head of Guilds and others to deal with in Dale. And in the middle of all that he would arrange for a very nice coat to be made, along with a thousand other little tasks that piled up all around him whenever he turned his gaze.

He wasn't sure when he had last been so happy.
There is a lot to do before they can welcome the caravan to the mountain. Fortunately, Bilbo is quite efficient about running things, and he is not above using the opportunity for some light scheming of his own.

Of course, when the dwarves of Erebor flock home, Bilbo will have to deal with meeting Dís for the first time... though whatever his worries, the one who is most concerned about meeting her is Fíli.

Of the names in this chapter, Vati means "bowl" or "basin" while Pata is "pot" or "cauldron" in Finnish. Bilbur, on the other hand, is simply a mix of Bilbo and Bombur.

Bilbo, Thorin was coming to realise, could be very efficient when he set his mind to it. Of course, Thorin was aware that there were things that ought to be done in preparation for the arrival of the caravan, but he had more or less assumed it would be accomplished by the people around him without any direct involvement on his part. After all, he had very little input in the day to day chores of the mountain, busying himself with the more important matters, as it should have been. Surely it was enough to pass the word of the impending arrival and someone else would take care of the rest.

This someone, as it turned out, was Bilbo. Thorin liked to think everything would have been accomplished even without him, but Bilbo seemed happy to take charge and Thorin was even happier to let him. He had not forgotten Bilbo's reaction when they had been unprepared for guests. He did not want to imagine what Bilbo would do if some detail was not to his satisfaction as they welcomed all their people back home.

Their people. He'd heard Bilbo say that, sometimes, and it never failed to fill him with warmth. Bilbo considered them, the dwarves of Erebor, his people as well, and Thorin wouldn't have had it any other way. Bilbo was his One, and all that he was belonged to Bilbo; Durin's Folk were only one small part of that.

It was certainly interesting, watching the way Bilbo went about his self-appointed task. For all that Bilbo might not have known many dwarves outside the Company, he did know them and their strengths quite well, and was not above exploiting that knowledge. Bombur was given instructions to send people to purchase more food from the merchants, both for the initial welcome feast and for the daily life afterwards, while Bilbo asked Balin to send word to Iron Hills and their other trading partners that more food traders would be more than welcome as soon as possible. Dwalin and his guards marked the areas of the mountain that had been inspected and found structurally sound enough to be lived in, while some hired hands from Dale cleaned out a few large halls to house all the new arrivals until the smaller living spaces could be called not only safe but habitable. Dori and...
Bofur worked together to collect lists of all the tasks that immediately needed ready hands, so they could assign the arrivals suitable work as soon as they knew each of their trade and talents, with Ori and Balin keeping meticulous lists of tasks and living areas and everything that needed to be kept track of.

How exactly Bilbo got Ori to present the details of all these preparations in front of the council, Thorin had no idea, but that was exactly what Ori did, with a steady voice and not a hint of his usual shyness as he listed the new stocks of food and other supplies acquired, the plans on where to assign the new workforce, who would get priority as new living spaces were deemed clean enough. He did seem relieved to blend back to the background at the end of it, yes, but when he had first asked Ori to take notes during the council meetings he would have never even imagined he would do something like this so calmly and without fear. Fíli was beaming with pride, and couldn't stop himself from sneaking glances at Ori for the rest of the meeting. Thorin couldn't exactly blame him.

What he found the most impressive, though, was the matter with Dale. Obviously it would not do to have a caravan of dwarves stomping right through the fields the men had worked so hard to cultivate, so they would need to guide the arrivals along the road and the parts of land that did not grow anything important. This in turn required the cooperation of the men of Dale, as they knew better than the dwarves what were the best routes for moving through the area without damaging anything. Instead of going out himself, as Thorin might have expected, Bilbo sent out a delegation consisting of Fíli, Kíli, and Tauriel to Bard's equivalent of a council meeting to request this necessary help.

It was, Thorin decided, a sure sign of Bilbo's silent genius that this was the group he sent, and to such an occasion. He knew perfectly well the matter could have been settled between Bilbo and Bard over a cup of tea, or perhaps Bilbo might have asked Thorin to pay a visit as part of his ongoing campaign to bring Erebor and Dale closer together. Instead he sent the two princes who needed the practice in handling official matters, with Tauriel along to balance their occasional mischief and Fíli to act as a chaperon in case anyone thought there was anything inappropriate about Tauriel and Kíli being on their own in a semi-public setting. And not only did this present Fíli and Kíli as official representatives of Erebor to the gathered people of importance from Dale, but it also served to remind the men of Tauriel's ultimate loyalties, just in case they might have forgotten it with her still spending most of her time in Bard's household. The only way this could have been more perfect for subtly training the young ones for their positions was if Ori had accompanied them on the errand, and not only was Thorin aware it might have been asking a bit too much of the scribe, but it might have also been seen as excessive for such a simple message. After all, this was to be a friendly request for aid, not a show of force, and three dwarves and one elf passing a message might have been something of an overkill.

Thorin's suspicions of Bilbo's devious approach were only confirmed when it was Kíli and Ori who were sent along the following day to get confirmation from Bard that suitable people had been chosen to guide the dwarves' approach and would be ready as soon as they got word of Dís's arrival. This was a smaller task, less intimidating with only Bard and perhaps one or two advisers instead of a full council to deal with, and all in all quite perfect as a first task for Ori outside the mountain.

"I know what you're doing, you know." Thorin leaned against a wall, watching Bilbo fussing about. The entrance room to the royal quarters, once quite bare and without any particular features aside from several doors, had been transformed into a rather comfortable sitting area with seats and tables and even a thick rug on the floor. It did, Thorin had to admit, look more like the core of a family home now, which was what it ultimately was supposed to be.

"I'm going to go ahead and assume you do not merely mean folding a throw blanket, right now." Bilbo kept his eyes on the blanket he was indeed folding, though there was a hint of a smile on his face.
"This business with Dale. You could have well taken care of it yourself, or simply had Nori hire a few young ones from Dale without bothering Bard at all; it's not like the men would blame us for taking steps to protect their fields from being trampled."

"Well, it is only polite, after all. And if I did not involve Bard directly some of the more vicious ones might try to claim that we'd had no plan in place and didn't care about their fields at all." As though Bilbo could have ignored a very real threat to growing crops.

"That's not what I mean." He walked closer, setting his hands on Bilbo's waist, simply for the joy of being able and allowed to do so. His two hands almost circled the whole span of Bilbo's waist, though less easily so now that Bilbo was regaining some of the plump softness he had lost on the road. It was, Thorin found, something he rather liked to see. Any dwarf would have been happy to see their chosen mate well fed and filling out, but it seemed of particular importance for his hobbit to be, well, more like a hobbit. "I was referring to your decision to use the young ones to pass the messages."

"And what do you think I am doing by that decision, besides accomplishing the task itself?" Oh, so he was playing innocent, now? Good thing Thorin wasn't entirely unobservant.

"You're preparing them." He pressed a brief kiss to Bilbo's curls, entirely chaste. "You set Fíli as the leader on their little expedition, teaching him to take charge of official matters, with Kíli in charge of the smaller task as he will also have to take such a role sooner or later. At the same time Kíli has to learn to stand beside his brother and offer his support rather than drawing attention to himself, while Tauriel and Ori both will benefit from brief exposures to what their future roles will entail. It's not a big task, nor something that would lead to ruin if they were to fail somehow, but next time they will each be a little more prepared for what they are to do."

"Now really, Thorin, you think far too highly of me." So why was Bilbo grinning like that?

"I really don't think I am." He gave Bilbo's curls another kiss, nosing at the base of one of his courtship braids. It wouldn't be long now that he would be able to replace them with marriage braids. Just a few months, no more. "Please know I am not complaining at all. If anything, I am grateful. I have been trying to think of ways to accomplish the same, but aside from what Fíli already does in his role as my heir, there is little enough I can do to guide them."

"Then you will like what else I have planned."

"Oh?" Thorin found a smile tugging at his lips. "Dare I ask what schemes you have thought up now?"

"I'm going to have Fíli and Ori in charge of assigning all the new arrivals their tasks. And before you ask, yes, I am aware this will likely take several days at the very least, more if the caravan is very large. Balin has already agreed to take care of Ori's duties during the time."

"That's not a bad thought at all." Really, Thorin was almost annoyed he hadn't thought of it himself. "It will let Ori practice dealing with people in an official capacity, with the support of Fíli's presence, but without the additional layer of being there strictly due to their connection."

"While Fíli gets to do negotiations with the Guildmasters and other people while also keeping in mind that he's the ultimate authority. That, and delegating tasks as necessary, as he cannot exactly deal with everyone involved on his own."

"See? You are most definitely scheming, my dear hobbit, in the best way possible." Thorin smiled. "My sister is going to adore you."
Bilbo groaned. "Please do not remind me of that. It's quite enough for me know that she is on her way, I do not need to be reminded like that."

"Now, why would you say that?"

"Well, what if she doesn't like me? And don't tell me it couldn't ever happen. Just because you like me doesn't necessarily mean she will."

"Perhaps not, but the fact that you can get me to listen to you does." Thorin chuckled. "Do not worry. There is no way Dís would dislike you, she loves anyone who can get through my thick skull."

"At least you are aware of your failings." Bilbo was smiling, though, and then turning around in Thorin's arms and tilting his face up for a kiss, so clearly he was only teasing.

Oh, yes, he was quite lucky to have found his One in such a perfect creature.

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Bilbo felt, quite frankly, ridiculous.

He was fairly used to wearing dwarven clothes by now, that wasn't the problem. He even knew that bearing his weapon was indeed the dwarven way, and it might have seemed strange to even bring it to welcome those returning except Thorin and his heirs were all doing the same. Even little Ori had a knife on his belt, a fine little blade forged by Thorin himself. Even so, Bilbo felt quite out of place as he stood in the middle of a row of dwarves right in front of the gates of Erebor, watching as the head of the caravan approached them along the road.

At least he was not alone in his predicament, with Ori also seeming a bit hesitant about his presence next to Bilbo. According to Balin, this was a traditional manner for Thorin to present his family as a unit, with Fíli and then Kíli to his right and Bilbo, Ori, and Tauriel in corresponding order to his left. It wasn't that Bilbo disagreed with the sentiment, it was altogether sensible for Thorin to be presenting the three of them as part of the royal family from the start for all those who only now arrived and might require some explanation as to why a hobbit and an elf would be walking around the mountain as though they belonged there. However, a part of him still rather wanted to turn away and hide until the worst fuss of the arrival was over with.

Or perhaps he was simply nervous about meeting Dís. That could have been it, too.

Everyone was growing restless as the caravan neared. Kíli, Bilbo suspected, would have already run off to meet his mother halfway along the road if Fíli hadn't kept a hand on his brother's arm, fighting against an amused little smile. Most of the dwarves in the mountain were gathered in the bare area in front of the gates, more lining the road and fields alongside the men of Dale. Most if not all of them would have family or friends among those arriving, Bilbo had been told, which rather explained the growing tension. However, before any heartfelt reunions could take place, the king had to welcome his sister and those she was leading to him, and dwarves were nothing if not sticklers to protocol.

Bilbo knew without anyone having to tell him that the female dwarf riding at the head of the procession was princess Dís. It was clear enough in her bearing, strong and proud and entirely assured of her worth as she came to a halt in front of their group, dismounting her pony as easily as she might have stepped down from a stair.

Dís gave their gathered group a quick glance, taking in her brother and heirs and their assorted intendeds with one look, then moving on to the others of the Company lingering at the sides. Then
her eyes fixed on Thorin again as she walked closer.

It was easy enough to see the resemblance now that Dís got closer. She was almost as tall as her brother, her hair still pure black where Thorin's had started to turn silver in parts, the strong features similar enough there could be no doubt of her identity. Despite the time on the road she was dressed in soft velvets, clearly aged but still fine, the softness of her tunic and trousers offset by the heavy axe she carried on her back, glinting in sunlight. She came to a halt in front of them, her eyes not straying from Thorin.

"Brother." Dís gave Thorin a serious gaze, not moving for the slightest nod, let alone a bow. "I see you are still alive despite your best efforts."

"Much to my regret, yes." Thorin met her eyes without flinching, his presence steady and calm at Bilbo's side. "And with both my sister-sons alive and well, you do not even have an excuse to end my miserable life yourself."

"More's the pity. I've come all this way with my axe seeing hardly any action at all. We didn't even see any uglies on our way over the mountains, even though I'd been looking forward to a proper battle there. Just a stray goblin or two, hardly enough to give us even proper exercise, never mind posing a threat."

"I'm afraid I must apologise for that. The mountains must have been emptied out in a great part so they could try and gut us all at once."

"So you stole away my battle and then didn't even have the decency to pay for it with your life?" Dís gave a derisive snort. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I can hardly bear to admit you are my brother."

"And yet that is the unfortunate circumstance." Just as Bilbo was about to make a run for it, dignity be damned, Thorin broke out into a wide grin and drew away from Bilbo in favour of stepping forward to draw Dís into an embrace. "Oh, sister. It's been far too long."

"That's hardly any fault of mine, you dunderhead." Dís hugged him back, and for a moment it looked like they were each trying to lift the other off their feet with the force of their embrace. "You're lucky to be alive, or I would have pried your grave open myself just to slap some sense into you."

"Oh, I have no doubt about that." Thorin stepped back, one hand still lingering on her shoulder as he raised his voice to be heard by all those gathered around. "Welcome to Erebor, Dís, daughter of Thráin, son of Thrór. I welcome you and those you lead, so that all of Durin's Folk may enter the mountain that is their rightful home."

"I thank you for your welcome, Thorin, son of Thráin, King Under the Mountain." Dís's stern expression was replaced by a smile. "I bring to you your people, so you might rule over them once more."

Apparently this was some sort of a signal, as all around them dwarves started to move, those already in Erebor moving forward to welcome those just arriving. Balin, Dwalin, and a few guards seemed to take charge of guiding newcomers into the mountain, with nobody paying much attention to the royal family anymore.

"So, brother, it seems that some introductions are in order." Dís looked at Bilbo, now, and he might have quivered at the intensity of her gaze if not for the hint of a smile on her lips, more open than Thorin's was yet so very familiar. "I do believe I recognise little Ori, but I find myself quite baffled at
the sight of what is supposed to be my family welcoming me home. More thorough introductions
may wait until we are in private, but for now, perhaps I might ask for some names?"

"Of course, my dearest sister." Thorin's lips tugged into an answering smile. "May I make known to
you Bilbo, son of Bungo, of the house Baggins from the Shire, the burglar of my Company and my
intended Consort." Bilbo gave a quick bow without prompting, hoping he didn't look altogether
inadequate for a king's future consort.

"From Glóin's stories I might have expected a more impressive creature. And yet, if he has
accomplished half of what I have heard, I find myself impressed regardless of his appearance. Now if
only he can learn that he is not to bow to anyone at the very gates of Erebor."

"Ah." Damn Thorin and Balin and everyone for not giving him more instruction on how to act, here!
"I have not been crowned consort yet, so I would not wish to seem presumptuous."

"Well! I have heard worse excuses, that's for sure. I'm sure we will get along quite famously, little
burglar. Anyone who can make my idiot of a brother smile must be quite an extraordinary creature
indeed." Her eyes skipped over to Ori and Tauriel, then to her sons. "As for you two, I assume you
can explain yourselves without help from your uncle."

"Lovely to see you, too, Mother." Fíli gave her a bright, carefree grin, and it was a relief to see it
again so easily applied; for all that Fíli was recovered for the most part, his open cheer had been slow
in returning. "May I make known to you Ori, son of Vuori, Head Scribe to Thorin Oakenshield and
my intended."

"And I also wish to make known Tauriel of Dale, of the house of Bard the Bowman, who has
accepted my courtship." The words were no less formal, but the difference in the implications was
clear enough. Intentional, too, Bilbo rather suspected. Kíli could be surprisingly adept at the social
niceties when he put his mind to it, and it was hard for Bilbo to imagine he wasn't aware of the
implications of making it clear that he had been the one to initiate the courtship, not Tauriel. After all,
it wasn't like Dís could argue with his choice, now could she?

"Interesting choices, to be sure." Dís lifted her eyebrows, glancing at Thorin. "Would I be wrong to
assume you have planned some kind of a meeting for the entire family in the near future?" The entire
family, meaning their intended spouses as well.

"Not wrong at all. We were hoping for a family dinner tonight, with all of us and perhaps a few close
friends."

"In that case, I'm sure we can have closer introductions then. For now, I was rather hoping my sons
could escort me to my rooms so I might reunite with them in private." There was no question in Dís's
tone, no request. She was simply informing Thorin of her intentions and expected this to happen.

Fíli and Kíli were clearly aware of this as well, as they quickly started leading Dís toward the gates.
Bilbo turned to look after her, then glanced at Thorin. "Was that good or bad?" Ori and Tauriel
remained silent, but he knew even without asking they shared his uncertainty.

"From Dís? That was an even heartier welcome than I might have hoped for." Thorin's lips twitches.
"If she truly objected to any of you, she would not have hesitated to make it known in front of
everybody. My sister has many fine qualities, but there are some areas of diplomacy where she is
somewhat lacking."

"Seems like a common Durin trait," Bilbo murmured, and Ori snorted next to him, then looked
mortified at his own reaction. Before Bilbo could say anything, though, he heard a familiar voice bellowing his name.

"Bilbo!" Glóin was striding towards them from a gaggle of newly arrived dwarves. Behind him Bilbo could see Gimli embraced by a female dwarf who had to be his mother, with Óin chuckling at the lad's loud and vocal protests at such treatment.

"Glóin! It's good to see you again." Bilbo smiled. "I guess I have you to thank for saving my home from the vultures, not that any thanks will be enough."

"Aye, we did our best. Pretty sure we didn't get everything, but all we could, we saved." Glóin slammed a hand on his shoulder almost too hard, but Bilbo hid the wince. The last thing he needed was for Thorin to start an argument over him. "That's rather what I was hoping to speak to you about, anyway. Your things, that is, couldn't exactly bring the whole house here on the back of a cart."

"A smial, not a house." Not that dwarves would have known the difference, he suspected, for all that they at least seemed to be sensible enough to prefer living underground. "What of them? Did you find any of my writings still there?" He had to admit he had been quite anxious about those ever since he had heard of the horrid incident.

"Aye, we brought all writings and drawings and stuff we could find. Some of the books, too, all the ones that seemed like you or your family might have written them. That cousin of yours, Drogo, was quite helpful in picking stuff, he even picked what he thought were the best out of all those holey napkins."

"My mother's doilies?" Bilbo almost felt his breath caught in his chest.

"A bunch of other stuff, too, all kind of small bits and pieces. Couldn't bring the china, didn't think it'd survive the journey, but there were some other knick-knacks, and a really nice pipe you'd left behind, and clothes and other such things your cousin couldn't use or that he thought you'd really like to have. Oh, and the pictures he said were of your parents, and your gardener apparently sent along seeds?"

"Oh." Now, he was definitely tearing up. "You — you didn't have to, really, but thank you. Thank you so much. And good old Gamgee, he couldn't even have known I'd have a garden for those seeds!" Seeds from his own garden. He hadn't even dared to think of that. But now, he could plant those in his little garden, could grow his tomatoes again, could see the same flowers and vegetables he had loved so much before.

Could see his child growing among the same things that had marked the garden when he had been but a bud.

"Yes, well, he said something about how if you didn't have a garden, I should send you right back with the seeds, because clearly we weren't taking proper care of you." Glóin snorted, glancing at his royal cousin without much hesitation. "Good to know Thorin's managed to do at least something right. I've got to say, I wasn't looking forward to yet another return trip."

"So glad I'm not a complete disappointment." Thorin snorted, and even Ori and Tauriel seemed amused, more relaxed now that the immediate threat of Dís was past. "It's good to know I'm at least taking adequate care of my intended."

"That, too, seems to be a common trait of Durin's line." Tauriel smiled, then blinked as she saw something behind Glóin. "Isn't that Bombur? He seems to be in a hurry."
They all turned to look to where Bombur was indeed running along, Bofur and Bifur barely keeping up with him. Bilbo was never going to stop being surprised at how swift the huge dwarf could be on his feet. "Vati!" he called out, darting between the milling dwarves apparently in search of a particular one. "Vati! Where are you, my lovely?"

"Bombur!" In response to Bombur's cries, a small pony with its rider broke off from the caravan, hurrying up close. Being faster than even the most enthusiastic overgrown dwarf, the pony met Bombur not far from where Bilbo and the others stood watching, certainly close enough for them to hear Bombur's delighted greeting. Other members of the Company drew nearer as well, Nori appearing at Ori's side and Glóin's family joining them, all smiling as they watched this particular reunion. They had all heard Bombur's whines about missing his beloved wife.

"Vati!" He picked up the rider as though she weighed nothing, spinning her around in the air before setting her down. "Oh, I missed you so!"

"That's clear enough." Bofur chuckled as he caught up with them, then took the reins of the pony. "It's good to see you, Vati." Bifur grunted his assent, his expression somewhat softer than usual.

"Likewise." She looked like a rather typical dwarf lady, for what little information Bilbo had about lady dwarves, with a soft beard and her long hair in thick travelling braids. "Do be more careful with your affection, husband mine. We wouldn't want any accidents."

"Oh?" Bombur frowned as he started leading her toward the rest of the Company, Bofur leading the pony beside them. "Are you hurt, my love?"

"Not at all." She laughed, then opened the belt holding together her heavy coat. Bilbo blinked in shock as he saw her carefully disentangling a little bundle from a sling hidden underneath her coat. "But I've had quite some trouble bringing this one all the way here, and if you were to harm him now, I would have to hurt you, husband or not."

"What?" Bombur stared, looking something between surprised and confused. "Is that…"

"This, my love, is your son." She leaned in to press a kiss to his cheek.

Nori snorted. "And suddenly the golden hoard is but the second best thing he gained from this adventure." And yet, even the cynical spymaster couldn't seem to resist the urge to smile along with the rest of the Company.

Bombur, for his part, seemed to still be struggling with the joyous news. "I have a son?"

"Indeed you do." Vati smiled. "He was yet without a public name when Glóin arrived, but I figured it wouldn't be good to take him on the road without one. After hearing his tale, I took the liberty of calling the child Bilbur."

"Bilbur?" Bombur blinked, then grinned broadly, his entire face radiating delight. "Oh, that's an excellent name! Bilbur, son of Bombur. I'm sure he'll grow brave and smart with that name!"

"Indeed." Thorin chuckled, reaching an arm around Bilbo, and it wasn't until then that it dawned on Bilbo what Bombur meant. Bilbur, named after she had heard Glóin's story of the quest. Vati had named her son in part after him? "Welcome to Erebor. I do suspect little Bilbur is to be the youngest in the mountain as of yet."

"Perhaps so, though not forever. I've been told they tend to grow." Vati turned toward Thorin and gave a small bow. "My King, Vati, daughter of Pata, at your service." Then, as though she had just nodded at a passing neighbour instead of greeting her king, she turned back toward Bombur. "Come,
then, show me where we will be staying. The poor child has been outdoors for long enough, it's about time he got inside a proper mountain."

Bilbo blinked slowly after the sight of Bombur being herded inside by his energetic wife and chuckling brother and cousin, then turned toward Thorin and the others, who all seemed somewhat amused. "Wait. Did I understand that right?"

"It seems you have an almost namesake, yes, if that is what you mean." Thorin chuckled. "I hope you don't mind that. From what I have heard from the 'Urs, Vati is not one to change her mind easily."

"Oh, yes, because all the other dwarves I know are so very pliant and easily changed." And Thorin didn't even have the decency to look abashed at that. "Ah. Perhaps we should all move inside the mountain, now? There's only so much room out there, we shouldn't be standing around when there are still so many people to come."

"That would probably be for the best, yes." Thorin still kept his arm around Bilbo. "I presume you will want a moment to gather yourself before I subject you to Dís."

"You are really not making me feel better about this, you know." And now Ori and Tauriel were looking uncertain again, too.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry if I were you." Glóin stroked his beard and chuckled. "It's going to be Thorin and the lads she's mad at, if I know her at all. She's been quite annoyed that Thorin hasn't shared more information on Kíli's intended, and believe me, she knows who to blame for that."

"Indeed." Thorin sighed. "Ori? If my sister murders me in a brutal fashion, I trust you will continue to support Fíli as he takes the throne."

"I'll do my best, Your Majesty." Ori nodded, all serious and earnest yet with a slight tug to his lips, and as Bilbo saw that, he decided it would be fine. He would be fine, and Ori and Tauriel would be fine, and nobody was going to get murdered and everything was going to be fine in the end.

First they just had to get through a dinner with Dís.

*

Now that they were no more in public, Fíli found he could not quite meet his mother's eyes.

Luckily, he didn't have to, not yet. He'd taken the lead, striding along toward the royal quarters, while Kíli walked alongside their mother, filling the silence with constant chatter. They didn't come across anyone on the way; those who weren't outside greeting the newcomers or hard at work in the kitchens or elsewhere deep in the mountain were guiding the new arrivals to the large halls serving as temporary quarters for those who didn't have family already in the mountain. This far in the corridors were deserted, only their steps and Kíli's voice filling the silence of the stone.

He only half listened to his brother, who was mostly talking about Tauriel, sometimes turning the topic to Bilbo or Ori or their new life in Erebor instead, yet always returning back to his beloved. Fíli wasn't even sure if he was just very eager to share everything about her with their mother or if he was that desperate to secure their mother's approval. Not that he'd need to worry, he was sure. Their mother would adore anyone who had saved her baby boy from certain death.

They made their way to the royal quarters easily enough, walking into the entrance hall that was rather cosier than it had been when they first took over the place. Fíli led them to the door to Dís's rooms, which had been furnished to the best of their abilities, not that it would stop her from making
changes as soon as she found the time, of course. Dís always found the way to have a superior opinion on just about anything.

"These are the rooms prepared for you." He stepped through first, waiting for them to follow, with Kíli as the last closing the door behind them. "Would you like us to show you around?"

"Actually, I would much rather hear about you." She gave him an inquisitive gaze. "What is wrong? And don't try to deny it, don't think I didn't notice you being quiet the entire way here. Usually when I haven't seen you two for a while you almost come to blows over who gets to talk to me first."

"Mother, I..." He paused, looking for the words that wouldn't come, caught in his chest like a sharp ache. What could he say, anyway? Anything he might have said couldn't have come even close to explaining the depth of his failure.

"Fíli?" Her voice was gentler now, though no less insistent for it. "Fíli, dearest, what is it? Is this about Ori? Are you worried I might not approve? Because he seems like a perfectly wonderful young dwarf. I might be a bit disappointed that I didn't get to handle the negotiations, but that's no fault of yours. It's not like I would have been willing to wait any longer than necessary when I found your father before courting him."

"It's not that," he murmured. "It's not Ori I think you'll find unworthy."

"Who, then?" Because she always had been perceptive.

"I..." He tried to speak, truly, he did. Behind his mother's shoulder he saw Kíli looking at him with an encouraging expression, ever the supportive little brother. However, he still couldn't find the words, not with his mother looking at him like that. He took a step toward her, then another, and then he suddenly found himself on his knees in front of her, tears making their way out where words failed to do so.

For a moment there was silence, with no sounds besides his own broken sobs. Then there was a soft humming as his mother knelt down in front of him, drawing him into her arms as though he were fifteen years old and not seventy-six. "Oh, my poor child," she murmured. "My sweet golden prince."

"Fíli went gold-mad," Kíli said, his voice quiet but audible enough. Fíli was grateful for him. There was no way he could have spoken of it, himself, not to his mother. "Glóin's probably told you how Uncle was when he was suffering from it, all suspicious and obsessive and yelling at everyone. Fíli... he drew into himself instead, spent all his time working on Ori's gift or staring at that blasted stone."

"Except that's not all there is to it, is it?" Her hand was gentle as it petted his hair even as her tone was firm. "Tell me what happened." It was an order, not a request, and somehow it made it easier for Fíli to speak up than when he had tried to speak to her gentle gaze.

"I attacked Ori." This, she had to hear from him. "Ori came to visit me and I accused him of stealing from me and attacked him, drew his blood even, and when Uncle Thorin came to his aid I tried to fight him and Dwalin, too. I hurt my One because I thought he was going to steal a stupid little bead, and I can never take that back, and I still have to look him in the eye every day and see him smile at me."

She was quiet for a long while, and Fíli might have been afraid of her reaction if not for the hand that still remained in his hair. As she spoke at last, it was in a measured tone, neither too stern nor overly gentle. "I saw my grandfather fall to the madness. I still remember Thorin having to drag him from
the mountain, because he would rather have burned than been parted from that blasted treasure." Fíli shuddered, knowing all too well the lure of gold and the gleaming stone. "He never quite recovered from it, even when we left the mountain behind and had nothing left of our glory. He remained in its spell to the last, and truly I cannot tell you if he is free of it yet, long since given to flame and stone as he is."

"But that didn't happen with Uncle, or Fíli," said Kíli, ever earnest. "They both got over it, and Uncle got rid of the Arkenstone so they couldn't be lured by it again, at least."

"Oh, yes. That was the one piece of news your uncle did find it appropriate to pass on in his otherwise woefully lacking correspondence." Dís snorted. "Good riddance, says I. That thing has never brought our line anything but misery. I'd be quite happy to never set eyes on it again."

"I feel the same." Except he wasn't entirely sure he would still agree if he actually saw the Arkenstone, and that terrified him more than all the orcs of Gundabad had. "I just... I want to spend the rest of my life making it up to him, but I'm not sure I can ever do that."

"Oh, Fíli." She drew back at last, setting a hand under his chin to tilt his head up to meet her eyes. "You want to make it up to him? Then be the best dwarf you can be. Be the brave prince I know you were born to be, and one day be a fair and just king. Be a loyal son and nephew and a loving brother and a steadfast friend, cut down those who threaten your people and spare those who don't deserve your ire. Show him that he is not wrong to love you, and show that you love him in turn, every day of your life."

"And will that be what he wants?" he murmured. "Will that be enough for him?"

"Fíli, Fíli, my dearest. You are his One, are you not? He would love you no matter what, all you can do is be worthy of that love."

"That sounds rather like something Bilbo told me."

"Well! It seems my brother has found himself someone more intelligent than he is himself. I like this hobbit of his already."

"Bilbo is quite great, yes." Fíli managed a faint smile, now, though his eyes were still teary. "We kind of wanted him as an uncle even before he got together with Thorin. For such a small thing he's really brave."

"And smart, and nice, and won't let Thorin get away with anything stupid." Kíli grinned. "Also he gets along great with Ori and Tauriel. It's almost worrying, really, how they all seem to get thick as thieves. You just know they'll be scheming against us together."

"As well they should! They wouldn't make very efficient consorts otherwise." Dís's lips curved into a smile. "See, the job of a consort is twofold. On one hand, they must help their One bear the burden of ruling, or else it might get too much for them. On the other hand, though, they have to be ready to oppose their One when needed, because if the king is about to make a bad decision, their consort is the last one who can speak up against them where all others have failed." Her eyes locked on Fíli's. "That's why the best consorts are those who are not afraid to confront their kings. It sounds to me like this Bilbo will do quite well for my brother, and I hope that one day Ori will do the same for you, in both aspects of his duties."

"I know he will." That much, at least, he could trust in. "He's seen me at my worst and was not afraid to come back to me, but I also know he will not let me hurt him again." Fíli would make sure of that.
"Well, he has to be quite the extraordinary one, to have won your heart." His mother's hand brushed against his cheek, where tears were soaking into his beard. "Now, dry your tears and calm yourself. I know you blame yourself for falling to the madness, but the weakness lies in our blood, and few could escape it under such temptation. You fought it, though, and came out stronger on the other side, and for that, I can only be proud. Think of it as learning your limits in this matter. Next time, if indeed the sickness tempts you again, you will know the signs and steer clear or seek help."

"Right." He swallowed, then finally got up to his feet again, slow and careful. "For what it's worth, Kíli at least seems quite untouched by our curse. He hasn't felt the pull at all, from what he tells me."

"Then that's a blessing on me and not a weakness on you." Kíli shrugged. "Thorin fell prey to it, after all, and I'd dare you to find a more honourable or strong-willed dwarf than he is."

"And I've had quite enough of all this talk, thank you." His mother stood up as well, dusting off her knees. "If you want to speak about it further, I am always willing to listen, though I cannot give much in the way of advice, lacking personal experience as I do. For now, though, just know that I am endlessly proud of you. Both of you," she added, turning to look at Kíli as well. "I sent off dwarflings and find myself with grown warriors instead. How could a mother be anything but proud?"

"Thank you." He leaned forward to press a kiss to her cheek. "I hope I won't let you down again."

"You haven't done so yet." Dís smiled, then straightened herself. "So! I believe you promised to show me my rooms. I'd rather like to get acquainted with them, and perhaps get someone to bring my belongings from the carts so I can wash and change before the dinner. It wouldn't really do for me to be properly introduced to my new family with all the dust of the road still on me, now would it?"

The dinner, for all that Fíli had somewhat dreaded it, turned out surprisingly fine. Bilbo took control of the conversation very quickly, meeting Dís on equal ground once he got over his initial apprehension, not allowing himself to be cowed into submission. It did help that Dís was not as vicious as Fíli knew she could have been, appearing more curious to get to know the new additions to the family than she was to test them and their worth. Ori and Tauriel spoke less, Ori probably due to his shyness and Tauriel no doubt uncertain of her welcome as an elf. However, Bilbo and Dís seemed to be working together to draw them into the conversation as well, and before dinner was over Ori was rather enthusiastically explaining their project to redraw and update the old maps, while Tauriel was recounting the now rather amusing anecdote of Kíli rushing off to find dragon scales for his gift. Not that Kíli seemed to mind; he was practically beaming at the sight of Tauriel and their mother getting along.

Thorin leaned towards Fíli as the subject turned to the other details of their respective courtships, his voice low even as a smile played at his lips. "I'm not sure if I should be delighted that Dís seems to have accepted them so readily, or worried about what this is going to mean for our future."

"Delighted," Fíli decided after a moment's thought. "Think about it. We already know Bilbo, Ori and Tauriel are quite capable of working together when they set their minds to it; it seems unlikely the addition of mother would make the situation so much worse that it would be preferable to be caught in the middle of a fight between them."

Thorin paused, seeming to mull over this for a while. Then, he nodded. "You're right, this is the better alternative. Particularly as I would not wish my sister's wrath on anyone, least of all someone I love."

Fíli chuckled, finding himself agreeing. However, before he could murmur anything in response, his name said in his mother's voice caught his attention. "Fíli, dearest. What is this about you making
poor Ori wait for your courtship offer by making things more complicated than they needed to be? Really, I thought I raised you better than this."

Fíli straightened, mind already racing to find some excuse that would not end up exposing his fears to all and sundry. He couldn't do it, not with Ori here, couldn't let Ori hear that there had been a time he hadn't been sure if he should offer his courtship to Ori at all.

Except Ori was sitting there, with a small smile on his face, yet with a hint of seriousness as though he already knew perfectly well, had always suspected.

Well. Ori always had been very perceptive.

Knowing there was no way out of this, now that Bilbo had brought up the subject — not that he probably had expected Dís to question him about the reasons, Bilbo wouldn't have done that to him — he drew a deep breath, eyes still lingering on Ori. As long as Ori was here, he could do it, even though he was sure this time his mother actually would be disappointed and Kíli would stare at him like a wounded puppy.

Except then he confessed his true folly, his realisation that there had never been any chance of his marrying another, heirs or no, because his heart had been given and it could not keep beating if it weren't in the hands of the one who owned it, and he had never before seen Ori look at him with a smile quite like that.

And perhaps, just perhaps despite all his failings and transgressions, one day he might be a dwarf worthy of that smile.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

There's a lot to be done before the wedding can take place. Dís and Kíli have to agree what to do with Tauriel, Gimli has a delivery to make (and Dori has things to meddle with), Bilbo finds an opportunity to tease Thorin while imparting very important knowledge, and a final courting gift is given.

And then, Dáin has an important confession to make.

Chapter Notes

Of the names in this chapter, Kulta is Finnish for "gold" or "darling".

In this chapter, a couple of ages are referenced with various degrees of accuracy. Now, I am aware that in book canon, Dáin is significantly younger than Thorin. However, since the movie canon is already playing around with the ages and timelines, and movie Dáin looks at least Thorin's age, I've shortened the gap here.

For those interested, here are the ages of the various dwarves at the time of the next chapter (the first Durin's Day since their return to the mountain):

Balin (214), Óin (205), Bifur (187), Thorin (182), Dáin (179), Glóin (174), Dís (170), Dwalin (168), Bofur (163), Dori (143), Bombur (136), Nori (106), Fíli (78), Kíli (73), Ori (67), and Gimli (63).

As for their various spouses, Glóin's wife Kulta is 145, and Bombur's wife Vati is 124. Dís's husband Tuli would be 181 if he was still alive, while Dori, Nori and Ori's mother Vuori would be 226; Tuli died a year after Kíli was born while Vuori died giving birth to Ori.

For the purposes of this fic, dwarves come of age (being able to enter contracts or, say, volunteer for a potentially deadly quest) at 65, but aren't really considered "full" adults (such as being able to take an apprentice of their own) until they turn 75. Also, the sack of Erebor occurred some 80+ years earlier, so Nori is the youngest of the Company to have been born in Erebor.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So this is where she will be staying?"

"Right." Kíli tried not to be too nervous as his mother looked critically around the set of rooms reserved for Tauriel. The rooms had a strange air to them, not quite abandoned but also not obviously lived in. There were a few personal items left behind from previous visits, but for the most part it looked just like it had when they finished the initial preparations. "I know it's a bit bare still, but we thought she'd rather decorate it properly herself now that we have more trade going on."
"I see." Dís nodded, walking further into the rooms. It wasn't too large an apartment, just a receiving area with a bedroom and a bathroom attached, but he hoped it would be adequate for Tauriel until they could marry. "And has the place seen use yet?"

"Some. She has on occasion stayed a night or two, when the circumstances called for her to stay in the mountain, though only with Thorin's permission." No, he was not going to hesitate, not now. "He said she could move in permanently now that you are here, if you give your permission for it."

"As it should be." Dís nodded. "Well, I don't think there is particular cause for me to disagree. Now, don't get too excited yet," she added quickly before he could say anything. "There will be rules set in place, and you will follow them. Her living in the mountain doesn't mean you may suddenly forget all about propriety, and it certainly does not mean that you may follow your uncle's example and have her run in and out of your rooms as you please. If anything, her living here will mean you should pay more attention to propriety, not less."

"I know that." He nodded, well aware of the truth in her words. "And I know our situation is different from uncle and Bilbo, too. There's quite enough whispers about how she's put me under her spell and other such nonsense as it is; I won't let anyone have doubts about her honour if it has anything to do with me."

"Well, it's good to hear you realise that." Dís patted him on the head as though he were a little kid all over again. "Not that I believe you to be any particular threat to her virtue, anyway. I raised you better than to touch a lass without her full consent, and it seems to me Tauriel is far too sensible a thing to give the dwarves in the mountain anything to use against her; she certainly would not take the risk of an untimely child before you marry. However, just because I believe so does not mean everyone will, so you will have to be careful about the appearance of things."

"Of course. As I said, I won't let my behaviour cast any doubt on her."

"Just as it should be." Her expression softened. "However, there are other things where we might go easier on the rules. If she is staying in the mountain, there is hardly any reason to have someone follow her about just in case she might run into you during the day, or have someone follow you for the same reason. You will of course still need a chaperon if you are in private rooms — anyone's private rooms, mind, not just your own — but as long as you stay in public places, I would think the presence of others is enough guarantee of your propriety without having anyone specifically keeping an eye on you."

"Really?" That sounded absolutely great. He enjoyed going out to Dale with her, where the busy streets were quite enough to guard their reputations, and had often wished he could have the same experience here in the mountain without someone assigned to watch them, however discreet they might have been.

"Really. The mountain is full enough of dwarves now that nobody can argue you aren't accounted for if you're walking down the hallways with her. However, I don't want to hear any whispers about you sneaking off to shadowed corners or behind closed doors, is this clear?"

"Clear as crystal, mother." He couldn't help the grin fighting its way onto his face. "I won't let you down, I promise."

"Oh, I know you won't." She touched his hair again, except instead of patting his head like he were still a little dwarfling, her fingertips brushed against one of the courting braids in his hair. "I have to say, I didn't expect to see this happen so soon. When you left, you still seemed so young, I could hardly believe you were old enough to follow Thorin. Yet here you are, my brave warrior prince, courting your own beloved like I did your father."
There was a wistful hint to her smile, one that was echoed in Kíli's own. He didn't remember his father, had been but a babe when he died, but he had always known just how much his mother had loved his father. "I know there is a lot more I need to learn, still, if I want to help Thorin and Fíli in their duties. But Tauriel will help me with that, I know it."

"Oh, I'm sure she will. She already seems to make you more grounded." Dís smiled. "Of course, now that she is going to be staying in the mountain, I will get to know her even better."

"I would joke about how that will end badly for me, but really, I know it won't." Kíli gave her a grin. "Because I love her, and I know you will approve of her, too."

"You tell me she is your One, my darling boy. For that, she is already my daughter." Her smile turned into something more of a smirk, now. "Of course, I also hear she is excellent at killing orcs, so clearly she can't be altogether hopeless, elf or not."

"She is indeed very excellent at killing orcs, I promise. Also at saving my life, as it happens." And now, Kíli was not worried anymore. This would turn out well for everyone. His mother would come to love Tauriel, and Thorin would marry Bilbo, and everything would turn out for the best.

Everything would be fine now that his mother was here.

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Gimli was starting to get somewhat frustrated.

It wasn't that he minded being sent out on an errand, because he didn't. He knew it was because he was free and without much in the way of other duties, not because his mother saw him as a dwarfling to send running about. Rather, he quite appreciated the chance to go out of his father's reach. He might have thought that being back in Erebor and taking over the treasury would have been enough to keep Glóin from fussing over him, but it seemed a minor hindrance at best. It appeared that while Gimli had rather enjoyed the independence of his errand with the elves, his father had spent the entire time worrying about his safety, and was now determined to make up for the lost time.

Gimli loved his father, really he did. He knew how lucky he was to have someone who cared about him so, just as he was lucky to have his mother. However, at times his father treated him like he was still barely old enough to walk down the corridor on his own, never mind wandering about the mountain. Therefore, he was only delighted when his mother gave him a small box and told him to take it to Dori.

Except now he had been to three places already, and couldn't find Dori anywhere.

He'd gone to see the Ri brothers' rooms first of all, because that might have been a logical place. Upon finding the rooms empty, he had headed for the guild hall, assuming he would find Dori there directing his new workers. While he had indeed come across a number of tailors and dressmakers making themselves at home, Dori hadn't been there, nor could they tell him more than that Dori had mentioned something about getting new supplies. Even Gimli knew that the marketplace in Erebor hadn't been reopened yet, and probably would not be for a couple of months at least, as getting everyone suitable lodgings was the main priority for now. Which meant that, in lack of any further information, he headed out to Dale.

Of course, he could have simply waited until later for Dori to return, knowing nobody would have faulted him for the decision when Dori wasn't anywhere to be found. However, he was not exactly unhappy about the excuse to have another look at Dale. They had barely even stopped there on their way to Erebor, and while he had wandered that way once or twice while waiting for the caravan to
arrive, it was certain to be much more interesting now that there were bound to be plenty of dwarves around as well. A busy marketplace sounded like an excellent place to see all kinds of interesting things.

Except he still hadn't found hide nor hair of Dori, who really should have been easy enough to spot, it wasn't like he was a small dwarf and easily lost in a crowd. He'd checked all the merchants trading fabrics and threads, but though a few of them had seen Dori today, none of them could tell him where Dori might be now. Not back in Erebor, at least, as he had arranged to meet with one of the merchants later in the day to collect a small order, but Gimli didn't feel like standing within sight of the stall for what might be hours waiting for Dori to show up.

So, yes. Frustrated.

It was mostly by sheer luck that he found Dori in the end, luck and some memory of his father's stories. Dori liked wine and tea, or so he recalled, and after asking around he heard of a little tea house near the marketplace that specialised in just such things. Even so, his sleuthing would have been useless if he'd been there just a little later, as he arrived just as Dori was walking out of the place.

"Master Dori!" He weaved through the crowd to get closer, clutching the box that had been entrusted to him.

Dori blinked, then smiled as he saw Gimli. "Ah, Gimli, wasn't it? It's good to see you."

"Right." He nodded. "Ah. My mother asked me to bring this to you." He settled into step next to Dori, who seemed to have a destination in mind, and reached out the box.

"Oh, thank you!" Dori accepted the box. "Really, you didn't have to go to the trouble of coming all the way out here. It could have waited."

"Eh, it's not like I had much else to do." Gimli shrugged. "Father is busy at the treasury, and mother doesn't seem to have much for me to do, so I figured I could track you down instead of just sitting around doing nothing."

"What of your craft, then?" Dori gave him a curious gaze. "Surely you must have one, I can't imagine Glóin not arranging for an apprenticeship."

"Ah, I was apprenticed to a goldsmith in the Blue Mountains, yes."

"And not any further in your studies? As I recall, you're a few years younger than Ori."

"I'm sixty-three, now." Which was obviously more than old enough to take part in the quest, had been even back when they had been first setting out, but since he had not come of age yet his father had told him to stay behind.

"And you're still just an apprentice?" Dori frowned. "Ori is now working on his masterpiece, and would probably have been a Master for a while now, except it took us some time to save money for his journeyman's fee, and then it was agreed his Master's examination fee would be waived as part of his payment for the Quest. I can't imagine that would have been a problem for your family, though, so I'm surprised to hear you're not a journeyman at least."

"Ah." Well. Now he felt almost ashamed, for not putting more effort into something others had to work so hard for. But then, it wasn't all his fault. "Would you be offended if I speak my mind?"
Dori lifted his eyebrows. "I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to hear the answer."

"Honestly, I think my father's been delaying me." Gimli sighed. "I'll admit I haven't been pushing the issue, so it's my own fault in part, but my old master never brought up the subject of ending my apprenticeship. Given how my father is, I wouldn't put it past him to have encouraged that delay just so I won't be moving out or anything."

"Well, that just won't do." Dori snorted. "Not that I don't understand the sentiment, I would dearly love to keep Ori close for years and years yet, but I know he's a grown dwarf and could already leave if he so wished. It just won't do for you to be uneducated, though. If you do not wish to become Master, that's your choice; from what I understand the goldsmith's guild has rather strict requirements, and many never go forward at all. However, you should at least become a journeyman, for your own sake if your parents aren't pushing for it."

"It's easier said than done, though." Gimli shook his head. "My old master stayed in Ered Luin, so I would have to find one willing to take me on to begin with. As you said, there aren't many Masters in the guild, and few who are willing to take on another apprentice, particularly one who might already have habits they do not approve of."

"If you'd like, I could see what I can do? As it happens my current position gives me some clout when it comes to the guilds, and I do have a certain Master goldsmith in mind who does not have an apprentice that I might be able to persuade. Probably not until the mountain's settled for winter, everyone will be busy enough until then, but I'm sure I could get him to agree after Durin's Day."

Something in Dori's expression hinted there was more to the matter that he wasn't saying, but Gimli wasn't sure he wanted to push for clarification.

"Ah. If it's not too much trouble?"

"Nonsense. It can be my way of paying your mother back for looking after my little treasure. I would imagine she isn't as opposed to you mastering your craft."

"What is in that box, anyway?" Gimli asked, before his manners caught up with his curiosity. "If you don't mind my asking, that is."

"A treasure, so to speak, that I asked your mother to look after while we were on the quest so it would not get lost. We had no close kin left in Ered Luin, but I had done a few orders for your mother, and asked if she would do me that favour for the sake of our kinship with your father, however distant it may be."

"A treasure?" Now he was certainly curious. "What kind of a treasure?"

"One that is more precious to a heart than a wallet, and not easily replaced." Dori paused in his step, then carefully opened the box.

Gimli leaned closer to get a look. There were several beads in the box, along with a simple hair clasp. One of the beads was silver with gemstones, and even Gimli's eye recognised it as being very fine work, while the other beads and the clasp had all been carved of a beautiful, reddish wood. One of the wooden beads, he noticed, was not quite finished, while the other bore what seemed to be a family crest. "Is that a courting bead?"

"It was supposed to be." Dori closed the box again and secured its latch. "These are all our mother had left of Nori's and Ori's fathers. I've been holding onto them for when Ori is ready to have his father's beads."
Gimli wasn't sure why Ori wouldn't be ready yet, he at least was of age and everything, but he supposed that wasn't his place to ask. However, there was another obvious question. "And Nori's? Why are you holding that as well?"

Dori snorted. "Mostly? I'm still not convinced he won't just try to sell it." His tone was fond, though, so Gimli didn't think he was being serious. Well. At least not entirely serious.

It wasn't until Dori started walking again that Gimli realised they had been walking through the town for most of the time they had been speaking. "Ah. I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?" Damn. He probably looked like a child whining for attention, hounding Dori like this.

"Not at all. As you can see, I'm perfectly capable of walking and conversing at the same time." Dori made a small sound, as though he had only just thought of something. "Actually, would you like to accompany me further? Thorin asked me to meet with King Bard to discuss how we are to handle the reopening of Erebor's market, as out of the Company I'm perhaps the most familiar with how the marketplace in Dale works at the moment. I'm not sure how interesting that discussion would be, but I'd imagine his children would like to meet someone young who won't be afraid to speak with them just because their father is called king. I spoke with the older daughter at some length the last time they visited the mountain, and it seems Tauriel has been the only equal companion she has found in a while."

Gimli snorted. "Well, I'm not afraid to speak my mind just because I might be faced with a prince, that's for sure." Not after he had grown up calling Fíli and Kíli his cousins.

"That is rather what I was hoping for, yes."

As it turned out, Bard's children were not bad company at all. The younger ones left him be quite soon once they had established nothing too exciting had happened to him on the journey — which, really, if it was stories they wanted he knew a great many, even if he hadn't lived through them all! — but, as Dori had said, Sigrid seemed quite grateful for a companion who treated her as an ordinary lass rather than a princess. Gimli certainly did not mind providing her with such company, and soon enough they found themselves discussing their elven acquaintances. Gimli might not have spent terribly long in Legolas's company, but Tauriel had featured heavily in their conversations during that time, and it was rather interesting to compare that knowledge against Sigrid's personal experiences.

It was rather late in the day that he returned home, having helped Dori carry his purchases to the mountain in the end, but his mother did not seem too concerned about his absence. As he told her he was planning to finish his apprenticeship, though, she all but cried out in delight, drawing him into an embrace so tight he could barely breathe.

Well. Apparently he would have plenty to do soon enough.

* * *

Thorin could hear Bilbo before he even stepped into the room.

Catching the soft hum, he paused at the door, ears focused on the sound. He didn't recognise the melody, though that was not saying much; he assumed there were a great many songs Bilbo knew that Thorin was not familiar with. It sounded light and cheerful, doubtless some hobbit tune, and it made him feel quite warm to know that Bilbo felt safe and secure enough to hum to himself in such a carefree manner.

At last he opened the door, as quietly as he could manage, and stepped into the doorway. Bilbo was on his knees in a corner of the room, bare toes digging into the dirt under his feet as he worked on
something. With his back turned to the door, Bilbo didn't notice Thorin's arrival until he turned to pick up one of the tools he had by his side.

"Oh, Thorin!" The cheerful hum paused, and Bilbo blinked up at him. "I'm sorry, was I needed for something?"

"Not at all. I was only looking to spend some time with you, nothing more." Now Thorin walked up the couple of steps to the surface of the dirt, glancing around. "Where should I not step?"

"Ah, just stick to the parts where you can see I've trampled the ground flat. Stay away from the soft dirt and it'll be fine." Bilbo chuckled, standing up and dusting off his knees. "I've been thinking of getting some pretty gravel or something similar to mark the pathways, since I suppose there'll inevitably be dwarves rushing about and I wouldn't want them to kill all my plants."

"Gravel is one option, yes, but how about some kind of a tile? Something sturdy, so it'll withstand steps without having to be very heavy. That way it'll be easier to change the pathway later if you change your mind on where it should go."

"That might be a good idea, yes." Bilbo smiled as he walked up to Thorin, avoiding his little mounds of dirt without even looking where he set his feet. Thorin wondered if hobbits had a sense for plants in the earth in the same way dwarves could find the strong points of the stone beneath their feet. "So, do you have some time free, or did you slip away without permission?"

Thorin snorted. The mischievous look in Bilbo's eyes made it clear enough he was being teased, and he could rather gladly take that from his beloved hobbit. "And whose permission would I need in my own mountain?" He took Bilbo's hand, bringing it up to his lips. "I've just come from speaking with Fíli and Ori, if you must know. They have assigned workers to all the most immediate tasks, such as cleaning out living spaces and working the kitchens, and are waiting to hear from Bard on how many woodworkers and stonemasons he is going to need in Dale before assigning too many of those anywhere particular. For the rest, they are now working on allocating the remaining workers according to what the Guildmasters need and what Dís believes to be necessary for the service of the royal house."

Bilbo shook his head. "It's good to know she has some knowledge on that. I've never managed anything bigger than a house, and I was quite content with a gardener and a friendly miss to do my laundry every week. I couldn't even begin to imagine what would be required to run an entire court and the royal household."

"Oh, I doubt she'd give up that task anytime soon, even if you were more knowledgeable. Dís hates sitting idle as much as any dwarf, and she's made the running of the royal court into something of an art." Thorin's lips twitched. "I have to admit, I was somewhat worried you might disapprove of the idea of having a number of servants around. You hobbits seem to be a rather simple folk, after all." Not that he was still entirely used to the idea, after the years in exile, but he knew it was necessary to have someone else take care of the most menial chores if he wanted to have any time left for a life outside his duties.

"Simple, perhaps, but we are also altogether practical. It's not at all unusual for the wealthy hobbit households to keep a gardener and the like, as I did. Cooks we rarely employ, but that's mostly because hobbits rather like to do their own cooking, not for any moral opposition. I've seen well enough how busy everyone is even when the mountain had far less people than it does now. As long as Bombur lets me putter around in the kitchens when the mood strikes me, and nobody tries to clean up my working desk, I'm not going to work myself into a tiff if someone else sweeps the floor while we're meeting with the council."
"That's good to hear." Thorin leaned in for a quick kiss, now, just because he could and because Bilbo was so close and bright and smiling.

Bilbo chuckled as the kiss ended. "There is one task where I refuse to employ a servant, though, even if it might make things more difficult."

"Oh? And what is that?" He couldn't imagine what would be such a pleasant chore that Bilbo couldn't give it up.

"Child-rearing, of course." Bilbo gave him a small smile, though a part of him looked almost worried. "I will not grow a child only to give them for someone else to hold and love."

"Oh, have no fear about that." Thorin ran his hand through Bilbo's soft curls. "I know that's often a habit for noble houses of other peoples, but any self-respecting dwarf would sooner give up their weapon than leave their child in someone else's care other than in utmost need. If the parents are busy, the rest of the family will pitch in, and that's often only if their work is too dangerous to bring the child along. I remember my father sometimes taking Dís or Frerin as babies along to court or council meetings if my mother was at the forges."

"Well, I suppose we'll have plenty of people quite eager to help in that aspect." Bilbo chuckled. "We might have to see about getting a nanny goat or two when the child is due to arrive, though, since it's not like either of us can nurse."

"That is not one of my talents, no." Though he would have gladly learnt how, if it had been possible. Anything for the sake of the child he dreamed of. "So, you think we can grow a child in this garden?"

"I see no particular reason why not. This is good, rich earth, and I'm working hard to make this a thriving garden, all the better for growing a child." Bilbo's hand sought his and gave a little tug. "Ah. Would you like to see what I have growing here now? I'm not sure how interesting it will be for you, but I'm afraid I'm used to discussing such things with my neighbours, and for some unfathomable reason there aren't many people passing by in here."

"I'm willing to listen, as long as you take no offence if I do not understand." He had little enough interest for such things, preferring stone over earth as he did, but if this was even remotely related to the possibility of a child, he would listen to every last word.

"Just nod and smile, like I do when you go on about your work at the forge." And again with the teasing. Really, he might have been offended if Bilbo's smile hadn't been so very pleasant.

Nodding and smiling seemed to work well enough, as Bilbo walked him through the garden, pointing out his rather meticulous plan with each vegetable and herb set in a precise area. Really, it seemed gardening was much more involved than Thorin could have imagined.

"Stinging nettle?" he cut in as he recognised a surprising name. "Isn't that a weed, and an unpleasant one to handle?" Not that he knew anything about gardening, but he did know well enough how unpleasant it was to run into nettles in the wild.

"Ah, no, this is my tea area." Bilbo chuckled. "Some of these I'm growing for the taste, others were recommended by Óin or Dori for some other uses. Nettle tea, for example, can help a whole number of ailments. Then there's one that relieves pain, and one that helps you sleep, and I'm told this one helps lasses control their cycles and prevent pregnancy. Not something I need on hand for myself, of course, but that's no reason not to be prepared!"
"Of course." Thorin smiled as he listened to Bilbo chattering on, listing each herb in his garden and its wonderful benefits. They came to an end soon enough, though — the room was not small, having been designed for a family bath, but also not overly large — with Bilbo halting next to the rounded area in the middle.

"Here, I'm growing tomatoes. I have to say, I'm glad I hesitated over picking the best seeds; now I managed to use the seeds good old Gamgee sent over. Of course, it would be far too late in the year to plant them outside, but luckily it will be warm and light in here regardless of the season. And here, in the middle," Bilbo's smile took on a hint of mischief, "here I was thinking we could plant our child."

"I rather like this idea." Thorin grinned. Oh, yes, the idea of a child with Bilbo was definitely a good one. "So, am I allowed to know how we're to do it? Or is that some kind of a hobbit secret that you can't share until we are wed?" Well. He was supposing it could be shared once they were wed, at least. It might get a bit awkward otherwise.

"No secret, I don't suppose. It's more that few big people ever bother to ask, because it never occurs to them our ways might be different." Bilbo chuckled. "To begin with, all we need is a patch of ground in a garden, such as we have here, and a seed. Any plant seed will do, I'm told, though some believe it's better luck if it's the seed for a plant that means something, such as the seed of a flower used in courting or a favourite grain."

"I'll let you figure out that part," Thorin said. "I don't think I would know one seed from another in any case."

"I can certainly do that." Bilbo's lips curled further. "Then, once we have those, one of us must place the seed in his mouth. It has to be passed into the other's mouth in a kiss, so it's best not to choose anything terribly small, or it might get swallowed by accident."

Thorin nodded. "That does sound sensible. And then?"

"Then, my king, we plant the seed, put it in the ground and cover it with dirt. And once we're done with that," Bilbo's voice dropped low, though his eyes remained intent on Thorin, "then we lie down on top of it to bed each other right then and there."

Now, Thorin had to swallow to keep some of his less virtuous thoughts in check. "And hobbits do this in their gardens? All out in the open?" He'd have thought them somewhat prudish in such matters, considering how reluctant Bilbo had been to even share a bath with others on the road.

"Well, usually you'd have a little tent there, you know, to avoid giving the neighbours too much of a show. But I don't think we have that worry in here, do we?"

"I wouldn't think so." Thorin had to stay calm, here. He'd done his best to wait until now, he was not going to give in yet. Not even though Bilbo was clearly teasing him on the matter. "And that's it, then? Doing that will make it grow into a babe instead of a flower or whatever?"

"More or less. We'll have to ask for Yavanna's blessing for the seed once we're done, and of course keep tending the garden afterwards, but all in all it's a rather simple matter."

"And there are no, ah… extra requirements, in how we are to bed each other?" There might have been a flush on his cheeks, but he was going to ignore it. Hopefully Bilbo would, too.

"Only one, that both of us find our pleasure in it." Bilbo's eyes were practically twinkling, now, though at least he made no mention of Thorin's flushed cheeks. "I've been given to understand that's
part of why young hobbits are often eager to practise before their weddings. Makes it easier to get it right when you're doing the planting."

"...You know why I will not do that." Not because he didn't want Bilbo, Mahal knew he did, but because he wanted to treat Bilbo as a king should his chosen consort. Idle dalliances were all well and good for those who only sought company for the night, but Bilbo was more than that. Thorin wished to wed him, to have Bilbo as his one and only for as long as he lived. If he could not stay in his decision to wait until their wedding to take Bilbo to bed, how could he ever claim to stay true to his marriage vows?

"Oh, I know. And you know I will wait for you, and my opinion of you will not change whether you stay true to your decision or not." Bilbo leaned closer, standing on his toes to press a kiss to Thorin's cheek. "Now, I think I should go and get cleaned up. I might be lacking a clock here, but my stomach is quite insistent on telling me it's drawing near to dinner time."

"Right." Thorin nodded, brushing his hand over Bilbo's before he stepped back with some reluctance. "Ah. I should probably do the same."

"You do that." Bilbo chuckled. "I wouldn't want your sister to think I let you get untidy, walking all around my dirty garden." And no, Thorin was not thinking of the dirt getting anywhere but the soles of his boots, he was definitely not thinking of what they were supposed to be doing on the little patch of bare earth in the middle of Bilbo's meticulous garden.

Bilbo didn't quite laugh as Thorin all but fled the garden, but Thorin suspected that was only because he was too damn polite to do so aloud.

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Bilbo was not nervous.

Really, he wasn't. In fact, it would have been quite ridiculous to claim that he was, because there was absolutely no reason for him to be nervous. No reason except that he was getting married in a week's time and was just about to present his intended spouse with his courting gift even though he wasn't even sure it would be acceptable as one by dwarven standards. Also, Thorin was late. Very late.

Okay, so perhaps he was a little bit nervous. But clearly he had every reason to be so.

Before he could work himself up into too much of a state, though, Thorin walked in with hurried steps. "I'm sorry to have made you wait," he sighed, and that apology alone was a clear sign of how much Thorin had changed since the first time Bilbo had met him. "I was meeting with the goldsmiths' guild and the meeting ran long."

"I see." He watched as Thorin tossed aside his crown and coat. He wasn't quite as richly dressed as he might have been for court or council, but he still had to be dressed as a king when he was acting as such, which meant he liked to get ease himself of the worst of the obvious signs of royalty when he got home. It was somewhat puzzling, considering he had grown up as a prince, but then Bilbo supposed he hadn't had much time or resources for such finery in his long time in exile. "The Guildmaster giving you trouble again?"

"When isn't she? It seems she has it in her head that because they deal with the most expensive materials, they are automatically entitled to the best halls available. Now, I understand the need for plenty of room when most people don't have their own workshops or even private quarters yet, and may need to work in the guild hall to work their craft, but there are other guilds with similar needs who have many more members yet don't make such demands. She even had the gall to point out the
size of the area Dori has claimed for the dressmakers' guild, claiming that she deserves more because apparently goldsmiths are more important than the people making sure we're all warm and clothed, never mind that he has more craftsmen and certainly many times the number of Masters she has in her guild."

"That does sound insufferable." Bilbo shook his head. "I don't suppose you could just get rid of her?"

"Not very easily, I'm afraid. While technically I have the power to do so, being King Under the Mountain and all, traditionally the king should stay out of the affairs of the guilds; I'm already breaking precedent in being as involved as I am. Ideally my Head of Guilds should be handling all this, but it turns out he is an absolutely incompetent idiot." Thorin heaved a deep sigh. "I'm half tempted to follow through on my threat and set Tauriel in his position instead."

"Except you wouldn't do that to Tauriel. Not that she couldn't handle them, but even with Dís's approval she needs all the allies she can get in the mountain, and she would win no friends arguing with the guilds on your behalf."

"True. I guess I'll have to wait at least until she's safely married to Kíli." Bilbo wasn't even entirely sure Thorin was joking. "But I doubt you asked to meet me at a specific time just to discuss my cause for being late. What is it you wanted to talk about?"

"Ah." Well, this was it. Thorin was eyeing him curiously, and for all that he had prepared his words, Bilbo found them fleeing him right now. Drawing a deep breath, he spoke. "I wish to give you my courtship gift." Great, that was a good start. "I want to show you my skill and my devotion, and I want to show you how I see you, and everything I am willing to do to stand by your side. This is a bit late in the game, I know, but I hope you will accept it nevertheless."

"I would accept it without question, no matter what it is." Thorin gave him a soft smile. "But I would not do you the dishonour of doing so without even seeing it first, because that is no true acceptance."

"And also because you do not want to seem like Kíli." Now, he was feeling a bit easier, easy enough to tease, just a bit. Though then, Thorin was the one who had told everyone that particular detail. "My gift is in your study, as it would be hard to present here."

Thorin looked puzzled, but followed him easily enough. As they came into Thorin's study, he blinked at the large parchment on his desk. "That is…"

"This is a map of Erebor, as she stands now." Bilbo felt the nervousness rising up again as he walked to the side of the desk. "I used one of the old maps we found, rotted and faded though it was, for a guide on how to fit and attach everything so the different layers can all be combined in one document, big though it is. Everything's redrawn, though, to take into account the current situation of the mountain. I also left space to add the areas that are currently unaccessible, if we're to open them again. The mines aren't as detailed as the rest, I'm afraid, since sometimes all Bofur and his people could offer me were vague guesses at best, but at least it shows which shafts and tunnels are currently in use and what materials each of them produces."

Thorin walked closer, quiet as he leaned down to trace the lines with his fingertips. "You've even marked the mines," he murmured. "In Khuzdul, Westron, and miners' script. How did you even…"

"Balin and Ori helped me with the Khuzdul," Bilbo explained. "And Bofur and Bifur both checked the miners' script for me in my drafts. Everything about the finished version is my own work, though, as it should be."

"Balín and Ori helped me with the Khuzdul," Bilbo explained. "And Bofur and Bifur both checked the miners' script for me in my drafts. Everything about the finished version is my own work, though, as it should be."
"And your maker's mark in the corner, I see." And of course Thorin would notice that, the small mark pressed there by the ring Thorin himself had given to Bilbo. "Bilbo, this is…"

"I know I'm not a dwarf." It was only the truth, after all. "I know there are some who will never accept me as your consort because of that. No matter how much I study, I will probably never understand all your customs and habits as well as someone who has been born into this. Even so, I rather find I don't want to let anyone else stand beside you, because that is my place by right, and while I will never live up to all the expectations I will at least make sure that I can be the consort you need me to be, even if all may not agree."

"Bilbo Baggins." Thorin looked directly at him, blue eyes shining. "I would never have another consort, because it would be shameful of me to take another as my spouse when I have already given my heart. If any disagree, that is on them, because you already are my consort in all but name."

"So you accept my gift?" Because he did still need to hear it.

"Of course I do." Thorin's lips curved into a smile. "Bilbo, this is… magnificent. I remember seeing the old map, when I was young and my grandfather used to spread it out sometimes. It seemed like a miracle then, how all of Erebor could be fit on one surface. This... this is better, still. To have fit all of my kingdom together, so neatly drawn and written, even if you had old examples to go on... truly, I've seen masterpieces presented to the guilds with less skill and effort in them."

"Now, that's just nonsense." Bilbo was starting to flush a bit. "I've seen just a glimpse of the work Ori is putting into his masterpiece. This isn't nearly as remarkable."

"That is because Ori knows the value of the opportunity he has been given, and would not squander it. Balin would not have taken him as an apprentice if that was not true." Thorin shakes his head. "This is a wonderful gift, Bilbo. I am proud to accept it."

"Well, that's good to hear," Bilbo sighed in genuine relief. "I really don't think I'd have the time or opportunity to make anything else before the wedding, the time being rather short and all."

"I might say I was going to accept it either way, but that might seem an insult, as though I wasn't sure you would produce something good enough for my genuine acceptance." Thorin reached for Bilbo's hand to bring it to his lips, and he had to fight down a blush. "So instead, let me remind you that all those people who helped you certainly hold us both in enough regard that they would have let you know if they'd had any doubts about the quality of your gift."

"I suppose that's true enough." Bilbo smiled. "So now all we have left to do are the rest of the preparations for the wedding, and the coronation, and the festival in general. Why, it will be positively trivial compared with everything else!"

"As long as it all ends with us married, I have little care for the effort involved." The look in Thorin's eyes was so honest, so sincere, it rather took his breath away.

"You are ridiculous," Bilbo murmured, because it was true and Thorin was. "I really do not know why I put up with you." Thorin was smiling, though, and that was answer enough, the only answer he would ever need to what wasn't truly a question.

It should have been terrifying, really, the depth of his emotions for this ridiculous dwarf, but instead he couldn't help but smile back.

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This was, as Thorin well knew, not appropriate in any way.
Though then, it wasn't like he was going to care. The following day would be busy from the moment they woke up; if he wished to spend the night sitting with his One, he was damn well going to do so. They weren't doing anything inappropriate, anyway, sitting in his receiving room, Bilbo engrossed in a book while Thorin plucked at his harp in front of the fire. It wasn't his old one, the one he had played in Ered Luin, but rather a beautiful old frame he had found in the treasure room and had restrung. There was a part of him that missed the familiar feel of the small harp that had served him in his exile, but there was also something to be said about the sound and range of this rather grander instrument.

Bilbo seemed to enjoy listening to him, for all that he was rather out of practice, humming along as he turned his pages. It was good to see him so relaxed, particularly as Thorin rather doubted Bilbo was as confident about things as he liked to let others believe. For all that he knew they both wanted this, wanted to be married and bound to each other forever, this was still a very big step.

And not the only big step Thorin was about to take, either.

There was a knock to the door, which caused Thorin to lift his eyebrows. Few people might have come to see him this late and yet have the manners to knock before entering. Letting his hands fall from the harp strings, he looked over to the door. "Come in."

He was not altogether surprised to have the door open to admit Dís and Dáin. For all that he was the oldest of the three of them — though only by a few years in Dáin's case — they had both always taken it as their obvious right to offer up advice whenever the opportunity presented itself. He would have been quite shocked if neither of them had seized the opportunity to give him some guidance the night before his wedding, given how they both had some experience in the matter of married life.

Except instead of teasing grins, he only saw solemn expressions more suited for the eve of a funeral than a wedding.

"Now, don't look too cheerful, one might soon think you happy," Thorin stood from his seat by the harp, walking closer to the sudden guests. "Is something wrong?"

"Cousin." Dáin nodded at him, then at Bilbo. "And Master Hobbit. This is good, we won't have to summon you, then."

"Lord Dáin." Bilbo was also frowning, no doubt sensing the same unsuitably somber air that bothered Thorin. "What is the matter?"

"I have a confession to make." Dáin's voice was more grave than Thorin had heard it in ages, if ever, and they had gone through quite a few serious things together. "I have asked the Lady Dís to stand as a witness to this, and she has agreed to do so. Let it be known that should you choose to strike me down as you hear my confession, I will not fault you for it; all I ask is that this not affect my son's position in the Iron Hills, since he has had no part in my sins."

Thorin frowned. "You speak of serious matters, cousin. What could you have done that would be quite so grave?"

"I'm afraid I have deceived both you and Master Hobbit in quite an underhanded manner." Dáin sighed. "You know that I came to you some time ago with news of a rising challenge against your lineage."

Thorin frowned deeper, nodding. "Yes, that is true. What of it?" The only thing that could have possibly explained this kind of behaviour was if Dáin was somehow responsible for the scheme, but he knew that to be impossible. Not only did Thorin trust in Dáin's loyalty, he knew he was utterly
devoted to his daughter and would not have brought her any grief. And in any case, why would he have warned them of it beforehand?

"There was no such plot in the making." Well. That would do it. "At least, if some might have murmured of such things, I was never privy to it. Had I known of any scheme against you, I would have indeed brought it to your knowledge. As it stands, though, the only one to conceive of that plot was my own good self, and none knew the details of it before I spoke to you."

"You made it up." Thorin sank down in the closest seat, now, feeling he rather needed the support. 
"Why? What reason would you have for such a thing, if all you were going to do was warn me of something that did not exist? Were you hoping I would confront my council over nothing and make a fool of myself?"

"No! No, if that had been your plan, I would have confessed right then and there. You know me, cousin. I have no wish to make trouble for you." Dáin shook his head. "It… well. Not long before my visit, I received a message from Balin."

"Oh?" Bilbo's hand reached for Thorin's, squeezing it. Thorin was rather grateful for the support, for all that it felt inadequate at the moment. "And what did that message say?"

"Quite simply? That everyone in the mountain was getting fed up with the way the two of you kept staring at each other and never did anything about it." Wait, what? Clearly Thorin hadn't heard right. "My plan, such as it was, was to startle you into thinking of such things, hoping you might then confess your fondness for Bilbo. I was always going to reveal it as a scheme of mine, pass it as a joke perhaps; however, when Bilbo came up with his own plan to counter it, I realised this might be for the better after all. I left Balin with instructions to reveal the truth if it seemed either of you might have been happier without the courtship, but by all accounts you were quite content, so I saw no reason to disrupt that."

"You tricked us into courting?" That was… Thorin wasn't even sure he could describe such a scheme to any degree of satisfaction.

"As I said, that was not my intention. All I planned for was for you to realise your feelings and stop dragging your feet. When things went beyond that so fast, I figured I could just as well see how they developed. You seem to be happy, from what I have heard from everyone, but I still wanted to come clean before you take the last step, and I will understand if you wish to make me pay for my lies."

"Right." Thorin drew a deep breath. "You know, I'm not even sure what I should be the most offended by here."

"Oh?" Dís lifted her eyebrows, still calm as ever. She must have known about this scheme, at least before they came in, or she wouldn't have been so collected. The Durin temper did not only run through the male line. "Because he lied to you, or because he hid it for so long, you mean?"

"Oh, no." Thorin shook his head, finally managing a faint smile. "That he lied, or that he seems to think my union to Bilbo would be cause for anything but celebration."

Dáin blinked, now, clearly surprised. "What?"

"Oh, don't take me wrong, cousin; if I had any reason to suspect Bilbo is only willing to be wed to me due to this scheme, or if that was my own sole motivation, nothing would spare you from my wrath. However, as embarrassing as it is to admit, you and Balin appear to have been correct in your evaluations, and we were indeed simply blind to each other's affections. So, while I'll thank you not to even think of doing something like that ever again, clearly it was necessary in this case, and I can
hardly fault you for helping me reach the greatest delight I have known in all my years." Now, he gave Bilbo a warm smile, quite enjoying the answering flush.

"This does explain a few things, I suppose," Bilbo murmured. "Such as all that correspondence Balin was busy with before your visit. Or how Lord Dáin seemed so very convinced that it would be believable for us to present a love match to the council, even though he shouldn't have been that well acquainted with the current situation in Erebor."

"And if this all this speculation about our relationship was going on behind our backs, it would explain why you were so eager to share the news with Fíli and Kíli, cousin, as well as why the boys did not seem very surprised at all." Thorin snorted. "I suppose it would have been too much to ask for them to simply talk to us about the matter."

"If you listened to mere words, brother, many things would be different." Dís's lips twitched, finally chasing away her serious look. "Am I to understand the ceremonies tomorrow will not involve a public execution?"

"The plans for tomorrow have not changed one bit." Including the one aspect only Dís and Balin knew about besides Thorin himself. Clearly she caught on to the implication, if the slight curve of her lips was any indication. "Though I have to say, if indeed we were only courting because of this scheme, the night before our wedding would be woefully late to reveal the truth, particularly as we have professed it a love match from the start."

"I trusted Balin when he said he was certain of your love for Master Baggins. If I could not count on Balin to know you, who could I?" As the worry cleared, Dáin was becoming almost too satisfied with his little scheme. This was not how things were supposed to go at all.

"You forget that Balin is a hopeless romantic who will always believe a love story if one can feasibly be imagined." Thorin reached for Bilbo's hand, giving it a squeeze. "Thankfully in this case he turned out to be correct."

"Thankfully indeed. I don't think my son is yet ready to lead the Iron Hills."

"I pray the day will not yet come for many a long year." Thorin shook his head. "Now is there anything else? You aren't involved in any assassination plans, are you?"

"Nothing else, save that the hour is late and you both ought to be asleep." Dís, this time, of course. "We all have a very long day tomorrow, so if there is to be no killing, I suggest we get some sleep before the chaos descends upon us."

"And by chaos, you mean Fíli and Kíli, I presume." Bilbo was smiling as he slipped a bookmark between the pages of his book and set it aside, so very casual about keeping his current reading in Thorin's rooms. Which were soon to be their rooms, anyway. "You are right, of course. Wouldn't do for Thorin to start dozing off in the middle of his coronation, after all."

"Please. I am more fearful for your state of consciousness with all the long, boring speeches in archaic Khuzdul." Not that Bilbo wasn't improving at a rather impressive rate — enough so that Thorin was certain exchanging their vows in Khuzdul the following day would be no problem for him — but being able to hold a simple conversation was quite different from following the intricacies of formal court speech.

"Well, at that point I'll still be out of the way. Ori has promised to poke me with something sharp if I look like I might be about to fall asleep." Thorin wasn't entirely sure whether Bilbo was speaking in jest. He supposed this should have worried him more.
"In any case, I do want everyone properly awake tomorrow." Dís was wearing her determined look, now, the one that could not be argued with. "Off to your beds, both of you! You can spend tomorrow night sitting here and mooning at each other if you wish, for all that it seems a poor use of your wedding night, but for now it's high time for Bilbo to get out of the door while there's still some semblance of decency going on." With this she ushered Bilbo out, Dáin following her like a relieved little duckling.

Well. This was a very interesting development, all things considered.

Good thing he had all night to decide whether he should give Balin some generous gift in thanks or lock him away and throw away the key.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be the wedding, and it's going to be a long one. (Seriously, the main scene is longer than a lot of the other chapters.)

I'm planning to post the next chapter in about two weeks, since I'm posting something else next week, but if you'd like a little preview to tide you over, feel free to click here. (Just pretend I sound like Gimli. Disclaimer: I don't sound like Gimli.)
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Thorin gets teased, crowned, and married.

It is all glorious.

Chapter Notes

Please note that this is only the first half of the wedding. I was going to post it all at once, but when it had grown twice the length of a regular chapter and I was still missing the last scene, I decided to ease your waiting at least a little bit.

In this chapter, we have the morning of the wedding, and some a lot of formal dwarf ceremonies. (I do love writing formal dwarves, can you tell?) Next chapter will have the feast and what happens after.

Really, it was all too easy for Bilbo to joke about Fíli and Kíli being chaos incarnate, when he was in no danger of being woken up by the two far too early in the morning.

Thorin, much to his regret, had no such luxury. He was an early riser as a rule, but even so he was still holding onto the last vestiges of sleep when a whirlwind of pure noise seemed to infiltrate his rooms.

"Uncle!" Fíli, judging by the voice, all but throwing himself on Thorin's bed. He was glad to see the poor lad had recovered from his madness so thoroughly, really he was, but just because he was glad for the cheerful tone didn't mean he necessarily wanted to hear it quite so early in the day. "Wake up, it's Durin's Day!"

"I am aware." He sighed in defeat, peeking his head out from under the covers. Fíli was indeed perched on his bed, with Kíli grinning just a few steps away. "Where is your mother?" Not that it surprised him that she would have sent her sons ahead to make his morning that little bit more miserable before things started to turn out for the better.

"She said she has to see to a few things this morning, especially since Balin will be busy helping Bilbo get ready." Kíli grinned, bright and wide. "Also she said you should get a bath and she's not coming anywhere near you before you're guaranteed not to be smelly."

"Of course she did." Thorin sighed, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. "And when are the two of you going to get ready? I hope she hasn't forgotten you're also supposed to make a public appearance today." Not that Dís would forget. She probably already had a strict schedule worked out for making sure everyone with any part in the ceremony would be nice and presentable by the time everything was to start.

"Don't worry, we'll take turns to get ready! I mean, there's only so much time we can spend
hemming and hawing over your armour and braids. If Mother's going to have enough time to get herself and Tauriel ready and also make an appearance here, we can handle braiding our own hair and straightening out our clothes." Kíli gave him a goofy grin, no doubt at the thought of his mother helping his intended dress herself for her small part in the ceremonies.

"Right. As long as you get it done. I'm supposed to be crowning princes, not unkempt page boys." Fighting back a yawn, he forced himself to crawl out of the bed. "I suppose I should start with a bath."

"We already drew you one!" But of course they had. "You go get clean, we'll find your clothes in the meantime."

Thorin tried not to feel too much dread as he made his way to the bathroom; after all, the boys were quite capable of such a simple chore, and he knew they would take this seriously. Even so, he was quick about washing himself, however tempting the warm water might have been otherwise.

When he came back, busily drying himself, the boys had indeed laid out clothes for him. His best armour was there as well, though that had little to do with the princes; Dwalin had insisted on choosing and polishing it himself and brought it the night before. Thorin wasn't even sure if he just wanted to have a part in preparing Thorin for the ceremony, or if he had that little faith in Fíli and Kíli's ability to make the appropriate choices.

He was not entirely surprised as the two surrounded him at once, eager to get him dressed. However, he did take pause as Kíli took out one of his best combs and a number of beads. "Are you sure you shouldn't leave that for your mother?"

"Don't worry, I'm much better at braiding other people's hair than my own." Not that Thorin was going to have any choice in the matter, anyway, judging by the firm way he was made to sit down on the edge of the bed so Kíli could start working on his hair. "Balin made me memorise all the appropriate braids, and Fíli's here to double-check everything, too."

What this translated to was the two talking almost endlessly while Kíli combed out Thorin's hair before starting to work braids into it. It was pleasant enough in the end, once he stopped worrying about the results of Kíli's handiwork, listening to them chatter on with each other and with him, mostly about things that had nothing to do with Thorin's choice of braids or their placement. It calmed his nerves, for all that he hadn't known he was nervous in the first place. Though then, he supposed that was the reason for the tradition anyway. It wasn't like Thorin couldn't have dressed himself and made his own braids, but he certainly wouldn't have wanted to sit there on the morning of his wedding day without any of his family with him.

Dís swept into the room in her fanciest dress and brightest jewels soon after Fíli had brought them all breakfast, light things they could eat without making a mess while they were getting ready. Kíli had just finished with Thorin's braids, except for the courtship braids that he was to make himself, and was now working on his brother's hair. Thorin hadn't even had the chance to dress himself aside from his breeches and undershirt, quickly pulled on before Kíli started, but that didn't seem to bother Dís in the slightest.

"Well, it's good to see you've made at least some progress." She nodded in approval at Thorin's hair, then frowned as she took a closer look at them all. "Really, I do hope you boys don't think this will do for you. Do I need to remind you that Thorin isn't the only one who will be making an appearance today?"

"We know! We're getting ready right now, see?" Fíli waved at the hard-working Kíli with a piece of bread, then pushed it into his brother's mouth. Kíli murmured his thanks around it. "I'm going to do
Kíli's hair next, it's not like Thorin actually needs our help with dressing himself. We'll help him with the armour if he needs it, then go dress ourselves. It doesn't take that long to put some clothes on when you're not expected to be in full armour."

"We've got our best court clothes set out to wait, we're putting our nicest beads in our hair, and we both had a bath last night," Kíli added as he had his mouth empty again. "We'll be all nice and presentable for the few moments anyone's going to be looking at us instead of uncle."

"I'm not sure I believe that, but I suppose there's just barely enough time for me to look you over before it starts." Dís sighed, then marched up to Thorin and sat down next to him on the edge of the bed. "So. You're actually getting married."

"So it seems." Thorin let his fingers twist the familiar pattern of the courtship braids in his hair. Instead of the fine beads with gold and gems that fastened his other braids, for these he used simpler clasps, easily removed as needed. "Unless, of course, Bilbo comes to his senses between now and the ceremony."

"Oh, I don't think you need to worry about that. I dropped in earlier, and he quite clearly just wanted it all to be over with. Can't see why anyone would be so impatient to get bound to you for all eternity, but I suppose there's no accounting for taste."

"Says the dam who once had to sit on her chosen dwarf so he wouldn't run on her."

"What?" Fíli and Kíli seemed to perk up at this, leaning closer even as Fíli continued to feed them both with bits and pieces off the breakfast tray. "And why haven't we heard this story before?"

"Because your uncle tells it wrong." Dís snorted. "For the record, it wasn't because your father didn't want to marry me. He'd just somehow gotten it into his head that he shouldn't, what with my being a princess and all. Of course, that was just plain ridiculous, but I did need to hold his attention somehow while I explained this to him."

"So you sat on him." Fíli seemed inordinately amused by this idea. "I'm assuming you did manage to convince him not to run, since we're here and all."

"At least she managed to convince him that having her sit on him might not be a bad thing." Thorin dodged the swat from his sister, lips twitching at the distressed noises the boys made as they caught on to the implications of his words. "What? I know you are aware of how these things work. Or did you not listen to Bilbo's lecture? I'm sure he would repeat it if you wanted."

"Perhaps you should be the one teaching them instead," Dís suggested, though Thorin wasn't entirely sure whether this was a joke or her way of getting back at him for teasing her. He more or less discounted any chance of it being a serious suggestion, at least. "Not that I have anything against Bilbo, but I have heard some rather strange things about hobbits and raising children, and I'm not altogether convinced he's the best option to teach my poor boys about the facts of life."

"Well, soon enough I imagine Bilbo's knowledge on the dwarven way of things will be rather on par with mine. Besides, I took care of the puberty talk for you, and that was quite enough for me, thank you."

"Oh, I am aware of that. And I promise I will come to your rescue if Bilbo somehow works his hobbit magic and you end up with a daughter who might need to know a thing or two."

"I think you're rather getting ahead of yourself, there." Not that the thought didn't make his heart skip, just a little.
"Oh, I'm sorry. I should be focusing on your upcoming marriage, shouldn't I?" Dís gave him a smile that was the very picture of innocence, enough so to make him shudder with dread. "Perhaps I should be advising you instead, just so you don't turn out to be an absolute disappointment for poor Bilbo?"

"Mother!" Fíli burst out. "I really don't think we need to be hearing this!"

"Hm, I think you might be right. Well, Kíli might benefit the most from the pointers I could give, since he plans to take a wife, but I suppose that can wait for a while." Dís patted Thorin on the shoulder and turned to smile at Fíli. "The two of you can just ask Dwalin if there's anything unclear. I'd presume he's the most likely to be able to give you any advice on the matter of attending to a male lover without teasing you for it."

"It's good to know you have so little confidence in us, you're already worried about our love lives before either of us has even married." Not that he wasn't amused to see Fíli and Kíli's mortification. "I will seek advice if Bilbo has any complaints about my conduct, and not before."

"I suppose that's the best I can ask for." Dís sniffed. "Just remember it's not an actual hammer, no matter what words you might use. Pounding harder is only a good idea if he asks for it."

Of course, Dís being Dís, she had to time this just as Thorin was biting into some bread. Thankfully she also had mercy enough to pound him on the back enough to dislodge the chunk that ended up in the wrong place, though he suspected it was only to avoid the hassle of getting Fíli to learn the ceremony in time for him to be crowned instead. At least the boys were too busy being horrified to tease him too much about it.

Dís didn't relent much in her teasing, but then it did help Thorin avoid focusing on his various worries and fears. She chased her sons out to get properly dressed once they were done with each other's hair, and by the time they returned in their finest court clothes and fully armed she had managed to get Thorin into full armour. He still felt strange putting it on, remembering how the last time he had donned it had been in the worst depths of his madness, but tradition required it, and he wanted to do everything right for Bilbo.

It was better than the raven crown, anyway.

"What do you boys think?" Dís tapped her cheek with a finger as though deep in thought, even though he suspected she had already made up her mind. "Cape or no cape?"

"Absolutely a cape." Fíli probably would have sounded more convincing if he hadn't been struggling with the fastenings on his own cape just then, looking like he would have been quite happy to toss it aside. "He'll look much more majestic and kingly that way."

"I've got to agree." Kíli at least wasn't fidgeting, though then he had decided to forgo the cape that usually was part of his formal outfit, given that it would have been quite tricky for him to carry his bow and quiver and wear a cape properly. Fíli had the same problem with his back scabbard, and had been forced to place his swords at his belt instead. "Besides, if he wasn't wearing his armour, there'd be no question about his wearing his most impressive cape and robes for the coronation. Why'd he leave that aside just because he's going to get married as well?"

"I suppose that is a fair point." Dís nodded. "Cape it is, then." She turned to get his ceremonial cape, the heavy thing he never wore outside formal occasions. "Other than that, how does he look?"

"Very impressive, I've got to say." Fíli grinned. "I've got to say, I hope it's a long time before I have to worry about a coronation."
Thorin snorted, adjusting Orcrist's sheath at his waist. "At the very least I hope it's long enough in coming that you manage to get married before then."

"Just don't die or abdicate before Ori's managed to finish his masterpiece." Fíli's hand came up to touch one of his courtship braids, a fond smile on his face. It was rather pleasant to see, Thorin decided.

"I'll try my best, though I make no promises if certain nobles continue to be as obnoxious as they have been so far." Thorin held still while Dís fastened his cape, fussing about until she was satisfied with its placement. At last she stepped back, looking over his handiwork. "So, how about it, sister? Do I pass muster?"

Dís clicked her tongue in thought, then surprised him by surging forward to draw him tightly to her chest, paying no mind to the hard surface of his plate mail. "You look like the king you were born to be." She released him a moment later, and he could have sworn her eyes glimmered with tears, except that couldn't possibly be true, Dís hadn't shed a tear since she was done mourning Tuli, not even when she had sent her sons off on a quest from which he could not guarantee their return. "I'm glad I got to see you at your brightest."

"While I'm glad you didn't see me at my lowest." Though then, she probably would have had better luck than anyone at snapping him out of it. "Our people are home, sister. I think it's time we all celebrate that."

"Yes, well, tonight we're celebrating something else entirely." Dís chuckled, wiping away any hint at the impossible tears. "We're running short on time. I'll go ahead to make sure everything is ready, you follow shortly. Dwalin will be waiting for you at the doors."

Of course, being Dís, she couldn't resist the chance to fuss over her sons' appearance one last time before sweeping out of his rooms with all her usual grace. If Thorin strained his ears, he could hear her giving orders outside, no doubt directing Bilbo's side of the whole affair.

Bilbo. Soon enough, he would be facing Bilbo in front of all his people.

"So. It's finally happening, huh." Fíli hummed to himself, fingertips tapping out a nervous rhythm on the pommel of one of his swords. "Your actual proper coronation, the wedding, everything."

"Seems kind of unreal, doesn't it?" Kíli tilted his head, and though his hair was properly combed and braided for once, Thorin couldn't help but recall him as an unkempt, inquisitive little lad of a dwarfling puzzled at some great mystery such as shoelaces. "I mean, not that I'm surprised that it's happening, it was pretty much a done deal since that first night Thorin saw Bilbo, but I guess I didn't think it'd happen this soon."

Thorin snorted. "Don't try to tell me you foresaw this from then. Even I was not aware of my affection for our burglar until a long time later, never mind being aware of his returning those feelings."

"Never mind that you really shouldn't be talking about falling for someone fast," Fíli teased. "Flirting with an elf while she's locking us up! Really, it's just shameful, little brother."

"It was all part of my strategy." Kíli sniffed, putting on an air of wounded pride that melted almost instantly as he poked his brother in the side. "Besides, it's still better than your endless hemming and hawing. How many years has it now been since you first told me Ori's the only one you could love?"

"Too many, and I'm aware of that. However, it's not like I would've had any hope before he was of
age, and after that I haven’t exactly had time for wooing him, what with the quest and all." Fíli shook his head. "Besides, now we’re both courting, so clearly the end result is the same, whether we rush in or take our time."

"Right, except you get to be wed first since you’re the heir." Kíli gave a put-upon sigh. "I hope it doesn’t take Ori too long to finish his masterpiece, or for the wedding date to be set after that. I’ve agreed to wait for the minimum formal courting period, I don’t want to wait any longer just because you’re dragging your feet."

"Not everyone wants to rush in head first, Kíli. There’s nothing wrong with Ori wishing to get his Master’s braid before he marries, and if I hear you’ve complained about it taking long anywhere other people might hear, I’ll make you regret it." Fíli and Ori’s courtship had enough pressures as it was; Thorin wasn’t about to let a petulant child add to it. Kíli could act like an adult when he put his mind to it, so he could just as well get started.

"I know, I know. And I can’t really complain now, considering how much I whined about you and Fíli taking forever to start courting while you kept staring at your chosen loves."

"Yes, I’ve heard a thing or two about people getting involved in our love affair before there was any such thing." And he was mad at Dáin and Balin, just a little. Not enough that he wouldn’t also be grateful, though. They had been right, after all; without a push, he would have taken forever to make any move on Bilbo, perhaps long enough that his hobbit had already returned to the Shire.

Now Bilbo wouldn’t, because he had chosen to make his home in Erebor. And all Thorin could do was make sure he didn’t regret it.

They chatted for a little while, until Fíli decided to do his duty as Thorin's heir and prod him about actually making an appearance. Thorin didn't truly have any excuse to dally any longer, save for some remaining shreds of hesitation, so he found himself marching along empty hallways with his two princely guards. It was almost as though the mountain had been empty again, like it had been when they had first wandered through the empty corridors after sneaking into the mountain under the dragon's nose. The emptiness and the weight of his armour might have drawn Thorin's mind to darker thoughts, but that was quickly chased away as he extended his sense for the stone further in the mountain, finding his way easily enough by simply heading for the largest concentration of life. It was a bright beacon to his senses, a gathering of warmth and breath and life, and for all that his friends might have teased him about his poor sense of direction above ground he didn’t hesitate a moment at leading their way to the huge pair of doors that were their goal.

They did not use the grand throne room, not for this. It was all well and good for receiving visitors or passing judgement, but it was less suited for a matter such as this, when there was going to be a large crowd all eager to see and hear what was going on. The walkways were for making an impression, not for the whole kingdom to occupy, and having everyone see the coronation was the sole point of doing it all over again. Instead, a dais with a throne had been built at the very end of the Gallery of the Kings, while the feast was being prepared in the Great Chamber, finally cleaned out for use.

Thorin had to admit he had hesitated about stepping on the golden floor again, had feared it might remind him of the depths of his madness. Bilbo, being clever as ever, had suggested giving himself time to get used to it instead of waiting for the ceremony to step inside for the first time. He had done so, overseeing the preparations with brief visits every day, and was now reasonably sure he could bear the sight of the golden floor without dragging up unwanted memories.

Besides, it would be hidden well enough beneath countless dwarven feet.

Dwalin met them at the door, his armour gleaming with almost as brilliant a shine as Thorin's own.
He gave the princes a sharp look before nodding in approval, then turned towards Thorin. "Everything is ready, or so I'm told. The guests are all in their place, as are those taking part in the ceremonies. Dís has arrived, too, and Bilbo and his people; it's just us out here."

"Good." Thorin nodded. "Give the signal, then, if that's all."

Dwalin made a gesture at a guard standing by the doors, and he took up a small horn, blowing out a sharp signal. This was returned in a rather more impressive fanfare from inside the Gallery, the heavy doors of the main entrance sliding open for them.

Dwalin walked first as a honour guard, leaving Thorin to follow with the princes trailing behind. The crowd parted before them, letting them walk up to the front without any hindrances. It seemed like all of Erebor was gathered there, every last dwarf, all eyes locked on him. As they got up to the front he saw the Company and other important people gathered around the dais, with their various guests in the front rows of the crowd. There was Bard and his children, and Thranduil's son representing Mirkwood, as well as delegations from various realms of dwarves and men and even elves. Any other time he might have taken a moment to wonder at how many elves had decided to arrive, but right now, all his attention was at what lay before him.

Dwalin stepped aside as they got close enough, taking to the side of the dais, intimidating as ever. Thorin was vaguely aware of Fíli and Kíli heading to the sides to join the rest, allowed himself a brief glance at those gathered, rather fancying he might have caught a glimpse of Bilbo among the taller dwarven figures. Then, however, he turned his focus to the throne and to Balin standing next to it in his fanciest ceremonial robes. They exchanged a brief nod before Thorin came to a halt at the foot of the dais, turning to face the crowd.

Balin launched into his speech, now, the one he had been preparing for ages, but Thorin hardly heard a word, eyes sweeping over the gathered crowd and the magnificent hall around them to keep himself calm. There was something about duty and honour there, he was reasonably sure, of everything he had done for Erebor, and a very lengthy recital of his bloodline to generations past. The men and most of the elves looked bemused as Thorin's gaze flicked towards them, though a couple of them almost seemed to pay attention — the Lady of Lórien, his mind supplied, who was even older than Thranduil, and the two younger elves who he vaguely remembered being introduced as Elrond's sons. He supposed it made sense, if their father could speak ancient Khuzdul, that they could at least make out the general gist of the speech.

There was a time when he might have been incensed at the idea of people who were not dwarves listening in on his coronation speech. Now, all he could think of was wondering how much Bilbo and Tauriel could understand.

Bilbo. Bilbo was here.

At last Balin was done, and Thorin had to tear his eyes away from the crowd, turning his focus back to the actual events. He turned around, now, taking a couple of steps up the dais until he came to kneel in front of the throne. It was a grand enough affair to look at from afar, though from close by he could tell it was a light little thing compared with the actual throne, something that could actually be shifted and moved instead of the heavy stones of the throne room.

The new thrones would be even more massive, as he well knew.

"Before us is Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, blood of Durin the Deathless and the rightful heir to the crown of Erebor." As well as the one who had been wearing it for a while now, but Balin wasn't about to be slowed down by details. "Thorin, son of Thráin, do you swear to rule Durin's folk with a just heart and a steady hand?"
"I swear."

"Do you swear to serve the throne of Erebor with wisdom and courage, without falsehood and without fear?"

"I swear." He would do it, for his people, would rule them with all the wisdom he possessed, would never let himself fall to madness again. He swore it here, where he had seen the worm slither under endless gold, where he had cast aside the crown of Thrór and his sickness with it.

"Do you swear to protect her people in peace and in wartime, to find your pride in their safety and your peace in their prosperity?"

"I swear." He would not fall to the lure of gold, not ever again, would make sure his people were safe and fed above the glimmer of his treasure chests.

"Do you swear to wear this crown with pride, as Durin wears his crown of stars, until the time comes for you to pass it to your heir?"

"I swear." And a wonderful heir he had, too, could never ask for better than his golden prince.

"And what do you swear all this by?"

"I swear it by the blood of my fathers, by the blood of Durin the Deathless, who came before me and will come after me again, that I might be worthy of the name of his line. I swear it by my blade, by sharp steel and the hands that wield it, that I might always stand in defence of my people, or else fall before them. I swear it by our Maker, by steel and stone and the fire of the forge, that he may have made me worthy of my place and will one day welcome me in His halls as one who failed Him not."

"Has this oath been heard by all?"

The answer came at once from behind him, a thousand voices speaking as one. "Aye!"

"Then before the eyes of Mahal and the blood of Durin, it has been done." From the corner of his eye Thorin saw Dís stepping closer, handing Balin a familiar circle of gleaming silver and mithril before she stepped back and he came closer instead. "Thorin, son of Thráin, I crown you king of Durin's folk and King Under the Mountain."

The crown was a familiar weight on his head, yet he was quite sure it had never been heavier than when Balin placed it there, bearing the weight of far more than just the metal and gemstones as he stood up at last. Taking the last couple of steps to the throne, he turned to face the crowd and took his rightful seat to the sounds of a glorious fanfare.

"Dwarrows of Erebor!" Balin spread his arms to draw more attention, as if that were even possible. "All hail Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, heir of Durin and blood of kings! All hail Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain!"

He had been cheered before, more times than he could count, had heard people raising their voices for him. However, he had never felt anything quite like the wave of emotion that crashed over him as he heard his people cheer for him at this moment. It was both uplifting and humbling, leaving him feeling elated and quite unworthy of their praise at the same time.

"He has been crowned king in front of his people and in front of Mahal." Balin looked serious and proud both, as though he had waited his entire life for just this moment. Perhaps he had, Thorin mused, or at least ever since he had taken to being Thorin's friend and mentor both. "Who will be first to swear fealty to him?"
"We will." The two voices rang out bright and clear, perfectly in unison, as Fíli and Kíli both stepped forward, looking quite impressive in their finest clothes and brightest beads. There was the faintest hint of a smile on Kíli's face, but other than that they looked perfectly serious as Balin motioned for them to step forward. Again, they moved as one, stepping in front of the throne before they each fell down to one knee.

"I am Fíli, son of Tuli and son of Dís, of Durin's folk and Durin's line, a prince of Erebor." Two swords were drawn from their sheaths and placed on the ground in front of Thorin. "My swords are yours to command, as your will is my will, your people are my people. I pledge myself to the service of Erebor and her king, and will serve them to the best of my ability until the day I am given to the stone. This I swear by my braids, by my blades, and by my blood, or may they all be lost to me."

"I am Kíli, son of Tuli and son of Dís, of Durin's folk and Durin's line, a prince of Erebor." It was a bow that was placed before him now, carved from sturdy wood and strung with fine strands of coppery hue. "My bow is yours to command, as your will is my will, your people are my people. I pledge myself to the service of Erebor and her throne, and will serve them to the best of my ability until the day I am given to the stone. This I swear by my braids, by my bow, and by my blood, or may they all be lost to me." The difference was slight but significant, one that Thorin was sure the sharp ears of the court would catch. Fíli had pledged himself in service of the king, Kíli of the throne. Of course. Thorin was the only king Fíli would ever serve, first in line as he was; Kíli, on the other hand, was already swearing his loyalty to his brother as well. Fíli clearly caught this, judging by the quick glance he cast his brother's way.

"I have heard your pledges, and I accept them." Thorin stood from his throne, barely making a gesture as Glóin was already there, looking supremely serious as he carried forth a pillow with two coronets set upon it, one silver, the other gold. Thorin took the golden one in his hands and turned towards the two kneeling princes, lifting his eyes to the gathered dwarves and other guests. "People of Erebor, I give you Fíli the Golden, son of Dís." He placed the coronet on Fíli's head. "I hereby name him my first heir, the crown prince of Erebor by his birth and his blade both."

This time the cheers were less thunderous, but no less sincere. He waited for them to die down before he reached for the silver coronet, stepping in front of Kíli next.

"I give you Kíli, son of Dís." This time, the coronet settled perfectly on Kíli's brow. "I hereby name him my second heir, a true prince of Erebor by his birth and his bravery both. May they both serve Erebor as strong and true as they have ever served me, and may Mahal bless Durin's line in them and their children." Assuming there ever were children. Neither of their situations was exactly conducive to many little dwarf children, but Thorin could hope at least.

While the crowd was cheering again, two more figures stepped forward, one kneeling on each side of the princes. They were both clad in blue with ravens embroidered in threads of silver and gold, a bold statement before anything had even been said. Even down on her knee Tauriel was clearly taller than the others, while Ori somehow managed to look even smaller than usual, but neither of them wavered even as the cheers died down and everyone's attention turned back to Thorin.

"I also give you Ori, son of Vuori, of the line of Durin, the head royal scribe and the betrothed of Prince Fíli of Erebor." Ori seemed startled by such public acknowledgement of his bloodline, but Thorin paid it little mind. This, all of this, was what he wanted for Erebor and his line, and by the Valar, this would be. "And also Tauriel of Dale, of the house of Bard the Bowman and formerly of Woodland realm, slayer of Bolg and the betrothed of Prince Kíli of Erebor." She, too, seemed startled. Please. As though it hadn't always been clear who had slain Bolg, when she had been the only one there besides Kíli and he had only barely avoided being skewered like a fried fish.
This time the cheering was hesitant at first, as though they were not quite sure if they were supposed
to cheer. However, as Thorin made a gesture and the princes picked up their weapons before the four
all stood, giving one last bow in unison before turning to face the people of Erebor, the voices grew
louder with confidence.

Then the four stepped away, one couple to each side, and Thorin found himself wondering how
many times they had rehearsed it all with Balin to get everything down so perfectly. He stepped back
to his throne, taking a seat as Balin spoke again.

"Is there any other who would swear fealty?"

"I will." Dáin stepped forward, now, looking rather magnificent in all his jewels and gleaming
armour. However, he had barely made it down to one knee as Thorin stood again, interrupting any
words he might have been about to say.

"Rise, Dáin, son of Náin," he said, his voice soft yet steady enough to carry. "Bow not to me, or any
else."

Dáin stood up, the slightest of frowns on his brow. "My King?"

"Not yours any more." Thorin glanced around at the tense faces all around. "For the aid and loyalty
of Dáin, son of Náin," he announced, "and for the part the dwarrows of Iron Hill played in the Battle
of the Five Armies, I cast aside any claim Erebor has held as the older line of the two realms. May
our shared blood be one of alliance, not of lordship, and may songs long tell of the friendship of
King Thorin of Erebor and King Dáin of Iron Hills."

There was a moment of silence as everyone processed this, followed by frantic murmurs as the word
was passed to those too far to have heard it. Then someone broke into a cheer, and another, and soon
the entire crowd was shouting, crying out in celebration.

Dáin took the hand Thorin offered, and they drew each other close at once, their foreheads banging
together with rather satisfying solidity.

"You didn't have to do that," Dáin murmured to him. "I did not aid you for my own benefit."

"I know that, my cousin," Thorin said, and allowed himself a small grin. "And it's precisely that by
which you have earned it."

"Hopefully this will get at least some of the rebellious whispers to quiet down."

"I will admit that was part of my motivation, though I did genuinely wish to reward you." Thorin
chuckled. "Of course, this means you'll have to take back all the old ones who do not want to be cut
off from Iron Hills."

"I knew you had some dastardly scheme behind all this." However, Dáin was grinning as he stepped
back, the only warning Thorin got before his cousin raised his voice. "Well! It seems I'll have to get
used to a new title, now, thanks to my cousin." His grin got just a little bit broader. "Of course, now
that we're equals and everything, perhaps Master Balin would indulge me and allow me to conduct
the ceremony for the actual reason we're all gathered here today?"

"But of course." And Balin was smirking, that was definitely a smirk, he might not have told Dáin
about the title beforehand but this part was certainly planned out. Had they not had enough of
scheming behind Thorin's back yet? "After all, who better to officiate the wedding of a king than
another?"
They had rehearsed this part before, of course, yet this sudden change of plans left Thorin feeling quite out of sorts as he somehow managed to find his place, standing before the throne with Dáin next to him. Things were proceeding somewhat faster than they were supposed to, but nobody seemed to be paying much mind, the crowd only growing more enthusiastic as music started out again, more cheerful than somber though no less majestic.

"Dwarrows of Erebor!" Dáin slammed his hand together, his voice booming with not so hidden mirth. "We're gathered here for a most magnificent event, as it is my honour to see my good cousin bound in matrimony. May the two betrothed both come forth?"

Thorin might have had a time of it trying to keep his face straight and not either scowl or grin like an idiot, except then a small figure stepped out from the opposite side of the throne, and he was left staring.

He had seen Bilbo earlier, right before the coronation, but only the briefest of glimpses. This was the first time he could truly take in his hobbit, and the sight rather stole his breath away. Bilbo was standing in front of him dressed in layers and layers of shades of deep blue, embroideries of little acorns and oak leaves circling his sleeves and ravens of Erebor upon his breast. There were a few simple braids in his hair besides his courtship braids, speaking of battles and royal protection, and beneath his fine velvet coat Thorin could see his mithril shirt, his elven dagger firmly set on his belt. His expression was one of fierce determination, but as he met Thorin's eyes, it softened into something much more pleasant.

"Who are those who come before us this day, and what do they seek?" At least Dáin was taking his job seriously, for all that he was clearly taking some delight in having surprised Thorin.

"I am Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, of Durin's folk and Durin's line." He kept his eyes on Bilbo, quite unable to look away. "I come here to be bound to my One before Mahal and before my people, so that we might be together in this life and the next."

"I am Bilbo, son of Bungo, of the house of Baggins in the Shire." Bilbo's voice didn't waver, nor did his gaze. "I come here to be bound to my One before Lady Yavanna and her husband, called Mahal by his people, so that we might be together in this life and the next."

"You come here armed, but there is no quarrel to be had on the day of Mahal's blessing. Will you lay down your arms, so that you may only hold each other this day?"

"I will." Thorin took Orcrist from its sheath, placing it before Dáin, even as Bilbo echoed his words and actions both with Sting.

"Who then will protect you, so that you may have no fear in each other's arms?"

"We will." Thorin heard movement behind him, knew without looking that Fíli and Dwalin had stepped forward, enough of a threat to make a small army think twice if they had any sense to them. He was not surprised to see Kíli taking the same position behind Bilbo, though the addition of Ori beside him was less obvious. The young scribe looked as fierce as he had when he had announced his plans for the dragon, though, as though he expected to actually fight down a threat in their stead.

A little scribe armed with only a knife was hardly a traditional choice for this task, yet somehow, Thorin didn't doubt that Bilbo felt perfectly safe with those two watching his back. He had to feel secure indeed to turn his back to such an expression.

"Excellent!" Dáin's grin got that little bit wider. "You have come here to be joined together, so that none may part you again. Once you exchange your vows and receive the blessing of Mahal, you will
become one, as two pieces of iron in the same melting pot. Do you understand this and accept this?"

"I do." Thorin met Bilbo's eyes again, smiling as they spoke as one.

"You have made promises to each other, carried those promises made in your courtship braids. Here, that comes to an end, for no longer are you courting or courted. I ask you, then, to take out those braids, to replace them with your vows of marriage."

Thorin stepped forward, moving first by virtue of his higher rank. He reached for one of the clasps in Bilbo's hair, then the other, the intricate braids unravelling easily from the soft hair. He could have made two in their stead, but they had decided to stay to the one that was required, as Bilbo had no family braid to weave in Thorin's hair, and they would each be wearing symbols of Durin's house in any official events anyway. Instead, he started to weave one braid, the familiar-looking weave of a marriage braid, speaking in Khuzdul as he did so.

"Bilbo, son of Bungo, my One and my intended, on this day I make my vows to you, for my house and my person both. I give you my house, and my line, and my blood, so that you may be considered one of us now and forever more, and none may question you because Mahal will have made it so." Bilbo's hair was soft in his hands, just barely long enough for this. "I give you my love, and my hope, and my devotion. I will fight beside you and shield you from harm, I will hold you as precious as the purest gems or most shining gold, I will be your strength as you are mine. For you are my One, sparked from the same strike of Mahal's hammer, and without you I am but a fraction of what I might be." He finished the braid, and reached for the beads that Fíli stepped forward to give him. They secured the end of the braid just right, snug and tight, his personal seal on one of them and the crest of Durin on the other. "Everything I am is yours, now and all the days of my life, and when I am given to stone I will yet seek you in the Halls of Ancestors, so we might together await the reforging of the world." Because surely Bilbo would be there, too. Surely Mahal would not be so cruel as to part them.

He let his hands fall, and Bilbo reached for his braids in turn, a hint of tears in his eyes even as he smiled at him. He also spoke in Khuzdul, his pronunciation imperfect but understandable, lending a strange lilt to the familiar tongue that Thorin yearned to hear over and over again. "Thorin, son of Thráin, my One and my intended, on this day I make my vows to you, for my house and my person both. I take your house and your line as my own, so that I might bring them honour and glory, as I would the house of my birth." Thorin's hair was less pliant than Bilbo's, but Bilbo's hands were nimble and clever, making quick work of his courtship braids before setting to work on the marriage braid. "I give you my love, and my faith, and my loyalty. I will stand beside you come good or ill, I will make you my greatest treasure, I will be your courage as surely as you are mine. For you are my One, grown from the same root as I have, and I would sooner see a blossom grow without sun or rain than see myself live another day without you." Ori was the one who offered Bilbo his own beads, Bilbo's seal on one and a tiny little oak tree carved on the other, a symbol of his beloved Shire and Thorin both. "Everything I am is yours, now and all the days of my life, and when I wither like a flower before winter I will go to my sleep without fear, because I know the Green Lady will bear me in her hands into your arms once again." Bilbo smiled, warm and brilliant, and reached over to take Thorin's hands in his own.

"We have heard their vows, and witnessed their braids." Dáin reached a hand over their clasped ones. "In front of all these witnesses and under Mahal's gaze, these two have been bound together in the bonds of matrimony. May Mahal bless this union, and may His hammer strike down any who would try to part them!"

Once again there were cheers and more music, and perhaps more words as well, but all Thorin could focus on now was Bilbo. Bilbo who kept smiling at him even as Balin stepped forward to place a
crown on his head, a wreath of golden oak leaves with flowers of white gemstones, all rounded lines and delicate curves to contrast with the sharp angles of Thorin's own crown. Then they were leaning closer together and Thorin's breath hitched in his throat, not that it mattered since he was about to be breathless anyway.

It wasn't their first kiss, far from it, but it was the first they shared as husbands, and for a moment even the roaring of the crowd faded away as all Thorin could think about was Bilbo.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Fíli wants to know what Kíli was thinking with his pledge, while Legolas is feeling lost among all these dwarves, though thankfully one of them is tolerable company at least. (Even if he may be a bit strange for a dwarf.) And then, Thorin and Bilbo have things to do.

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter includes some very vague, very non-graphic implied sex. I may or may not write a more explicit sidestory later, but for now I don't feel like raising the rating of the story for one scene.

Posted a bit early because I'll be busy with a presentation tomorrow and would probably forget. >_>

If you're curious about the song, and missed the preview link at the end of chapter 19, here is a quick recording of it. Just imagine I sound like Gimli. (Disclaimer: I do not sound like Gimli.)

"So, what was that about?"

Kíli gave one last glance after Tauriel before turning towards his brother. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't pretend like you don't know." Fíli hurried his steps, leading Kíli to match them. They were both walking after their mother, who was busy ushering Bilbo along the long corridors of the mountain. "What was that thing with your pledge?"

"It was a perfectly legitimate oath of fealty, if you must know. I checked with Balin and everything." He had, too. He didn't do everything without thinking ahead, just some things.

"You know what I mean." Fíli sighed, running a hand over his hair and almost snagging it on the coronet. "You didn't have to do that, you know."

"Oh, but I did. If not for you, then for my own sake." Kíli shrugged. "Perhaps I was just being selfish, making it clear I have no view on the crown and no quarrel with you either. My relationship with Tauriel is less likely to be questioned as long as I stay out of all that and give nobody any reason to think I'm of a mind to bring elven blood to the throne." If he even could, never mind his intentions. He knew there had been elves who had children with men, but for an elf and a dwarf to be granted the same grace seemed far less likely even for one as hopeful as he was.

"That's not something you should concern yourself with." Fíli managed a smile, but he looked tired, more so than he should have been simply from a busy morning and a ceremony to attend. "If you're so intent on staying out of politics, perhaps you should just let us handle all that."
"Oh, I never said I'd have no part in politics, just not on the throne. You'll need people on your side even when Amad and Uncle Thorin aren't here, and while Ori is great he can't be all you have. I wouldn't make an oath I don't intend to keep. When you're king, I'll stand by you; it's what I was born to do, anyway."

"And here I was hoping at least one of us might escape this madness." Fíli's smile grew more genuine, though. "Though then, you're still going to be my heir until a better prospect shows up. Not that it's hard to be better than you, but there's something of a dearth of candidates who aren't likely to be dead long before either of us."

Kíli snorted, not rising to the teasing bait. For one thing, their mother would have had no regrets about swatting him over the head if they started to fight, however in jest. "Thorin's married now and the two of us plan to be, and while Gimli seems to have no particular longing I haven't heard him to swear off love either. The young Thorin certainly seems to have a mind for it, from the stories I hear. If none of us manages any form of heir, well, I'm sure those with a mind for history can track down some heretofore forgotten branch of the family. So really, there's no reason to threaten me with such horrors."

"Oh, I don't see why you would be frightened, brother dear. Clearly for you to become king would be a terror upon our people more than on you."

That clearly deserved a sharp poke in the ribs, not that Fíli felt it much under all his gear. Even so, Kíli hasted his steps to catch up with Bilbo and their mother, to be safe from any retaliation.

"I still don't understand why you dwarves have to make everything so complicated," Bilbo was sighing just then. "Back in Hobbiton the ceremony and the feast are one in the same, and nobody has to change clothes in the middle. Well, unless something gets dirty, that is."

"It's all very symbolic and traditional, I'm afraid." Their mother didn't seem too concerned at this questioning of dwarven ways, though then there was very little that could unsettle her, and she in general had little tolerance for meaningless nonsense herself. "For the ceremony you must be fully armed and armoured, to show you're willing to fight for your claim, and to appear as the best you can be. You're prepared for that by your own family, so they can support you in that last step. And now we welcome you into our family in turn by helping you change, and you have to cast aside the armour and weapons to show that you trust Mahal and your families to protect you. Your wedding day should be for nothing but celebration, not fighting."

"So, why do we need weapons before we're wed? To fight off spurned suitors?"

"Well, it has happened before," Kíli cut in, unable to resist. "Not very often, of course, but you do hear tales. Some clans even have staged fights, to really show that you'd fight for your love, but our people generally just go for the appearances. Most of the time, anyway."

"You're not exactly reassuring me about the reasonableness of dwarves." Oh, please, like he'd ever thought dwarves reasonable. Kíli didn't think dwarves reasonable half the time, and he was one. "What's this Balin said about taking out my braids, too? Seems strange now that I've finally got it." For all that Bilbo's words were sharp, bordering on a complaint, the way his fingertips touched the marriage braid in his hair was nothing but gentle.

"Not all of them. The marriage braid stays. You're supposed to always wear it from now on, no matter what the situation." Fíli gave his input this time, having joined Kíli right behind Bilbo and their mother. "It's the same thing as with the weapons. You go to the ceremony with all your braids, to show everything you are and have accomplished, but in the feast the only thing that's supposed to matter is that you're a newlywed, so all the rest of it gets lost for the night. Some don't even wear
their family beads on the marriage braid for the feast, but that's kind of silly, since your family will still be there to protect you and everything so they're part of the feast anyway."

"And let me guess." Bilbo glanced over his shoulder. "You'll take great pleasure in trotting around fully armed just in case some imaginary threat comes up for you to fight off?"

"Well, of course." Kíli grinned. "Well, I'll switch my bow for a sword because that's just not practical in a crowd, and Fíli'll probably ditch his cape for the back scabbard because two swords on his belt is really not a good idea for dancing, but we'll definitely be armed, don't you worry about that. Would be right improper for us to be unarmed after we swore to fight in your stead today."

"Ori's going to borrow Dwalin's hammer and strap it to his back so he'll be properly armed for the feast," Fíli added, pride clear in his voice. "And of course Dwalin is Dwalin, he's always armed. He probably won't even take his armour off for the feast, he rarely dances anyway."

"Like you get to speak about being always armed." Kíli couldn't help but chuckle. "I'm glad I won't be responsible for getting you disarmed for your wedding feast. We'll have to tell Dori and Nori to strip you naked and comb through your hair if they want to make sure Ori doesn't run into any sharp surprises later."

"At least Tauriel won't have to worry about anything sharp even if you keep your wit."

"Boys, let's not start a quarrel just yet, hmm?" Yet their mother sounded more amused than anything, so she couldn't be that mad with them. "You may just be teasing now, but soon enough one of you will say something wrong and the other gets angry, and then I'll be dealing with squabbling brats all over again. You even think about starting something, and I will have no qualms on giving Bilbo some very detailed advice on how to best bed a dwarf while you both have to listen."

Judging by Bilbo's squeak and a slight flush, he would very much protest at that. And really, from the talk he had given them, Kíli trusted Bilbo knew well enough what to do in that regard. Even so, it really wasn't worth a risk, and Fíli seemed to agree with him on that.

When Fíli's shoulder nudged his along the way, it was a friendly gesture from a brother, nothing more.

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Legolas wasn't sure he had ever felt quite so out of place.

Of course, this wasn't much of a surprise, not really. He was an elf in a dwarven kingdom, in the midst of a dwarven celebration, and for all that there were other elves and even men mingled within the crowd they were few and far between with hundreds if not thousands of dwarves filling the grand hall and various adjoining spaces. He had managed to exchange a few words with Lady Galadriel as they were all guided out of the Gallery of the Kings, even had a brief chat with Tauriel before Kíli had returned with the newlywed couple and the rest of their attendants. Then, however, the king and his consort had been presented to everyone with much pomp and ceremony, both dressed in rich fabrics instead of gleaming armour, and the few familiar faces in the crowd had all dispersed to enjoy the feast at hand as they pleased.

There was a high table set out, and he supposed he would have had a seat there if he wanted it, being here in place of his father as he was. However, few people besides the royal couple stayed there for long, and Legolas had no will to linger, either. The best he might have hoped for there would have been some semblance of solitude, perhaps a few stilted words exchanged with people who came up to pay their respects to the king and happened to recognise him as well, but that was hardly what he
was looking for. Instead he chose to wander about the grand space, skirting along the side of what appeared to be a dance floor and trying out various things from the large tables laden with food of all manners. Perhaps he could run into Elladan and Elrohir at some point, provided they didn't first run into the dwarf princes and conspire with them to cause some sort of utter scandal. And if they did, well, at least he would be entertained.

He had just found some fairly enjoyable wine as he spotted a familiar face among all the dwarves that blurred together into one nameless mass in his mind. "Gimli!" He tried not to look too relieved as he weaved his way through the crowd, careful not to spill his wine. "Gimli, is that you?"

"Can't say who else I ought to be." Gimli grinned, appearing happy to see him, and Legolas felt some touch of warmth at the idea that at least one dwarf in the mountain would rather have him here than not. "I did hear the Elvenking sent someone in his place, but I did not dare hope it would be you."

"I suppose he has come to accept I'm the only one of high enough rank who doesn't find the idea of staying in the mountain even for a brief period of time entirely distasteful." No need to mince words here, Gimli was surely aware of the remaining tension between their peoples. "He can avoid visiting without actually offending, I get to see that Tauriel continues to be safe and happy. He might not much like my grudging acceptance, but he will rather allow it than deal with dwarves personally."

"Grudging, hmm?" Gimli chuckled. "So at least you're starting to accept Kíli might not bring her to ruin?"

"Oh, I know he will, one day, but I'm starting to believe it won't be through any fault of his own." Legolas shook his head. "And if she will rather have what brief happiness she can grasp, I would rather see her have that at least than for her to find naught but sorrow."

"That seems like a sad way to lead your life." Gimli studied him with a curious look. "Always concerned for how long something will last, that is. You elves claim the passing of time matters not to you, yet you seem the most grieved when something is brief and fleeting. If a hundred years is meaningless to you, how can anything matter when nothing lasts forever?"

"It is because of our long lives that we fear so, I think. If we lose something precious, there are uncountable years in which to mourn."

"And will years not dull the pain? Or are they powerless there as well?"

"I do not rightly know, for I am still young among my race." He had seen his father, though, had seen the pain in his eyes that he sought to hide, the words he could never quite say. "I think for some the pain may fade, forgotten in the mists of time, while for some it remains as sharp as ever. And I must say, I am not sure which possibility I find more frightening."

"Perhaps, then, our brief lives are a blessing for us." Gimli shrugged, a gesture that seemed too easy for such heavy matters. "If we find something we value, we grasp to it all the tighter, because we know our years of happiness are counted out before they even begin. And if we do lose it, our mourning, too, is not without end. If a dwarf loses their love, they know it's only a matter of time before they are reunited again, as the Halls of Ancestors will stand for all time."

"Yet they might not bring relief to all." Even in the vast space he could see Tauriel, far away in the crowd, her tall form and red hair setting her apart from the multitude of dwarves around her. She was dancing, he could see that, could glimpse the dwarf prince with her, taller than most around him yet so much less so than she was. "Perhaps some of your number will have to know our endless grief in death, if not life."
"You speak of Kíli." Gimli must have guessed this, as there was no way he could see past the crowd to where he was looking. "Or perhaps Thorin, as he also loves one who is not a dwarf. No matter, their fate is the same, yet I'm not sure it's one to be mourned."

"And what do you mean by that?" It seemed strange, to see him so unconcerned with this. Legolas was hardly an expert on the matters of dwarven hearts, yet he had heard things from Tauriel and yet others from Gimli, about how dwarves gave their hearts once and for all time. How if they lost their love, they would still not love another, because their hearts were bound together even beyond death.

"Dwarves are creatures of law and tradition, and our memory is longer than our lives, brief though they may seem in your eyes. Sometimes I wonder if we might be too much so, yet other times, it works out for us. Many would like to speak out against Thorin's choice, and many more against Kíli's, yet they will grumble among themselves and not take to open protest because we believe there is no choice at all. They each claim to have found their One, and that means their love is Mahal's will for them, those names already carved into their hearts before they fully emerged from the forge. Only the most wretched souls will try to work against that, and none will pity them when they are struck down for their efforts."

"You do not exactly convince me they will be spared pain in their death."

"Tradition is a tricky thing, and sometimes it's up to us to interpret it." Gimli's eyes took on an almost amused light, his lips twitching into a smile. "Do you not think more might have protested at Bilbo speaking his vows in Khuzdul, the sacred language we're not supposed to teach anyone?"

"I did wonder at that, but I supposed the king has the right to grant him that privilege."

"Aye, that is true enough, yet he would have that right even if he did not hold the heart of the king in his hands." Gimli shook his head, the mass of thick red curls shifting at the gesture, not very long yet but still impressive for its sheer volume. "Our oldest laws, from days before we first took Erebor, state very clearly that anyone who marries a dwarf of Durin's folk becomes, for all purposes, a dwarf of Durin's folk as well. Presumably this was to mean dwarves of other clans who might be taken as part of our people, yet that is not what the words say, not quite. The argument here is that whoever marries a dwarf of Durin becomes not only one of Durin's folk, but a dwarf as well, as far as our laws are concerned."

"So… you mean he is allowed to know your language because he is a dwarf as well?" Surely that couldn't be right.

"According to our laws, now that he married Thorin he is a dwarf, and always will be. And some of us like to believe that his being a dwarf, and the other half of Thorin's heart, means that once he passes he will be allowed in the Halls of Ancestors."

"That… is a pleasant thought, I suppose." Legolas's eyes slid over to Tauriel again. "You think Tauriel might be granted the same, then?"

"If Mahal is as merciful as I believe him to be, I cannot see how she wouldn't." Gimli shrugged again, an easy roll of shoulders that were surely wider than Legolas's own. "Our Maker loves us, so much that he could not strike us down when he was told to do so. I do not believe he would have let two of his own find their hearts only to wrench them away again. Of course, it may be a long time before she joins him, with the way your people are, but the Halls are made for waiting, after all."

"You do not know, then." Gimli's puzzled glance was answer enough. "That elves may die of grief or a broken heart."
Gimli was quiet for a while. "I did not know that, no. But knowing that does do something to explain why you have such concern over her."

"If I thought I might only lose her for a century or two, I would mourn but wish her that happiness. When I know losing him might steal her away from me forever… well." Legolas sighed, fiddling with a lock of hair that had fallen over his shoulder. "I've come to accept this is her choice to make. That doesn't mean it's not going to hurt me."

"You elves truly are strange creatures. Untouched my age and sickness, yet you would die of sorrow. I mean no offence!" Gimli hastened to add as Legolas glanced at him. "It's just, I've never heard that to happen to a dwarf. Not because we do not mourn, but because it is not our way to throw away a life that is already short. The closest are those who might seek death in battle, but more often when a dwarf mourns, they go on with their life. We will use our hands and our hearts to build things that show our love for those lost, so that we might capture some small measure of them still in this world, and when our time comes in turn we rejoice to find them again."

"I was once taught that dwarves have no such emotion. That your kind are only capable of greed and anger and hatred." He took a small sip of his wine, contemplating this. "Yet here I see love and joy and friendship, longing and acceptance, more so than in many an old soul of my race. It… makes me think, that's for sure."

"Our forefathers may have been hewn from stone, but that is not all we are," Gimli shook his head. "But this is no time for such talk, I don't think. It's a wedding feast and Durin's Day no less, a time for joy and new beginnings. We're being rather too morose for such a day, I fear."

"Indeed. I should apologise, it's my maudlin thoughts that have dragged us down." Legolas glanced around, casting for another topic. "Can you tell me more about these foods? I recognise most of them, but there are some I don't think I've ever seen before."

This seemed to suit Gimli just fine. They spent some while walking along the tables, trying out some more foods Gimli pointed out for him, then drifted further as their conversation moved on to other things. Legolas couldn't say he was paying much attention to the rest of the party, not really, and thus was surprised when the music, already cheerful enough, seemed to pick up pace all of a sudden.

"Ah, I rather thought so." Gimli was not looking to the dancers, but rather the musicians set on a small stage near the dance floor. Following his gaze, Legolas saw familiar figures standing in the middle of the musicians, a dwarf with golden hair and another with dark, both playing fiddles while still wearing coronets and all the rest of their finery. "Makes sense the princes would get it started."

"Get what started?" Around them a large part of the dwarves had started to sing along to the melody. "Is something special going on?" Was that the king and his consort being ushered to the dance floor?

"It's wedding songs, that's what." Gimli grinned. "They're special songs, rarely sung outside wedding feasts. For them to start is the sign for the happy couple to take to the dance floor. I assume the others did not quite dare to get started until the princes went up with their fiddles."

"Many people seem to know the words, though I cannot understand them. Would you be willing to tell me what they say?" The dwarves around them certainly seemed to be grinning and chuckling even more than before.

Gimli eyed him in a strange manner, then nodded slowly. "I'm not too good at translating on the spot,
I'm afraid, but some of them have been translated by quicker minds than mine, and I do know some of them in Westron. If one comes up that I know, I'll sing it for you if you'd like.

"I would be much obliged if you could. I have to admit to being somewhat curious."

Not too long after the song came to an apparent end, another starting up right after. This time, though, Gimli sang along in Westron, his voice just loud enough for Legolas at his side to hear over the rest of the crowd. It started out innocently enough, but as Gimli went on Legolas found his cheeks heating with a flush.

"The mountain halls all ring with cheer, for it's a joyous day,
The dwarven smith his wedding holds and all have come who may.
His bride is fine
Like silk and wine
Like gleaming gems and gold,
He vows to hold her all his time
And in her arms grow old.

Her braids all held in golden beads, her beard in gleaming curls
He takes her to the dancing floor and there she hops and whirls.
Just one more turn
So he will yearn,
Her kiss gives such a thrill
But hot though hearts in love will burn
Her forge burns warmer still.

A fine smith he, and no mistake, his hammer hanging low,
He takes her to their chambers and he lets his yearning grow.
Her fire bright
Burns all the night
He gives it his best try,
His hammer works with awesome might
And makes her smile and sigh.

The wedding night is over now, the morn turning to day,
Yet the dwarven smith is at her forge, still hammering away.
But his bride fine,
She will not whine,
The game's not growing old
For he took his pickax to her mine
And struck a vein of gold."

"And you say that is an accurate translation?" Legolas couldn't quite bring himself to address the actual content just yet.

"More or less. Of course, in Khuzdul we make little difference between the genders, so in the original you can't really tell if the smith is marrying a lad or a lass." Gimli snorted, taking a sip of his drink. "When I was a wee dwarfling, I couldn't understand why a smith would go mining in the first place. But then, I also didn't get the jokes about the size of a dwarf's hammer, so there was a lot I missed."

"It… doesn't seem like something that would be appropriate to sing in the presence of a king." Never mind about one.
"Oh, that's one of the nicer ones." Gimli's grin widened a bit. "The princes are being very courteous, not playing anything more scandalous. Some common wedding songs are downright filthy, though they're usually not sung until late at night, when the wee ones have gone to bed and the couple has long since been chased off."

"Chased off?" That didn't sound like the appropriate way to treat the guests of honour.

"Aye. Now that the dancing has started, it's only a matter of time. When it seems the couple tires of dancing, their attendants will surround them. That's the people who helped them prepare for the ceremony and the feast," Gimli added, no doubt seeing Legolas's confusion. "Usually it's your closest family, or if they're dead or too far away, a few chosen friends like Bilbo's. They help the couple get dressed, keep them calm and on time throughout the day, and at the end of it they surround the newlyweds and usher them into their chambers while the feast goes on. I've heard that sometimes one of the newlyweds might even get carried off, so the other must chase their love," he added with a grin. "Though I doubt that will happen here, even if my cousins are involved. Never mind that it might be disrespectful of our newly crowned king and his consort, but I doubt Thorin would hesitate about tanning their hides if they caused Bilbo any manner of grief."

"Oh. Oh, my." Glancing over to the princes playing their fiddles, he found his eyes widening despite himself. "Please tell me that's not Elladan and Elrohir climbing up there."

"The twin lordlings from Rivendell? I'm afraid I see the same." Gimli shook his head. "And they seem happy to sing along, too. Never thought elves would know Khuzdul."

"I suppose there is very little Lord Elrond doesn't know. It hardly surprises me his sons would have picked up the least appropriate things." Legolas sighed. "I truly don't know what would possess them to behave in such a manner with their grandmother right here."

"Grandmother?" Gimli gave him a curious look. "I thought they were all that came from the house of Elrond."

"Ah, she's not from there. Their mother was the daughter of Lady Galadriel, the Lady of Lórien." He paused. "Though then, from what little I know of her, she might be more amused than anything."

"She wouldn't be the elf in a white dress and shining hair I saw earlier?"

"That does sound like her, yes." Legolas couldn't help but chuckle. "I suppose she would stand out in a place like this, huh?"

"I have the feeling she would stand out no matter where she was." Gimli sighed, and Legolas paused for a moment. He wasn't sure he had yet heard such a heartfelt sound from the young dwarf. "I've never seen such a beautiful creature in all my life."

"Truly? You find her beautiful?" Of course she was, everyone knew that, there had been songs written for her countless lifetimes before Legolas had even been born. Even so, and even knowing Kili had found Tauriel fairest of all, he couldn't help but feel some surprise that a dwarf would recognise that.

"How could I not? I could find the brightest gems and most shining stones in the treasuries of Erebor, I could bind them in gold and silver, I could use all my years to work and polish, yet nothing my hands might make could come even close to even a pale imitation of her beauty."

"You are a strange dwarf, Gimli son of Glóin."

"It's the fault of my father, I fear. He is the one who chose my name, after all." As Legolas frowned,
Gimli chuckled. "My name means Star, and I am often called that. Glóin's little star, or so my many cousins call me sometimes. He says it's because he wanted to name me for a gem or precious stone, yet when he first held me, he found he could not think of one bright enough."

"I can see how that would make you strange for your race, indeed." Legolas tried to hide his smile, though he suspected he did not quite succeed. "Now I find myself curious. You spoke sweet words of my father's wood, and find beauty in the Lady of Lórien. Is there a place in Erebor, perhaps, that an elf might find beautiful in turn?" He did not ask of dwarves, for he already knew the answer. Certainly Tauriel seemed to find beauty enough in dark hair and a stubble-rough cheek.

"Aye, I do think so." Gimli's eyes were almost twinkling. "Though I find myself wondering what use it would be for me to show you such."

"If you do so, I will tell you a secret I hope might amuse you."

"Well, it seems good enough a gamble to me." Gimli grinned at me. "Will you follow me, princeling?"

Legolas did so, wasting no time for hesitation. He feared no ploy or plan here, knew Gimli held no hostility for him save for some lingering offence on his mother's behalf. If anything he felt relief as they stepped out of the grand hall and away from the crowds, the number of dwarves milling about thinning out until they were walking along practically abandoned corridors.

Erebor was a sight to behold, even Legolas could admit that. It much reminded him of his father's palace, with walkways and arcs and so very much stone, yet there was something distinctly dwarven about the sharp edges of Erebor that set the two places clearly apart. He saw plenty of the hallways and staircases as Gimli led him along, climbing up until Legolas felt almost certain they should have come up through the top of the mountain already. Just as he was about to question if the dwarf was leading him astray as a jest, though, Gimli came to a door and pushed it open. Legolas stepped out after him, then stopped short.

They had come out to a small alcove, out on the side of the mountain, shielded from sight and most of the wind by a small outcropping to either side. Above them was the infinite expanse of darkening sky, stars blinking into sight one by one on the dark velvet as evening deepened into night. Below he could just make out the harvested fields among rock and stone, could see the lights of Dale, so far away and yet almost within reach. He could swear he heard sounds from there, too, saw the movement of people on the streets despite the darkening night.

"The Men of Dale are celebrating, too," Gimli said, his voice quiet yet easy to hear in the silence that surrounded them, only broken by the howl of wind just barely out of their reach. "Not all of them could be invited, of course, only King Bard and his family and some of the most important advisers, but I hear Thorin sent them plenty of ale and food to share so they, too, would find joy in his wedding."

Legolas should have spoken, should have commented on the generous gift or made some other remark, yet he had forgotten himself in the sight before him. Had it not been so late, he was sure he could have seen his home, could even now follow the line of the River Running down toward the lake. Had they come here at daytime, there would have been much more to see, yet now he found his eyes captured by the awakening stars and their reflection in the lights of the town of men below. Little lights, little lives, each burning only for a moment before it flickered out, yet each one was so full of joy and pain alike it made him ache to see them.

"Well, Master Elf?" Gimli's voice was friendly, quiet, as though he was being careful not to spook a wild animal. "Have I earned my secret?"
Legolas drew a deep breath of the crisp mountain air, shaking away his maudlin thoughts. "The shirt of mail the prince consort was wearing at the ceremony, I recognise it." At Gimli's surprised look, he allowed his lips to curl a little. "It used to belong to me, back in the day."

"Really?" Gimli blinked. "Why, it's hard to imagine you were ever so small!"

"Even elves start their lives small, for all that we may not remain that way." His lips twitched into a more amused curl. "It was my pride and joy ever since I was first presented with it. When I grew too big to wear it, I cried bitter tears, and then told my father to trade it away so I would never see another elf child have it in my stead."

Gimli laughed, now, a full and joyous sound. "Well! I bet you never expected to see it on a full-grown hobbit, then."

"Indeed I did not. But I have to say, I'm happy to see it worn again, instead of tucked away in a chest somewhere."

"I'd say I hope it won't be worn as anything but a decoration anytime soon." They both fell into silence for a moment, looking out into the village. Gimli produced a pipe from somewhere, packing it with pipeweeds and lighting it. Legolas might have protested at the smell, yet he found that for once, it was not quite as distasteful as he usually found it. Even the cold air was a relief more than a burden, especially as he recalled the heat and noise of the feasting hall.

It was Gimli who broke the silence again, his voice thoughtful, aimed at nobody in particular. "I do wonder, though, if it will be worn by an actual prince again," he said, and it took Legolas a moment to realise what he was referring to. "I mean, I did hear that Bilbo promised to do his best to gift Thorin with an heir."

That did cause Legolas to splutter rather inelegantly before he managed to demand a clarification, but somehow, he didn't think Gimli was going to spread that particular tale too far.

As the door to Thorin's rooms closed behind them, a part of Bilbo was rather tempted to simply sit down on the floor in exhaustion.

No, not just Thorin's rooms, he reminded himself as they both stepped forward, Thorin taking off first his crown and then his cape. Bilbo followed suit, taking off the golden crown Thorin had had made for him. It really was a beautiful thing, for all that such extravagance made him somewhat flustered still. But then, for all the protests that he might have made otherwise, he knew it was necessary. He was the Prince Consort now; he needed to look the part.

Oh, sweet Yavanna, he was actually married to Thorin.

"Are all dwarven weddings so exhausting?" he asked, peeling off one of the lovely velvet coats that had been layered on him. "I thought I knew what I was getting into, after all the hobbit parties I've attended, but I've never been quite so worn out even after the most boisterous of celebrations!"

"I'd imagine it's different when you're the one being celebrated." Thorin chuckled, taking off the gleaming rings in his fingers one by one. "And the structure of dwarven wedding is more or less the same, though I dare say it's been a while since I've seen one so grand, and won't be seeing another at least until Fili's. Some will be continuing with the festivities well into the night, I presume."

"I'm just hoping nobody gets any funny ideas with enough drink in their stomach. I'd rather hate to start tomorrow by soothing over diplomatic incidents because someone decided to stab an elf or
something equally ridiculous."

"Unlikely. Dwalin has a hard head that's not easily clouded; I'm sure he'll keep enough guards around to make sure nothing terrible happens."

Bilbo lifted his eyebrows. "And if Dwalin does decide he would like to celebrate his best friend's wedding day?"

"I may have also told Nori that if the night goes without incident, I will give Dwalin a week off from his duties once the mountain is back to normal. Whether he keeps Dwalin away from trouble or keeps the peace himself, I do not know, but either way he will find some benefit from it."

"Now that I find somewhat impressive thinking." Bilbo smiled, now, unable to resist the temptation for a little teasing. "Who thought of that, then?"

Thorin chuckled, apparently amused. "Believe it or not, I am not altogether hopeless at being a king. I did manage to keep my people from falling apart before you arrived into my life, and not just by getting Dís and Balin to do everything for me, either."

"Oh, I am aware. You are quite the impressive king, you are." Bilbo might have said something else, except then he found himself drawn against a thick, strong chest, Thorin's arms circling him easily.

"Your king, as it happens." Thorin smiled at him, the lovely, brilliant smile that always made Bilbo feel a little weak at the knees. "So. I believe it is customary for hobbits to do their planting on the wedding night?"

"Ah. That is true, yes." Bilbo did his best not to blush too horribly, though he suspected he was doing an awful job of it, judging by the heat on his cheeks. "You're quite sure about it, then?"

"Of course." Thorin leaned in for a brief kiss. "The only thing that could make me even happier than being finally married to you would be raising a child with you, if you think we might be granted that mercy."

"Well, we won't know that unless we try, now will we?" Bilbo rested his hand on Thorin's chest for a moment. "I have to say, I'm very happy that we figured things out before now. If we had reached this point without being clear on our feelings, I would have felt quite guilty for enjoying my marriage to you while you supposedly only agreed to it out of necessity."

"Imagine how my guilt would have been, then, thinking you only agreed to it to help me in my troubles." Thorin let him go, now, only to take his hand and bring it up to his lips, pressing gentle kisses along Bilbo's knuckles. "I have to admit I tried my best to discourage your decision, fearing you might change your mind later."

"Oh, yes, I noticed that." Bilbo's lips twitched. "You know, I asked around, and from what I hear consummation is traditional but by no means mandatory. Why, I even heard of dwarves who may wish for love but never bed. Balin was rather scandalised that I would have gotten such an idea from somewhere, so I presume you'll be happy to hear I never told him where I heard such a lie."

Thorin at least had the dignity to look abashed. "Please know I would never demand anything of you that you do not want as well. Before or after your agreement, before or after we each confessed our love, nothing could change that."

"Oh, I am very much aware of that. And it goes the other way around, too, you know. It's why I've been asking you every step of the way in this whole process. I don't want you doing something just because you think it might make me happy."
"Why, but there are quite a lot of things I would do just to make you happy." Thorin smiled, shifting his grip on Bilbo's hand. "Shall we, then? As I recall, we should head to the garden for this."

Bilbo's heart was beating rather faster than usual as they neared the garden, hand in hand, but it had nothing to do with fear. Bilbo knew fear, had felt more of it in his life than he wished to contemplate, most of it after he had signed a foolish contract and run off with a bunch of boisterous dwarves. This wasn't fear, not one bit. Anticipation, mostly, and perhaps a touch of nervousness, but not hesitation, not at all. He had thought this through a thousand times, and he still had no reason to back away.

The garden was silent as usual as they took the couple of steps up together, the room lit by the crystals as usual. Most of the time Bilbo would have set his attention to the various patches bearing fruit, some ready for harvest, others already done with their first crops and growing the next batch. This time, though, his eyes went to the bare spot in the middle, walking forward until Thorin and he came to a halt right next to it. They turned to each other, both wearing small smiles.

Oh, yes, Bilbo wanted this so much. And it seemed Thorin wanted it as well.

"So, do you have a seed ready?" Thorin reached out and ran his hand along the side of Bilbo's face, then down to his shoulder and arm. The touch felt impossibly warm, and Bilbo rather wanted to move toward it. "I believe we agreed that to be best left to you."

"I do." Bilbo drew a deep breath, then stuck his fingers into his pocket. Very carefully, he took out the familiar little object he had been carrying with him for over a year, now.

"Your acorn?" Thorin's eyes widened as he saw the brown seed in Bilbo's fingers. "I thought you wanted to plant that to grow an oak tree."

"Actually, I wanted to take it back to the Shire and plant it there, as you might remember." Bilbo looked up at Thorin, managing a small smile. "I wanted to look at it and remember everything that happened, everything I'd seen and done. But now I am here, and I need no reminders, not when I have you all here with me." He reached for Thorin's hand, closing the acorn between their clasped hands. "We hobbits tend to grow our roots deep into the ground, and are not easily shifted once we do so. I can think of no firmer root I could grow than this, and no sapling I would rather tend than that born of you and me both."

For a moment Thorin looked at him, his expression unreadable. Then he leaned down and drew Bilbo into a deep, hungry kiss, rather more passionate than anything they had shared before. It continued until he was out of breath, when at last Thorin drew back, looking at him with heavy eyes.

"I suppose that was good practice." Bilbo offered Thorin a small smile. "Shall we, then?" He squeeze Thorin's hand once before he drew his hand and the acorn away, holding it up for Thorin to see. He couldn't quite resist the urge to smirk with some mischief as he placed it in his mouth, rolling it on his tongue to make sure it got nice and wet.

As Thorin drew him into another kiss it was less hurried, slow and warm and all the beautiful things. Bilbo almost forgot what they were supposed to be doing, though only almost. With a happy little sigh, he pushed the acorn past Thorin's parted lips, letting his tongue brush against Thorin's own for a moment before retreating.

Thorin was again the one to break the kiss, looking almost amused as he stuck out his tongue for Bilbo to take the acorn from him, holding it carefully with his fingertips. "So. Now we plant it, as I recall?"

"Indeed." It was with some reluctance that Bilbo stepped away from Thorin, taking the last few steps
to their chosen patch of ground. "Come help me, will you? I need a small hole to put it in."

Thorin didn't hesitate in kneeling down in the dirt, his fingers quickly digging a hole precisely in the middle of the circle of crystals shining around them. Bilbo placed the acorn in it, carefully covering it with dirt.

"We'll have to water it in the morning, but for now, this will do." He looked up at Thorin, trying not to feel shy. There was no reason for him to feel so, not at this point. It was their wedding night, after all. "Are you ready, then?"

"Quite so." Thorin smiled, a warm smile that made Bilbo feel light and giddy inside. Then he reached for the hem of his tunic, starting to draw it up, and Bilbo was filled with another feeling entirely.

They made quick work of what little clothes remained on each of them, scattering them about with little concern for where each piece landed. Bilbo should have been scandalised, really, but right now he had little concern for such things. All he cared about was Thorin, Thorin and every inch of scarred, battle-worn skin that was revealed to him, until they were both left bare to gaze and touch both. Then there were hands and mouths and skin, soft sounds and dirt and Thorin, only Thorin, only ever Thorin as Bilbo closed his eyes and lost himself in sensations.

It was really quite unhygienic, he decided afterwards with a slight dizziness lingering in his mind, only barely gathering the strength to get up to his knees to murmur his prayer to Yavanna. Thorin lay on the ground next to him, seeming to care little that he was naked and sweaty and stretched out on the dark earth of Bilbo's garden, a lazy smile on his lips as he listened to Bilbo's words, eyes closed. Bilbo echoed his smile, his hands tracing the dirt above the spot where their little seed lay, hopefully to soon sprout from the ground.

Before that, though, there were other things to do, a dwarven king to pull to his feet and a bath to draw and skin to scrub, there were kisses and whispers and lingering caresses and a bed that was far too large for a little hobbit but seemed to suit a little hobbit and his dwarf just fine when they both lay in it. There would be more to do in the morning, and in all the days after, and waiting for a little sprout was only part of what they were to do.

He could wait a while, Bilbo decided, as long as he did not have to do it alone.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Thorin gets a good start on appointing his new council, which means new duties for many of those around him. Bilbo gets a start on his duties by seeing to some of the work of the consort without even realizing it. However, Kili makes a shocking discovery -- though Gimli is probably the more shocked one.

"So. What is our situation regarding the council?" Thorin's office had a few more occupants than usual, scattered about in ones and twos. Nori was sitting on the corner of his desk, which Thorin presumed was his way of showing some quiet rebellion because he was Nori. Bilbo and Balin had each taken their usual places, with Fili, Kili, Ori and Tauriel standing nearby, Dís keeping an eye on everything from a corner. Dwalin was standing guard outside, making sure nobody got close enough to eavesdrop.

It might not have been his council, but it was where the important things would be decided.

"Better than expected, really." Nori was toying with a knife, a restless habit more than a threatening display in this company. "Between those scared off by what happened with Sora, those disagreeing with your decision regarding the Arkenstone, and those who'd rather be in Iron Hills now that Dain is king, most people on my list of troublemakers have either left or are making noises about leaving. There are a few left, but none who would require urgent actions, and more than enough empty seats for you to fill with more desirable arses."

"Not that many arses I desire, but I get your point." Bilbo snorted at this, the tips of his ears turning pink, and Thorin tried to hold back a smirk. "Dís? I was hoping you would take over as Head of Guilds. I'll leave your participation in the council up to you, though any insight on other advisers I might name would of course be welcome."

"I need no permanent seat, thank you. I'll be busy enough running the guilds, and you can always ask me to make an appearance when you think it necessary." Of course. Dís had never had much patience for the mockery that was council meetings, for all that she was brilliant at diplomacy. Even so, he had to offer at least.

"Very well." He nodded, glancing at Balin. "Balin. I understand your guild got some reinforcements with the latest caravan?"

"Oh, aye." Balin nodded, stroking his beard. "Of course, most have found employment already, a living mountain tends to have work for good scribes, but I do still have a few who have no permanent position yet seem competent enough."

"Good." Thorin nodded again. "See if one of them is competent enough to take over the note-taking for council meetings, and if another could be trusted with my non-confidential correspondence." His eyes slid to Ori, looking for a reaction. The young scribe gave a wounded sound, and seemed about to say something, but Fili acted first, leaping in front of him as though to shield him from an actual threat.

"Uncle!" Fili's expression was nothing short of thunderous. "I don't know what you're playing at
here, but I won't stand for it! If you have complaints about Ori’s conduct, you can damn well say so, but —"

"Calm yourself, Fíli." His heir did not look calm at all, but at least he fell silent, so Thorin turned his gaze back to Ori. Perhaps he was not as good at diplomacy as his sister, but he was not an actual idiot either, and he knew this matter had to be addressed directly. He wanted Ori to act on his own, not as an attachment of Fíli's, so he would not handle Ori's matters through Fíli. "Ori. Please understand that I am not taking away your position, nor does this mean I will not need your services anymore. I still have plenty of confidential correspondence and notes that I would not trust to anyone but Balin or yourself. However, if you are to fulfil your duties, never mind complete your masterpiece, you can't be doing everything by yourself. You are still the head royal scribe, but as the title implies, there may be other royal scribes as well."

"Right." Ori looked a bit wary, still, but he nodded. "If you don't mind me asking, though, what duties do I have left aside from being the scribe to confidential matters? I used to be busy with the maps when I was not with you, but Master Balin has already employed a couple of scribes to work on that, and others to take responsibility for the general restoration of the royal library. I don't see what there is left for me to do that would take up so much of my time." Well. At least he could still stand up for himself. That was a good sign.

"Why, your new position as Fíli's head adviser, of course." Well, that at least silenced them both. "As you may have noticed, he has more duties now that the mountain is full, and that amount will only increase as we work on renewing the government. He will need someone to stand by his side, and while I plan on giving Kíli more duties related to this, you are the more natural choice to take the main duty. You know as much about council matters as Fíli and more about the rest of my dealings, you have a good head on your shoulders, and Balin assures me your skills are more than up to the task."

"I…" Ori blinked. "I don't mean to doubt your assessment, or Master Balin's at that, but I'm not even sure what such a task would require of me!"

"You and Fíli will figure it out between yourselves; I'm sure you've seen enough of Balin working with me, anyway. Think of it as an extension of your working together on assigning the new arrivals." Thorin's lips twitched despite himself. "Don't worry. I don't expect you to take an actual seat on the council until you wish to do so; you can still continue to listen from the sidelines until you're ready."

Ori's eyes widened at the implication that he would, in fact, be expected to take a seat eventually. Thorin, however, turned to the next matter at hand.

"Speaking of seats on the council, Tauriel. I would rather like it if you took on a seat as the representative of my guards." She seemed about to protest, which he couldn't allow. "And before you say anything, I asked Dwalin first. He told me he'd skin me first before he took a seat, but with so many new people, he'd be happy for some help with actual experience. You were a Captain of the guard in Mirkwood, were you not?"

"I was, yes. But I'm not so certain the guards would follow my orders."

"You have Dwalin's support, and you have mine. If they do not follow you, I don't want them in my guard to begin with." Thorin shook his head. "Kíli, Dwalin also wanted you to speak with Bard about arranging some proper training for his men. I suspect there's plenty of young men in Dale who'd like to learn archery now, and while you don't have the time to train them entirely, you could at least get everything started, and perhaps pick some of our guards to teach them other skills. The more people are trained and able to fight, the better for us."
"Showing off my archery skills to an actually appreciative audience? It's a tough job, but someone has to do it, I suppose." Kili grinned. "Somehow I don't think this is the end of new duties for either of us, though."

"Probably not, no." He looked at Tauriel again. "This seems like a good way to get started on bringing you into the public eye. Nobody can argue that you aren't competent as a guard captain, and with that position they can't truly argue against your sitting on the council."

"I suppose that makes sense enough." Tauriel nodded. "Very well. If you think it won't be useless, I will sit on the council, but I doubt many will listen to an elf."

"If they will not listen to you, that will give me the perfect excuse to get rid of them as well. I need a council that works together." Bilbo snorted, and Thorin rolled his eyes. "Fighting does not mean they cannot work together, Bilbo. We argue, you and I, and I would say we still can accomplish things. Disagreement is fine, dismissal of those I have appointed I will not tolerate." He looked at Bilbo, then at each of the young ones in turn. And yes, he was including Tauriel in that number. "If anyone during a council meeting or any other official situation tries to ignore or dismiss any of you because you're too young, or inexperienced, or not noble, or not a dwarf, I will have them removed from their position. You are my consort and my heirs and the future consorts of my heirs, and within the walls of Erebor you outrank anyone outside this room. If someone cannot understand this, well, I do not want such dimwits to have any part in the running of my mountain."

"Of course, if that happens in a non-official situation, we'd rather like to hear about it anyway. You know, for proper intelligence and so on." Nori smirked. "I do so love when I have better idea of where to direct my eyes and ears."

"There's one thing I've been wondering about that." They all turned to look at Bilbo. "Isn't a spymaster supposed to be, I don't know, secret? I mean, you don't exactly make a secret of what you do, Nori. Doesn't it make it harder for you to get information?"

"I may open with the Company, but that's because it's clear to you all what I do, anyway." Nori made a show of cleaning under his nails with his knife. "You lot see the sneaky thief who now has the king's permission to snoop around and tickle some ribs with my knife. To the mountain at large, I'm either the lazy middle brother who has refused any actual responsibility in favour of running minor errands for Dori and being scandalous with Dwalin, or the hopeless criminal who has somehow pulled the wool over everyone's eyes and is running a long con of some sorts." He snorted. "You'd be surprised how forthcoming people can be when they think they can blackmail me with the idea of telling Thorin about my past."

"As though I didn't already know after all his run-ins with Dwalin." Oh, he was under no illusions that he knew everything there was to know about Nori, he doubted even Dwalin or his brothers could claim that honour, but he knew enough for his purposes. "It's a valid point, Bilbo, but not one we haven't considered. If Nori was the only one of the Company without a known title or position, yes, that would make it obvious he is doing something unknown for me. When Dori and Nori have had several rather vocal fights, both before and after the arrival of the caravan, about how Nori keeps refusing any duties offered to him? I dare say it's an even better cover than if he actually held some position of minor importance."

"It must all be very satisfying for Dori." Nori sniffed in a rather facetious manner. "He gets to yell about how irresponsible I am without worrying too much about how it appears to others, and I'm not even supposed to get actually angry back at him."

"I have to say, I am somewhat impressed despite myself, brother." Dís looked all too amused at all this. "I never thought you'd have the head for any sort of scheming that didn't involve bashing
skulls."

"Oh, I make no claim to have either the patience or the head for it. That is why I employ a spymaster in the first place, after all." Thorin nodded at Nori, who smirked. "My spymaster, and Balin and Bilbo. It rather worries me sometimes how good they both appear to be at this sort of thing."

"I have to say, all this has been much easier to handle ever since I figured out it's not that different from dealing with unpleasant relatives." Bilbo smiled in that pleasant soft manner of his that hid a core of steel. "I grew up knowing all about the need to be proper and not cause a fuss even when you know someone is whispering ill things behind your back. True, among hobbits such things rarely involve assault or such dreadful things, but in the end there's frightfully little difference between a hobbit lass complaining about her cousin inheriting a pretty pendant instead of her and a hardened dwarf grumbling about how unsuited the consort is for his position."

"You know, Master Baggins, I'm rather beginning to see why my brother would be interested in you." Dís smiled. Never a good sign, that, certainly not for Thorin. "That's a rather fortunate thing. It would be most unpleasant to now realise that his consort is quite unsuited to politics."

"I'd like to think you would have noticed my lack of ability by now, if that were the case." Bilbo returned her smile, and Thorin couldn't help but remember each time Bilbo had been quite fearless about questioning him. Of course those two would get along. "As I understand it, though, Thorin still has quite a few seats to fill even without getting rid of anyone. Do we have suggestions for those?"

Thorin was not surprised to hear Nori and Balin speaking up. Bilbo wasn't too shocking, either; he had a habit of getting to know people even when they didn't want to be known. The same applied to Dís, who was obviously the best informed out of them regarding those who had come with her from Ered Luin. Even Fíli was expected to have some opinions on people he might have come in contact with in the course of his duties. However, Thorin was slightly surprised to also get input from Kíli, Ori, and even Tauriel. He hadn't thought they would be paying much attention to politics beyond the current council, but it seemed they were all aware of at least some of the names tossed around, and presented solid arguments for and against specific people.

Ori and Tauriel were particularly helpful in weeding out the most unsuitable candidates. It was amazing how much of their ugly side people were willing to show to those they didn't deem important enough to please.

At the end of this very unofficial meeting Thorin had a new Head of Guilds, another council seat filled, and a fine list of sensible dwarves to invite to join the council. With this, he was hopeful he might soon actually accomplish things, even with the mountain full of dwarves.

The obvious step forward in training Fíli and his future closest advisers for their eventual duties was only an added benefit.

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"Excuse me?"

Bilbo looked up from the documents he had been reading, smiling as he saw Dori in the doorway. "Ah, Dori. Can we help you? Thorin isn't here, I'm afraid, he's out with Dís reviewing the new guild district."

"I'm rather hoping you two can be of assistance, or at least tell me if I'm on a fool's errand. I'm not interrupting anything, I hope?" Dori frowned as he stepped in, seeing them both with papers in front of them.
"Oh, no, nothing urgent." Bilbo arranged his own papers on the small desk Thorin had commissioned for him. It was not as grand as the one he had in their rooms for his personal work, but then he didn't want it to be. While it was useful for him to have his own desk in Thorin's office, lacking an official space himself, he wouldn't have felt right if it had been as impressive as Thorin's. This was, after all, Thorin's office. As a result, Bilbo and Balin each had a small desk there, suitable for reading, while any greater projects were left for Thorin's desk. "I was just reviewing the reports on the crops from the fields of Dale. Plenty of time to go over those before planting season."

"My work can wait as well." Balin nodded, stroking his beard. "What is it? I'm assuming you're on official business of some sort, since you've come to the office, but if it were guild matters you would have sought out Dís."

"It is and it isn't." Dori shook his head. "Actually, I came to speak about Fíli."

"Oh?" Bilbo frowned. It wasn't that unthinkable Dori might have some concerns about Fíli, given his courtship of Ori. However, Balin was right in that Dori was hardly the type to come to Thorin's office to speak of personal matters. Had that been the case, he would have waited until evening and visited their personal chambers. "What about him?"

"I was hoping he might agree to become Gimli's master." Dori looked as serious as though he had suggested a fight to the death, but then, Bilbo's experience suggested Dori always looked serious. "However, given his position, I thought it best to ask you or Thorin to see whether his duties could be rearranged to allow that before I even approached the lad himself."

"You mean, to have him take Gimli as an apprentice?"

"Aye." Dori nodded. "Fíli's a Master in his guild, and he's reached his full majority, so if he agrees there should be no problem. Gimli's old master was left in Ered Luin, and he can't finish his apprenticeship until he finds a new one, never mind continuing further than a journeyman."

"Right." It sounded clear enough, all of it. Full majority was seventy-five, and Fíli was past that; had he been younger, he could not have taken an apprentice, but that was not the case. And if Gimli's old master was not in the mountain, there could be no conflict. Except… "Why, exactly, are you invested in the matter? From what I understand, it should be Gimli himself making such requests, or his parents in his stead." He glanced at Balin, who nodded. So Bilbo's fleeting knowledge of dwarven apprenticeships wasn't entirely amiss here.

"Fíli is going to marry my brother." Dori sounded remarkably calm about this, which Bilbo counted as a good thing. "I know this, and have no quarrel with this, not as long as Ori is happy. However, I would know exactly the kind of dwarf he is about to bind himself to."

"And you think this will reveal that?"

"I know so." Dori nodded. "From what I understand, Gimli and Fíli are childhood friends. To have Fíli act as his Master will be a true test of his character. If he is the dwarf Ori insists he is, he should be able to set that aside, and neither be too lenient towards a friend nor be too stern for the joy of the power he holds over him."

"Which would also show how he might act when he has the power of a king one day, when it's even more important that he be just and fair." Bilbo nodded. That was certainly reasonable. "Well. I suppose I can see why you would wish for it, and I can certainly see what benefit Gimli would have from gaining a Master to finish his training. What, then, would Fíli have to gain from this?"

Dori lifted his eyebrows. "Most consider an apprentice a gain in itself." Yet he didn't seem surprised
"That may be so, but Fíli is not most people." Not that he needed to say this; clearly Dori was well aware of it. "He has no need for a teaching fee, nor does he have regular orders so he might benefit from the aid. I would say he might do it simply for the sake of his friend, but since it would require rearrangement of his duties, I'm afraid I have to speak up here and ask what he would gain in exchange for his time and effort." Somehow, he got the feeling Dori had an answer ready for this as well. He did not seem the kind of a dwarf to bring up such a scheme without thinking it all through.

"I have heard he has not touched his tools since the incident with Ori." Bilbo might have asked how Dori came by this knowledge, but when one of his brothers was courting the prince and another held the most intimate confidences of Dwalin, it would have been little effort for him to find out such details. "Perhaps he could live his life without, take on blacksmithing instead or something, but it would seem a pity for a dwarf to give up his best loved craft. If he were to train Gimli, he could bring himself back to his craft little by little, with someone else to keep him company while he does so. That ought to help with the matter."

It was, Bilbo had to admit, a solid plan. He glanced at Balin, who nodded in agreement. Turning back to Dori, Bilbo gave a nod of his own. "The final decision is Fíli's, of course, but if he agrees, I will make sure his duties are arranged so that he has the time and opportunity to teach Gimli." It should be doable, particularly now that Fíli had Ori to aid him with his official duties.

"Thank you for that." Dori gave a quick bow, quite unlike what Bilbo was used to receiving from members of the Company. They only ever bowed to Thorin like that in official situations, and certainly not to Bilbo. "I'll make sure Fíli informs you if he agrees to it, then."

"Right." Bilbo waited until Dori had left and closed the door after himself, then turned to look at Balin. "What was that about?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Oh, like Balin was fooling anyone with that smile on his face. "Far as I see it's a very good plan from Master Dori, and he is right in that it will be beneficial for everyone."

"You know what I mean." Bilbo frowned, resisting the urge to set his hands on his hips. It wouldn't have had the same effect when he was seated, anyway. "You hardly said a word! I know little about these things and you're well aware of that, yet you left it all to me. And then that bow! You'd have thought we were in court, and I wearing a crown!"

"Oh, but you were, my friend, even if it might not be here right now." Balin's smile got even wider as he stroked his beard. "Dori didn't come here for Bilbo, his friend in the appreciation of fine teas and pretty kerchiefs. He was speaking to the Prince Consort, and acted accordingly. And why would I have interfered? You were handling everything rather brilliantly there. Even if I had a differing opinion, the final call on the crown prince's duties would be for Thorin or you to make."

"Now, don't be ridiculous. This isn't something that important."

"But of course it is." Balin rose from his seat, now, walking over to set a hand on Bilbo's shoulder. "Fíli is a grown dwarf; as such, most decisions regarding him are his own to make. For some he might ask for advice from those around him, but the final call is his. However, when it comes to official matters, such as his duties as the crown prince? While we will of course consider his opinion, there are two people, and only two people, who outrank him in such cases." Balin smiled. "The King Under the Mountain… and the Prince Consort."

Bilbo blinked. "Oh. Oh, my." He… hadn't quite thought of it like that. "I thought Fíli was second from Thorin?"
"On the matters of inheritance, yes. If it came down to it, he could even overturn Princess Dís, though I don’t think he would ever feel inclined to try. However, the consort is the hand of the king, an extension of his power. As long as Thorin wears the crown, you as his consort are second only to him in power, even before his heirs." Balin squeezed his shoulder. "Not all consorts choose to use their power. Many have been perfectly content to busy themselves with the social aspects of running court, or focus on some particular field of expertise. Nobody’s expecting you to run the council or hold court if Thorin were absent, those are things Fíli is much better trained for and quite capable of doing. However, if you chose to do so, none could oppose your wish."

"Right." Bilbo sank back in his seat. "I, ah. I'm quite happy to leave all that to Fíli, thank you. I have enough headaches just sitting on the council."

"Aye. As I said, no one expects you to do such things. However, it’s important that you’re aware of your power, particularly if anyone were to try and question it." Balin’s expression shifted into that perfect picture of innocence that made it clear he was not being innocent in the slightest. "Ah, that reminds me. Thorin might not have remembered to mention this, but he wanted you to visit the stonecarvers with him some time soon."

"Oh? And why is that?" No, Thorin had not mentioned such a thing, but then that hardly surprised him. Thorin had a bad habit of often assuming things about other people's schedules.

"Why, I would think it to be obvious." Oh, yes, definitely not innocent, not with that twinkle in his eyes. "They'll need proper measurements if your throne is to suit you in the slightest, of course."

Well. Perhaps Thorin had had his reasons for not mentioning it earlier.

Bilbo was certainly going to have a thing or two to say about such nonsense.

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"Why are we doing this?"

"To gather feathers for fletching, obviously." Kíli snorted, not bothering to even glance in his cousin’s direction. He wouldn’t have, anyway, since he was rather too busy trying to keep from falling and cracking his skull open. He’d made the climb before, but it hadn’t been any easier then. "I told you this, didn’t I?"

"I’m just wondering what my role here is, since you seem to be doing pretty well on your own."

"You’re here in case any of the young ones get obnoxious and try to give me trouble, so you can talk them down." He’d gotten permission from the older birds, of course, he wasn’t an absolute idiot, but that didn’t mean everyone had got the message.

"Can’t you talk to them yourself?"

"Not when I’m hanging on with one hand and trying to shield my pretty face with the other." He found another very nice pen feather, picking it up and sticking it in the bag on his belt. "Why the whining? I thought you liked chatting with ravens."

"There are a lot of creatures I like talking to. Doesn’t mean I’m in a particular hurry to see their beds.” And yet, despite his complaints, Gimli hovered near as Kíli shifted to the side, trying to remember the route he had taken the last time. Most of the raven nests were on small outcrops along the high stone wall, with very little footholds available when he had to avoid stepping on any nests. Sure, the fledglings were long since out by this time of the year, but even so he didn’t think it would have made the ravens particularly happy.
"Maybe you should try with the elf princeling. Might wipe that frown off his face for a little while."

"Kíli!" Gimli sounded absolutely scandalised. Even without looking down Kíli knew he was probably flushing almost as red as his beard. Suppressing a giggle, he picked out another nice feather before dragging himself up another bit. He was almost to the point where the wall started curving towards a large stone shelf very near the ceiling of the cave that housed the majority of the birds. It would be a lot easier to keep from falling once he got that far.

"What? You know I wouldn't judge. Would be pretty hypocritical of me to even try. You did notice who I'm betrothed to, right?"

"Rather hard not to, when you won't shut up about her." It was good for Gimli that Kíli had lived all his life with an older brother, or he might have been offended at the obvious attempt at teasing him. "And you know that isn't the issue! I don't think of Legolas like that!"

"And why not? You can't deny he's pretty. A bit lacking on the beard side, but again, not like I can judge, on either side of the matter. All that hair, though! Believe me, braiding that is a marvel."

"I'm perfectly capable of appreciating beauty without immediately thinking of bed!" Now, Gimli sounded actually offended, as though it wounded him Kíli would think so of him. "He's not even the prettiest elf there is!"

"Oh, yes. I did hear you go on about the lovely lady Galadriel." He was almost over the edge, but he'd have to be careful. If he remembered right, there was a sharp edge somewhere here; he'd cut his hand on it the last time, and would rather avoid doing so again. "You know you worried your father, right? He told Thorin he was worried you'd been put under a spell or something, what with the way you sighed over her."

"If he didn't want me to find beauty outside a treasure chest, maybe he should have found me a more suitable name." Now, Kíli was perhaps not the smartest dwarf there was, certainly not when it came to not saying too much, but he did have a bit of social savvy if he said so himself. He certainly had enough of such to know that here the tone of Gimli's voice was not necessarily mere good-natured grumbling.

"You know that's not it, right? I mean, if your father had an actual problem with it, he wouldn't have named you what he did." This was so not one of Kíli's strengths. Joking around and ignoring the issue was more his style, but even he knew that wouldn't be the appropriate response here. "He just really, really doesn't like elves, even less than Thorin, I think. I'm pretty sure the only reason he doesn't outright hate Tauriel is because he's secretly decided she's already an honorary dwarf for pointing her bow at Thranduil's face."

"Doesn't that bother you?" What, they were changing the subject now? Not that Kíli particularly cared. This was so much better than Gimli getting all upset about not being what his father wanted. As though Glóin could have ever thought his precious son was anything but perfect. "I mean, I know it's not just my father. A lot of dwarves probably frown on your courtship, even if they may not voice it."

"Well, their opinions don't matter, do they?" Wait. Had that pile of stones been up here before? It certainly didn't look like something the ravens would have built. "There are also a lot of dwarves who think badly of me because I'm tall and slim and don't have much of a beard, or because I use a bow, or for a number of other reasons. The fact that I love an elf is but a small addition to the list of my failings. Yet as long as I have Thorin's favour, and Fíli's after him, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks."
"I guess." Gimli didn't sound entirely convinced, though.

"Are you doubting me? Your beloved cousin? I really should —" He reached his hand toward the stones, only to freeze just short of touching the pile. Something about it made him feel uneasy. No, it was more than that; just thinking of touching it made him sick to his stomach. Yet at the same time, he almost felt compelled to do so, like something was drawing him toward it. Like something was tempting him, beckoning him closer. If he only got a bit further, he was sure he could shift the stones aside and —

Something was shining underneath. Something pale and beautiful and terrible. Something that absolutely hadn't been here the year before, when he'd gathered the feathers for his gift for Tauriel, nor had the stones that tried to hide it from view.

"Kíli?"

He drew his hand away, held it to his chest as though it had been burned. It certainly felt like it. He could feel the coldness of a burn on his fingertips, for all that he hadn't come close to touching yet, that sick fascination that tempted him to draw closer even though he knew he shouldn't.

"Kíli!" Gimli sounded worried now instead of confused. Right. He really should gather himself. Snatching a couple of more feathers, he stuffed them in his pouch. It wasn't as much as he'd hoped, but it would do for now.

"Sorry, sorry. I just happened to think of something." Good thing he had a moment before he had to face Gimli, what with the need to climb back down and everything. He wasn't sure he could put a grin on his face just yet. "How'd you like hunting down some orcs?"

"How'd I like it?" Gimli barked with laughter, and in that moment he sounded just like his father. "Why, I'd hardly like anything better!"

"See, I had this idea." He didn't hurry, not quite — that would have been most inadvisable as he made his way down the wall — but he also didn't dally in getting himself out of reach of the small pile of stones. "I'm really not too busy the next few days, and I doubt Tauriel has anything scheduled that she can't get away from. So, if I can get my mother and your parents to agree, we could go out, the three of us. I've heard there are some orcs still lingering nearby, certainly goblins, and the usual patrols don't have the time to track them down."

"Nor would they have as much luck as an elf, I reckon." Gimli snorted. "In other words, you want out of the mountain with your lady love, and think I would be the least bothersome chaperon since you'll have to take one along no matter what."

"Something like that, I suppose." He needed to get out of the mountain, at least. He could resist the temptation, was doing so right now, but he needed time to clear his head and formulate a plan. A proper plan, one that worked this time. Not that the first one had been terrible, few people came here and even fewer had any reason to climb up to the highest nest, but it had happened now and it might happen again, and that could not be allowed.

"Not that I complain, anyway." The concern had faded from Gimli's voice, so he probably had bought Kíli's excuse for his sudden silence. "As long as I get to swing my axe at some goblin skulls before we get home, I'll be happy."

"I rather thought you might be." Kíli paused, leaning his head against one of his hands clutching at the wall. His stubble was rough against his skin, starting to get long again. "Though you have to promise to keep a secret."
"Not if it involves you and Tauriel. You know your mother will question me about your conduct, and I know better than to lie to Lady Dís."

"Nothing like that." Kíli sighed, making the rest of the way as quickly as he could, hopping down once he was a safe distance from the ground. "I suppose it's easier to show than to explain, anyway. First, though, there are other things to do."

Gimli was remarkably patient about the promised secret, tagging along for the better part of the day as Kíli ran around asking for permissions and making arrangements. At last, Kíli led their way into his rooms, pausing as he made to close the door after them.

"We'll be leaving at dawn, so you'd better call it an early night after this." Right. Enough dallying. "Promise me you'll tell no one what I'm about to show you?"

Gimli frowned but nodded. "You have my word."

"Right." Kíli strode over to his bedroom, Gimli trailing behind. He took an ornate bowl from a small table set under a mirror and thrust it at Gimli. "Go get me some water from the bathroom. Warm, please."

Gimli nodded again, hurrying out of the room. In the meantime, Kíli drew a deep breath and gathered himself before going for his jewelry box. It wasn't the first time he had done this in front of someone, but it was the first time it was anyone outside his immediate family or Tauriel.

It was good, though. This was good, uncertainty and all. He needed to worry about other things than pale light under stones.

Gimli returned soon, setting the bowl of water back on the table. He opened his mouth, probably to ask something, but snapped it shut as he saw that Kíli had cast off his shirt and tunic, though his face was full of curiosity. He still didn't say a word as Kíli methodically set out all the requisite components, the cup, the soap, the brush. He'd made do with much less on the road, but he did take some comfort in his routine when possible.

"Do you know what these are for?"

"I'd say you're going to wash your face, except I've no idea what the brush is for in that case."

"Perhaps this will clue you in." He set the last piece of the puzzle on the table, where Gimli took it from as Kíli started to work up a lather from the soap. He knew the exact moment Gimli worked out the blade even without looking; the sudden yelp was clear enough.

"This — this is a razor!" Well, at least he knew that much, then.

"Aye, it is." Satisfied with the lather for now, he started working it on his face. "And I assume you know what it's used for."

"You shave your beard?" Gimli sounded as horrified as if Kíli had just confessed to dancing jigs on the tombs of his ancestors.

"From time to time, yes." He forced himself not to look at Gimli, even through the mirror. "It grows fast at first but slows down after that. When it starts to get too long I shave it at night when I know I'll be out of public eye for the next day or two, then I'm presentable again for a while. It's a fine balance between too short and too long; it's not like I can just trim it to an exact length like Thorin used to do with his."
"But why would you do that?"

"Because getting my whiskers ripped off by a bowstring is not an experience I particularly cherish." Not that he had much experience with it, really. He had been doing this for a long time, after all.

Gimli didn't ask any more questions, then, just mutely handed over the razor when Kíli reached out his hand, watching him intently the whole time. Finally, as Kíli was patting his now smooth face dry, he spoke again. "Does Thorin know?"

"He's the one who first handed me the razor." He gave a wry smile at Gimli's shocked expression. "It belonged to my father first, if you must know. He was an archer, too, a hunter, though from what I've heard he didn't even pretend to keep a beard. I suppose I'll have to content myself with a smooth face eventually, too, once mine starts growing properly. Much harder to keep it just long enough not to get suspicious, then."

"And Thorin is really all right with that?" Gimli was staring at the razor, now. It was a fine thing of good quality, with a few jewels on the handle with fine engravings. It had been a gift from Dís to her husband, or so Kíli had been told, a symbol of her acceptance of his choices. He counted himself lucky he'd managed to keep it hidden in the elven dungeons; never mind the reveal of having it in his possession, it would have been a terrible thing to lose something so precious. "We're dwarves! Your beard should be your pride, not something you try to avoid! It's — only honourless traitors get shaved!"

Oh, Kíli was well aware of that. He could remember all too well the satisfaction of shearing beards from the worthless worms who had dared attack Ori. "Do you think Thorin is without honour, then, because he kept his beard short while mourning Erebor?"

"That's — that's entirely different!"

"Is it really, though?" Kíli very carefully rinsed the blade one last time, then patted it dry. "When Thorin first spoke to me of it, he told me I had a choice. I could keep my beard and my bow both and be passable at shooting, it's possible enough, though rarely without mishaps. Bard certainly seems to suffer no ill from his whiskers, though his stance is rather different from mine. Or I could choose to make the bow my main weapon, could devote myself to it, like my father had done. If I chose that path, if I loved my bow enough to keep my face smooth to bring the arrow that little bit closer, he would support that choice no matter who questioned it."

"And… he really accepts it?"

"So I believe." He closed the blade once he was absolutely certain it was dry, placing it back in his jewelry box among the mishmash of glittering beads and beautiful combs. "Thorin says we can only find the true value of something by looking at what we're willing to sacrifice for it. There's nothing more dwarven than devoting yourself to your craft or your weapon, and if I'm willing to give up my beard for my bow, clearly that's just a sign of how important my skill at the bow is to me."

He would just not think of what Thorin had at one time been willing to sacrifice for the sake of a pile of gold and a shimmering stone. Not now, when his hands could still feel the burn.

"I guess you're right." Gimli didn't sound entirely convinced, but he seemed willing to concede the point at least. "Your secret's safe with me, in any case, though I can't say I understand it fully. I love my axe well enough, but it's hard to imagine anything I'd willingly trade my beard for."

"Maybe one day you'll find something so dear. I certainly hope you will." He just hoped it would be something truly precious, not the cold shadow of a stone and the whispers of a dragon already given
Out. He needed to get out of the mountain. Out of reach, out of sight, out of any possibility he might climb the high wall again and push aside the stones that failed to shield him from the burn within.

And by the time they got back, he'd hopefully have grown a plan alongside his usual stubble.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Gimli writes an unexpected letter, just because he has news to share. Ori has to deal with a rather startling request, while Nori has a demand to make instead.

As for Thorin and Bilbo, they make a very exciting discovery, but sharing it is another matter.

Prince Legolas,

I hope you are not too baffled to receive this letter from me. While I might say your company was pleasant enough at the wedding, there was hardly any promise or prospect for further correspondence. However, I find myself with news to share that I wish to discuss with someone who is neither a complete stranger nor privy to this revelation before myself, and within the mountain the number of those grow few indeed. I hope, therefore, that you might indulge me and read my news, and in turn I will tell you about your friend Tauriel.

It occurs to me even as I write this that I'm not sure if this letter will ever reach you. Indeed, were I to hand it over to an elf headed for the wood, I could be sure of its destruction or revelation long before it ever got into your hands. My plan therefore is to bring the letter to Princess Sigrid of Dale, in the hopes that she might convince an elf trader or ambassador of some sort to pass the message on. Certainly she would have better luck with it than a young dwarf lad might. I've spoken with her before, and she seems a sensible lass; I have great hopes she will agree to help me.

I'm to finish my apprenticeship! Somehow, Prince Fíli himself was convinced to take me on as his first student. I do not plan to waste this opportunity. The prince has asked me to craft a sample of my skills for a start, so he might assess my current skill and talent alike. My plan is to make a pendant of my own design; see the sketch to the side of this letter for my thoughts on its shape. It is not going to be my most complicated piece yet, but I thought it better to make something I know I can finish to satisfaction rather than reach too far and then fail utterly. I hope I will not disappoint him. It's one thing for my friend Fíli to chuckle at my mistakes as I learn my craft, but it would be quite another to let down the one who has promised to be my master. Besides, I know it's going to take quite a few arrangements to make it possible for him to tutor me. I would not want to waste all that time and effort from all involved.

I have to admit, I still find it somewhat odd that you elves would not have crafts. I know you have great artisans of many kinds, but from our talks I understood there are plenty of elves who do not count any craft dear to their heart. It's hard to even think of such a thing among dwarves! Even those of us who have devoted themselves utterly to their weapon or some other trade will have at least rudimentary skills in one craft or another. Indeed, it would be quite difficult to even court one who has caught your eye without having a craft to prove your worth! I am curious, though. Do you have a craft of some kind? I know Tauriel knows much about the making of bows, as she crafted a very beautiful one for Kíli as her courtship gift to the prince.

Speaking of Tauriel, she is doing well. She seems well adjusted to the life in the mountain, and all of the company seems quite enamoured with her, or at least they have accepted her bond with Kíli, which is really all that matters. Thorin has even set her as a Captain of the Guard, right alongside
Dwalin, and given her a seat on his council to speak for the guards. Dwalin is one of Thorin's oldest friends, and trained the princes since they were wee lads. To give her the same rank as him is no idle honour, nor one Thorin would hand out lightly. He is certainly not obligated to bestow any honours upon her just because of her courtship of Kíli, so I'm forced to assume he does in fact hold her in such high esteem.

Of course, not everyone is as happy. Every now and then you may hear someone grumble about her, saying how she's unsuited for a prince of Durin and how Kíli is betraying his ancestors or some such. That seems all quite ridiculous to me, but then, they do not see what I do. Anyone who's laid eyes on those two for longer than a moment would see they are hopelessly in love, both of them. I suspect they would have long since been wed, had Thorin not demanded a proper courtship period of them. Of course, then Fíli started his courting, and as he is the heir his wedding must come first, so now there can be no proper wedding plans at all until we know when Ori is to finish his masterpiece.

(Is it true that elves are married simply by sharing a bed? No, don't answer that, that was quite improper of me to ask. It's just, I heard some of the older ones joking about it. Well, Nori was joking about how he should by all rights be already considered married to Dwalin, and Dwalin told him not to give the princes any ideas lest they do something inadvisable, Kíli especially. I mean, he is to marry an elf, after all.)

I think there's something going on with those two. I hope it's nothing improper, or I might end up in trouble. A week or two ago I played chaperon for them, as the three of us went out looking for some stragglers from the armies of orcs and goblins. We only found a few weaker ones, who were little trouble even in my inexperience, but it was a pleasant outing nevertheless. However, I could tell something was weighing Kíli, and from the way she acted I'd wager Tauriel knew of it soon after they first got to speak alone. (I did keep an eye on them when I could, Lady Dís would have my braids otherwise, but I didn't see the need to stick close enough to hear every word. They get precious few opportunities for private words in the mountain.) Of course he denied all when I asked, but I know my cousin. Something strange is afoot, though I suspect I will not find out what until and unless they choose to tell me. For someone so loud, Kíli can sometimes stay very silent on some things.

But I am rambling, and the letter grows long. In summation, rest assured that Tauriel seems happy, and is gaining more support every day. Lady Dís in particular has taken her under her wing, and that's a very formidable wing indeed. So really, there is no reason for you to fret over her.

I do not know if you wish to answer this letter. It would certainly delight me if you did, but you are of course under no obligation, particularly not after my rather unexpected approach toward you. Even if you do not, though, I trust I will speak with you again at the next royal wedding, if not before.

Until then I remain,
At your service,
Gimli, son of Glóin

*  

Ori wasn't really used to having people come visit him in his room.

It wasn't that there was nobody who might want to see him, of course. However, most of that tended to happen through the day. Those few who needed him in an official capacity would find him while he was attending to his duties, or visited the small office that had been set up for him near Balin's. His friends would either do the same or find him at the library when he found the spare moment to go there. All in all, when he made it to his rooms he didn't expect to be bothered by anyone except
possibly his brothers.

As such, he was rather surprised to have someone knock at the door. He was alone, as it was early enough in the evening that Dori was still out and about. Whether Nori was even planning to come home, he didn't know. Nori had not spent much time in their shared rooms as of late, preferring to join Dwalin in the small apartment he had claimed near the royal quarters. Ori might have almost thought he was fighting with Dori again, but they seemed to get along well enough when they happened to be home at the same time.

Perhaps Nori was just finally growing more open to the idea of a proper courtship. Ori rather hoped so; it was hardly going to make any difference to him, but he knew it would ease Dori's mind a great deal. Whatever the reason, though, Nori wasn't here, leaving Ori alone to answer the door.

He was almost startled to find two tall figures in cloaks and hoods outside the door, particularly as one of them was clearly one of the tall folk. However, the shorter one pushed his hood back just enough to show a familiar face. "Ori." Kíli smiled, though Ori got the feeling his heart wasn't in it. "May we come in?"

"Ah, of course." He stepped aside, letting Kíli come in, followed by what could only be Tauriel, before Ori made to close the door after them. "Ah, just so you know, if you want to be inconspicuous wearing a hood isn't the best way to go about it."

"Perhaps that's true for most, but we're going to attract attention either way, being who we are." At least now Kíli took the hood off entirely, followed by the rest of the cloak. "Are either of your brothers here?"

"No, I'm afraid. Dori is visiting King Bard over some guild business and won't be back until late tonight, and I haven't the faintest idea where Nori is. As usual."

"Good." Kíli's expression was more serious than Ori could recall seeing it in ages, probably not since the day of the battle. "We're here to speak with you, and it's probably best not to have any extra ears."

"Right." Because that did not sound ominous at all. "Will you please at least sit? It's rather unnerving to have you both towering over me." Sure, Kíli wasn't that much taller than him, but he was tall enough. Taller than Fíli, certainly, though not by much.

"Do forgive us. We didn't mean to cause you any distress." Tauriel took a seat, followed by Kíli. Ori did the same. A part of him tried to insist he should have offered them tea, but he rather suspected this was not the kind of talk to be had over calming tea.

"So, what brings you here?" He did his best not to wring his hands or toy with his sleeves, wishing for a quill or a knitting piece to busy his hands with. "Not to say I'm not happy to see you, particularly since you both have seemed a little distant lately, if you'll forgive me saying that. However, that also makes me more curious about why I now find you here all of a sudden."

"Right. I suppose we should apologise for that." Kíli sighed, and Ori noticed he looked terribly tired. He indeed hadn't seen much of the younger prince lately; he had been quite withdrawn ever since they had returned from their orc hunting trip with Tauriel. "It's just, well. We've had a lot to think about."

"Please don't tell me you're eloping." Ori resisted the urge to hide his face in his hands. "I'm feeling guilty enough as it is for taking so long with my masterpiece." He was working on it, really he was, but there were only so many hours in the day and most of his were already spoken for. Which would
have been frustrating enough if it had been only his own marriage to Fíli that was postponed, but with Fíli being the heir, habit dictated he should marry first, which meant Kíli and Tauriel had to wait as well.

"What? No!" Tauriel looked genuinely shocked. "Oh, no! If that was our plan, we wouldn't approach anyone until it was too late to do anything!"

"Tauriel, love, I adore you with every last pebble and stone in me, but right now you're not helping." Kíli's lips quirked for a moment, his hand reaching out to cover hers before he turned to look at Ori again. "No, it's not that, so don't worry. Tauriel is here as… a witness of sorts, I suppose is the best way of putting it."

"Witness?" Ori frowned. "To what?"

Kíli sighed. "I'll tell you, but only if you promise not to speak to anyone. I… I'm here to ask for your help, but I know you might not agree. And I need you to promise that even if you don't want to join me, you will not speak of what I'm about to say to others."

"This sounds awfully serious." Ori frowned. It did, too, rather too serious for a conversation involving only the three of them. "But if that's what you want, you have my word. Whatever it is you wish to tell me, I won't tell anyone."

Kíli still seemed to hesitate, but then gave a decisive nod. "Very well. I've decided to trust you on this, I shouldn't question you now." He paused. "I cannot promise that if you help me you won't anger someone else. In fact, I'm rather certain that if anyone were to find out you helped me in this, there are many who would hate you for having any part in the scheme."

"But you think I will agree to help." Why else would Kíli be here?

"I hope so, yes. Because it will help Fíli."

Well. At least Kíli knew how to get his attention. "I'm listening."

"Good." Kíli drew a deep breath. "I, ah. I found the Arkenstone."

Ori's eyes widened. Clearly he had misheard, right? Kíli must have noticed his shock, as he went on quickly.

"You know Thorin got rid of it, though few people know more detail than that. I was one of the witnesses as he gave it away, so I know he picked two trustworthy dwarves and told them to hide it away. They did good enough a job, I guess, except I found it purely by chance. And while it was only a matter of coincidence that I came across it, or even knew what I was looking at when I did, it just makes me fear there is no good place for it anywhere."

"When Kíli discovered it, it called to him enough he thought it best to leave the mountain for a spell." So that was the reason behind the sudden hunting trip. "He told me of his discovery, so he would have someone less vulnerable to its call to keep an eye on him. By the time we returned, he seemed recovered enough, but we still had no plan."

"Something must be done, that's clear. And yet, we couldn't think of a better place to hide it. I might just go back to those who hid it in the first place, tell them where it is, but, well. A part of me is suspicious enough to think it might be for the best to stay away from them. As it is, three people besides myself and them know who were set to hide it, and Thorin is one of them. If there was a moment of weakness, it would be clear who he would turn to first to find it again."
"So it's better if Thorin doesn't know who knows the location." That was... well. Ori couldn't argue with that.

"Right. I hate to think of things like that, but I rather feel I must." Kíli sighed. "But, as I said, we can't think of a better hiding place for the moment. Even so we can't just leave it sitting where it is. Never mind that someone else might come across it, but I'm not confident enough in myself to say I would never be tempted."

"That's not true." Kíli had not shown any weakness to gold sickness, not even once from what Ori had seen. "And if you can't leave it there and can't hide it elsewhere, what other choice do you have?"

"Well, we did think of something at least." Kíli glanced at Tauriel, then back to Ori. "We thought we might lower the risk, so to speak. Because, well, Thorin won't be wanting it back, not unless he loses his mind again."

Ori frowned. He wasn't sure he liked the sound of this. "Go on."

"We want to break it apart." Tauriel's voice was quiet. "Perhaps, if it's in shards, it won't have quite the same power. Besides, if it's broken it might be easier to hide somewhere it won't be found ever again."

"I already tried." Kíli shook his head. "Either I'm not strong enough, though, or it's influencing me not to try my hardest, because I can't seem to take off even a chip."

"Is that why you've come to me?" Ori wasn't sure he dared even ask, but he had to. "You think I could break it instead?"

"If anyone can, it's you." Kíli gave him an earnest look. "You're one of the strongest dwarves I know, probably the strongest after Dori. And you must hate it as much as I do for what it did to Fíli. And yes, I know you're of Durin's line as well, but I haven't seen you show weakness to gold yet."

"I'm not sure I'm so strong as you seem to think." In either mind or body. "But... I'm willing to try, at least." Because he did hate it, did hate what it had turned his beloved Fíli into. He knew he should have been shocked, appalled even, at the suggestion that they break such a precious treasure. And he would have been just a year or so ago. However, that had been before he had seen what it could do. Before he had seen the madness in Fíli's eyes.

"You are?" Kíli smiled, now, the first time he had during this strange visit. "Great! Let's go, then!"

"You mean right now?" That startled him for some reason. Somehow this seemed like a matter that would require more consideration.

"Of course! Less time for either of us to start overthinking it." Kíli got up from his seat. "We can't go to the royal smithy, I think Fíli's working there right now, but I borrowed a smithy hammer from there earlier, and I've an anvil in my rooms."

"You have an anvil? Why?" It wasn't relevant in the least, but perhaps, if he focused on the irrelevant things, he could keep from thinking too much on what he was planning to do. And besides, it was quite peculiar. As far as he knew, Kíli had no interest in smithing, for all that he had learnt the very basics alongside his brother to help their uncle at his work.

"I used it to chip the dragon scales into proper shape for Tauriel's arrows, and never got quite around to taking it away afterwards. Mostly because I was being lazy, but it sure gets useful now."
Tauriel stood as well, her cloak falling around her in elegant waves. "The first time I visited his rooms — with proper supervision, of course — I only wondered why he would keep a jewelry box, and never thought twice about the anvil I'd passed by. Apparently my choice of things to wonder at was a cause of much amusement."

"It's just that any dwarf would wonder at the presence of an anvil so far from a forge." Kíli waited for Ori to grab his mitts and scarf — it got chilly in the mountain this time of year — before they all headed for the door. "Anyone asks, I wanted to show Tauriel something and you were kind enough to come along as a chaperon."

"And if someone asks what that something is?" He was stalling, he knew that. Even so, he was following the two of them down the corridors of Erebor, so clearly he was in on this strange scheme.

"Oh, I've always got something I'm working on for Tauriel." Kíli flashed them both a grin. "Good thing about having my courtship gift done, I've plenty of time for crafting smaller gifts."

"I can only dream of that." Ori sighed. "At least Fíli having his duties rearranged to help train Gimli means I'll have a bit more free time, too. Between my duties, my masterpiece and my courting gift, it's a wonder I have time to sleep and eat."

"You know you do not need to hurry on our account, don't you?" Tauriel frowned a bit beneath her hood. "I know you said you feel guilty about making us wait, but you shouldn't. It's not so onerous a thing to court a bit longer for the sake of custom, particularly one that is hardly your doing."

"I didn't mean it like that." Ori shook his head, managing a small smile. "Believe me, I'm impatient for my own sake more than anything. And then, it is me who is most concerned about getting my Master's braid first. I'm sure that if I changed my mind on that, even Dori wouldn't make much of a protest. But if you had a mind to elope because I'm taking so long, then I might indeed feel some guilt over it."

"Well, don't. If we eloped, that would be our own impatience and not the fault of anyone else." Kíli chuckled. "Besides, some are grumbling even now that things are moving too fast for us. I'd guess the only reason there aren't any actual complaints is because Thorin and Bilbo were in even more of a rush."

They tried for some more light chatter, but it died off soon. It wasn't a long walk anyway, as the rooms Ori shared with his brothers wasn't far from the royal quarters — not due to any special aspirations on Dori's part, obviously, but simply because that part of the mountain had been mostly untouched and easy to clean out. They didn't run into anyone, which was rather fortunate, as Ori doubted Kíli's or so clever excuse would have helped much if someone like Lady Dís had taken an interest in their actions. By the time they got to Kíli's rooms nobody was speaking, Ori barely daring to even breathe as they walked in.

"So." Kíli was clearly done with his attempt at subterfuge, tossing the cloak into the corner as he walked up to the anvil he indeed had sitting near the fireplace of his receiving room. Picking up a heavy smithy hammer he had leaning against it, he turned toward them. "Tauriel? Do you have it?"

"I do." Tauriel reached inside her tunic, drawing out a leather pouch. Somehow, just seeing it made Ori shiver. "Are you prepared, Master Ori?"

Ori swallowed, stepping closer. "I rather have to be, don't I?" He accepted the hammer from Kíli, watching as Tauriel set the pouch on the anvil.

"Just remember, this had a part in breaking Fíli." Kíli stepped back, clear away from him. "Once we
shatter it, he won't have to fear it ever again."

"Right." For Fíli. He had to do this for Fíli, so he'd never see that look of rage and madness in his eyes again. So he'd never again see the guilt and shame there afterwards.

The hammer was heavy, but he had handled heavier, and never before with quite so much will.

He took a swing, and another, until he had quite lost count, finally letting the hammer fall from his hands. The smooth bulge inside the pouch was gone, reduced to rubble. A couple of shards had broken through, dull white peeking out through the leather, but he didn't care. All that mattered to him was that its shine was dulled to a fraction of what he remembered from when it had shimmered at the head of the king's throne.

"You did it," Kíli breathed, reaching a hand toward the shattered stone but not actually daring to touch it yet. "You actually did it. You broke it."

"About time someone did." Ori closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He felt terribly tired all of a sudden. "So, what are you going to do with it now?"

"Well, Tauriel seems the best person to hold onto it, still, since she doesn't share our weakness." Kíli paused. "Though we were thinking about it, and, well. Now that it's in pieces, we might divide it so it's not all in the same place."

"No." He didn't even wait for Kíli to ask before he answered the obvious question. "I won't have anything to do with it if I can help it, not even a part of it, so don't ask me to keep it. Just let me know when you've found a way to get rid of it for good."

"As you wish." Kíli set a hand on his shoulder. As Ori opened his eyes again and looked at the prince, there was a small smile playing on his lips. "You know, I'm glad you're Fíli's One. You're going to be a brilliant consort for him."

"I hope I'll be good enough, at least." He somehow managed a faint smile. "I… thank you. For trusting me."

"I had to. I figured you were the only one strong enough to break it, both in heart and arm." Kíli squeezed his shoulder. "Tauriel will keep the shards hidden, even from me. And we'll let you know when we think of somewhere to hide them."

"That's all I want." That was all he could ever want from that horrid stone.

Even if he was trembling the whole way back to his rooms.

*

Nori was a patient dwarf.

He might not have much looked like it, but he was. He had to be, in his line of work. Sometimes it felt like he'd spent all his life waiting for one thing or another, waiting for the trap to be sprung, for the mark to turn their back, for the guard to pass. Even now as he had left the more unfortunate aspects of his life behind, there still was little benefit to rushing ahead. Anyone who knew him would know this, and Dwalin certainly knew him well.

Really, he shouldn't have been too surprised that Dwalin frowned as he hurried into the rooms they more or less shared and dropped into a seat.
"You're in a rush." Dwalin set aside the papers he had been looking at, probably something about guard rotation. He wasn't a stupid dwarf by any means, but unlike his brother Dwalin took little pleasure in reading. Even when it came to stories he much preferred songs and spoken tales. "I'd ask if I need to worry, but I'd hope you're not flopping down on your pretty arse if there's actual danger about."

"You." Nori pointed a finger at him. "I want your braids."

Dwalin merely raised his eyebrows. "Don't think I've done anything to wound you so grievously, not of late at least."

"Not the braids on your head, stupid. Your courting braids, in my hair. You promised me them, remember?"

Dwalin's eyebrows climbed even higher if possible. "And why would you want that now, when neither my brother nor yours could speak you into it?"

"Because the mountain is full of dwarves and I'm sick and tired of explaining three times a day that I'm not amenable to courting attempts." There had been a time when it would have amused him, when he would have toyed with such hopefuls to his heart's content. However, that time was long past. He had things to do and people to see, and while flirting was an agreeable means to an end when he was looking for an easy mark, it was less so when he was acting on official business, however secret said official business was.

Taking someone up on their less decorous offers — and there were quite a few, he did have a pretty face after all — was not an option. His faults were many and numerous, but unfaithful he was not, not in this.

"And are you not?"

"You know I'm not." At least he certainly hoped so. Dwalin knew him better than anyone, even better than his own brothers sometimes. He should have been aware of that much at least. "Besides, I don't like that way the new lieutenant of yours is eyeing you when your back is turned. He seems to take more interest in your backside than his job."

"Good thing it's not his to have, though." Dwalin paused, eyeing him with a strange look. "You actually mean it? You want to wear my braids?"

"Aye." Nori sighed. "Not that I'm in a hurry to marry, still. And I can't promise to always wear them in full. I need to go unnoticed sometimes, and that's hard to do with Durin's beads in my hair."

For a moment Dwalin just looked at him, his expression unmoving. Then he stood up and walked to his bedroom.

Nori resisted the urge to sigh and hide his face in his hands. Really, he only got what he deserved. He shouldn't have expected Dwalin to agree. For all that their little arrangement had been quite mutual, Dwalin was still an old-fashioned dwarf. It was no wonder he would not stand for someone proposing to make such mockery of a proper courtship.

Really, he shouldn't wonder that Dwalin seemed willing to question his loyalty. Nori had hardly given him much reason to believe in it.

He contemplated just running out, leaving and not turning back. However, a small part of him was still hoping to explain, in some way Dwalin might understand, might accept. That small part of him was the reason he was still sitting there when Dwalin returned, bearing with him a wooden box with
rough engravings on each side.

"What's that?" Nori frowned. He was certain he'd never seen it before, for all that he had spent an awful lot of time in Dwalin's rooms.

"Look." Dwalin thrust the box out at him, and Nori took it without question. He continued to stare in a rather unnerving manner until Nori opened the lid of the box, looking inside.

There were needles in there. Needles for sewing and embroidering, sharp and blunt, short and long, made of steel and gold and bone. Scissors, too, several pairs, fine small ones just big enough to snip an embroidery thread and larger ones for cutting cloth. He took out the largest pair, a heavy set that seemed better suited for a dressmaker like Dori. "A bit much for embroidery floss, don't you think?"

"Press the stone at the joint."

Nori frowned at the instruction, but did so. To his astonishment the stone pressed inside, just a little, and the heavy scissors separated into two blades, both sharp and deadly.

"I made all these with my own two hands, as is appropriate." Dwalin looked down at him with serious eyes. "Nori, son of Vuori, of Durin's line and folk… I, Dwalin, son of Fundin, son of Farin, of Durin's line and folk, Captain of the Royal Guard… would offer you my courtship."

"You…" Dwalin had made this for him. Dwalin had made all these tiny, delicate things, so very different from the blades and axes he usually smithed. It must have taken him ages to learn how, hours upon hours of working at the forges, yet he had done so, all to offer Nori a courtship gift. "You planned for this?"

"I know I told you I wouldn't give you my braids unless you asked for them." Dwalin shrugged his massive shoulders. "Thought I should be prepared anyway."

"You could just give me anything, you know. If you wanted a crafted gift at all." Because Dwalin was a noble, and it was clear enough he was the higher of the two. Nobody would have faulted him for giving a provider's gift instead to start with.

"I wanted to make it proper, though. There's little enough proper about us." Dwalin fell down to his knees so their eyes were somewhat level. "I made up my mind from the start not to push, lest I drive you away. I still won't, I'm not in a hurry. But if you'd take my braids, whatever your reason… I was hoping you'd take my proper courtship as well."

Nori stared at first at Dwalin, then down at the gift. He looked at Dwalin again, then. "I hope you don't think this means I'll be proper and stay out of your bed."

Dwalin snorted. "Would be worried if it did, and not a little disappointed. I've grown used to you in my bed, and find I rather like it."

"And I won't bear your children." Which was probably a ridiculous thing to even say, but hey, Dwalin had started the being ridiculous, here.

"Never expected you to." Dwalin shook his head. "If I wanted a proper lady to bear my kits and naught else, I would find and court one. What I want is you, though, everything you are and everything you aren't. If you'll grant me that, I've no further wish."

Dwalin smiled, then, after all that he smiled, like Nori was worth that, like Nori was worth anything, and something deep inside Nori shattered. It took him a moment to speak again, and as he did his voice was rough, but somehow he found his lips curling as well. "You know Dori and Balin are both
going to have a fit, right?"

"Oh, aye." Dwalin's smile brightened a touch. "Will want to negotiate courtship and everything."

"Even though they know we're in no hurry to wed." Nori paused. "I, ah. If you tell anyone what I'm about to do, I will kill you, make no mistake."

Dwalin just nodded, because he was an idiot like that, looking at Nori without question, without expectation. Waiting.

Nobody had ever wanted him, not really. His father was unknown, his mother had been busy keeping bread on the table. He suspected even his brothers would have had little patience for his antics if they had not been compelled to do so by blood, for all that Nori would always be as fierce in his protection of them as he was quiet in his love for them. Yet here was Dwalin, a noble of Erebor and cousin to kings, a dwarf who had more reason than most to look down at him and scoff at him, on his knees before Nori and waiting for his answer.

Nori hadn't cried since his mother died, had held back even then as best as he could. Dori had had no time for comforting him, had been too busy caring for Ori and feeding them all, and Nori was enough trouble as it was, had known that even as a dwarfling not quite yet forty.

Perhaps he was out of practice, but Dwalin would never tell.

* Thorin was, in fact, the one who usually woke up first.

He knew many suspected otherwise; after all, Bilbo could be quiet efficient when he set his mind to a task, and he certainly was hardworking when there was something to be done. Such people often also enjoyed getting up early, after all. However, those who thought so forgot that hobbits were creatures of comfort. Bilbo got up just in time to see to his garden before they started their day, and not before, while Thorin was used to getting up early after half a lifetime of working hard for his living. While their daily duties now started around the same time, and since their wedding they had made a habit of sharing breakfast and not only dinner, Thorin was usually the one who woke up first, finding a sleepy hobbit in his arms without fail.

As usual, he took a moment to simply watch his sleeping husband. Bilbo always looked so peaceful in the morning, his curls tousled and expression calm. His hair glowed golden in the light of the small fire, brought back to life by some busy servant not long before. Thorin was sure he had never seen a more beautiful creature than this. And he was here, in Thorin's arms, because he chose to be.

Bilbo started to stir, and Thorin chuckled, leaning in to kiss him quickly before he drew away again, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. He would have to fix his braids before they went out for the day. "Good morning."

"Mmm… morning." Bilbo yawned, stretching in bed even as Thorin got up. He could feel the hobbit's eyes on his bare back, not that he was complaining. "What's the time?"

"Fairly early still." He glanced at the clock above the fireplace, set there mainly for Bilbo's benefit. Thorin liked to be on time when it mattered, but in the mornings it was enough to rely on his own sense of time. "You have plenty of time to sleep a bit further if you wish, it's a few hours until we need to be anywhere. I can wake you up when you need me to."

"Hm… a tempting thought, but I think I must refuse. There are some documents I should look through before the meeting today, and I thought it'd be better to get that out of the way. So I'll take a
look at them after I've checked on the garden and had a proper breakfast, and have some time between that and the meeting proper."

"So sensible, my hobbit." Thorin quickly washed his face before he put on a clean tunic and trousers, starting to work on his hair as Bilbo went about his own ablutions, finally out of bed. "Will you need my help in the garden?"

"Well, yes, since those light poles of yours haven't gotten any shorter." Bilbo gave a put-upon sigh. "I shouldn't complain because they cast such a nice light all around the garden, but I really need to find a way to attend to them myself. I can't keep bothering you twice a day for it."

"It's no bother, really. Though I'll admit I don't well understand why it's necessary for you to cover them at night." Thorin shook his head. "I would assume more light is better."

"Perhaps it is, perhaps it is not. However, it's not light out around the clock in the Shire, and just because it might work doesn't mean it will. Better stick to the conditions I know will work, just to be sure. I might do some experimentation once it's only vegetables there, but right now I will do everything I can to keep it as close to the Shire as possible."

"I suppose that makes sense enough." He certainly wasn't about to encourage Bilbo to take risks with his garden, not at this time. Not when they were sheltering such a precious seed in the dark earth.

Bilbo took his time with his morning preparations, so much so that Thorin had managed to finish his braids by the time Bilbo was dressed in simple clothes and done with the couple of braids he wore in his short hair. They made their way down the corridor toward the garden together, Bilbo waking up enough to start some light chatter that he would have never called gossip and Thorin thus wouldn't call that either, if only to keep the marital peace.

It wasn't entirely dark in the garden, at least not to Thorin's dwarven eyes, but it was nearly so. Bilbo had fashioned a sort of hood to slip over the crystals during the night, and only the slightest bit of a dim glow made it through the thick cloth. Thorin reached to take the hoods off one by one while Bilbo went about gathering his usual tools in the growing light. He'd have to think of a mechanism to allow Bilbo to do it himself, he thought, or perhaps a little stool he could easily move around. Not that Thorin minded helping, but he couldn't guarantee to be there every evening and every morning at the right moment, and he knew Bilbo would hate to bother anyone else with the chore.

"Thorin?" Bilbo spoke up as Thorin was taking off the last hood, a strange tone to his voice. "Thorin, come see this."

"What?" Thorin turned to look, his heart skipping a beat as he saw Bilbo kneeling down near where they had planted the acorn. "What's there to see?"

"Just come." Thorin hurried a couple of steps closer, pausing a bit before he knelt down next to Bilbo. "Can you see that too?"

"What?" Thorin leaned down, then gasped. There were leaves. Just two tiny leaves, barely breaking through the surface, a pale golden green against the deep brown. "Is that…"

"I think so." Bilbo definitely sounded excited, his hand coming to clasp Thorin's. "It'd be very early for the oak to have sprouted, though not impossible, but the hint of gold to the leaves seems a clear enough sign. I may not know very much, but even I know it's supposed to be golden leaves for a child."

"It worked." Thorin could barely contain his own excitement. "We're going to have a child." Their
child, not only his, a child he would grow together with Bilbo. Just as it should be.

"So it certainly seems, yes." Bilbo smiled, bright and brilliant, and he had never seen something so beautiful.

"We'll have to tell everyone." Oh, Dís would be beside herself with joy to hear they had succeeded so soon. And the boys would be even more delighted, he was sure of that.

"Is it not too early?" As Thorin frowned, not fully understanding his question, Bilbo sighed. "I mean, I don't know much about the precise points of dwarven pregnancies, but from what I have understood not all of them result in a living child. And even with us, sometimes the seed does not take, or the fruit will not ripen, or a chill or drought may cause it to wither before its time is full. Should we not wait until the risks are somewhat smaller?"

"That's not the dwarven way." Thorin shook his head. "A child is announced to the family as soon as we are certain one is on the way. If the child is lost before its time, clearly then the mother needs the prayers of their closest ones."

"I… suppose that's sensible enough." Bilbo nodded slowly. "What do you pray, then? If you don't mind me asking."

"It depends on how far along the child was in its growth." Thorin looked down at the fragile little leaves, touching one with a gentle fingertip. "If the child is lost after its quickening, we believe life had been given and lost in its entirety. We will bury and mourn him or her as though we had lost any other of our number, and pray that they will safely join our ancestors in the Halls of Waiting until we can be reunited with them again."

"And if it's before that?" Bilbo's voice was quiet, almost hesitant. Thorin couldn't blame him. It was a somewhat morbid topic to be discussing when they ought to have been rejoicing by all rights.

"If that happens, we believe Mahal changed his mind and took the spark of life back to his own forge, to work it over again. We then pray that he will complete his work soon and give it back to the mother for her to finish it, so the child might join us at last." He managed a smile at a memory, though he supposed it was a wistful one. "Fíli gave the Maker some trouble, it seems, as he took him back three times before he was satisfied. Dís used to say that Kíli being born so soon after his brother was the least Mahal could do for her after making her wait so long for her first."

"Ah." Bilbo looked down. "I hope we do not have to wait quite so long."

"As do I." Thorin reached over to take his hand again. "I'm sure our child will grow true and strong, Bilbo. Do not worry."

"I'm trying not to."

Except Thorin knew it was not as easy as that, not when the plant looked still so very small and fragile, just a couple of small leaves, easily lost to even the slightest chill. It was safe from the breeze and snow that would soon be surrounding the mountain from all sides, yet even Thorin with his rather limited knowledge of gardens couldn't help but worry over the safety of the little seed of their child.

Their child. That was what this was, what it was going to be, a promise and a wish alike hidden within those few small leaves. For all that he might not have been able to guarantee its safety, he was certainly going to do everything he could to try to ensure that it could grow and thrive without a worry. Little though it was, here, with Bilbo knowing so much more of such matters.
"We don't have to tell anyone if you don't want to." Bilbo looked up as Thorin spoke, his eyes bright in the light of the crystals. "Just because that might be the dwarven way does not mean we have to abide with that. If you would rather wait until we are more certain of our success, that is fine with me." He would certainly not want to cause Bilbo any distress.

"Ah, no." Bilbo shook his head, a small smile creeping up on his face again. "I'm fine with us telling the family. I'd appreciate it if an official announcement could wait for another bit, though."

"As you wish." Thorin lifted Bilbo's hand up, pressing light kisses on each of his fingertips, heedless of any dirt he might have found there. "I rather feel like running out and shouting my joy for all the world to hear, but that can wait." There would be plenty of time for grand announcements later.

Bilbo chuckled at that. "I rather fear that might convince everyone you have finally received one crack too many to your noble royal skull."

"I'm a dwarf, with dwarven subjects. Children are our most precious treasure, and quite rare for all our wishes otherwise. I promise you, they would certainly understand my joy."

"Just don't come crying to me if they think you've lost your mind for good." The tone was teasing, though, which was good. Thorin certainly couldn't have mustered up any offence right now, he was far too delighted. "We're going to be parents, Thorin."

"So we are." His grin was wide enough it almost made his cheeks ache, but he didn't care. Right now, his joy could not be contained.

Clearly things were turning out for the best.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Gimli isn't the only one writing letters, as it happens. While certain young ones are busy making friends, love is in the air in the mountain, or at least talk about love. Fili is done with his crafted gift, and Ori takes his doubts about the timing of their courtship to the logical conclusion. The Ur family, of course, have their own feelings about family and courtship and other such things.

Chapter Notes

Of the name in this chapter, Vati means "basin" or "bowl" in Finnish, while Timpur comes from "timpuri", which is "woodworker/carpenter" in Finnish.

Master Gimli,

I will admit I was surprised to receive a message from you, but the surprise was not an unpleasant one. We get precious few news from Dale here in the forest, and even those of our traders who might share some rarely have any word from the mountain. As such, I am thankful for your offer of news from your part of the world.

I can assure you that your letter reached me swiftly and without tampering; it arrived in my hands with seal untouched. I will send my letter back by way of Princess Sigrid, and trust she will pass it on to you likewise. Perhaps, if we plan to exchange more of these letters, we should think of some gift to thank her for her aid? It seems unlikely this would be possible for us without some problems if she had not agreed to pass the messages on.

May I offer my congratulations for your finding a new master? As I have understood this is an important matter for young dwarves, and to be taught by the crown prince himself must be a great honour — I know I do not take students easily, for all that many have expressed the wish to learn archery under my tutelage, and I surely do not have as many duties as I imagine Prince Fili must see to. I'm sure you will impress him, though, if your actual skills are half as good as your sketch suggests.

I suppose the matter of crafts is yet another point where our races differ. Indeed, few of us ever devote ourselves to any single pursuit as much as dwarven crafters are said to do. I myself must confess a lack of any such skill. I know something of bows and fletching, and have done some woodcarving to pass my time, but I wouldn't dare compare that to any dwarf who might have claimed such as their craft. It would be useful for courtship, I imagine, but we have to make do with other ways of wooing our loves, such as purchasing gifts from those better skilled at them. And, of course, we are all fond of music and poetry. You might advise your cousin that he would no doubt bring great joy to Tauriel if he were to play for her, or perhaps even compose a song for her, if his skills at the fiddle allow. Though I am made curious by your wording. Do dwarves only exchange one courtship gift each, or many?
I'm glad to hear Tauriel is settling into her life, for all that I miss her presence here in the woods. However much I miss her, I do wish her all happiness, and it seems Kíli offers her that. It is hardly a surprise that some would object to her presence. However, from what I have seen, I have every confidence the House of Durin will ensure her safety in the mountain. I hope you and your kin will prove worthy of this trust, for I do not give it lightly.

The heir must wed first? That seems a peculiar notion. Surely the first to marry should be the one who courted first?

(Do not worry, I am not offended by your question, though a little amused. I suspect it would be natural to be curious of that. It is and it isn't enough, depending how one looks at it. It is true that elven lovers may be wed simply by sharing their love in body and not just in heart; however, the act itself is not quite enough, but must be accompanied by words of devotion. It seems hard to imagine lovers sharing pleasure without whispering some promises to each other, though, does it not? So you may indeed need to keep a close eye on your cousin, unless you want him wed in the elven way first! But I jest. Tauriel would not allow such a smear on her honour where she is already questioned, even if an elf would not see it as such.)

Did you find out what Kíli and Tauriel were up to? Was it something terribly scandalous?

Awaiting your reply,
Legolas Thranduilion

The problem with Ori was, he was actually fairly good at blending into the background.

Sure, Ori himself considered this an asset, not a problem, but it was troublesome for anyone trying to find him in a crowd. Kíli at least had the advantage of being taller than most of the dwarves in the marketplace, but even so he was having a hard time spotting the familiar figure within the grand cavern. The marketplace in Erebor had only been open a week or so, and the stalls weren't quite as numerous as he was sure they would soon be, but there were still plenty of dwarves milling about obstructing his view.

Thankfully, though, Kíli's height wasn't his only advantage here. He was the son of a hunter, and had been one himself long before he was a warrior or even a proper prince. Though he hadn't had much practice lately, he did know the basics well enough, and knew that the first step to finding his target was to anticipate its moves. To find a deer, he might have looked for water. Since he was tracking Ori, he simply headed for the biggest stall with writing implements and waited.

Luckily, he wasn't disappointed. He hadn't spent too long scanning the passers-by when he finally spotted a familiar head of red hair above a soft purple scarf, and heading his way, too. Grinning to himself in triumph, he waited until Ori had actually come up to the stall before speaking up.

"Thought I might find you here."

Ori seemed startled for a second, and Kíli was enough of a warrior to notice the way his hand reached toward his belt for a moment before he relaxed. "Kíli! Don't startle me like that." Huffing and shaking his head, he turned to inspect the inks on offer. "You were looking for me?"

"Was sent to find you, is more like it. Dori said you'd come down here, so I thought this was the best place to wait." Kíli watched as Ori compared the little jars with a critical eye. "You run out of ink again? How much of that stuff do you need?"
"A lot, in fact. I do kind of write a lot most days, you know." Ori picked a couple of jars, then selected a small stack of paper before paying for all his purchases.

"Okay, I know you have paper. I've seen your office, you have piles of blank paper everywhere. You can't possibly need more."

"Not all papers are the same, nor inks." Ori stuffed his purchases into the bag he was carrying. "You wouldn't use the same leather for a smithing apron as if you were making a pair of nice gloves for Tauriel, now would you?"

"Well, no, that's obviously different. All those inks and papers seem more or less the same to me, though."

"Yet those leathers seem the same to me at a glance, just like I know little about what might make two bows different. But I won't come around telling you they're all the same, so I'll ask you not to make the same comments about my yarns or writing things." The words might have been sharp, but Ori was smiling genuinely enough, so Kíli figured he was more amused at Kíli's ignorance than annoyed at his comments.

"Fair enough. I'll stay out of your craft and trade, you stay out of mine." Kíli clapped Ori on the shoulder. "Anyway, as I said, I was asked to find you. Care to follow me?"

"Should I even ask who told you to find me?" And yet he started walking after Kíli without waiting for a response. That was clearly a testament to just how charming and trustworthy Kíli was. "I shouldn't have any more duties today, I checked with Balin and Fíli both, and my scribes shouldn't need me for anything, either."

Kíli couldn't help but chuckle. "Feels nice to say that, huh?" He glanced over his shoulder, finding a small flush spreading on Ori's cheeks. "Actually, Fíli wanted to see you."

"He did?" Ori frowned, hurrying his steps to come up to Kíli's side. "Did he say why? This morning he said he wouldn't need me all day. And why didn't he come to find me himself? Has something happened?"

"Hey, slow down before you work yourself into too much of a worry. Nothing's wrong, I swear. I would tell you if there was." Kíli smiled, not taking the turn that would get them en route toward the part of the mountain that housed the royal apartments and offices, instead leading them to the general direction of the grand forges. "He just finished sooner than he thought and now he has something to show you."

"Show me?" Ori's frown deepened. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I suppose it's not giving too much away at this point if I say he finally finished his courting gift for you." As Ori's eyes widened, Kíli grinned at him. "It's not a mere trinket, though, so he and Thorin are waiting in the royal smithy to show you the gift there before worrying about transportation."

"He's finished with it? Really?"

"Oh, aye. He's spent most of his free time on it ever since... well. Ever since he recovered." Seeing Ori's face turn into a frown, Kíli started to grow worried. "What? Is something wrong?"

"Ah, no, not as such." So why was Ori fiddling with his sleeves, the way he did when he didn't know what to say? "It's just..."
"Yes?" Should he not have mentioned the incident? He thought Ori could handle that by now.

"I'm not done with my gift yet." Ori bit his lip. "Or my masterpiece, either. And now he'll have given me both his gifts, and I'm still taking my time, for my gift and my masterpiece both. And then that's forcing you and Tauriel to wait, even though you've already exchanged your crafted gifts, and… well. It seems I'm the only one holding everyone back."

"Hey, hey. None of that here, do you hear?" Kíli grasped Ori's arm, pulling him closer before he could draw too much into himself, then gentled his grip into a comforting pat. "Tauriel and I told you there's no need to hurry for our sake, remember? And we meant it. We know how busy you are with everything, and Fíli knows that too. We all also know how much you look forward to being done with all this, too. And of course all of us finished our gifts first. Your masterpiece is a lot bigger project than any of those, and it leaves precious little time for anything else. Believe me, I know how that is, and Fíli definitely knows it, too. He spent ages on his, and that was without all the other things you have going on. Your masterpiece is supposed to be your best work, to show all your skills at their best. Fíli would be horrified if you rushed yours in an attempt to please him."

"I suppose you're right. I mean, I know you are," Ori hurried to add before Kíli could even open his mouth to protest. "It's just, it's hard to think of it like that sometimes. You may see it as my working on many things. Me, I'll look around at the end of the day and feel like I've accomplished nothing, because nothing seems to have progressed at all."

"That's not true, though, is it? You're getting a bit further every day. So, hey, what are you making for your masterpiece, anyway?" Seemed best to offer a little distraction, at least until they made it to the smithy. "I don't think you ever told me, though I'll assume it involves all different kinds of inks and paper." At this, the threw in a placating grin. Obviously he was learning.

"I'm making an account of our quest, actually." At least Ori seemed a touch more relaxed, now, continuing to follow Kíli down the corridors. "Mostly based on my notes from the road, but I've asked around when I don't have something clear. I'm getting near the end, now; I'm mostly just missing the battle at the end and some of the illustrations. I might come to interview you soon, to get your part of the battle straight."

"Well, you've still got some work ahead of you if you're planning to get through what everyone in the company did through the battle." Kíli shrugged. "I wasn't all that impressive in the end, really. Mostly just got saved at the last second by Tauriel. You'll have to ask for her account, too, and I'll fill in where she'll no doubt be too modest."

Ori chuckled. "Not sure how biased that account would be."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm just waiting to see how you write about Fíli's glorious exploits."

"In full and accurate detail, of course." Ori glanced around. "Are we very far, still? I don't think I've ever actually been to the royal smithy before."

"Almost there." There were numerous smaller smithies scattered about the mountain, but most of them were still in disrepair, the grand forges being an obvious priority for restoration. They weren't needed just yet, anyway, as the smiths they had were quite happy to be working near the legendary forges of Erebor. The royal smithy, though, set near the grand forges but a bit apart for privacy and security both, had been fully repaired by the time they had the fuel to spare for such smaller pursuits. Kíli himself had no use for it, having little skill and even less interest in blacksmithing, but Thorin and now Fíli spent quite a bit of their spare time there, with some of the other blacksmiths in the Company making occasional appearances as well. This time there was no sound of clanging metal as they approached, yet he knew it was occupied.
Kíli stepped aside right inside the doorway, letting Ori step ahead of him. Fíli and Thorin were indeed both in the smithy, Thorin in a simple tunic and trousers, Fíli dressed in somewhat fancier clothes despite the heat that radiated this far from the forges even with the smaller one in here reduced to simmering embers right now. There was something next to him, a slim form up to his chest, concealed under a cloak.

"Fíli?" Ori said, with only the quickest of nods toward Thorin. "Kíli said you wanted to see me."

"Aye, that I did." Fíli was nervous, Kíli could tell that, yet he drew a deep breath and launched into the speech he had more or less learnt by heart by now, from all the times he'd heard his brother recite it. "When I begun work on my gift to you, I was going to make you a set of pens, crafted from gold and gems and silver, finer than anything that had put words to paper before." Fíli offered them a rueful smile, shaking his head. "But then I became consumed by that finery, and quite forgot why I was doing it in the first place. I forgot that I wanted to show you how precious you are to me, how I wish to offer you all the riches and everything beautiful, to prove how much time I would spend to make you happy and how well I knew your wishes."

Fíli paused, but nobody said anything. Even Thorin remained still, enough so Kíli might have almost thought him a statue if not for the smallest of nods that inclined his head, perhaps meant to encourage Fíli for all that he would not see it, facing Ori as he did.

"Then I committed a grievous crime. I raised my hand against you, I drew your blood and tried to do worse, all over a silly little bead. After that, I cannot offer you gold and gemstones, not yet, not as my courting gift. What would I prove by devoting more hours of my life to glittering gold? Certainly not how precious you are to me. Also, while you are a scribe, that is not all that you are. I've seen others dismiss you for such foolishness, and I would not do the same to you." Fíli shook his head. "You once told me you loved all of me, that you loved the young rascal and you loved the musician, you loved the goldsmith and you loved the prince who would one day be king. Let me then tell you in turn, that I love all of you. I loved the young dreamer who answered my uncle's call, who was not afraid of the dragon when it mattered and we all took our first steps on this journey. I love the scribe with clever hands that can make words dance and pictures shine, and I love the loyal friend who has never been afraid of my title or station. I love the warrior who does not think of himself as such yet has faced battles that brave soldiers have run from before, and the scholar who finds everything to be a cause for learning, and the diplomat who sees and hears everything yet only says that which he must." Fíli paused. "It is my hope that one day, I will be allowed to love you as my consort, as one who stands beside me in this world and will do so again once we reach the Halls."

Fíli now reached to draw the cloak away, and even Kíli had to bite back a gasp. He'd seen it in progress, of course, from Fíli's earliest sketches, but this was the first time he saw the finished work all put together. Judging by the not so silent gasp, Ori was equally impressed.

What stood in front of them was a book stand, the perfect height for Ori — getting it just right had been a matter of much worry for Fíli, yet as Ori now stepped closer it was clear he had gotten it precisely correct. The whole thing was wrought from hard steel and iron, unadorned by gems yet with intricate designs running down its sides. The base was wide and heavy, not something that could be knocked over by accident and probably not even on purpose. All in all, Kíli had to admit his brother had skill in blacksmithing, too, for all that it wasn't his main craft.

"This is..." Ori trailed off, reaching out to touch the stand. His fingertips ran along the smooth metal, almost reverent. He turned to look at Fíli, but still couldn't seem to find the words.

"It's not all." Fíli had to be out of his mind with nerves by now, yet he kept his voice calm, stepping closer. "I told you I love all sides of you. This is for the scribe and the scholar. This," he took Ori's
hand, gentle and careful, and traced it down the side of the stand, "this is for the warrior who faced
dragons and orcs and traitors, and never backed down an inch."

It was cleverly hidden, Kili knew that, had seen the designs Fili had agonised over. If one didn't
know where to look, it was nigh impossible to tell, the secret hidden within the ornamental designs.
Under Fili's guidance, though, Ori's hand found a small recess, then the seam. His hand closed
around the object and he drew the rest of it out of the stand, leaving behind an empty space that
exactly matched the heavy war hammer he was now holding in his hand. It was a fine hammer, too.
Dwalin himself had tested it out before Fili had declared his satisfaction.

"As much as I wish otherwise, I have seen I cannot always be there to protect you." Fili's voice was
so quiet, Kili only barely heard it. "I'm hoping that if you accept this gift from me, then at least no foe
would catch you unarmed and unawares again."

"Oh, Fili... it's perfect." Ori seemed about ready to just drop the hammer he was holding, then
thought better of it and set it carefully back in its place before throwing his arms around Fili. He
clung to Fili, apparently unconcerned that both Kili and Thorin were watching with faint smiles. "I
could never not accept."

"Of course you could not accept it. I'm just glad that you do." Fili appeared to be equally
unconcerned with such things, as he embraced Ori back just as fiercely. "You're my warrior scribe.
Of course I want to equip you accordingly."

"I'm really, really not a warrior, whatever you might say, but I'm thankful nevertheless."

"Perhaps so," and now finally, Fili started to grin, "but even so, it's just not proper that you'd have to
fling around the entire book stand, even if you could absolutely do it."

Kili glanced at Thorin, who was looking back with a small smile. If this went much further they
might have to interfere, but for now, it was good to see them lost in each other.

It was good to see Fili smiling without hesitation.

* 

"So, I have to admit I am curious." Lady Dís looked at Dori over her tea cup, because apparently this
was his life now. "Have things been any different for Nori since he accepted Dwalin's courtship? Or
with Nori, I suppose."

"Well, yes and no." Dori cradled his own half-full cup. He'd come to see Dís to discuss a minor
matter regarding the guilds, and somehow that had led to them drinking tea in the entrance room of
the royal apartments. Which might have been strange enough on his own, yet Dori's main thought
was how it was a pity Bilbo couldn't join them yet. Truly, his life had become strange when he was
having tea with princesses and consorts and considering it unremarkable. "His behaviour really hasn't
changed much, he's still sneaking about and such, though I suppose he does that as much for fun as
he does to actually avoid detection. But, well. He'd deny this to his last breath, and likely resent me
for saying this, but he's... happier."

"Happier?" Dís smiled at him. "And how does that manifest?"

"He smiles more, and more sincerely. He is less tense in general." Dori shrugged. "I already saw
some changes earlier, but it all seems amplified now. The other night I saw him touching his courting
braid with the sweetest little smile on his face when he thought I wasn't looking."

"Tauriel says it's made a difference in the guard, too." Kili didn't look over to them from where he
was lying on a thick rug on the floor, too focused on his whittling, but it was clear enough he wasn't just rambling to himself. "Apparently some of the guards used to get really flirty with Dwalin sometimes, but they've more or less all backed off since he started wearing the courtship braids."

"That is good to hear. I would hate for Nori to get into trouble for stabbing a guard." Sure, his brother was now more or less on the right side of the law, but Dori held no illusions about how tightly he would hold onto such things if he thought someone was endangering what he considered his.

"That would be quite embarrassing, yes. Though I have it on good confidence the Captain of the Guard might actually side with him in the matter."

Dori chuckled, but before he could respond his attention was caught by the sound of a door opening. Even before he turned to look he knew it had to be either one of the Company or Tauriel. The guards would not have allowed anyone else into the royal apartments otherwise; even servants only came at set times. Even so, he was a bit surprised as he saw the dwarf walking in, red hair neatly combed and braided and his clothes all in rich blues and soft purples. Surprised, and maybe a bit proud. His brother looked so very grown-up and competent like this.

Dís looked over as well, smiling as she saw the arrival. "Ah, Ori. Were you looking for someone in particular? I'm afraid Thorin and Bilbo are touring the new marketplace, and as for Fíli, well, I suspect you would know his whereabouts better than I."

"Fíli is checking up on the restoration of the last of the great forges in Thorin's stead." The answer came easily, without Ori needing to give it any apparent thought, and if Dori had ever doubted whether Ori could actually perform in his role as Fíli's adviser he was rather reassured by that. "Actually, I was hoping to speak with the two of you, together."

"Oh?" Dori frowned. "Dís and myself?"

"Yes. I've been thinking about it for a while, and since I dropped by the guild and they told me you're here, I thought I'd take the opportunity."

"Well, do come and sit down. What's on your mind?" Dís was surely as curious as Dori was, but she waited patiently as Ori walked over to take a seat next to them. Kíli seemed to perk up as well, at least enough so to actually sit up for a change. "Would you like some tea?"

"Um, no thank you. And, ah. Well." Ori drew a deep breath, clearly gathering himself. "I wanted to ask if you'd agree to renegotiate the terms of the betrothal. For me and Fíli, that is."

"Really, now." Dís's eyebrows rose. "And why would you ask that? Is there a specific point that you would like to address? I hardly think you're aiming to break off the arrangement entirely."

"I would never!" Ori seemed genuinely shocked by the suggestion. "It's just, well. I've been thinking."

"Let me guess." They all turned to look at Kíli. He had set aside his whittling, giving them his full attention. "This is about the length of the betrothal, right? I mean, currently all that's been agreed on is that the wedding will be after you finish your masterpiece."

"Right." Ori nodded. "I still kind of agree with that; I want to wear my Master's braids when I marry Fíli. I know it doesn't matter to him, but, well, we are young, and people are paying rather too much attention anyway because of his position. If I can at least accomplish that first, maybe I won't seem so much of a child next to him."
"You know none of us think that." Dori couldn't, for all that he was having a hard time accepting it. He'd have liked to hold onto the image of Ori as a little dwarfling, still too small and innocent for the wide world. Ori had faced a dragon and fought a war, and by every passing day he was moving further away from Dori. Which was a good thing, he knew it was a good thing, young dwarves were supposed to grow up and move on with their lives. That didn't mean he couldn't be the slightest bit wistful, though. "And if you have not changed your mind on that, what is it you want changed?"

"I was hoping you could set a date for the wedding." Ori fiddled with the edge of his gloves; it'd get frayed in no time at that rate. "Because, well. I know I still need to finish my masterpiece, and my courting gift as well, but I'm working hard on them both. And, well, having a deadline might help with that? Because otherwise I'll just keep hemming and hawing over the last few points forever. And now that there are other scribes working with the court, if I really needed to I could take some time off from most of my duties to finish them on time."

"Why are you doing this?" There was an odd intensity to Kíli's gaze as he crawled closer, because apparently getting up to walk would have been too much of a hassle. "We've already told you —"

"It's not because of you and Tauriel," Ori cut him off. "At least, not only because of you. I don't want to wait too long, either, and I don't want to make Fíli wait so long because of me. And, well." He sighed, eyes firmly fixed on the hands in his lap. "Nori mentioned there had been rumours, that the lack of a date means the royal family hasn't fully accepted the engagement."

"Well, that's just absolutely ridiculous." Dís huffed. "Now, however much fun it might be to get to have a full round of renegotiations, I really don't think there's any need for that, precisely because we have no objections to the union. However, I do believe we could renegotiate the particular details. Do you agree, Master Dori?"

"Ori?" Dori reached over to touch his shoulder. "Are you certain about this?" He wasn't only referring to the request, and he suspected Ori knew it. If they set the wedding date, there would be virtually no going back. Certainly, Ori was a grown dwarf, and he seemed sure enough of calling Fíli his One, but Dori couldn't help but feel a bit protective, still. It was hard not to when Ori's courting braids were still wound copper wire clipped where his hair had been shorn. "I am." Ori finally looked up, meeting his eyes head on. "I want to marry Fíli, and I want to do it as soon as I reasonably can. There are many things I might have doubts about, but this is not one of them."

"Very well, then." Dori looked to Dís. "Do you have any particular preference for the time frame?"

"Actually, I did have a thought about this." Dís stroked her beard in thought. "I rather liked the idea of combining Thorin's wedding with Durin's Day. Really, I think that would be an excellent tradition to start for more royal weddings. Would the next one be too soon for you? Or will you be finished by then?"

"That should be plenty of time." Ori broke into a smile. "I'll have to tell Fíli as soon as he's done at the forges, then."

"Oh? You didn't speak to him first?" Dori blinked. That surprised him somewhat.

"No. I didn't want to get his hopes up in case the two of you didn't agree."

Dori wondered what Dís might say to that, but her attention didn't seem to be on Ori right now. Instead, she was looking past him toward her son. "Kíli? Is something on your mind?"
As Dori followed Dís's gaze, he noticed Kíli had finally stood up, but he also seemed awfully tense all of a sudden. He wasn't quite looking at them, much like Ori just a moment earlier, yet there was a very different air to it. "Kíli?"

"Mother." Even Kíli's voice was strained, his hands clenched. "I thought you had no opposition to Tauriel."

"And I don't." Dís frowned. "I'm rather fond of her, in fact. She is good for you and makes you happy, and that's all I could ask for. Goodness knows I'd rather see you married to an elf than sealed in a tomb."

"Then why would you do this?" There was a definite edge to his voice, now. "I was fine with waiting for the proper courting period, because it might stifle some of the protests. I was fine with waiting for Fíli to marry first, Mahal knows I was impatient for him to finally start courting Ori. But this? I have to wait three years to marry my One just because you want to cling to a particular date? Forgive me if it seems like just an excuse to give me more time to hopefully change my mind."

"What are you even talking about?" Her frown deepened. Dori couldn't help but agree with her confusion.

"Durin's Day." Kíli spat the words as though it were a curse instead of their greatest day. "You just said you want the royal weddings on the day, and Fíli goes first. Which means that by the time I get to my wedding, it'll have been over three years since I found my One, and nearly as long since I started courting her. Which may not be that long for one, but I rather hate the thought of wasting any time I could have with her, when it's already not going to be nearly enough."

"I never said I would make you wait that long."

"What, then? Is mine just not considered a royal wedding? Not that I particularly mind, Fíli's welcome to the throne and apparently Thorin's doing just fine in adding to the line, but I'd at least like to know beforehand if my marriage is going to have me officially disinherited." His hands, Dori noticed, were trembling, the edge of anger in his voice turning toward something very much like tears. He was still so very young, just as Ori was, for all that they had already lived through things many an old warrior couldn't imagine.

"Oh, Kíli." At last, Dís set aside her tea cup and stood up, crossing over to Kíli and drawing him in her arms. He came easily to her, letting her pull his head down on her shoulder. "I'd like to see that happen against your will as long as I draw breath. No, my love, I'm not making you wait."

"You misunderstand me, little one." Dís clicked her tongue. "Yes, since you are both courting, Fíli's welcome to the throne and apparently Thorin's doing just fine in adding to the line, but I'd at least like to know beforehand if my marriage is going to have me officially disinherited." His hands, Dori noticed, were trembling, the edge of anger in his voice turning toward something very much like tears. He was still so very young, just as Ori was, for all that they had already lived through things many an old warrior couldn't imagine.

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"It certainly sounds like it." Kíli's voice was somewhat muffled by her shoulder.

"You misunderstand me, little one." Dís clicked her tongue. "Yes, since you are both courting, Fíli must be wed first. And yes, I want you both married on Durin's Day. However, for all that the traditions may dictate in the matter of royal courtship… nowhere is it said how long beforehand the heir must be wed."

Kíli lifted his head and pulled away a little, a hopeful look on his face. "Do you mean…?"

"Aye." Dís nodded, a small smile on her lips. "If you've no opposition, I'd rather like to see both my sons wed on the same day. We'll just have Fíli and Ori say their vows first."

The hopeful expression broke into a bright grin. "Yes! Yes, that's brilliant. You're brilliant!"

"I rather like to think I am, yes." Dís ruffled his hair one last time before stepping away. "Now, why don't you run off to inform Tauriel as well? I think she'd rather like to know the wedding date has
"Right. Right!" Kíli spun on his heels, then more or less ran out. Dís looked after him, shaking her head with a fond smile.

"I suppose I should go tell Fíli as well, though I'll probably be a bit slower, just so I don't trip over my own feet." Ori stood up, and this time he was the one who touched Dori's shoulder. "Thank you, Dori. I really do want this."

"I only want you to be happy." And if this was what it took, well, Dori would do whatever he needed to make it happen.

Perhaps it was time to turn his discussion with Dís toward the subject of wedding attire.

* Good evening. " Bofur grinned as he stepped into Bombur's apartment, finding Vati standing at the stove. A proper stove had been Bombur's only wish when looking for an apartment for his family, and they'd found him the best and the biggest and paid workers to fix it up where age had touched it. "You two haven't had enough of cooking for the day?"

"Just trying out a recipe Bilbo gave me. I figure if I can get it right, he'd appreciate me introducing it to the royal kitchens." Vati stirred the pot slowly, nodding to her side. "Someone's been waiting for you." Indeed, Bilbur looked up from where he was playing on the floor, squealing with joy as he saw Bofur.

"Well, hello there." Bofur grinned as he bent down to pick Bilbur into his arms. "How's my favourite nephew on this fine day?"

"He's your only nephew, Bofur." And yet Vati was grinning at him, so clearly she couldn't be very annoyed or anything.

"You know what, I do think he is. How about you do something about that, hmm?"

"Don't make me hit you with a ladle." She would do it, too. Bofur knew better than to mess with his sister-in-law. "Also, you start joking about that, I might just start telling you all about what we've been doing to work on that, hmm?"

"Please don't!" Bofur lifted the baby in his arms as though Bilbur could shield him from any unwanted details. "I wish you two all happiness and joy, I really do, but there are things a dwarf just doesn't need to know about his baby brother!"

"Oh, she wouldn't." Bombur chuckled as he walked into the room as well. "And how has your day been, my Lord?"

"Great until you called me that." Bofur made a face. "Didn't we talk about this? No lords inside the family. I'm no lord to anyone who's ever had to haul my drunken arse to bed."

"Well, certainly it's hard to think of you as very lordly after the time you decided to be sick in your trousers because it was apparently better than your hat."

"Bombur, hear that? Your darling wife is making fun of me. How can you allow her to treat me like this?" Bofur sighed, sitting down in a nearby chair to better bounce Bilbur on his knee. "Why, you go on like that, I soon won't tell you about all this lovely gossip I've heard regarding the kitchens."
"You go on like that, I might not set you a plate for supper." Oh, please. Like Vati would actually allow anyone to go hungry in her home. She and Bombur were rather perfectly suited to each other.

"Well, I'm not supposed to be speaking of this yet, since it's not been through the council yet, but the Lady Dís said it's a done deal and I'd like to see those pompous arses contradict her." He couldn't help but grin at the thought, for all that he knew they wouldn't be foolish enough to try. "That little plan I told you about, that Thorin was considering? Well, looks like it's happening. The crown's going to be paying the kitchens to feed the miners."

"Really?" Bombur's eyes widened. "For free?"

"Aye. For five years for a start, after that he'll see how well it's worked." Public kitchens were common enough in dwarven settlements, offering cheap food to the workers. Even if the food on offer was only porridge and stew, it was still more than a hungry miner had time and skill to make after a long day, and often cheaper for them to buy than to make a small pot from scratch. To offer the same all on the king's coin, though, was a bold move; it was clear Thorin was working hard to tempt back all who would come.

Though then, it wasn't like Erebor couldn't afford it. He sometimes wondered if Thorin wasn't just in a hurry to spend as much of the gold as he could, before it tempted either another worm from the north or the return of his sickness.

"Even if it's only miners to start with, and many of them already eat at the kitchens, if it's free there'll surely be many more." Vati shook her head. "Well! Seems you'll have to find a lot more helpers, hmm, Bombur dear?"

"Indeed." Bombur nodded. "It's going to be busy."

"You'll get to know as soon as it's decided for certain, so there'll be time to find more hands. Would be a shame indeed not to feed all the hungry mouths, after all."

"Not like you'll know much about that, I'd wager." Vati smirked at him as though she were amused at his expense. "We haven't seen much of you since that tavern of yours started selling food as well."

"It's closer to the mines, that's all. Can't be arsed to walk very far after a long day just to get a plate and a tankard."

"Ah, yes. And I'm sure that's also the reason you haven't tried out any of the other new taverns, yet." Vati glanced at Bombur. "Remember how he was in Ered Luin? The moment a new place opened, or even an old one changed their offerings, this one had to go see what it was about, and then tell us all about it. Yet now we haven't heard a peep from him even though there's a new place open every week, it seems."

Bombur just smiled and shrugged, the traitor. "We know why."

"I think we do, yes." Vati offered Bofur a sweet smile. "So when are you going to bring her around for dinner?"

"Bring who? Where? There's nobody to bring."

"So you're telling me you haven't even approached her yet? For shame, Bofur. I thought you'd know better than this." She clicked her tongue at him. "We all know you only frequent that tavern so much because of the pretty owner. Do something about that, hmm?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Okay, so perhaps he did have some idea, but he didn't
see any reason to rush things. Besides, there was no reason to think she'd even be interested if he did make some advances. She certainly didn't seem to be too interested in his title the few times he'd actually spoken with her beyond ordering, which frankly was a relief, but also meant he had very little left with which to impress.

"Well, figure it out, then." Vati shook her head, but then smiled. "You know we want to see you happy, Bofur. And if she'd do that for you, we'd gladly welcome her to the family."

"I know. Just not sure there's anything much there for me to pursue."

"As I said, figure it out." She tasted her cooking, smacking her lips together in thought before going on. "Speaking of such things, do you know if Bifur has anyone in his sights? I mean, I've seen no indication there is, but I'd like to know if there's something going on."

"Not to my knowledge, no." Bofur frowned despite himself. "And even if there was, I'm not sure it'd matter."

"Ah." Bombur nodded in thought. "Because of Timpur?"

"Would make sense, wouldn't it? I mean, I know he's not without love, but I haven't seen him show interest in anyone since."

"Timpur?" Vati frowned, looking confused. "What, did he use to have someone?"

"Not quite like that. Timpur, well. He was our other cousin, as it happens."

"I don't think I've heard much of him. Is this something I shouldn't ask about?"

"It's not a secret, no, just not something we talk of very often. A bit of a sad tale, it is." Bofur kept a smile on his face, though, still bouncing Bilbur up and down. No reason to worry the little tyke, after all. "Timpur was Bifur's brother, younger than him by some seven years. Best whittler I ever saw in my years, no way could Bifur or I even compete."

"Since they were so close, they often competed in everything." Bombur scratched at his beard. "I think Timpur was upset one time that Bifur managed everything first, being older and all."

"That's what we were told, at least," Bofur added. "This happened when they were just lads, before my baby brother was even born. So Bifur made him a promise. Said that whatever else he did first, he'd not court and marry until Timpur had done it first."

"Right." Vati frowned. "What happened to him, then?" It wasn't a hard guess for her to make, Bofur supposed. After all, she'd been part of the family long enough to realise she'd never met such a dwarf.

"He took a job on a trading caravan, as a guard and a general busybody, as I recall." Bofur glanced at his brother, who shrugged, finding no fault in his recollection. "He was a fair hand with a hammer, I think, would have made a fine smith if he hadn't been so in love with his knives. It was… why, it's almost been seventy years since, only a couple of years to go, I think. I wasn't quite yet hundred when we waved him off, and Bombur here was just barely into his majority."

"And he didn't return." It wasn't a question, this time.

"No, he didn't. When we went to meet the returning caravan, he was nowhere to be seen." Bofur shook his head. "The traders were honest folk at least, gave us his earned wages and told us what happened. They'd been beset by orcs, a whole hungry pack of them. Timpur might have been fine,
except he made to protect a dam who was part of the caravan. I hear she was feisty enough with a set of knives herself, but hardly a warrior. Timpur got between her and a warg, and became a chew toy in her stead."

"A hero's death for a mere whittler," Bombur added gruffly. "She buried him herself, or so we heard."

"Aye. She sent her thanks, too, and regrets she couldn't come meet us. She was in a hurry to get home, with two sons waiting for her." Bilbur giggled at the bounces, chewing on his little fist, and Bofur managed a smile in response. "'S what he wanted, I think. He'd never have chosen to keep his life at the cost of orphaning two."

"He sounds like he was a good dwarf, then." Vati frowned down at her pot. "And you think Bifur might be still holding himself to that promise?"

"I wouldn't know, really. Never seen him do much about finding love, though, so that's as good an explanation as any." Bofur shook his head. "Of course, there's also the whole thing with the axe and the head and things. Some people seem to find that a problem, and it doesn't exactly make him happy when they do. Maybe he's just given up on it."

"Well, it's useless for us to guess at it, I suppose." Vati gave a decisive nod. "What matters is that he's got a family either way, and we're not about to treat him badly."

"Indeed we aren't." Bofur couldn't help but grin as he saw Bombur flush and mutter something to himself. He always got so adorably flustered when Vati spoke of Bofur and Bifur as her family as well.

It was true enough, anyway. They all had a family, and a fine family it was, too, so much better and more important than grand bloodlines and ancient oaths, since a name alone did not warm a hearth and no ancestor laughed and tugged at his beard with such tiny hands and bright eyes.

And if he or even Bifur ever chose to bring someone else into the family, well, he was sure they would be warmly welcomed, too.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Thorin may be tired after a long day, but thankfully he has a lovely husband and spirited little golden leaves to cheer him up. Bilbo, on the other hand, finds out new things about his parents's life before him -- though he may not be the one who is most deeply affected by the revelation.

Meanwhile, Nori just wants to go out with his brother, only to run into someone he'd really rather have never seen again.

Chapter Notes

Since this chapter mentions ages once again, I figure this is a good time to point out that I have a chart of various family relationships/ages (for the dwarves) here. It also serves as a little guide to how I imagine the various parents/spouses/other relatives look.

Also, if you missed it, I posted a little Kili/Tauriel piece in honour of the recent lunar eclipse. It's set in the future of this 'verse, but I promise it doesn't spoil anything crucial (unless, of course, you're really worried about how Thorin and Bilbo's baby efforts turn out).

Of the new names in this chapter, "Loka" is Finnish for "mud".

Please note: this chapter includes discussion of/references to miscarriage and potential loss of child, as well as (in another, unrelated scene) a mention of attempted child murder. Please read accordingly.

"You look tired."

"Why, thank you." Thorin sighed, rolling his shoulders as he walked further into their rooms. "Next you'll tell me I look like a dwarf, might be a bit less obvious."

"Now, there's no need for you to get snippy with me." Bilbo sniffed, looking back down at his knitting. Thorin wasn't sure if Ori was a good or bad influence, but he had to say he liked seeing Bilbo crafting with his hands.

"Perhaps, then, you might find some other greeting for your husband." Thorin sighed again. "Sorry. My patience has been worn down quite harshly by all the idiots I've been dealing with."

"Oh, my poor thing." Bilbo made a sympathetic sound that seemed sincere enough. "Was anything accomplished, at least?"

"Some things, yes. Which at best means that next time I'll be dealing with different idiots." Thorin ran a hand over his hair. "The new throne is coming along well, by the way. They'll soon be ready to
move it to the throne room for finishing touches."

"I note you're still speaking of a single throne." Bilbo lifted his eyebrows, though he seemed more amused than offended. That was a good thing. Thorin wasn't going to back down on wanting seats for his consort and heir as well, but for all that he didn't expect Bilbo to be there most of the time, Thorin didn't want him feeling awkward about the whole thing.

"Well, it's designed as a single thing, that's all." He watched as Bilbo carefully set his knitting on a side table and stood up. "Am I interrupting you?"

"No, I was just about to go to the garden, that's all. Make sure everything's watered properly and all that." Bilbo extended a hand toward him. "Come with me?"

"Gladly." He might have understood very little about the whole business of gardening, but he did enjoy seeing Bilbo putting about in his cave. Thorin rarely had time to sit and watch Bilbo work there for long, but he did often accompany his husband for shorter rounds of the garden.

If he spent most of his time speaking to the tiny little plant that reached its goldish green leaves further up every day, well, Bilbo never said anything about it.

"So what have you done with your day?" he asked as they walked down the hallway toward the garden. "I don't think I've seen you since breakfast, and it'll soon be time for dinner."

"Oh, this and that. I had a nice, long talk with Bombur and a couple of his people about the thing with the kitchens, and accompanied Dís for a visit to a couple of the guilds. I also met with Gimli; he asked me to help him work on his letters."

"Oh?" Thorin frowned. That didn't sound right. "Why? I know he can read and write, Glóin wouldn't allow anything else. Glóin has also been boasting about his neat runes since he could barely scratch his name, and from what little I've seen, it's not all just a proud father's gloating. He certainly has neater writing than Kíli."

"In runes and Khuzdul, certainly. But he's rather uncertain of his written Westron, it seems, and wanted my help on that."

"Whatever would he need that for?" Thorin wasn't being dismissive, he certainly didn't mean to be, he just honestly had no idea why Gimli would be so eager to write in Westron. Unless he was writing to Bilbo himself, any personal correspondence he had might as well be taken care of in Khuzdul.

"You see, not everyone in the world reads Khuzdul. And it might even be someone he wants to impress, in a way." Bilbo paused, though whether this was because he was now climbing the couple of steps up into the garden or to actually take a break from his words was not entirely clear. "Promise you won't repeat this to anyone? Especially not to Glóin and Kulta? I know they're his parents, but the lad is at the age where he needs some privacy from them."

"I promise." And now, this was sounding very interesting.

"Apparently, he has been writing letters to Sigrid."

"Sigrid?" Thorin blinked. "Bard's eldest?"

"The very same." Bilbo went over to where he kept his tools, taking the watering can that had been carefully made to fit his hands, shaped to hold enough water to be of some use without getting too heavy for him at full. "It's not just an idle rumour or anything, either. Gimli himself wouldn't tell me
why he needs to better his Westron, but you know Dori's often visited Bard's household, and he told me Bain and Tilda confirm Gimli has often brought letters to Sigrid, and received messages in turn."

"Well, that's certainly an authoritative source." Thorin paid little attention to the rest of the garden, focusing on the little plant in the middle. He'd last seen it this morning, when he helped Bilbo uncover the crystals, yet he could swear it had grown just a bit since then. "Dori's not one for making up gossip, or repeating anything he isn't certain of."

"Oh, I agree." Bilbo nodded, starting his round around the garden to water any patch that might seem in need of it. How he determined this, Thorin didn't know, but he trusted Bilbo's judgement on the matter. "Dori seems to think it is nothing but friendship; it appears he was the one to introduce them, thinking Sigrid might enjoy the company of another young thing who won't be jumping up and down at the sight of her. That's all the more reason not to spread this around, though. You know what everyone will think if they hear, and I'd hate for them to halt their friendship just because others misunderstand it."

"I promise you, I will not spread this to anyone." Thorin shook his head. "Though I have to say, I rather hope it is nothing but friendship, if only for Gimli's own sake."

"What do you mean?" Bilbo frowned. "Do you think his parents would disapprove of the match?"

"That, I do not know. However, I fear that whether they do or not, such a love would only bring Gimli pain." Thorin sighed, letting his fingers carefully brush against the edge of one gold-dusted leaf. "Now, they are both young. In fifty years' time, she will be nearing the end of her life, while Gimli will still be counted young among our numbers."

Bilbo was quiet for a while, not looking at Thorin as he moved around the garden. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. "I am not a dwarf, Thorin, nor have I been given the lifespan of one. In fifty years' time, I will be near the end of my life as well, if indeed I have not passed already by then."

"I'm aware." Oh, was he ever aware of how precious each moment with his One was. "But I am not young, Bilbo, for all that I may not be old either. If I have another fifty years and no more, I will not have much cause to complain; if I am given another century, that will be a full life indeed. Yet Gimli can reasonably expect to live another two centuries if no blade claims him first, and two and a half would not be unheard of. I'm sure you can see the difference there."

"That's not all of it, though, is it." Bilbo's voice was still quiet.

"No, it is not." Thorin sighed again. "I have some hope, hope that I hold onto as tight as I can, that we might find each other again after we pass. Your people are beloved by Lady Yavanna, and she might turn the Maker's heart. However, it seems unlikely he might allow for one of the Tall folk to join us in our rest."

"It's useless to wonder about such things when we know so little." Bilbo shook his head. "I don't even know where hobbits are supposed to go when we pass. It's an impractical notion to worry about in this life, so we give little thought to such questions. If I can join you, I will be content; certainly it would be more interesting than whatever passes for an afterlife for my people."

"And if you can't, then I will lie down in my rest, until the world's reforged and we may be reunited." Thorin shook his head. "Forgive me. I've brought us to rather maudlin topics."

"You didn't speak alone, and it's a valid concern. Even so, I say we should not worry of something that might not come to pass at all." Bilbo paused next to him, touching his shoulder, before
continuing his walk around the little garden. Thorin kept his eyes on the plant. Had they been on stone, he could have followed Bilbo's footsteps through his stone sense alone, at so close a distance; the thick layer of dirt, however, muted his senses, just as it muffled what little sound Bilbo's bare feet might have otherwise made. As such, he could not keep track of Bilbo's movements, not until he suddenly realised Bilbo was standing next to him.

"I'm sorry." He stood up, dusting off his knees. "Was I ignoring you for long?"

"I'd have made some noise if I minded." Bilbo smiled a little. "You were speaking to it again."

"Seems like something one would do." He scratched his beard, trying to hide his embarrassment. "I have some vague memory of my father doing so when my mother was expecting Frerin, though I was too young to recall if he did the same for Dís. And again, Tuli often spoke to Dís's belly every time she was bearing. I used to wonder why they would do so, yet now I find myself drawn to do the same."

"You do know that's not quite yet the baby, don't you?" Bilbo stepped closer, until their chests were almost touching. "The first leaves grow before the fruit does. Soon enough there'll be a bloom, and that starts to grow into the fruit as the rest of the plant grows around it, but for now, there's nothing there that will actually be part of the fauntling."

"It's all from the same seed. Seems close enough for me." Thorin smiled. "Besides, if I don't say the things on my mind now, I might not remember them later. Do you think it's strange, my speaking to the seedling?"

"Endearing more than strange. It's a common enough habit in the Shire, or so I hear, though not generally one started so early in the seedling's life."

"Then I see no reason to stop." He reached his arms around Bilbo and drew him closer, because clearly it was just wrong for them to be half a step apart when they could be flush against each other instead. "There is little enough I can do, since I know little about gardening. So I try to do what I can to help, even if it's only paying attention."

"You do so much more than that. And even if I might be able to handle the gardening part alone, I wouldn't even dream of growing a child on my own." Bilbo looked up at Thorin, a smile playing on his lips. "Say. How long is it until dinner?"

"Not long, I don't think. I suppose we should soon get changed to be on time." It was a good thing, having family around for dinners, even if — or perhaps especially since — it meant Dís would show up to drag him out by his ear if any official business that was not absolutely urgent threatened to take up his dinner time. "Why do you ask? Hobbit belly starting to pain you?"

"Well, there is that, but that's not why I asked." Bilbo's hands settled on his chest, only to start sliding down right away. Thorin couldn't help but shiver as Bilbo continued right past his stomach. "If we had more time, I'd ask you to take me to bed. Since we don't, though… well. I'll have to be quick, I suppose."

Thorin almost asked what Bilbo had in mind, except just then those clever hobbit hands found the ties on his trousers, deftly opening them. The next moment there was no more hobbit in his arms, because Bilbo had slipped away and down, and Mahal as his witness, Thorin had never seen anything more enticing than the sight of Bilbo kneeling in front of him, looking up at him with darkened eyes. Well, except perhaps the sight of Bilbo spread out on his bed, but then there would be more time after dinner.
Of course, then Bilbo tugged down his trousers and breeches both and leaned in, and Thorin had to leave future plans for later.

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Ever since they'd had the entrance room to the royal apartments furnished and heated, Kíli had spent little time in his own rooms except to sleep.

It wasn't just because he still could not spend time with Tauriel in his rooms, though that certainly factored in. No, mostly it was because this reminded him of their little home in Ered Luin, where they all gathered in their main room in the late evenings when there was no work to be done, with little chores and crafts to occupy their hands and songs and stories to do the same for their minds. The room was bigger now, heated by water inside the walls and floors rather than a fireplace they could barely afford to keep blazing, with members of the Company dropping by as often as his nearest and dearest, but for the small part of Kíli that still held some longing for the mountain where he had spent the most important years of his life, it was similar enough.

This was better than even his fondest memories, though. This was better because right now Thorin was smiling as he played his harp, singing songs of great triumphs and love rather than lost treasures and longing, stealing the occasional glance at Bilbo, who was curled up with a book of some sort. This was better because his mother was working on something she enjoyed, rather than something she needed to finish right away for a customer to bring in some little coin, or worse yet neglect her own craft entirely to help Thorin and Dwalin and Fíli at the smithy. Dwalin and Fíli weren't even there, yet that was better too, since he knew they were each spending the late evening hours with their loves instead of working as long as they could, with Dwalin and Nori doing who knew what while Fíli at least pretended to be decent by sitting at the Ri entrance room under Dori's watchful eye to keep Ori company while he worked on his masterpiece.

And Tauriel was here, of course, sitting in front of Kíli for him to braid her lovely hair while they spoke in simple Khuzdul to allow her to practice, and nothing in his life had ever been better than this, seeing his beloved sit with his family without any worry about whether she would be accepted.

"So, do you mind if I ask what you are reading, Bilbo?" Dís asked. "That looks like one of the books Glóin insisted on bringing along, but I don't think you'd be quite so engrossed in your own writing."

"You're right on both counts, as it happens." Bilbo lowered the book to smile at her over the top of it. "This is one of my father's journals, actually. He kept a diary for most of his life, and those volumes were included in the books Glóin brought me. It has been rather interesting reading."

"Oh?" Thorin paused in his singing, though his fingers still plucked at the harp strings. "And what is so interesting about it?"

"Well, for one thing, I may have found out why I was an only child." Bilbo's smile softened, his eyes falling down to the book in his lap. "Apparently, they tried before, several times in fact. However, each time the seed was not quite ready to plant, or withered for some other reason.

"Oh." Thorin frowned, now. "That's not a fear for us, is it?"

"I hope not." Bilbo shook his head. "From my father's notes, most times it was clear from the beginning that the seedling was struggling, and ours is doing well from what little I know. The one time they lost it later, the summer was short, so it wasn't ready for the harsh winter that followed. That, at least, is not a worry for us here in the mountain."

"I have to say, I'm still rather fascinated by this way of yours, Bilbo." Dís did look curious. "So if
you are all grown in gardens, does this mean that all hobbits are born in harvest time?"

"Most of us are, yes." Bilbo turned another page. "Some in the spring, if the summer falls short and
the fruit must winter another year, or even in the summer if the timing is bad or they got to planting
very early. Most will be born between late summer and the end of harvest, though, as it's considered
rather unwise to plant at a time that would require the seedling to winter twice, that always adds to
the risks. Never in the winter. The fruit will not ripen in the cold."

"It seems a complicated thing, still. But then, if your lasses are indeed the same size or smaller than
you, it's probably worth the hassle." Dís shook her head. "Mahal knows just about anything would
be easier than the birth of Kíli was."

"Oi! I can't help how I was made!" He'd heard often enough how hard his mother had worked to
make him, most often when he'd been reluctant to do some chore or another. It wasn't until much
later, in hushed tones and not much detail, that he'd heard making him had almost claimed his
mother's life.

Now that he knew in rather too much detail just what the birthing of a child entailed, he felt even
more guilty for everything he'd put her through in his life.

His mother was hale and hearty now, though, smiling at him in a teasing manner. "Just be warned,
Tauriel. The line of Durin breeds thick skulls and not much sense. I couldn't help my fate, being of
the line myself, but you might still be able to flee."

"I thank you for your warning, Lady Dís, but not much of that surprises me." And this? This was
betrayal of the worst kind, clearly. He wasn't sure if he'd ever recover from such a blow. "And in any
case I see no reason to worry about the practical implications of that just yet."

"I should hope not." Dís smirked, then switched to Khuzdul, probably to help Tauriel practise some
more. "So, have you thought much more about what you'd like to wear for the wedding?"

And apparently that was what they were speaking of now, and even Kíli had to take part, because
while his best armour would serve him well for the ceremony it was simply not an option for the
feast. Not that he had much of an opinion, either way; as long as he ended up married to Tauriel by
the end of it all, he would be happy. He rather suspected Tauriel shared his opinion, but they both
knew better than to voice it. This was the only wedding his mother would get to plan for her
children; he didn't blame her for wanting it to be perfect.

They had just moved on to discuss the exact shade of blue that would be best for the new tunic that
was apparently absolutely required for Kíli's wedding clothes when they were interrupted by a small,
distressed sound from Bilbo. Everyone turned to look at him at once, Thorin pausing in his playing.

"Bilbo?" Thorin frowned in concern. "What is it?"

"It's, ah." Bilbo wet his lips. "I… I think I found my father's notes from when they planted me."

Kíli might have teased him about it, or made some crude comment, but Bilbo's expression was not
that of one who had come across embarrassing revelations about his parents. Rather, he looked…
pained.

"Is it something you'd like to share?" Kíli wasn't sure when he'd last heard his mother speak with
such gentle tones. Perhaps when she'd been speaking to Fíli during his confession.

"I… I suppose, but I'm not sure you'd all enjoy hearing it." Bilbo glanced at them. "I mean, it's not
exactly… well. It's not very happy."
"We're all adults here." Kili was almost startled to realise that Thorin was counting him in that number, but then, it was true enough. He was a full-grown dwarf, for all that he was still a couple of years shy of his second majority, sitting here with his betrothed. It was still a surprise to have others acknowledge it as well, though.

"Very well." Bilbo cleared his throat, then began to read, his hands clutching the book tight. "Today, we have made our last attempt at planting a seed. Belladonna smiles, but I suspect she feels the same fear that holds my heart. We've been disappointed a great many times, and to feel that pain fresh again seems a burden I would not readily bear. Belladonna agrees with me, for all her smiles. She told me that whatever happens, whether this seed brings fruit or not, she will not try again, for fear of another failure and the pain that brings."

Bilbo paused, but nobody spoke up. They waited in silence until he was ready to go on.

"I have heard of the superstition, of course, that burying an offering with the seed might make Lady Yavanna look upon it more favourably. I've never put much stock in it, though I've heard that many a precious thing has been buried, never to be found again. However, it seems Belladonna has some faith in it, at least enough to make an attempt."

Bilbo's voice caught, now, and Thorin stood from where he was seated at his harp, walking over to lean over the back of the couch and reach his arms around Bilbo. This seemed to give the little hobbit the strength to continue.

"I wasn't sure what she meant to offer, but it seems she thought further on this than I ever did. After we placed the seed in the ground, she brought out the leaves she had saved from our previous seedlings, one from each, neatly dried and pressed. These she buried, surrounding the seed, telling me she could not imagine anything more precious she could give to the Lady."

"Oh, Mahal." Dís blinked, and Kili hadn't seen her so close to tears in ages. "That's… I can't even imagine doing that."

"It's another hobbit tradition, the leaves." Bilbo drew a deep breath, then reached for the length of ribbon he was using as a bookmark. Clearly he would read no further today. "If the seedling withers, or the fruit dies for some reason, it's custom to bury it all in the ground, except for one leaf, to remind us that the seed took root at least. For my mother to have offered up all evidence of the chances she lost for the sake of this one… well. She was right, really. I can't imagine anything she might have sacrificed that might have been more precious to her."

Thorin drew Bilbo closer, and it wasn't hard to guess what he had to be thinking of. Dís, too, wore a distant look, one hand creeping toward her stomach. Kili had heard, of course, of the many attempts it had taken Mahal to finish his work on Fíli. Never before had he wondered, though, how that might have felt at the point when his parents had not yet known as a certainty that the work would ever be finished.

He didn't know that pain, not truly. He'd never held hope of a child, still didn't know if that was a hope he might ever be allowed to have, if the Valar would smile so upon his unusual union. He knew the look on his mother's face, though, the one she'd had when she first let Fíli go on a short working trip with Thorin and spent days pretending she was not worried at all, the one that had been there again when she'd seen them off on the quest, fear masked behind forced dignity and grace. He knew the look on Thorin's face, too, from waking up on nights during the quest to find Thorin watching them with fear he'd never show during the day, from the first horrid moments after the battle when they hadn't yet known how Fíli had fared.

Looking at them now, at Thorin and Bilbo and his mother, a part of him wondered if he even wanted
to have that hope, if it came with such fear to accompany it.

Then Tauriel moved, now leaning against his side instead of seated in front of him, and as he reached
an arm around her he decided he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

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"So." Ori was fiddling with the corner of a bolt of fabric with the studious expression of one who
might not have been an expert on the matter himself, but had spent the better part of his life around
people who handled fabric for a living. "Care to tell me why you're here, exactly?"

"I have no idea what you mean." Nori had to say, he was somewhat impressed. Ori had started the
conversation in Khuzdul, which he rarely did around people who weren't dwarves, not wanting to
appear impolite. However, his casual tone made it appear as though he was merely commenting on
the fabric. The human holding the booth certainly didn't seem to notice anything amiss with this,
paying little attention to them in favour of serving a customer who was ready to make a purchase.
There had been some attempts at getting on their good side at first, of course, even men who had no
idea about braids or beads could see the value of the golden beads that Ori now wore in his hair, and
someone peddling fabric would pay more attention to the rich fabrics than the simple cut of their
clothes. However, after a polite dismissal from Ori the man had focused on a more likely customer,
which Nori had to admit was probably the more profitable approach.

"Please, Nori. I'm not actually that stupid, you know." Ori's tone was still light, a slight smile on his
face as he toyed with another fabric sample, and not for the first time Nori had to wonder just how
much Ori had learnt from him instead of Dori over the years. "Why did you want to come with me?"

"What, I can't keep company for my own little brother now without it being suspicious?" Nori
shrugged, reaching out to test the corner himself. It really was nice fabric, he decided. They'd have to
get some for Dori. "I told you, I have my own errands to run here. You're not the only one with
things to do and people to see, you know."

"Oh, I know. Except the things you do and the people you see are usually the kind of things and
people you don't want me to get involved with." Ori's smile never wavered. "Besides, I know for a
fact you prefer not to be recognised when you're in Dale, and you've said yourself it's much harder to
avoid when you're with me or Dori."

"Maybe I have my reasons." It was correct, anyway. When he was on his own it was relatively easy
to change his hair style and clothing and blend into the ever increasing numbers of dwarves
wandering about Dale. A different posture, a different accent, and even dwarves who actually knew
him could be fooled long enough for him to pass by unnoticed. As soon as he was standing next to
the well-known beauty that was Dori, or the pretty face and rich clothing of Ori, the association
made him much easier to recognise. Not that he was complaining, really; he wasn't exactly
begrudging his brothers the recognition and easy life they damn well deserved, but Ori was right in
that it rarely served his own ends.

"And what would those reasons be?" Ori lifted his eyebrows, probably appearing a bit critical about
the next bolt of fabric to anyone nearby who didn't understand Khuzdul. "Because if you say
anything about my needing protection or the like, I'm going to have some sharp words for you."

"No, nothing like that." And it wasn't, really. He knew well enough that Ori had visited Dale on his
own several times, and had full confidence in his ability to defend himself from a sudden threat, just
as he was certain Ori knew himself well enough to take a break from the crowds when he needed it.
"Actually, I decided to come with you because for once I'd rather like to be recognised for who I
am."
"Should I even ask why that is?" Ori seemed amused more than suspicious. That was good. There was actually no reason for him to be suspicious, not this time.

"Honestly? I'm trying to keep an ear out for any rumours regarding Dori."

"Dori?" Ori frowned. "Why would you think there are any rumours? And why would you listen for them in Dale, anyway? Surely people would be speaking about Dori in Erebor."

"Except it's his visits to Dale that I want some information about." Oh, his network of eyes and ears in Erebor was extensive enough to have its tendrils in Dale as well, but sometimes nothing beat a bit of good, old-fashioned legwork. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed him coming here more often lately."

"Well, yes, but that's been on guild business. That, and he's been helping with the opening of the market in Erebor." Ori shrugged. "I mean, what else could he be up to? You know he's not interested in love, so it's not like he's carrying on an affair or anything, even if you could imagine Dori doing anything but the most proper of any courtships ever."

"I don't think he's having an affair, no. Which is why I'm rather curious as to what he's up to."

"And you didn't think of simply asking him? Surely that would be more accurate than going around looking for rumours told by people who don't actually know him beyond occasionally seeing him about."

"And you think he'd tell me if I did?" As though that would happen. Dori rather delighted in keeping him in the dark when he could. He knew just how badly that irritated Nori.

"I could always ask for you." Ori offered him an innocent smile. "You know he can't lie to me."

"Oh, I know. You're frightening that way." Though he supposed he was to blame more than anything. He was rather certain a big part of why Ori could notice lies so easily was because he had spent so much time deciphering the truths in what Nori said.

"Or maybe I just have a good relationship with my brother." Ori pursed his lips. "Do you think Dori would find a use for this? It's a really nice colour, but I don't think he's working on anything for himself right now, and you know he prefers to pick materials for orders himself."

"Just buy some of it. If he can't find any use for it, I will." And wasn't it just wonderful, really, that they could be discussing buying a very nice fabric as a gift for Dori just because they liked the look of it, without worrying over every last coin.

"Indeed, because that won't annoy him at all, you claiming fabrics from his stash." And yet Ori was already motioning for the man selling the fabrics.

"He wouldn't let me do it if it actually bothered him."

Ori switched to Westron, now, telling the man which fabrics he wanted and how much of them, while Nori lingered nearby, turning his attention to the rest of the crowd. The marketplace in Dale was a huge place, reaching out to several small alleyways branching out from the central square, all filled with stalls and booths selling very nearly everything imaginable. It was still not as impressive as the old market before Smaug, from what little he could remember and had been told, but it was still quite a sight so soon after the resettling of the city.

There weren't as many dwarves in this corner of the area, most preferring to deal with dwarven traders, which was why they had been relatively safe in using Khuzdul for their shared conversation.
Not that there had been any actual secrets traded, but Nori did appreciate the privacy anyway. Perhaps it was this relative lack of dwarves that drew his eye to the short figure moving between the men and women and even the occasional elf, perhaps something else caught his attention, some mannerism or feature that was too small for his conscious mind to register yet his instincts picked up without delay. He liked his instincts, they'd kept him alive through many a hard turn. If his gut was telling him to be wary of someone, he tended to listen.

Of course, then he actually had a better look at the dwarf, and he froze for a moment.

It was only thanks to long years of never showing what he was actually feeling that Nori was able to shake off the shock, straightening himself. "Ori?" He kept his tone light, rather unfitting for the words he used, opting for Khuzdul once again. This was really not something he wanted some curious trader repeating to his friends later. "I'm going to go speak to a particular dwarf. Don't approach unless there are weapons drawn, but keep an eye on us, all right? I want you to remember his face."

Perhaps Ori understood the urgency of his strange request, as he didn't question this, only smiled and nodded before turning his attention back to the man. Nori gave him one last glance, then started striding through the crowd, his destination clear in his mind.

"Afternoon." The smile he offered to the dwarf was perhaps sharper than he usually wore when he was supposed to be on legitimate business, but then, he was not yet convinced this particular encounter truly merited his more legitimate persona. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Why wouldn't I be here?" There was a flicker of something in the dwarf's eyes, recognition perhaps, but it faded quickly. Well. Nori supposed it had been a while, and he had changed much in the last few years, but really. They'd butted heads often enough before. "Who are you to concern yourself with where I am, anyway?"

"Ah, do forgive me my manners. Nori, son of Vuori." Not at his service, never at this service, not even if that were the only thing keeping another dragon away from the mountain. "While you are Loka, are you not?"

"Ah, do forgive me my manners. Nori, son of Vuori." Not at his service, never at this service, not even if that were the only thing keeping another dragon away from the mountain. "While you are Loka, are you not?"

Now the flicker returned and twisted into something sharper, colder. "Ah, yes. I didn't recognise you without all that dirt and the smell of desperation."

"Really, now, there's no need to be harsh like that." Nori spread his hands in what was supposed to be a conciliatory gesture, except he was constantly very aware of the location of his knives, of his distance from Loka, of how and where each of them might move at any given moment and how that might end badly. "I've come a rather long way in life, I'll admit that. Got us quite the cosy life here in Erebor, my brothers and I have."

"Oh, yes. I've heard you're quite the heroes now, huh. Got yourselves gold and everything." So that was what this was about. He should have known.

"Indeed." Now, he allowed his smirk to turn even sharper, clearly threatening even to someone who might see them from the outside. "Too bad for you that banishments aren't removed just because the king changes."

"And how do you propose to enforce that?" Loka lifted his eyebrows. "Is it true, then, that your brother managed to whore himself out to the prince?"

"It's true that he's being courted by the prince." And he would not let anyone cast any shadows upon that particular courtship, certainly not scum like this. "However, I have no reason to make use of any
such connections. You see," he brushed a hand against his hair, lingering for just a moment over one of his courtship braids, "I have rather the close link to the Captain of the Guard, myself."

"Oh, yes. Finally found someone worth spreading your legs for, eh? Or was the trouble finding someone who'd have you?" Loka sneered. "Though then, I have heard the house of Durin has made rather strange choices for bedmates of late. I suppose it's not that much of a surprise one of them would even want a freak like you."

"And yet I'm more wanted than you ever were." Nori smirked, enjoying the look of anger this earned him. "But, yes. I'm spreading my legs for the Captain, and in return for that he'll gladly make sure you don't set foot where you're not supposed to. And before you try to do something smart like threatening me with revealing what I've done, don't bother. He's very much aware of who and what I am, and what I've done in the past. There's nothing true you could tell him that would shock him, and no lies he wouldn't check with me first."

"You really are rather sure of your position, huh?" Loka actually had the gall to give him a defiant look. "I was under the impression the new king welcomes all who would return to Erebor."

"Oh, yes. Except you can't. Just because you grew back your beard doesn't mean you're still not banished." Nori clicked his tongue. "Look, I'll make you a deal. You stay in Dale, and don't try to get into Erebor or bother me and my brothers, and I'll leave you be. However, if you do try to make your way into the mountain, or if I hear you've made any attempt to approach either of my brothers, I'll make you wish you'd been branded and shorn instead of what I'll do to you. Understood?"

Loka narrowed his eyes. "You have no right to make such threats."

"Actually, I rather think I do." Nori smirked again, flicking a knife briefly between his fingers before hiding it again. Such obvious threats were almost uncouth, and not really in keeping with this particular persona of his, but he felt they were justified in this case. "Test me at your own peril, Loka. I've made my terms clear, you need only follow them."

"Don't think this is over so easily, brat."

"Oh, I wouldn't imagine it is. I'm rather waiting for you to give me an excuse."

It was Loka who broke off eye contact first, turning away and marching away with a huff. Nori looked after him long after he had disappeared into the crowd, not moving until Ori arrived at his side.

"Nori." If Ori's voice had been light before, it was serious now, all levity gone. "Who was that?"

"Someone you need to stay well away from." Nori shook his head. "Did you get his face? Do you think you can draw it?"

"Yes, I can. I can do it as soon as we get back to the mountain, that way it'll be still fresh in my mind."

"Good. Keep the first sketch, have someone make copies of it. Don't look at me like that, I know you have scribes you can get to do it for you and I don't want you to waste any more time on this than necessary. I'll need a few copies for Dwalin to give his guards, just to make sure he doesn't try to sneak his way into the mountain."

"Who is he, then?" Ori frowned. "Someone you knew before?" Which clearly was code for someone who might have shared in the more criminal activities in Nori's life.
"Yes and no." Nori shook his head. "He's a bad dwarf, I suppose is the best description. Not bad like me, with the occasional moral failing and a loose understanding of ownership, but actually, truly rotten to the core. He used to harass our mother back in the day, had it in his head she belonged to him somehow. Got himself banished from Erebor in the end, when he tried to push me off one of the grand staircases before I was even ten. We couldn't prove it was on purpose, of course, or he'd have lost his head, but the fact he did nothing to stop me from falling was enough to convince the courts he wasn't safe to have around."

"But — that's awful." Ori paled a bit, clutching the folded lengths of fabric he had purchased from the stalls. "How could anyone do something like that?"

"Easily enough, I find, when they think they are in the right. I told you, he's rotten. Don't have any contact with him if you can help it, and damn well don't listen to a word he says. If he gets too close, stab first and ask questions later. I wouldn't put it past him to try to take out another one of us out of spite, either because he couldn't have our mother or because we won't let him have a claim in our success."

"Why would he think he has any right to that, anyway? And why would he try to harm you if he wanted to claim our mother? Surely he'd see that could only harm his cause."

"I don't think he saw that, no. Not all madness comes from gold, Ori. Some people will do the worst things to claim what they think is theirs, and sometimes that includes other people." Nori paused, then continued to speak even as he started walking at last, motioning for Ori to follow. "As for why he'd first get it into his head, well. I'm really not the person who should be telling you this, but you need to know it, anyway. Better you're prepared if he tries to come and shock you with the knowledge."

"What knowledge?" Ori scampered after him, still clutching his fabrics. "Nori, who exactly is that dwarf?"

"His name is Loka, and there's precisely one good thing he's done in his life, and even that was actually accomplished by another," Nori sighed. "As for why he's got it in for us... well. For all that our mother realised how horrid he was soon enough, she did share her bed with him at least once."

The frown made way for wide eyes, now. "You don't mean..."

"I do mean." Nori offered him a humourless smile. "Much though we might wish otherwise, that worthless piece of trash also happens to be Dori's father."
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Dwalin is worried, of course he is, but there is only so much Nori will let him do to protect him, courting or not. Bofur, on the other hand, would very much like to be courting, if only his gift will be accepted.

Gandalf comes by, leading to a disagreement between him and Thorin, one where even Bilbo has to take sides. Perhaps, though, the wizard can put his mind to ease about a certain little trinket of his.

Chapter Notes

Of the names in this chapter, Olvi is an old Finnish word for "ale", while Kolvi is Finnish for "soldering iron". Pompur, on the other hand, is twisted from "pomput", which is Finnish for "(the) bounces/jumps". =P

"Right. Keep him out of the mountain." Dwalin frowned down at the portrait Nori had presented him with. "You're sure you don't want me to take care of him?"

"If I wanted him dead, I'd have taken care of that myself." Nori lifted his eyebrows. "As you are certainly aware."

"I wasn't doubting your skills or inclination." Dwalin shook his head, setting the pictures aside and crossing his arms over his chest. "Besides, I never said anything about killing him. That you'd immediately jump to that conclusion rather makes me suspect this isn't just some run of the mill poacher or cutthroat you ran afoul of back in Ered Luin."

"Well, how else would you take care of the problem? Arresting him would only bring him into the mountain."

"And you don't want that no matter what." Dwalin sighed. "I'll do as you ask, because you ask, because I trust you wouldn't bring the matter to me if you didn't have a damn good reason. However, I'd like to know that reason, if only so I know how to react if he does make it into the mountain one way or another."

"He is Dori's father."

"And that's a bad thing, I take it?" He knew little enough of the fathers of the Ri, save that there had been three of them, but he doubted Nori would have tried to keep the dwarf away if there was any chance Dori had some wish for him.

"That part is no crime. The part where he thought this gave him some claim to our mother, though, and where he tried to kill me for proving such thoughts false? That would be a crime indeed."
"He did what?" Dwalin's blood froze in his veins. He knew Nori had his enemies, of course, knew some had even made their way to Erebor, but usually Nori greeted them with a sharp knife and few questions. To think that someone had actually harmed Nori, and was still standing within a short walk's distance, made his hands itch for his axes.

"Peace, Dwalin." Nori's hand settled on his arm, perhaps to stop him from rushing out. "I was only a child, too young to remember much. And that doesn't help, I know that, but I also don't think he is much threat to me now. He was banished for his crime, though he got to keep his head because there was no proof he intended to kill me. I didn't meet him again until much later, when we were running in the same circles, so to speak. I doubt he'd cry if I tripped and fell onto his knife, but I also don't think he's likely to go after me now. He's too much of a coward for such confrontation with a grown dwarf."

"But you think him enough of a threat to keep him out of the mountain. Is it Ori you're concerned for?"

"Not truly, though I warned him as well. As I said, Loka's always been a coward, I doubt even Ori would seem an easy target for him. No, what I fear is that he might start spreading rumours about who he is, try to draw on his connection to us." Nori shook his head. "Dori would never want that. And because of that, I also can't just cut his throat and be done with it. Slime like him, I wouldn't put it past him to have arranged for someone to start the rumours should he fall by my hand."

"Dori would rather risk his reputation than your safety, though."

"Aye, Dori is like that at times. He also went hungry on far too many nights so that Ori and I would have a little more on our plates, and I never liked that, either. Dori's sacrificed too much to have the bastard ruin everything he's built with nothing but a few petty words."

"I don't like this." And Nori knew that, no doubt, yet Dwalin felt the need to say it. "Scum like that is always a threat."

"I know. That's why I gave you his name and face, and why I warned Ori and will be warning Dori as well. If he gives me any actual reason to think him a threat, he won't live out the day." Nori squeezed his arm. "I'm not taking more of a risk than I can handle, I promise."

"Not more than you think you can handle, you mean." Dwalin sighed. "Fine. But if I find him inside the mountain, I'll see to it that he gets the just punishment for that." To return to the mountain after banishment could only ever mean death.

"Fair enough." Nori nodded. "I'll be keeping an eye on him, of course. If I think he's turning out to be an actual threat, I'll let you know or handle him myself."

"I trust you will." And he did. Even if Nori might have been confident of his own ability to dodge such threats, Dwalin knew he would not have knowingly put his brothers in danger. "For now, I'll make sure all the guards at the gate are aware that he's barred from the mountain."

"Thank you." Nori leaned in and up, now, stealing a quick kiss before backing away because he knew precisely how best to drive Dwalin spare. "Now, I believe you had somewhere to be?"

"I did, but I don't have to go." He'd almost forgotten, really, that he had been preparing to leave their rooms when Nori had walked in with a fresh copy of the portrait Ori had drawn. "It's just a little scheme of the princes, that's all."

"Oh?" Nori lifted his eyebrows. "Should I be more curious about this?"
"Not your kind of a scheme, I'm afraid." Dwalin chuckled. "It's only, with all the great forges now running, the great baths have been opened again at last. Fíli and Kíli are curious, of course, and have been asking around for the whole Company to go."

"I have not heard of such a thing." Nori didn't look offended, though, just curious.

"I'd imagine they gave Ori the task of asking you, since you're not that easy to find sometimes, and he just told them you're not interested." It would have been true enough. Far as he knew, Dwalin himself was the only one outside his family that Nori willingly shared a bath with. He liked his privacy too well for that. "It's not going to be everyone anyway, so your absence won't stand out. I hear Bilbo still hesitates about it, and Tauriel won't even share the family bath, and then there are a few who are too busy with other duties to attend this time. I'm sure nobody would think much of it if I chose to back away as well." It was the closest he could come to offering his support, at least without angering Nori.

"No, you go. If both Ori and Fíli are going, more eyes on them won't hurt."

"You think they'd do something inappropriate?" Dwalin snorted. "They've bathed together before, you realise, and besides, neither of them is stupid enough to get up to anything with Dís and Dori both likely to be in attendance."

"Oh, I don't think they'd get up to anything inappropriate as such. However, it might be a good idea to make sure neither of them gets too distracted. I don't think they've shared a bath since they started courting, after all, and if either one gets too distracted there might be lots of embarrassment all around."

"Well, I suppose you might be right about that."

"I'm always right. I thought you knew."

Dwalin couldn't help but snort. "Let's not push it, now."

"Name a time when I've been wrong? And I don't mean morally wrong, before you jump on that."

Dwalin didn't even have to think. "When you thought I did not wish to court you, as though I wished for anything more."

This silenced Nori for just a moment, as he had expected it might. Then, Nori snorted, allowing a little grin. "Such a sappy old fool you are." And yet his hand again touched Dwalin's arm, squeezing before he was stepping away again. "You go splash in the water, then, and try to keep anyone's thoughts from wandering the wrong way. I'll see you later tonight."

"Later, then." Dwalin nodded, knowing the promise for what it was. "Don't get into trouble."

"When do I ever do that?" And then he was gone, just like that, leaving Dwalin looking after him.

Well. He had some guards to instruct, then.

If this was all he could do to keep Nori safe, he would damn well do it right.

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It wasn't like Olvi didn't know that one of her regular customers was a Lord.

It would have been rather hard not to, given that Lord Bofur did not exactly hide his position, for all
that he didn't flaunt it, either. There were no grand pronouncements or demands for anyone to know who he was, but he did occasionally come in wearing his court clothes with the family crest on his coat, or bought a round for his workers if they were there at the same time as he was. They'd even talked a couple of times beyond orders and pleasantries, on a slow night when there weren't many people around. He just didn't act like a noble, was the thing, and thus Olvi felt rather safe in not treating him like one, either.

Which meant that when she saw a head with the familiar pigtails peeking through the door half an hour before opening time, she didn't hesitate about calling out, "We're closed!" from where she was making one last round to see that all the tables were clean for the day ahead.

"That's quite what I was hoping for, seeing how I'm not here for business." Bofur grinned, but there was a slightly nervous air to it. That intrigued Olvi, just a bit. She hadn't thought it was possible for him to be nervous, given how he usually flirted and joked and laughed at everything.

"And what are you here for, then?" She turned towards him properly, setting her hands on her hips, one still holding the cleaning rag.

"Was rather hoping to speak with you, actually. On personal business, you see." He stepped inside, and she allowed it instead of shooing him back outside. It wasn't like he was the type to start trouble, after all.

"Well, I'm listening." She nodded. "Make it quick, though. I need to get everything ready for the customers."

"And you always do, every day." He relaxed a bit, walking closer. His hands were behind his back, she noted. Well, wasn't that curious. "Don't worry, I won't keep you long."

She nodded again. "Get on with it, then."

"Right." He drew a deep breath, and all of a sudden she knew precisely what was to come, however absurd the idea was. "Olvi, daughter of Kolvi, dwarf of Erebor." Bofur straightened, now, and for a moment she might have almost believed he indeed was a noble, with his serious expression and the fine beads in his hair and the clothes that she now realised were rather fancier than what he usually wore. "I, Bofur, son of Pompur, Guildmaster of the miners' guild, would like to offer you my courtship."

Olvi blinked. Then she blinked again. Then she just stared as Bofur stepped forward, bringing something out from behind his back, a wrapped package of some sort.

"I know I'm supposed to make a grand speech of some sorts, but I'm not really one for such things." Bofur scratched the back of his neck with the hand that wasn't holding the package. "I could try and dazzle you with my title and my gold, but I don't want someone who might be bought with that. I want someone who won't laugh at my jokes unless they're good, who won't think twice of tugging at my braids if I forget to wipe my feet before walking in, who might have wanted me back in Ered Luin when all I had to my name was my mattock and my smile." He placed the package on a nearby table and stepped back. "Whether you are that dwarf, well, I don't know. But you make me smile and feel like myself again even when I'm in fancy clothes, not like a dwarfling playing dress-up, and when you smile I want to make sure you keep doing that forever, and well I'll just shut up now, shall I?"

Olvi paused, trying to think of a response. Then, to buy time, she went to unwrap the gift. Without even looking she knew some of her helpers were peeking in from the kitchen, but this wasn't the time to bark at them to get back to work. Not now, when she was drawing away the wrappings to reveal a
courtship gift.

It was a tankard, a big, sturdy thing that seemed to be carved from a single block of wood. The inside and bottom were perfectly smooth, while the sides were carved with detailed little pictures. She brought it up to take a closer look at them, and gasped. That was her, no doubt about it, taking down three orcs at once. She hadn't been quite that formidable, she didn't think, but it was a lovely scene either way.

"I know you're retired, but I've been told a soldier's always a soldier." Bofur's voice was quiet now, as though he was afraid she'd bolt if he spoke too loudly. "I thought you ought to have something that shows both who you were and who you are. Anyone who courts me will have to deal with both the miner and toymaker and the poor excuse for a lord, so seems only fair that I'd have an eye both for the tavern keeper and the soldier."

Olvi was quiet, still, turning the tankard over in her hand. There was a thin leather strap wrapped around the handle, with two wooden beads on it. "These are courtship beads." She recognised the symbol on one of them, the same crest that Bofur had on his coat.

"Aye, made by my own hand." Bofur nodded. "It's a bit of a tradition in my family, carving our own beads and using them for courtship and marriage both. I know nobles make a habit of having the family make the marriage beads, but I'm not that much of a noble, and in any case it seemed to be good enough for the king to craft his own."

Olvi traced her fingers along the finely carved surface of the tankard. "I'm not suited for the court," she said at last, gaze still on the tankard. "I've no patience for their gossip and games, and my idea of dressing up is wearing a nicer eye patch. And I've a tavern and workers I plan to keep, I won't spend my life at the arm of someone else."

"Good! I'd have no idea what to do with a spouse like that, would get quite in the way while mining, I'd say." Bofur grinned. "Me, I've got a brother with a family and a cousin who lives with us more often than not, and quite the collection of royals and nobles of all sorts who seem to find it their right to get involved in my life. So in any case it seems I have the harder of it, and little to offer in compensation."

She paused. "What is it you do have to offer, then?" She knew the basics of it, of course, knew of his title and his gold, but she was more curious on what he would think worth mentioning.

"Two hard-working hands, and a heart that would love you." Bofur shrugged. "I've a tongue that takes to laughter and song before it does to pretty words and heavy oaths, and a knife I fancy quite deft at times, and a hearth I keep warm and a table I keep full. I'm a miner by trade and a tinker at times, and my craft I find as a whittler and a woodworker. If any of those seem good to you, I wouldn't know, but they'd all be yours regardless, if you would have them."

She looked at him, at the nervous expression that had replaced his usual smile, then down at the tankard in her hands. It must have taken ages. This was no idle gift to be sure, nor one easily offered. "You mean this."

"As much as I've ever meant anything," Bofur said. "And that's saying something, seeing how I once signed on to go against a dragon."

She paused another moment, then set the tankard down on the table. "Very well." At least her life would be interesting. "I accept."

There was an excited whoop, but it wasn't from Bofur. Looking over to the door to the kitchen, she
found her helper boys from Dale both looking sheepish, the dwarven cook trying not to look too affected. As though that fooled her; neither of the Dale lads had that low a voice. "Right, right, back to work, the customers will start coming soon enough."

"But boss, not even a drink to celebrate?" There was a hopeful look on all three faces, enough so that she rolled her eye and huffed.

"Oh, fine. But after that you're going to work twice as hard, do you hear me?"

She watched them disappearing into the kitchen, then turned only to find that Bofur had walked much closer to her. He was grinning brightly now, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and Mahal help her, that was a lovely smile to be sure. "And perhaps for us, a kiss?"

She rolled her eye again, but smiled either way. "Oh, very well." Which was all she got out before he was suddenly drawing her into his arms and kissing her with quite some enthusiasm.

If that was how her first actual customers found them as they barged in, well, at least none of them was stupid enough to try and steal her tankard while she was thus distracted.

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"So this is what you've been scheming." Bilbo looked up at the hulking silhouette that now dominated the centre of the throne room. "I have to say, I am rather impressed."

"I was hoping you would be." Thorin was actually grinning, like a child who had just showed a particularly clever trick. "You like it, then?"

"Let's say I do not dislike it." The old dais was still there, but the single throne had been replaced by three. The back was carved to resemble a giant raven, perched on top of the king's throne with its wings surrounding the other two by its sides. Two giant sapphires glinted as the eyes of the bird in the shadows above. "I'm never going to like a throne, Thorin, particularly one I'm supposed to sit on. But if I must do so on occasion, I'm fine with it being this one."

"Then I am glad." Thorin took Bilbo's hand and brought it to his lips. Despite the chaste gesture, Bilbo was glad the throne room was empty save for the two of them; the look in Thorin's eyes was quite enough to make him feel rather heated. "I would so hate to displease my beloved."

"I wish I could say you haven't so far, but that would be a lie." He was teasing, of course, and judging by the small grin still on Thorin's lips it was received in the right spirit.

"Really, now? I must work harder, then, to see to your pleasure." Oh, yes, definitely feeling too warm.

Bilbo was about to say something in return, hopefully something about how they ought to behave in the throne room though he didn't entirely trust himself to be that sensible right now, when the doors at the end of the walkway were opened and a guard looked in.

"Your Majesty?" the guard called all the way from the door. "There's a visitor for you?"

Thorin frowned, turning to look. Bilbo rather echoed his sentiment. Far as Bilbo knew, there weren't supposed to be any visitors today. "And they cannot wait?"

"I was rather hoping you would receive me either way."

The voice carried well in the huge cavern, as familiar as the tall silhouette in the doorway. Bilbo
blinked, then smiled at the figure striding down the walkway in road-worn grey robes as though he were a most richly dressed royal guest. "Gandalf!"

"Myself, as I ought to be." Gandalf walked almost up to the thrones, his eyes twinkling as he eyed the two of them. "I see there have been changes in Erebor since I last left."

"Indeed." Thorin shifted his hold of Bilbo's hand, drawing him close to his side. "We would have invited you to the coronation and the wedding, but no one seemed to know where to find you."

"A wizard is often busy. I'm sure the occasion was remarkable, though." Gandalf's gaze shifted to the throne. "A raven throne, hmm?"

"I thought it was appropriate, since I cast away the raven crown." Thorin smiled. "Bilbo was just telling me he might not utterly dislike being seated here, for all that he is no great admirer of thrones."

Gandalf took another look at the throne, then lifted his eyebrows nearly to the brim of his hat as he turned his gaze back to Thorin. "And what of the Arkenstone?"

"What of it?" Thorin's expression betrayed little reaction.

"What have you done with it, if it doesn't sit on your throne?"

"Ah, that." Thorin squeezed Bilbo's hand, just a little. "I had it hidden away."

"Hidden?" Gandalf frowned, now. "Where, then, and why?"

"I do not know where, nor do I wish to." Thorin's voice was steady and calm, that of one speaking the truth. "Fíli fell to the gold madness. He has recovered, thank Mahal, but I did not want to have the tempter anywhere in my sight anymore. It's gone, and I hope it remains so."

"You cast it out?" Gandalf's voice took on an icy tone. "After everything we did to find it, you cast it out? Without even knowing if it was responsible for your woes?"

"Perhaps it was not the only thing causing our madness, but it was guilty enough. We're better off without it, my line and myself both."

"That was not your call to make!" Now, his voice seemed to echo in the grand cavern. "You asked me for help, Thorin Oakenshield, help in finding that jewel and claiming your birthright, and then you cast it away like the cheapest trinket without even a word to me of your plans?" Bilbo almost wanted to back away in the face of such anger. Thorin, however, stood his ground, not backing down an inch.

"I did ask you for help, aye. Do not think me ungrateful, Gandalf." Thorin shook his head. "You passed me a message that would not have reached me otherwise. More than once you saved us on the journey. We won the mountain without you, but we might not have come that far on our own. For all that, you have my gratitude." Now, he straightened himself, and for all that he was short compared with Gandalf he almost seemed to be looking down at the wizard, not up. "However, there is something you often forgot during our quest, which you would do well to remember now."

"And what is that?" Gandalf was not pleased, that much was clear.

"I am King Under the Mountain." Thorin's stance was steady, his voice calm. He was speaking out of reason, not anger. "More than that, I was already king during our quest — a king in exile, perhaps, but a king nevertheless. I am the king of Durin's folk, and I answer to none but Mahal and my ancestors, and neither of them will I face until I am given back to the stone. Yet you seemed to forget
that far too often, you and everyone else. You thought I needed permission to make decisions for my
people and my home, that giving me what little inheritance my father had left was your choice and
not my right. I am grateful for what you have done, yet I do not forget the insults you have given me,
and I will not tolerate such disrespect anymore. You will treat me as befits my station, as you would
any other king in the heart of their realm, or you will leave my mountain."

"Well!" Gandalf gathered himself, and Bilbo rather fancied he was trying to hide how shaken he
was. "And to think I once thought you the reasonable one of your line."

"Oh, yes. I was very reasonable, in so far as I was susceptible to your demands." Thorin shook his
head. "For a long time I had no choice but to bow to the demands of others, unless I wished to see
my people starve. I worked my craft on the streets for a pittance that would not be a fair wage for an
apprentice, I tolerated scorn and suspicion, all so I could keep my people safe. Now I am not in such
a position anymore, and I can see how that would bother you. What do you propose to do, then,
Gandalf? Perhaps summon another dragon, to put the dwarvenfolk in their proper place? Or perhaps
you could come to realise that we do not exist simply to further your schemes, and have a right to our
own life and our own ruling?"

Gandalf seemed to have no comeback to this, not that Bilbo had expected him to. Thorin was
speaking the truth, after all. Gandalf may have been helpful, but only on his own terms, with no
regard for what the dwarves wished or needed.

"What I have done with the Arkenstone is no concern of yours. It belongs to me and my line, and if
my heirs do not question me, you certainly have no right to do so. Why would you, anyway? Are
you that upset to have lost the key to manipulating all the lines of dwarves? Clearly it's no concern
for me, as my line is secure enough as it stands."

This situation didn't seem like it would lead to anything good, not if either of the two was pushed just
a touch further. Clearly it was time for Bilbo to step in and do his job as a consort.

"Well!" Somehow he managed an almost cheerful tone, though he held no illusions about either
Thorin or Gandalf believing it. "Will you be staying long, Gandalf? We have some guest quarters
specifically made for tall folk, so you won't have to keep hitting your head everywhere. I can show
you the way."

He started walking without waiting for a response, letting go of Thorin's hand with one last squeeze
before he marched on past Gandalf and down the walkway. After a moment he heard steps behind
him, though Gandalf didn't speak until they had left the throne room and made it to the hallway.

"You agree with him." There was no question there.

"He isn't wrong, is he?" Which was probably not the wisest thing to say to a wizard, but then, Bilbo
had never had much trouble arguing with Gandalf before. "You've always viewed him as a petulant
child who must be deceived and manipulated to do as you wish. You showed Bard more respect
than you ever did Thorin. Perhaps you were simply frustrated with his stubbornness — goodness
knows I have often felt that grief — but that doesn't change the fact that you haven't treated him as a
king, and now he no more has to tolerate such disrespect."

"A dwarf will not listen to reason."

"Or perhaps he has his own reason." Bilbo shook his head. "I'm not altogether happy with you
myself, Gandalf. I know all too well your habit of disregarding the wishes of others, and forcing your
will on them. Thorin might have stood for that on the road, when we relied on your help, but I don't
blame him for refusing to be treated like a toddler in the heart of his own kingdom. His choices are
his, and you may disagree with them, but you have no right to act as though he should have consulted you before making them."

"You approve of this, then?" Gandalf rather sounded like he didn't believe so. "You risked your life for that stone, Bilbo. How can you stand by and see him throw it away after everything you did to win it?"

"I was almost thrown aside myself for the sake of that blasted stone." Bilbo shook his head. "I risked my life for many reasons on the road, Gandalf, the stone only being one of them. A stubborn wizard walking off in a huff would be another, as I recall. If I never see that thrice-cursed thing again, it'll yet be too soon, both for me and for Thorin's line."

"You think it's to blame for the madness, then?"

"I don't know for sure, but I have seen enough evidence to believe so." He was quiet for a while. "You didn't see Thorin in his madness, Gandalf, no more than a glimpse, and you certainly saw no sign of Fíli's. You weren't almost cast aside by the one you would call your very heart for the sake of it. If there's the slightest chance it had any part in the madness, and I have more than enough reason to believe so, then I'm glad it's gone and good riddance."

Gandalf nodded, quiet for a moment. "And you believe it is gone, then? The madness."

"I do." He had to believe so, for his own sake as much as that of Thorin and Fíli. "I watch them every day, Gandalf, see Thorin finding new ways to use the treasure for the good of his kingdom, see Fíli struggling to make up for his mistakes. Whether the madness might return or not, I don't know, but for now I'm choosing to believe in the strength of their hearts over the weakness of their blood."

"I hope you are right, Bilbo Baggins. I would hate to see you being wrong."

"Trust me, Gandalf, not as much as I would hate to see it." Bilbo shook his head. "For what it's worth, I don't think Thorin minds you staying as long as you don't try to treat him like a child. The rest of the Company will certainly be happy to see you."

"I suppose I might linger a day or two, then." Gandalf paused. "And what of you, Bilbo? Do you want me to stay?"

"As long as you don't start another invasion of my quarters, I would welcome you. I'm afraid the rooms I share with Thorin have not nearly as many guest rooms, nor as well stocked a pantry as my little smial."

"And how is married life treating you, then?" Now there was an almost teasing tone to Gandalf's voice, chasing away the lingering anger.

"Very well, thank you, both my life and my husband." Just to make it absolutely clear that Thorin was good for him. "In fact, there is something I would like to show you before we get you settled, if you don't mind a little delay?"

Gandalf inclined his head. Perhaps he was as eager as Bilbo to put the argument behind them, though a peevish part of Bilbo suggested this was because he could not argue with the accusations made. "Lead the way, then."

Bilbo was almost amazed how well he knew his own way along the endless corridors and stairways, now, leading their way towards the royal quarters. It wasn't far from the quarters designed for royal guests, anyway, so they weren't even that far off their course. The guards at the doors bowed as they
went in, and Bilbo chose to believe this was to Gandalf, lest he be forced to have another argument over how he was not to be bowed at outside official situations. Or at all, really, but he knew trying to argue for that was a lost cause, and there were still moments when he was supposed to act as befit his station, if only for the sake of appearances.

Gandalf didn't ask questions, ducking down under the doorways as they went, though Bilbo didn't miss the way his gaze was sweeping over everything, the way it paused at the door to Tauriel's rooms, clearly higher than the other doors in the front room. Instead he followed Bilbo into the king's quarters, only there pausing to ask anything.

"What is it you wished to show me, then?"

"Something you must promise not to tell anyone about." He paused, adjusting his waistcoat — fine embroidered velvet, something that might have been reserved for parties only back in the Shire yet passed for his everyday attire here — and added, "Or perhaps two such things, for rather different reasons."

"Well, now you have me curious." Gandalf lifted his eyebrows. "And you think you can trust me with such secrets?"

"If I can't, then you truly aren't the Gandalf I know." Bilbo gestured for him to follow further, heading from the receiving room to the back corridor. "Few enough people know, yet, but I rather want to tell someone at least. Oh! Do mind your head, the roof is rather low here."

Gandalf kept his curiosity under wraps until they made it to the garden, looking around. "Well! It seems Thorin has at least one thing right in how to treat a hobbit."

"More than one, but yes, I'm quite pleased with this myself." Bilbo smiled, walking to the middle of the garden. "I'd say I'd like you to meet someone, but it's a bit early for that." He crouched down next to the little plant, running his fingertip along one leaf. They were mostly pale green now, though the edges stayed a golden hue.

"Is that…" For once, even Gandalf seemed at a loss for words for a moment. "Well! I knew something of hobbit ways, of course, but never did I hear of such a thing happening with someone who isn't a hobbit." He paused. "This is the seed of a child, correct? From Thorin and you?"

"Yes. We planted it on our wedding night." And he wasn't going to go into more detail than that, thank you very much. "I wasn't sure if it'd work, myself, but we used an acorn for the seed and this is clearly not an oak sapling."

"I suppose congratulations are in order, then." And at last, Gandalf actually smiled. "This is a secret, then?"

"It is and it isn't. The rest of the Company knows, and Thorin's sister of course, but we agreed to wait with the public announcement. We're still not sure it'll thrive, after all, and in any case it will probably take longer than a dwarven pregnancy might, so there's no need to make people impatient like that." He tried not to worry overly much, didn't think he could handle thinking of such dreadful things right now.

"Well, I'm sure you're taking good care of your little seedling at least." Gandalf shook his head. "Though may the Valar save us all if the child has your wit and Thorin's stubbornness. They will take over, Arkenstone or no."

"Good thing Fíli shall remain the heir, hmm?" Bilbo rather liked the thought, however, of a child
with features from both Thorin and himself. Dark hair and hazel eyes, perhaps, or pointy ears but
naked feet. He couldn't wait to see how it all turned out.

"I suppose it is for the best." Gandalf nodded. "But you said you had two things to show me, did you
not?"

"Ah," Bilbo tried not to flush. "It's nothing, really. Just a silly little thing, never mind that. We should
get you settled in the guest quarters now, don't you think? I don't think you'll have a moment's peace
once the others hear you're here."

"Bilbo Baggins." Gandalf's gaze was locked on him now. "I'm not that easily fooled, and I hope you
do not think I am."

"Right." Bilbo sighed. "It's just, well. When we were in Goblin Town, I… I found something."

Gandalf listened intently as Bilbo recounted his meeting with the strange creature underneath the
mountain, and how he had used the ring to his advantage since then. The longer Bilbo spoke, the
more serious Gandalf grew. He didn't speak until Bilbo fell silent, and when he did his voice was
slow, considering. "And why are you telling me about this?"

"Well, you know about magical things, don't you?" Bilbo resisted the urge to wring his hands. "I
mean, I'd be dead several times over without the ring, but sometimes it makes me feel… I don't
know. Unsafe? Like there's something wrong with it. And if it's cursed or something, well, then I
don't want to have it near my family."

"I see." Gandalf nodded slowly. "And do you have it with you right now?"

"Ah, yes." Bilbo started to reach into his pocket, where the ring sat safe and sound. Gandalf,
however, quickly shook his head.

"No! Don't give it to me, not yet. I need to check something at first." Gandalf nodded toward the
door of the garden. "You had a fireplace in the receiving room, did you not?"

Bilbo frowned but nodded, following Gandalf back down the corridor. There was a fireplace in the
receiving room, though the small fire had been reduced to glowing embers, with both himself and
Thorin out for the day. It would be attended by a servant soon, to make sure the rooms were nice and
warm by the time they were done with their duties for the day. "Here."

"Right. Now, cast the ring in." Gandalf must have seen his hesitation, as he shook his head. "If it's
gold, this is not nearly warm enough to harm it," he said. "And if it's what I fear, you would need
something rather more powerful to do anything to it."

Bilbo wasn't entirely convinced, but he did dig the ring out of his pocket after a moment. It almost
seemed to linger at his fingertips as he made to throw it in the fireplace, until it at last landed in the
middle of the embers.

He waited for something to happen. Judging by his utter silence, so did Gandalf. After a moment,
Bilbo glanced at him. "So… is something supposed to happen?"

"We'll see." Gandalf reached for the fireplace poker, a simple thing Thorin had forged himself, with
a stylised acorn at the handle end. Carefully he picked up the ring from the coals, while Bilbo hurried
to get a small plate from a table by the couch, not wanting hot metal dropped on the tabletop. The
ring clattered against the plate for a moment, then settled.

Absolutely nothing happened.
"So?" Bilbo frowned. "What was that supposed to do?"

"Nothing, my dear hobbit." Gandalf sighed, a relieved little sound. "It does mean I'm not entirely sure what this ring is, though. There have been many rings of power in the old ages, some more remarkable than others; a ring of invisibility, however strange or old, is not enough on its own for me to know its history."

"Can't you find out something about it, at least?" Because Bilbo was still not exactly reassured. "At least enough to tell me if it's dangerous?"

"That, I can do." Gandalf nodded. "For now, I don't think it has any immediate danger. From what you told me, and what I have seen here, I think it might just be a jealous thing, clinging to its owner. If indeed it was owned by that creature for a long time, it might have taken on its feelings and thoughts. The longer you keep it, the less darkness should remain."

"That's good to hear, at least." Bilbo nodded. "So you think you might find out more?"

"If I can't, then I'm sure to find someone who can. Perhaps I can't find out where it came from, but at least I'd like to find out if invisibility is the only power it bestows."

"That would be quite useful, yes." Bilbo looked at the ring. "So, ah. What did you think it might have been?" Because clearly there had been something specific in Gandalf's mind.

"Something that I hope never to see again, as it should be long destroyed," Gandalf said. "However, some things of the dark will find their way out of almost anything."

"But you call this safe." It had to be, right? Gandalf wouldn't lie to him about such a thing.

"As safe as I can promise you, yes. Do not use it unless you must, as it's not wise to wield power you do not fully understand, but I don't think you are in much danger simply by having it on your person."

"Well, that's a relief." Bilbo poked at the ring. As it didn't seem about to burn him too badly, he quickly picked it up and slipped it into his pocket. "So! Shall we get you settled into a room, then? And perhaps see if we can't get the Company together for dinner tonight, with families of course, it's been a while since we were all gathered at once. Fair warning, though, there's a lot of courting going on so prepare for sappy looks, oh and be careful if Vati hands Bilbur to you, he's teething and likes to gnaw on beards. I'll need to get word to her soon as I can, anyway, and —"

Gandalf seemed somewhat bemused by all this, but he followed Bilbo easily enough as he headed out of the royal quarters and down the hallway. This, Bilbo decided, he could do. He could find accommodations for a guest and arrange for a lovely dinner, and if it wasn't in his spare room or all cooked by his own stove, well, his family had rather grown from the time he was a lonely bachelor in his little smial.

And if Gandalf had any complaints about that, well, he shouldn't have introduced Bilbo to his dwarves, then, now should he?
There have been quite a few letters between Gimli and Legolas, and they do not seem to cease.

— And can you believe, I've heard whispers that I might hold some interest in Princess Sigrid? Not that she's not a perfectly pleasant lass, but I hardly fancy myself in love with her! I have taken a moment to assure his father that such rumours are untrue, or else he might think me a threat to her honour. It might almost make me rethink our way of passing letters, but Sigrid herself assures me she is amused more than anything, and happy where she is not amused. Apparently since the rumours started there have been less whispers that she ought to marry a dwarf to strengthen the alliance, and she is quite glad for the reprieve. Even so, I find myself even more of the mind that we should somehow reward her aid in our venture.

It is, as always, a delight to see your words for me, as it is for me to be able to bring my words to you on everything that might give me cause to think. My only regret is that we cannot do this in person — no letter, however swiftly delivered, can quite compare to the delight of exchanging words with a friend by your side ——

— You are quite right, Gimli, in that we owe the fair princess a reward of some manner. Perhaps you could craft her a jewel of some sort, or I send a gift from the Mirkwood? Or would others read too much into the exchange of any manner of gifts between her and you? After all, we would hardly want to encourage such baseless rumours, even if she doesn't mind their existence. I'd hate to think of the Bowman holding some ire toward you for no reason at all, and while you are a good dwarf and anyone ought to be proud to have you for a son-in-law, I hardly think such an arrangement would bring happiness or peace to either you or Sigrid herself.

I also agree that it is rather difficult to hold our conversations over distance such as we do now. It would be good to have some solution to this, but I am hardly a welcome guest to Erebor without a clear reason to appear, and indeed the next such occasion appears to be the next Durin's Day and the weddings that await then. I would not miss that for all the world, of course, I do wish to see my oldest friend happily wed to the one she loves, but that day also seems frightfully far away, when we should by all accounts be considered rather close in distance, in miles if not in perception. ——

— Do you admit, then, that Tauriel loves Kíli? Or might there be some lingering part of you that still believes she might hold her heart out to you? I grow curious, my friend, on whether I should worry for your happiness. For indeed it seems any who might hope for Tauriel's heart except Kíli are bound for disappointment, since the love between them is plain for all to see. What she sees in him, I might not well know, but I suppose he does have his good points that are obscured to me as his long-suffering younger cousin.

I jest, however. Kíli is a good friend, after all, and loyal beyond measure; indeed I would not hesitate a moment on trusting him with my very life, no matter the situation, for all that I might not entirely
trust him with the continuance of my honour and dignity, cousins being as they are. He has a good heart, too, that loves as fiercely as any dwarf loves their treasure, so you should not fear for Tauriel. Kili might not have as much time with her as he wishes, but I know that he will love her for all time, no matter whether it be here or in the Halls of Ancestors.

But these are maudlin thoughts, and I would rather not contemplate them when thinking of you, my friend. After all, your letters always bring me joy, and it seems a pity indeed to ruin that with my sad imaginations about something that is, Mahal willing, a long time yet in coming. Let me think of the day I see you again, then, whether it be on Durin's Day or before that, for I will again be quite willing to act your guide and companion during the feast, and would also gladly see you before then if the opportunity presented itself——

—— I hold a love for her, that much I'll admit, but it is the love of a brother for a sister, nothing more or less. For a time I thought it might be something else, but I have been corrected in that notion, and indeed I mean it when I say I will be happy to see her wed, for all that I dread the thought of what might await her at the end of the road she has chosen for herself.

On the matter of seeing you again, though, I have been struck by an idea that I hope you will approve of——

*

"I feel ridiculous."

"If it's any consolation, I don't think you look ridiculous at all." Dori's words were somewhat muffled as he spoke around the pins in his mouth, but they were clear enough, as was the friendly tone he was using. It seemed strange, that he might so readily speak almost fondly to an elf, but that seemed to be the case. Though then, Tauriel had spent quite some time in the mountain, and Dori had apparently taken it as a personal challenge to produce a gown or a dress of some description that she would be happy to wear. Whether he was going to succeed, she wasn't certain, but she had agreed to wear one for the wedding at least, the first instance of this dress being what currently occupied Dori's hands.

"I do, though." Tauriel sighed, glancing at herself in the large mirror that had to be worth a fortune, so smooth and clear it was. "I mean no slight to your skills, Master Dori, but the designs of dwarven gowns are clearly drawn with a dwarven lass in mind, and you have to admit I'm not exactly the image of an ideal dwarven princess."

"Well, I would have an easier time if I had some thought in mind of what an appropriate elven design could be, but you haven't exactly been forthcoming with such details." It almost sounded like Dori was scolding her, but then it was more a gentle chiding than anything else. "And in any case, this is not the final design, as should be obvious; I would not let you enter the ceremony in such plain fabric and call myself responsible, I'd cut my own beard before I let that happen. This is only a mock-up to get me an idea of your shape, that's all."

"That only fills me with more dread, I'm afraid. While I might wear some decoration on my clothes as the occasion calls for, I do not feel comfortable in anything too elaborate." Tauriel ran a hand over the front of the gown that was being pinned on her at the moment. She supposed it was beautiful, but after so long in the forest guard she was quite unused to dresses of any kind. Apparently it was traditional for the wedding, though, and she had to admit the same would have been expected of her had she been wed in the elven manner; while her fellow elves did not look at her askance for having chosen the life of a warrior, as might have been the case among the mortal men, there were still
certain expectations that were held of elven maidens, particularly on a day as important as a wedding. So a dress she would wear, to please both her new family and what little she might have had of an old one, and at least she could count on the relief that she would be free to remove it at the end of the day.

Or, well, Kíli would probably be more than willing to give her a hand with that. But she wasn't about to think about that just yet, thank you, she didn't need to get all flustered in front of Dori.

"Oh, not to worry. My brother has an excellent eye for embroidery and an even better hand at it, and I have quite the fine taste for fabrics, if I do say so myself. I'm sure that together we can put together something fit for a princess that won't make you feel too uncomfortable in your own wedding."

"I will wear whatever you make, and trust you to make something that will not cause shame for the royal house by being too plain or too gaudy or somesuch. Do not concern yourself with my preferences overly much; I have spent the better part of my life running around prepared to fight at a moment's notice, and I do not think I'll ever again feel comfortable wearing something that isn't made for battle."

"And you think there aren't dwarven lasses who have dedicated themselves to their swords or axes?" Dori shook his head. "Oh, no. I'll certainly do my best to succeed, here, and I won't hear no for an answer. I would not have agreed to take on this task if I wasn't going to do my best. Just because you can't wear your armour and weapons for the feast doesn't mean I'm going to dress you in something you dislike."

"I suppose you have your challenge set out for you, then, Master Dori."

"That I do, but I welcome it." Dori put in one last pin, then stood up from where he'd been crouching near the hem of the dress and quickly walked around her for a closer look. "I'll be meeting with a delegation from Mirkwood soon to discuss the trade of fabrics and thread, and I thought to take that opportunity to put in an order for some fabric with you in mind. I know many of my fellow dwarves seem to think the only worthy materials for a rich outfit are leather, velvet, and perhaps a thick wool or fine cotton at times, but I'm not entirely sure I agree."

Tauriel blinked. "I thought the purpose was to make me look like a proper dwarven princess?"

"Oh, aye, but that doesn't mean I ought to conceal that you are an elf, as though that were even possible." Dori came back over to her front and gave her a serious look. "You wear the prince's braids, and will be crowned his princess when you are wed. I do plan to make it clear that you are marrying into the house of Durin, and choose my materials and design accordingly. However, a good dressmaker always considers their customer as well. I'm not about to take a dress I might put on Dáin's daughter and simply lengthen the hem for you."

"And that will be all right?" Why was she hesitating, now, when she had already told him that a dwarven gown would make her feel silly at best?

"Who would tell you otherwise? And before you wonder, Lady Dís has given me free rein in dressing both you and Ori for the feast. All she asked was that I ought to include the colours and seal of Durin somewhere in my designs, and that I was going to do either way."

"I will trust my comfort in your hands, then."

"I hope I won't betray that trust. Now, I'm done for the moment, so you can get out of it if you wish."

Tauriel was quite happy indeed to step down from the stool she had been standing on and hide
behind the screen Dori had provided, getting out of the mock-up dress as quickly as the numerous laces allowed so she could get back into her own clothes. For something that was only supposed to give him an idea of her shape, it was quite tricky to handle. "And if I wanted to request something less troublesome to get in and out of?"

"Now why ever would I listen to such a request?" Dori sounded almost cheerful at the suggestion. "You'll have help with putting it on, after all, and I rather suspect you won't have to worry about finding eager hands to get you out of it as well."

Well. If he was going to go there, she saw no reason to hesitate, either. "And you aren't worried Kíli might just get frustrated and take a knife to the entire thing, ruining all your hard work?"

"That's always a possibility, I guess. But if I do my job right, he ought to be too eager to see you wear it again to contemplate such a terrible crime. Or else too eager to see you out of it to bother finding a knife, seeing how he ought to be unarmed, coming away from the wedding feast."

"I suppose that is one way of looking at it." She finally managed to get away from the dress without drawing one of her own knives, setting it over the top of the screen for Dori to take before quickly pulling on her usual clothes. It was probably a bit silly of her to be so shy, Dori was a dressmaker after all and had probably seen countless others in insufficient clothing before, but it was difficult to get over what she was used to, and Dori was kind enough to accommodate her. Certainly she couldn't be the only one who had a hard time undressing in front of him, as he'd already had the screen at ready before the first time she'd ever come to him to have an appropriate outfit made for appearing in court. "Thank you for doing this. I know you're busy enough as it is, with all your regular work and your brother's wedding clothes."

"It's the upside of being Guildmaster, I have more or less free leave to pick my own commissions. Besides Ori's outfit this is certainly the most interesting one, so of course I won't let anyone else get their hands on it."

"Right." She paused as something occurred to her. "Ah. Do you mind if I ask you something? It's nothing to do with any of this, I don't think, but apparently it's about the wedding somehow."

"Just ask, I'll answer if I can."

"Balin asked for, well, a list of my accomplishments or something like that? He said I ought to focus on battles at least, but didn't say what it's for."

"Well, I'd assume it's to do with the braids." As she stepped away from the screen, Dori was setting the dress on a dress form that Tauriel rather suspected he only owned for her sake, unless he'd also taken to accepting commissions from Dale, given the general non-dwarven shape of it. "You know you're supposed to wear all your braids for the ceremony, right? So I suppose Balin has taken it upon himself to figure what kind of braids you have the right to wear. He did the same for Bilbo, except there he had at least some idea of what battles and such Bilbo had faced, but with you he'd need something to go on besides what we know of your exploits in the Battle of Five Armies."

"That seems like a lot of trouble for something I'll have to take out afterwards anyway."

"It makes Balin happy to do things nice and proper, I think, and no doubt he's going to be the one putting the braids in your hair before the ceremony, so you might as well allow it. Kíli will no doubt lose his train of thought entirely when he sees you in full dwarven braids."

"And that is supposed to be a good thing, then? Perhaps I'd like him to have some thoughts left at least, or he might just forget his vows entirely."
"I may not have much thought for love, but I've heard enough not to be entirely clueless. I've been given to understand most people would be quite happy to have a known way to get their spouse's attention entirely on them at times."

"I suppose we'll just have to hope he doesn't get too distracted, then." Tauriel smiled. "It seems hard to believe, still, that I would be allowed this. I'm not exactly what a dwarven parent would hope for their child, after all."

"Believe me, no proper parent will hope for anything but happiness for their child. And Dís knows her son well enough to know that you will offer him that at least."

"That is all I hope to accomplish." She might never be a true dwarven princess, or even look much like one no matter what Dori insisted, but at least she could try to be the princess Kíli needed and wanted to stand by his side. After all, if there was any truth to the beliefs of dwarves, that was what she had been made for, if indeed Mahal's hand and craft could even reach to children of other races. Certainly it seemed Kíli had been crafted to be the perfect match to her happiness.

And if it would make Kíli happy that she wore some specific manner of braid or gown, well, she could certainly do that.

Anything for her brave little prince, and the dwarves who had welcomed her when her own king cast her out.

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"So you think this is accurate enough?"

Bifur considered for a moment, thinking on the account that had just been read to him, then nodded. There was nothing untrue in the story, nor anything he might have wanted to add. Not that there was much to say in any case, not really. It had been a battle, and battles had played tricks on him ever since the axe wound; most of what he recalled was from his brothers, and that was also where Ori had gotten his story from.

"Right, that's good." Ori smiled, looking happy enough with this. "Thank you for taking the time to let me double-check things. I do want my account to be as accurate as possible."

Bifur nodded again. Of course the lad would want so. This was for his masterpiece, after all; to go for anything but the very best he could do would have been unthinkable. He quickly signed to Ori in Iglishmêk, not wanting his message to get lost in the differences between new and old Khuzdul. He knew not everything was different, of course, but he also couldn't always tell what was and wasn't. His cousins could usually parse what he was trying to say if not the precise meaning, but he couldn't and wouldn't count on others doing the same.

"Ah, thank you. I'm getting close to finishing, you know; I only have couple of accounts of the battle to finish, then a few illustrations and then binding it all together. It'll be a while before I get all that done, especially since I need to work on Fíli's gift, too. I can work on my masterpiece while he's around, but not his gift, so all the time I have on my own should go to the gift for now."

Bifur listened as Ori went on, feeling quietly satisfied to have someone ramble at him so. Too many people seemed to think that just because they could not understand his words meant he could not understand them in turn. They would treat him like an idiot, or ignore him altogether. Ori, however, had never had much of a problem with him; after some initial hesitation, he had happily accepted the fact that he could speak to Bifur just as he would to any other dwarf. In fact, he rather thought Ori sometimes seemed more comfortable speaking to him than he did to others, perhaps because he was
less likely to disagree or say anything unkind.

"Ah." Ori's words came to a halt. "You don't mind that I'm talking about this, do you? It's just, I
wouldn't want to just whine at you like some disgruntled dwarfling. I know there are others who
have a lot more to do than I do, really I have no reason to complain, to be working on my courtship
gift and my masterpiece is something many dwarves would love to do."

"I don't mind. I like listening." As always, he wasn't sure how much of his message got through; it
was clear enough to him, but that didn't always mean much. At least his tone seemed to have made it
through, as Ori nodded, looking relieved.

"Right. It's just, there's so much to do, you know? And even after I finish my masterpiece it has to be
accepted. I'm sure I can finish everything before the wedding, I wouldn't have agreed to the date if I
wasn't, but I can't help but worry sometimes. And I don't really have anyone I can speak to about
this. Dori will just worry, and Fíli would just tell me the gift isn't that important and he'd just accept
anything I made, and no matter what Kíli says I just feel guilty speaking about this with him since it
affects him, too. Bilbo and Tauriel are nice enough, but neither of them knows much about the matter
of masterpieces, and there's no way I could speak to Balin about this, he might think I'm not ready
yet."

Bifur nodded and settled down as Ori continued speaking, occasionally offering some brief comment
or another that hopefully got understood. He made them both some tea, it was only proper to offer
something to a guest after all, and for all that Nori and Ori did not always agree with Dori on
everything he had at least given them both a healthy appreciation for nice teas. Ori accepted the cup
with a polite nod and smile, his topic having now shifted to the general goings-on of the court. It was
clear some people still felt comfortable ignoring him, for all that Ori confessed this didn't happen as
often anymore now that he had taken a more visible position at Fíli's side, but then Ori seemed rather
adept at turning this to his advantage.

"They don't dare insult me openly anymore, so I suppose some of them think they can achieve the
same thing by pretending I'm not there at all." Ori shrugged. "It works well enough for me. They
don't get in my way as much, and if they try to ignore me on something that actually matters, I don't
feel guilty about getting them in trouble for it. And really, it doesn't happen all that much anymore.
Quite a few seem more interested in gaining my favour, now that they can't deny that I'm going to be
wed to Fíli."

Bifur nodded. Yes, that was rather what might be expected. Quite a few of the nobles who had
protested Bofur's new title were now all too happy to try and get on his good side. Sometimes it
worked, sometimes not. Bofur was a jovial enough dwarf, and happy to try and get along with
anyone who gave him the chance, but he also had little patience for insincerity and deceit. It was a
fine trait, that desire for honesty, and made Bifur even prouder of his cousin than he might have been
before.

He wondered, sometimes, what Timpur would have made of all this. He wondered if his brother
would have come along with them, or if he would have stayed in Ered Luin to look after Vati.
Perhaps he might have had a family of his own by now, and either chosen to join the journey to
provide for them or stayed behind for their sake. Right now he certainly would have been proud of
Bofur, telling everyone about their cousin the lord, now see how far our little Bofur has come.

Though then, Timpur probably was proud right now, tugging at the sleeve of the closest ancestor to
tell such tales, now look, even little Bombur has since grown older than me, where has the time gone
indeed.

Such were melancholy thoughts, however, and there was life in this room, with a crackling fire and
hot tea and Ori now busy recounting some scheme Kíli and Gimli were currently passing their precious spare time with, pausing every now and then to give Bifur room to interject if he wished. It was an afternoon well spent, in all, and as he gave Ori a small wooden figurine at the end of it he was received with a sincere gasp of thanks and a smile that almost reminded him of his brother at that age, a century and then some ago.

It was not the same thing, not quite, but it was enough to give him pleasant dreams that night.

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The first sign that something was going on was the way the guards smiled.

It had taken him some time at first to get used to the idea of guards stationed around the clock in front of what was in essence his family home, but he'd grown accustomed to it over time. The guards seemed to take little notice of his comings and goings, and while he suspected they amused themselves with gossip now and then, it wasn't like they made particular note of when he arrived and left. He was the crown prince and had full rights to come and go as he pleased, and the guards were much more concerned with keeping out those with no right to be there. Most of the time they barely spared him a nod as he walked by.

This time, though, one of them broke into a grin as soon as he walked close, and the other seemed to be fighting a smile, too. This was strange. Not bad strange, necessarily, but strange nonetheless, enough that he paused at the door.

"Is there something going on?"

"Not that I know of, Your Highness." A lie, and a bad one, and the guard couldn't even stop grinning. "Should there be?"

"Oh, I was just wondering, since you seem to be so very amused at something."

"Us? Why, never. We just heard a good joke, that's all." Right. And he was as gullible as a fifteen-year-old.

"I'm sure." Well, apparently he would just have to find out. He didn't believe there to be any threat; Dwalin had very carefully picked all the guards on the door rotation from his most loyal dwarves. Some kind of a prank, perhaps, though he would have hoped some childish thing from Kíli wouldn't have amused them quite so much.

Either way, he'd just have to walk in.

At first he didn't notice anything amiss. Nothing came hurtling toward him from any direction, nobody was shouting, nothing worthy of note happened at all. Ori was there, he noted, and judging by the hastily closed door to the baths someone else had been there just a moment before, but all in all there was nothing immediately noteworthy.

Then, however, he realised Ori was holding something. Something that looked very much like a wrapped gift. And he was looking somewhat unsure about it, too.

Oh. Right.

"Ori?" He affected a light tone as best as he could. No reason for them both to be nervous. "I didn't expect you here."

"You weren't meant to expect me." Ori offered him a weak smile. "I was almost beginning to fear
"you wouldn't come, even though you were supposed to."

"Is that why my mother sent me off at a precise time? And why the meeting this afternoon was cancelled?"

"I wouldn't have cancelled that for my own ends!" Ori looked somewhat scandalized by the very idea. "The meeting was legitimately cancelled! I only made use of my position to make sure it wasn't replaced by another."

"Peace, love! I know you wouldn't abuse your power so." Fíli smiled, hoping to encourage him. "So. You wanted to see me?"

"I did." Ori visibly took a deep breath, straightening a bit. "I would give you my courting gift, if you would accept it."

Fíli nodded, not saying anything yet. Ori seemed to still have plenty to say, and he wasn't about to interfere with that.

"You are a prince, and the heir to the throne. I could never forget that, I've known that for as long as I have known you. At the same time, though, you are my friend, the one who teased me when we were young, the one who kept me from despair during our journey. My gift to you should be something that fits your station, but I also wanted it to be something I would make for my dearest friend, as you are."

Ori bit on his lip for a moment. "Any dwarf would wish to protect their heart's chosen in any way they can, just as you have protected me time and time again. I can't protect you on the battlefield, not truly. I may try, and would certainly fight to my last breath in your defence, but my skills as a warrior fall woefully short of the needs of true peril. Even in the courts my protection of you is limited by my own fears and skills, and though I strive to do better, it will never be something I am glad to do, or indeed something I might do better than your own abilities. There is one small way, though, in which I can shield you, and that is what I hope to do with my gift."

He stepped forward now, thrusting the gift out to Fíli. He accepted it without hesitation, carefully opening the wrappings. He found a bundle of fabric inside, letting the wrapping paper fall to the ground in favour of shaking out the piece of clothing to examine it.

It was a cape, by the looks of it just long enough to cover his arms, broad enough to go all the way around him. He glimpsed black velvet in the lining, the outside covered in knitted fabric. It was made of dark blue panels for the most part, with cabled patterns mimicking many of the designs he often wore in his clothing, with the centre panel at the back having a beautiful image of the crest of Durin knitted up in pure white against the dark blue background. It was thick and heavy, and it looked like it would be delightfully warm in the drafty mountain. It certainly was fine enough for him to wear it even on official occasions, each stitch in the expanse of the fabric neat and even.

"I, ah. I put in some pockets on the inside, for your knives and such, I asked Nori for the best placement for those so they'll actually be useful." Ori flushed a bit. "It's just, I heard you say you were cold sometimes last winter, and, well, this is something I can actually do something about. I thought of making you a sweater, first, but I thought this would be more versatile."

Fíli was about to respond when he noticed something. The cloak pin holding the cape together at the front was of very simple make, a smooth, polished wooden piece. "Did you make this?"

"Ah, yes." Ori looked down. "I know it's not very remarkable compared with the pins you already have, but I needed to have something, and I have even less skill for blacksmithing than I do for
carving. Bofur and Bifur were very helpful with choosing the best wood and such."

"It's perfect." It really was. Sure, it was not as glamorous as the jewelled pins he now had aplenty, but it had been made by Ori, and that was all that mattered to him. Besides, anything more ornate than the simple wooden pin would have distracted from the fine work of the cape itself. "Help me put it on?"

He almost expected Ori to point out that Fíli was perfectly capable of putting on a cape all by himself, but instead the little scribe helped him settle the cape around his shoulders, adjusting it one last time after Fíli had secured it properly with the wooden pin. As he had imagined, the cape was delightfully warm, the weight of it a secure comfort around him, almost like a hug.

Of course, it wasn't quite the same, so instead he drew Ori into his arms and then into a kiss. A door creaked in the manner of an intended warning of company about to arrive, but he ignored it for now, rather more concerned with his betrothed. It wasn't until they broke apart at last, with Ori looking up at him with flushed cheeks and a small smile, that anyone actually spoke.

"I take it you've accepted the gift?"

Fíli still didn't let go of Ori, turning to look to where Kíli was leaning against the frame of the door to his rooms, grinning like the little sneak he was. "Not all of us will crow about our acceptance without even taking a look at the gift first."

"Has everyone heard about that? And Tauriel knows I meant no insult." Kíli walked closer, and Fíli wasn't too surprised to find other doors creaking open as well. Of course they would all have been listening. "So that's the last required gift between the two of you, right? The formalities are done with?"

"Right." Ori nodded, smiling as he lingered in Fíli's arms, apparently quite happy to be held close. "I just need to finish my masterpiece before Durin's Day."

"Well, there is still the matter of the marriage beads," Thorin pointed out from his own door, Bilbo smiling at them behind his shoulder. "But you two don't need to worry about those, that's what family is for."

"Didn't seem to bother you too much, as I recall." Of course, it wasn't entirely required that family members be the ones to supply the beads for the marriage braids, but it was customary for them to do so, particularly among the noble families. Of course, Thorin had entirely ignored any such traditions in the case of his own wedding. Though then, Fíli certainly hadn't been in any shape to make the beads at the time, and nobody else in their immediate family had enough of a hand for fine work besides Thorin himself; it had seemed senseless indeed to deny him the chance of making the beads in favour of commissioning them from some stranger.

"All the more reason to follow tradition now. Besides, Bilbo didn't have his family at hand to make his beads for him, whereas Ori and you both have people to do so in your stead."

"Because you haven't made enough marriage beads already?" Not that he was actually complaining, really. For all that Thorin was a blacksmith by trade, he had a fair enough hand as a goldsmith and a jeweller, as was evident in the beads in the royal marriage braids. Certainly he would not allow anything but the very best to be presented to Ori on Fíli's behalf.

"Don't worry. We'll allow you to make Tauriel's for Kíli." And that was his mother, now, who must have hurried indeed to catch up with him unnoticed after sending him away earlier, and Dori and Nori had been hiding somewhere as well, and then there were even more well-wishes and
congratulations as what seemed to be most of the Company appeared from behind various doors. It wasn't exactly traditional, for people outside the immediate family to be witnessing a gift, but then he supposed it was something of an occasion. This was the final gift, after all, and the final gift was always special, even when they all knew it was going to be a while yet until the wedding.

Of course, he hadn't realised just how special some might find it to be until Nori drew him into a hug under the guise of some friendly brotherly threats after most of the others had had their turn. Fíli wasn't sure what to expect, beyond the same threats he had heard often enough by now, only to have Nori murmur to him how Dori was going to be spending the night in Dale as Bard's guest soon and Nori had half a mind of spending that same night in Dwalin's rooms. Rooms that were very far from those Ori was going to be occupying all on his own, if Fíli caught his drift. Then he moved away again, looking as innocent as Nori ever did as he made to join Dwalin's side, but Fíli knew what he had heard.

The heat that rose to Fíli's cheeks had nothing to do with the warm cape around him, but with some luck nobody would notice his embarrassment, or would think it the result of some teasing comment. Embarrassing him had probably been Nori's main purpose, anyway.

And yet, all of a sudden he was wondering how soon the elven delegates Dori was supposed to discuss fabric trade with were going to arrive in Dale, exactly.

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It wasn't that he was nervous, exactly, certainly not afraid, but Ori had to admit there were moments when he wasn't entirely sure about this.

He had tried knitting at first, to put his mind at ease, but his tension was all wrong and he kept dropping stitches until he decided to simply give up on the entire thing for the night. There was nothing else he could work on to occupy himself, either, certainly nothing involving ink, he would just make a mess and produce nothing of value.

It might have helped if he could have stopped looking to the door every time he even imagined he might have heard something.

He hadn't thought much of it when Dori had announced his intention of staying in Bard's household while he did negotiations with the elven party. The negotiations were to take place in Dale, agreed by all to be the most neutral ground, and while the way wasn't that long between Erebor and the city Dori still preferred to be close at hand just in case. Besides, Ori suspected this was in part an excuse to spend a couple of days in close proximity to Bard and his children. Dori had always been fond of children, and it had been a long time since Ori had truly fit that name, so it was no wonder he took the occasional opportunity to spend time with Bard's young ones. Besides that, he seemed to have found a friend in the utterly practical king of Dale. It was good to see Dori having a life that wasn't entirely composed of his family and work. The Company was a good start, yes, but then they practically counted as family now.

Except then Nori had announced, over one of their shared dinners that Dori still insisted on at least a few times a week however busy they were, that he would spent that particular night with Dwalin. He had gone on to remind Ori to remember to lock the door if he didn't want any surprise visitors, with a tone that very much implied that he should instead leave the door unlocked if he might welcome a visitor. And Dori had only nodded and looked at Ori, with a look that made it very clear that he knew precisely what Nori was suggesting and did not, in fact, disapprove.

Ori had excused himself rather quickly from that particular dinner, not entirely sure how to react except flush and nod and quickly change the subject. Now, however, there was no getting away
from it any longer, not with Dori off to Dale to meet the elven delegation and Nori leaving with a
wink and some suggestive comments that had made Ori's cheeks burn. Ever since then he had been
trying to find ways to occupy himself and distract himself from the possibility of someone perhaps
coming to knock at his door.

He had left the door unlocked. That much, at least, he was sure he wanted.

The knock came late in the evening, enough so that Ori had almost stopped expecting it. Here it was,
though, brief but sharp, most definitely real and not just a figment of his imagination. He scrambled
to his feet from where he'd been cradling a cup of tea by the fireplace, only barely stopping to set the
cup aside before rushing to the door. If his hands trembled a little as he opened the door, well,
nobody had to know.

Fíli was standing outside the door, much as he had expected, looking a bit nervous as well.
Somehow, that made Ori feel better. At least he wasn't the only one thinking clearly too much about
this. "Ori. Ah, good evening." Fíli offered him a small smile. "May I come in?"

"Ah, sure." Ori stepped aside and then, because apparently being nervous made him state the
obvious, he added, "My brothers aren't here."

"Yes, I was told that." Fíli waited until the door was closed, then sighed, running a hand over his
hair. "To be honest, I wasn't sure if I should come."

"Oh?" Ori's stomach lurched. "If you don't want to —"

"Oh, no! No, that's not what I meant at all!" Fíli quickly shook his head, taking a step forward before
he came to a halt again, one hand half reached toward Ori before he let it drop. "It's just… you know
I've been careful, right? Doing my best not to give anyone reasons to think badly of you on my
account. And I didn't want to risk ruining all that."

"You're here, though." Unless he'd come just to tell Ori he wasn't staying. Which was… well, it
would have been fine, of course, it wasn't like Ori was going to make him stay if he didn't want to,
but he did have to admit it didn't feel entirely great.

"Yes, well. I, ah." Fíli flushed a little, looking embarrassed, now. "I actually went to speak with my
mother about it."

"Really?" Ori's voice came out almost as a squeak, which would have been embarrassing if he hadn't
already been utterly mortified by this news. Fíli had discussed this with Dís? "But — what did you
say?"

"I told her that Nori had implied you would be alone if I wanted to visit for the night, and that I
wanted to but wasn't sure I should, for the obvious reasons." Fíli sighed, tugging at one of his braids.
"She, well, she called me an idiot first of all, just in case you wanted a reason to feel good about this
mess."

"Why would it make me feel good that someone called you an idiot?" Though at least he was glad
that Dís didn't seem to think Fíli visiting him was a bad idea. Well, presumably she didn't think so,
since Fíli was here and not locked away in a room where he couldn't sneak out, or something. There
was no doubt in Ori's mind that Dís would have been able to stop her son from coming if she'd
disapproved of Fíli's plans.

"Because she thought I shouldn't be worrying about such things at all." Fíli finally made to take off
his cloak, the knitted one Ori had made himself, and lay it over the back of a chair by the table. "Not
that she thought I was stupid to worry about keeping things honourable between us, no. But she did point out that since we have exchanged all our obligatory gifts and the wedding day has been decided, we are only the ceremony away from being truly bound. Even the most traditional dwarves would not think much of us sneaking away together at this point. As she said, if someone thought badly of us for spending the night together at this point, then such people are already going to disapprove just because we have been behind closed doors together before, even if it was somewhere anyone might have walked in at any time."

"So… she approved, then."

"That's certainly what it seems like. She said that as long as I'm not flaunting it too openly, she's not going to tell me not to see you alone." Fíli still looked hesitant. "But… what about you? I mean, obviously your brothers are looking the other way, they wouldn't have made things so easy for us otherwise and there's no way Dori isn't aware of this, but that still leaves you." Fíli took another half step toward him, still not coming too close. "I won't stay if you don't want me to, Ori, just like I won't do anything you don't want me to even if I do spend the night. It's all up to you, I swear."

"I know that." And he did know, he did trust Fíli utterly on this, as he did in other matters. "And… I do want you to stay." He bit his lower lip, trying to find the words for what he felt, only managing to flush at the thought. "I, ah. I also do want you to… well, do things. While here. With me."

"Well, that's a good thing, since I can certainly work with that." Fíli smiled, finally crossing the distance separating them. "And at least I know where to start in this." He drew Ori into his arms and bent his head down, catching Ori's lips in a sweet kiss that soon grew more passionate.

Ori all but melted in Fíli's embrace, leaning against his chest and letting himself be swept away in the kiss. Fíli was a sweet kisser, always had been, but now there was an undercurrent of something else to it as well, if he wasn't entirely mistaken. Fíli was holding him closer than ever before, his hands strong at Ori's back, and to Ori's surprise and little bit of embarrassment one of them was most definitely sliding further down along Ori's body.

It wasn't a bad thing, though. Not a bad thing at all if Ori was to define it.

Fíli's hand settled at his backside, drawing him even closer, though Ori would not have thought that possible at their current positions. It was like there was no space at all between their bodies, his own arms reaching up around Fíli's neck now, breathless kisses following one another as they only broke off occasionally to gasp for air before diving back together.

At last Fíli drew back further, his eyes heavy-lidded and his gaze intense in a way that made Ori shudder. "I want you," he murmured. "I've wanted you for so long, Mahal, it feels like it's been burning me up from the inside."

"I'm all yours," Ori replied, surprised at his own boldness at speaking such words. But then, he supposed this was a night for bold decisions, particularly since they did not know if they would be given another such chance before they were wed. "If you want me, I'm all yours to have."

Fíli muttered a quiet curse, his arm tightening around Ori. "You'll drive me crazy with talk like that, mark my words," he said, his breath ghosting over Ori's hair as he leaned in to press a kiss at Ori's hairline. "Let's not rush too much, my love. We've all our lives to try, well, everything."

Ori drew a deep breath. Well, he'd already decided to be bold. "So help me Durin and all his smiths, if you propose to leave things off here out of some mistaken concern or sense of propriety, I'm going to hit you over the head and drag you off into my bedchamber if that's what it takes to change your mind. I know your line is known for your stone skulls and lack of thought, but I assure you, there's
enough of Durin's blood in me as well that I won't be turned away that easily."

Fíli let out a surprised laugh. "Oh! Oh, I never suggested that, I promise you. As much as I like kissing you, I'm rather eager for more, if you'd allow. All I meant is that we don't need to do absolutely everything at once."

"Well, that sounds better, then." Ori smiled, flushing a little at what he'd just said. "So… you'd like to do more than this?"

"Aye. And from what you just said, I'd assume I'm not alone." Fíli grinned. "Would it be terribly bold if I suggested we move to your bedroom?"

"I'd say less so than trying to go beyond kisses here in the front room, where someone might actually walk in."

And that was not something he wanted to happen, definitely not. Especially since the only people he might have expected to walk into their rooms unannounced were, well, Dori and Nori. Whatever he got up to with Fíli would never be in front of them if Ori could help it.

"I think I approve of this plan." Fíli drew away, only to offer Ori his hand. "Shall we, then?"

Ori was all too happy to take Fíli's hand and half follow, half lead him towards the bedroom. There was a lot he was willing to do for his crown prince, and retiring to bed with him was definitely high up on the list. And since Dori and Nori apparently did not think to stop them, at least not for tonight, Ori saw no reason to hesitate.

His bed wasn't terribly big, but it could fit the two of them easily enough, particularly when they settled down on it without much in the way of clothes to take up the room. They started with kisses, since those were familiar, moving on to caresses and touches and other such things that soon left Ori even more breathless and gasping than before. There were sure to be bruises along his skin in the morning from Fíli's eager mouth, and he was fairly sure he left scratch marks on Fíli's back, but then if anyone had any reason to see such marks, Ori would bear them without shame. There was nothing to be ashamed of in loving his betrothed, after all.

He wasn't entirely sure when they had dozed off, or even which one of them had had the minimal presence of mind to draw a blanket over their naked bodies as they sought warm from each other in the dimly lit room. However, he did know it wasn't much past midnight that he was startled awake, still held in Fíli's arms, by the sound of someone pounding on the front door.

Fíli stirred a little, but Ori placated him with a small kiss on his lips, crawling over him to get out of bed. "You stay here," he murmured. "I doubt that's Dori or Nori, and you probably shouldn't be found opening my door in the middle of the night without a stitch on you."

"Smart thinking." Fíli mumbled back, his voice sleepy enough Ori wasn't entirely sure he was aware of speaking at all. Ori fumbled through the shadows of the room, the candle they'd had lit long since burnt almost to the end, until he found a robe he could pull on. This was enough to cover him for now, he decided, and if anyone was scandalised by the sight of his bare feet under the hem of his robe then they shouldn't have woken him up in the middle of the night, now should they?

The pounding, for he wasn't about to call it knocking, had not ceased for more than a moment at a time as he rushed out into the front room, just barely having the presence of mind to close the door behind himself enough not to leave Fíli in plain sight from the front door. "Coming, coming," he called out in a low voice, rushing to the door. The front room was slightly more lit than his bedroom, but only just, the fire in the fireplace having died down to embers. He'd have to see to it once whatever was going on had been taken care of. "Now who is it at this hour?"
He yanked open the door, just about ready to unleash an angry tirade at the deliverer of such disturbances at an indecent hour at whoever he saw, then halted as he saw the all too familiar face of the younger prince.

"Kíli?" he gasped. "What — what are you doing here?" And why did he look so worried? Kíli never looked worried, not at anything short of an actual orc attack. Except if they'd been under attack someone would have sounded an alarm long before Kíli got around to coming to his door.

"I need Fíli."

"Why? I mean —" He wasn't sure how much Fíli had discussed the matter with Kíli, but he did know the princes rarely hid anything from each other. If Fíli had even talked to his mother about coming to meet Ori, then surely Kíli would know too. But what would be so urgent that Kíli would be coming for him in the middle of the night?

"There's no time. If he's even halfway decent, I'm taking him." Kíli pushed past him into the front room, his gaze immediately drawn to the half-open door of Ori's bedroom. "Did you hear that, Fíli? Get your trousers on and get out here, there's no time to waste!"

"I'd tell you to keep your trousers on, but then I think I should at least have mine all the way up first," Fíli called back. For all the teasing words, Ori could detect a slight hint of tension to his voice underneath the sleepiness. Clearly he had come to the same conclusion as Ori, that Kíli would not be visiting without a very good reason. "What's the hurry?"

"Gimli is missing."

"Wait, what?" Ori took a step back. "Missing? What do you mean?"

"He left home around noon, said he was going to Dale and he'd be back by nightfall. Now it's been long since and there's no hide nor hair to be found of him. Glóin's going sick with worry as you can imagine, so we'd better get moving and do something before he tears the whole mountain apart trying to find his little lad."

"To Dale?" Fíli peeked out of Ori's bedroom and frowned at his brother. "Are you sure he's not just, well, you know. Gone for a visit and forgotten himself?" Now he waggled his eyebrows to make a point.

"You mean like you?" Well, at least Kíli wasn't playing coy. "If he has, then that's all the more reason to worry."

"Why so?" Finally Fíli stepped out, lacing up his trousers, still without boots or any manner of shirt. Even so Ori could see that he had taken the time to strap on a couple of knives. His warrior prince never failed to show his true colours, even when just woken from bed. Then, he still wasn't entirely sure Fíli had been unarmed even when they went to bed, all clothes strewn across the floor. "You've heard the rumours as surely as I, so clearly it's not just someone who Glóin would think is unworthy of him. Well, not that Glóin would ever think anyone is good enough for his little lad, probably wouldn't approve of even Durin himself, but then that's just Glóin being Glóin. If we're being realistic he could hardly ask for anything better than a princess for his son, considering both us princes are already spoken for."

"Don't tell me you've bought into that Sigrid crap as well." Kíli frowned, arms crossed over his chest. "First, even if that were true, Bard would hardly approve of Gimli staying the night while they're unwed so that'd definitely be a bad thing. And second, I don't believe for a moment that Gimli's actually interested in her like that."
"Dori certainly doesn't believe so, and he often talks with Sigrid while he's visiting Dale." At last, something Ori could give input on! "He thinks it's just friendship and nothing more, and I'd assume he'd know better than someone spreading gossip for their own amusement."

"There's been letters, though, everyone knows that." Fili ducked back into the bedroom to take up a shirt and then stepped back out, pulling it over his head. His hair was in some disarray, but Ori supposed it couldn't be helped for now; there'd be time for arranging it better once they knew everything was under control. "Even if there weren't rumours about that, Bilbo said Gimli had asked for help with his written Westron, so there's got to be some writing going on. And who else would he be writing to if not Sigrid?"

"And why would he writing to Sigrid when he's already visiting her? Gimli's not the type to write things down if he could just say them, you know he speaks his mind well and clear." Kili shook his head, looking frustrated at something. Perhaps his brother's disagreement. "No, there's something else going on here, and if it's what I think then we have a lot of trouble indeed."

"And what is it you think is going on?" Ori decided he should at least have a belt over his robe for some semblance of decency. Why, of course he was going to go with Fili and Kili, he was the crown prince's adviser after all. Even if this wasn't strictly speaking official business, he wasn't going to just sit back and wonder what was happening while others were involved in the actual action.

"You know there are elves in Dale right now."

"Well, yes." Ori frowned. "You don't think they'd have done something to him? Because that's absurd, it's not like they could just spirit him away from under our noses, not when there's going to be plenty of attention on them."

"Not the delegation itself, no. But it's entirely possible someone else came with them." Kili paused. "Tauriel heard that it's not just Gimli who has been delivering letters to Sigrid. A couple of times she's met a messenger from Mirkwood with a letter to take to the princess."

"And you think the letters haven't all been going to Sigrid from the forest and mountain both."

"I don't think so at all, no. Especially not when Gimli's been showing some interest in how my relationship with Tauriel is to work."

Fili's eyes widened in a way that might have been comical if the situation hadn't been so very serious. "You don't think he has an interest in an elf, surely?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know. But I am fairly certain that he's been communicating with someone in Mirkwood, and now there are elves in town and Gimli has disappeared. Don't tell me this doesn't all smell fishy to you."

"Only one way to find out, I suppose, and that's to find the lad."

"That would be the least of our problems if Glóin decided to go about showing his worry to all. I've annoyed a dragon before, I'd not choose to get in front of an angry Glóin." Kili nodded at Fili and Ori both, then turned to walk out. They followed him at once. If someone was going to start talk about all of them leaving the rooms of the brothers Ri with Ori and Fili both less than entirely
dressed, well. As Fíli had said, if someone wanted to start gossip they were going to do so no matter what, and this situation was clearly more important than keeping up some manner of appearances when their young cousin was missing.

Ori hoped beyond hope that this was just a case of Gimli getting lost in a tankard of ale or something similarly innocuous.

Anything else seemed too terrible to contemplate.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Gimli is gone, which obviously requires investigation. Ori and Fíli have some luck at the royal stables, while Glóin and Kulta find some clearer clues. However, even knowing where he is might not be enough to keep him safe, as Gimli and Legolas are about to realise.

Chapter Notes

Of the new names in this chapter, Talli is Finnish for "a stable", Hepo is (oldish/childish) Finnish for "a horse", and Sadin is old Finnish for "a trap".

Thorin was not in a good mood.

It was not as though he was ever happy to be dragged out of bed in the middle of the night, particularly when doing so also startled Bilbo awake from his peaceful sleep. Of course his hobbit decided to join him instead of continuing his slumber, which was at once both endearing and frustrating. Surely it would have been better for at least one of them to be well rested come the morrow.

Not that he thought his Company would have woken him up in the wee hours of morning without a good reason, of course. This faith had only been shaken for a moment when he realised the alarm had come from Glóin, who was pacing the front room with a wild look in his eyes, for all that Kíli had been the one to deliver the message. No doubt Glóin had barged in and only belatedly decided to wake up Kíli rather than the king himself, if only so the prince could do the job of waking Thorin. He'd figured this probably had to do with Gimli, such moods from Glóin usually did, and had been fully prepared to calm Glóin and assure him the lad had probably slipped off to a tavern somewhere and forgotten the time.

Then, however, he had heard the full description of the situation, and things suddenly looked a lot more serious.

"He said he'd be back by nightfall," Kulta said, the only sign of her own worry being the pinched look around her eyes even as her husband paced and all but wailed for his little lad. "I don't think he'd get lost in a tavern like that, not when he'd promised to be back. He knows we wouldn't have minded if he wanted to stay out later, he's almost of age after all, so he didn't need to say he would be coming back at that time if he didn't intend to do so."

"I see." Thorin frowned, running a hand over his hair. He hadn't had time to see to it properly after getting out of bed, so it was gathered up in one large, loose braid, only his marriage braid standing out from the general mass of it, safely tucked behind his ear. Bilbo's hair was a mess of curls in contrast, framing his sleepy face as he fussed about the room, disappearing into their rooms to see to the tea pot he had set on the fire before he returned, trying to get everyone comfortable as more people started to fill the room. Kíli had disappeared off in search of Fíli — and Thorin was just going
to ignore the implications of that, thank you very much, particularly so as Dís did not seem worried
so clearly this was not something that should have concerned him — but more members of the
Company had soon arrived to take his place and more, no doubt awoken from sleep by Glóin before
he'd come rushing to the royal quarters. "And you have no idea what he might be up to?"

"Up to? Are you suggesting this is some scheme by my lad?" Glóin thundered closer. "It's those
pointy-eared bastards, I'm telling you, Thorin! My wee lad went to Dale, all innocent-like, and
they've done something to him, mark my words! I knew things would go bad when we started
consorting with them!"

"I highly doubt the elven ambassadors negotiating trade would have the inclination for kidnapping or
whatever horrors you are imagining," Tauriel pointed out, looking delightfully awake and dangerous
as she stood by a wall and toyed with a knife. In fact, she didn't look like she'd gone to bed at all, but
then Thorin had heard peculiar things about elves and sleep. At least she wasn't wearing the same
clothes she had the previous night, but that was little evidence of anything. "They do rather attract
attention, after all. Also, I would appreciate it if you didn't tar all my kinsfolk with the same brush."

"Yes, well, obviously you are different," Glóin allowed gruffly. "You're practically a dwarf by now,
clearly you're nothing to do with those untrustworthy elves in Mirkwood!"

Thorin might have pointed out that Tauriel had at one point been one of those untrustworthy elves,
had in fact had a direct part in imprisoning them, but he figured that would have done no good. And,
well, he didn't entirely disagree with Glóin. While he had come to accept that not all elves were
altogether terrible, he was still waiting for evidence that the category of tolerable elves consisted of
more than the one singular she-elf who was apparently responsible for his younger nephew's life and
happiness both.

Speculating would not get them far, though, and he started asking questions, wanting to gather as
much information about Gimli's movements the day before as he possibly could. There wasn't much,
regrettably, and even the others could not offer much. They were still without a solution as Kíli
returned, Fíli and Ori trailing after him. The latter two were only barely decent, Thorin noted, neither
of them even wearing boots, and really it would have been quite scandalous if Dís hadn't greeted
them with a nod and a knowing smile that clearly indicated she was not surprised in the least. Her
son, her choice on how to handle the matter.

"We have an idea about what might be going on," was the first thing Fíli said, and even barefoot and
with rumpled hair and only a thin tunic over his trousers he looked every inch a prince, now. Thorin
felt unreasonably proud of him for such a simple thing. "I mean, obviously we can't be sure until we
find evidence one way or another, but we do have an idea at least, and I think it's a good one."

"Where?" Glóin was surging forward again, his sudden interest so intense that Ori actually took a
step back. "Where is my lad?"

"We don't know! Not for sure, anyway." Ori was wearing a robe, and though it was properly belted,
Thorin found it rather doubtful he was wearing much underneath, if he hadn't even taken the time to
put on proper boots. "It's just, Kíli had this thought, and…"

"We think it's something to do with elves." Kíli at least seemed calm enough, standing next to his
brother even as he glanced towards Tauriel.

"I knew it!" Glóin spun around to point a triumphant finger at Thorin. "I knew the damned weed-
eaters had something to do with it!"

"Not like that!" Kíli protested. "I don't think there's any kidnapping going on, or whatever it is you're
"Kíli." Thorin looked calmly at his nephew, or as calmly as he could with his lack of sleep and growing annoyance with the situation. "What is it you know?"

"What I know? Very little. What I suspect, though, that's a whole another matter, here." Kíli shrugged. "Gimli's been writing letters, right? And I know there's these stupid rumours about him and Princess Sigrid. But it doesn't make sense for him to write to her if he's already visiting her every now and then. And… well."

"A couple of times I have encountered elves in Dale, who have asked me how they might find the Princess," Tauriel cut in. "When I have asked them why, they've told me they come from Mirkwood bearing messages. Yet if these were official missives of any kind, surely they would be directed to King Bard instead of his daughter."

Thorin frowned. "So you think these two things are linked?"

"Seems like it." Kíli nodded. "If we're right, it's not that Gimli's been writing to Sigrid, it's that he's been writing to someone in Mirkwood and they've been writing back, and Sigrid has taken the task of passing letters back and forth. It's sensible, really, I doubt many elves would bear a letter from some young dwarfling just like that, but the Princess of Dale can expect a much better treatment for her messages. And now there's an entire delegation of elves arriving in Dale all at once; it would be quite simple for one more to ride in with them and not attract much attention at all."

"I still don't see how this would mean there's no kidnapping going on." Glóin had crossed his arms over his chest, now, looking almost sulky. "My lad's still missing, in the middle of the night! How do you explain that?"

"Maybe he wants to be missing?" Kíli shot back. "You immediately expect the worst, just because there are elves involved. Did you miss the part where your wee lad's probably been writing to an elf for who knows how long, maybe ever since he passed through Mirkwood?"

"Yes, well, maybe not all of us are quite like you!" The words burst out in one angry shout, and then Glóin almost visibly recoiled, gathering himself. "Ah. I mean —"

"No, I think it's quite clear what you mean." Kíli's face took on a humourless smile. "I'm a freak of a dwarf, aren't I? No, don't try to deny it, I've heard it often and clear enough that I don't need any more evidence either way. But the thing is, it seems awfully much like your son might also be enough of a freak to cultivate some kind of a friendship with an elf as well, and if this is to end without anyone getting hurt, you might want to accept this."

"I'll just stop you here before anything happens that someone might regret." Thorin shook his head. "We will not be discussing such matters here, and Glóin, I fully expect you to deliver a proper apology to Kíli once we are all more calm and collected. You are agitated, and therefore I will not hold it against you as I might otherwise, but I will not have you insulting one of my heirs like that over something that ought not to be an insult at all."

"Right." Glóin frowned. "And what are we to do about the matter of my little lad, then?"

"Have you checked if he left a note?" Ori spoke up again, looking a little hesitant as all eyes turned to him. "I mean, he isn't really the type to make everyone worry about him, is he? And at least he knows you would get concerned and come looking for him, and that's hardly a good thing if he's trying to be somewhere longer than he agreed. So maybe he left a note and thought you might find it, so he'd be asking for forgiveness rather than permission. I mean," and now a hint of steel entered
even little Ori's voice, "it's not exactly hard to imagine why he might not be eager to tell you beforehand if indeed he's set to meet an elf for something." This was delivered with a meaningful glance at Glóin, who at least had the sense to look a bit abashed.

"We haven't looked for anything like that, no." Kulta spoke now, apparently thinking it best not to let her husband explain himself right now. "But we should do that, you are right. Gimli isn't the type to go off without any warning, he knows his father too well for that. I will go and take a look around his room, if he's left a note it should be easy enough to find."

"In the meantime, we should also look for other clues." Bofur was stretching himself, looking like he might need a nap any moment, but his eyes were sharp enough. "I mean, if he planned to go out for longer than just a day trip to Dale, he probably didn't just walk out the gates just like that. Check at the stables, maybe the market?"

"We should ask around in Dale, too, though that will have to wait until morning." Dís nodded. "Of course, if we are fortunate things will have sorted themselves out by then, but if not, we'll try to find clues on where Gimli might have gone, as well as ask the elves if Kíli's theory has any truth to it."

"Indeed. If all goes well this will all end with Gimli stumbling home with nothing worse than a headache for the morning, but best be prepared." Thorin sighed, glancing around. "Very well. Glóin, Kulta, see if he has left a note of some sort. You might also want to see if he has taken anything with him, it might be useful to see how long he planned to be outside. Tauriel and Kíli, make sure the guards are informed; also, if this stretches on, I'd like the two of you to speak with the elves who arrived to Dale yesterday. Bofur, try to get the word around in the taverns of the mountain, just in case, and perhaps in Dale as well if you can manage that. Fíli, Ori…" He trailed off, looking at the two.

"We'll take the stables and the marketplace." Fíli nodded. "Got it."

"Actually, before you do that, take a moment to get some proper clothes on." Thorin resisted the urge to shake his head. "The market stalls won't even be up yet, and it would be a pity for you to catch a chill or something, now wouldn't it?"

Ori flushed at the comment, but Fíli met his gaze head on, not seeming the slightest bit ashamed. Good. He'd need that conviction in the future as well.

There were a few more words exchanged, until everyone started to file out again, the few who could not escape their duties in the morning going to get some more rest while the others dispersed to their assigned tasks. Thorin made his way back into their rooms, then sighed, pausing in the middle of the receiving room.

"Thorin?" Bilbo came up to him, settling a hand on his arm. "Is something wrong?"

"I was just thinking." About the look in Glóin's eyes, the worry and need there. It was familiar in the worst way, bringing up the most unpleasant sort of memories, of a stone giant swinging by and stealing his nephew from sight, of the ebb and swell of a battle swallowing them both up. It was a cold feeling, that worry, cold and edged with desperation, and all of a sudden he almost wished the lads had remained behind so he could pull them both close and never let them go. "Bilbo?"

"Yes?" There was a hint of sleepiness in his voice, still, but his eyes were sharp enough as he looked up at Thorin. "What is it?"

"I don't suppose there's any way to keep our child rooted in the garden forever, is there?"
Bilbo looked like he was going to say something sharp at first, but then his expression softened, his hand running along Thorin's arm. "I'm afraid not, no," he said, leaning close to Thorin's side. "All we can do is teach them to walk and hope they choose the right path."

And, well, if he chose to draw Bilbo to his chest and just hold him there for a moment, he supposed he couldn't be blamed for wanting to hold onto at least the one bit of his happiness that was within reach.

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For all that he didn't miss looking after ponies — he liked the creatures just fine, but he preferred to have his feet on the ground, and besides he was quite happy with never having to count ponies ever again, thank you — Fíli did rather like the royal stables.

There weren't that many ponies in the mountain, of course, and most of those that had helped Dís and her caravan arrive had been sold or traded to Dale, where they might have more use. However, Thorin had held onto a few, with a selection of sturdy ponies for guards going scouting further from the mountain and a few others for the royal family and the Company to use as needed. Fili knew there was one Kíli was particularly fond of, housed right next to a very fine horse who belonged to Tauriel, and another that had served Gimli on his way from Ered Luin that he still visited on occasion. Of course there was a selection of stablehands, too, who were responsible for seeing all the ponies and the one horse were well fed, groomed, and exercised regularly.

Given that they had arrived before dawn, though, there was only one stablehand around, a young dwarf who looked rather nervous about being questioned. Fíli might have grown suspicious, except her behaviour reminded him of Ori before they had grown closer, rather than one who had done wrong and was aware of it. It seemed clear she cared about the ponies, or at the very least she immediately knew which one they were talking about when they mentioned Gimli's.

"Ah, yes, she's not here." She nodded. "I don't know when she was taken or by whom, though; she was already gone when I arrived for work. The stablemaster should know, though he's at home sleeping, now."

"That's quite all right." Ori smiled. "Do you know where he keeps his books? You know, the ones where he writes down when the ponies are taken out."

"They're at his desk." She looked even more nervous now, pointing toward a desk at the edge of the room, covered in papers. "It's just, he really doesn't like it when someone else touches them."

"You do know who we are, right?" Fili wasn't trying to boast or threaten, he really wasn't. Mostly he was just amused that she would be so nervous about possibly showing something to the crown prince and his adviser of all people.

"I still can't show you without the stablemaster's permission, though."

Fili was about to say something, but Ori simply smiled. "That's fine. Just go and get him, all right? Please tell him it's important, we'll wait here."

She didn't look too happy about this suggestion, either, but then nodded and hurried off. Ori barely waited for her to get outside before he marched right over to the desk.

"I don't think you have permission yet." Fíli grinned, though. He knew better than to get in the way of a determined Ori.

"These are official documents produced for the use of the royal household, since we're at the royal
stables. As the main royal scribe, I have every right to check his documentation."

"I do rather adore you, you know. All devious and smart, my dear adviser."

"Always glad to please." Ori shuffled through the papers until he came across a thick book, starting
to leaf through it. Fíli decided this was a sign he wasn't needed right now, turning his attention to the
rest of the stables. There were sleepy mounts dozing in most of the stalls, but the one where he
remembered Gimli putting his little pony when he returned from the hunting trip with Kíli was
conspicuously empty.

Well. This obviously warranted investigation.

He didn't find much of interest in the stall, save for signs it had been in use just recently, so it didn't
seem like the pony had just been moved elsewhere. Even so, he was still looking around for clues
when the silence was broken.

"And what's this about?" An angry voice caught his ear, and he peeked out of the stall. A sleepy-
looking dwarf swept in, hair still something of a mess as he marched up to where Ori was looking
through the papers at the desk. Fíli was just going to assume this was the missing stablemaster. "I
was told there was something important going on, and all I see is some child snooping through my
papers?"

Such disrespect was not entirely surprising, Fíli had to say. Ori was clad in fairly simple robes, a far
cry from the fancier outfits he wore to council meetings and court, and the few beads he had in his
hair despite not spending much time to prepare were covered by the hood he wore to protect him
against the night time chill. It was perfectly feasible that someone who wasn't directly involved with
the goings-on of the court might not recognise him at sight.

That didn't make the disrespect okay, of course, but it did make it more understandable.

"I'm here on behalf of the crown." It was true, really, in that both Fíli and Ori himself could be seen
to represent the crown. "And I was wondering why your log books aren't up to date."

"What are you talking about?" The stablemaster shoved Ori aside, grabbing the book that Ori had
been examining. Fíli almost stepped forward at that, but Ori caught his eye over the stablemaster's
shoulder and made a small gesture. Not yet. "It's all here! What are you, blind?"

"Oh, I clearly must be." Ori almost smiled, just a little, though there was nothing friendly about it.
"After all, your book claims all the royal mounts are here and accounted for, yet I just can't see
anything in one of the stalls."

"Not all the stalls are occupied. We can't exactly take them down and build them up when ponies
come and go, not that I would expect someone like you to understand." The stablemaster sniffed,
making his distaste clear.

"So it's by sheer coincidence that the name at the stall door matches one of the ponies that you have
on record as being here?" Ori reached over the stablemaster's arm to point at something on the page.

"Oh, that one! Yes, well, the owner came to get it, they must have not returned it yet."

"Then why is that not recorded in the book?" Ori looked extremely patient. This was not a good
sign. When Ori was actually waiting patiently, he either smiled or appeared lost in his thoughts. In
Fíli's experience this serious, calm expression only ever surfaced when Ori was doing his best not to
show how close he was to losing his temper. Not that most people even believed it was possible for
Ori to lose his temper. Well, the more foolish they were. "The rules very clearly state that there must
be a record of every time one of the ponies is taken out of the stables for any reason, regardless of whether it's by the owner or someone else."

The stablemaster snorted. "See, now, if I actually noted down every time some noble brat wants to go for a ride, I wouldn't have time to do my actual job."

"Funny. And here I was thinking marking such things down was precisely what your job entails."

"I don't have to listen to that kind of crap from you!" The stablemaster turned toward Ori, now, his arm raised, and Fíli was already moving. On the opposite side of the scene his eye caught the stablehand moving closer as well, looking worried but not shocked. Before either of them could get much closer, though, the large dwarf froze.

"Oh, please do. I would be happy for the excuse." Ori was smiling, now, a sunny expression that did not exactly match his actions, as he held his knife just short of actually touching the larger dwarf's throat. "Let's try this again from the beginning, shall we? And this time, I would appreciate it if you could at least pretend to be more respectful."

The stablemaster stepped back, sputtering with anger. "Who do you think you are?"

"Ah, yes. Let's establish that first of all, shall we?" Ori slipped his knife back to its hiding place, lifting his hands to his hood. It fell back to show his copper courting braids and his scribe's braid, with golden clasps and beads in each. He stood up just a bit straighter, now, not slumped down anymore. "I am Ori, son of Vuori, head royal scribe and betrothed of Fíli the Golden. You are someone extremely important, I'm sure, but I'd still appreciate it if you could answer my questions."

The stablemaster was now pale, and much less confident. "You could have just said who you are!"

"I did tell you I was here on behalf of the crown. Except that shouldn't matter at all either way. Your job is to keep track of what happens here at the stables, and to have that information available. I could have sent anyone here to ask where that pony is and who took it, and you should have had that marked down for them to see."

"I told you, the owner took it! I know it was him, he's been here before. He rode out soon after noon, said he'd be a few days."

"There. That was easy, wasn't it?" Ori was still smiling. "Now, I'll let you get back home. Don't worry about making it back in time for morning, you won't have to bother returning at all."

"For one missing log entry?" Fíli could only quietly echo the stablemaster's shock. "Surely that's not —"

"One missing log entry." Ori lifted a finger. "Disrespect towards someone who had perfectly legitimate reasons for questioning you." Second finger rose. "The fact that your records show the exact same exercise routines for all the ponies, every day, without exception." Third finger. "You can leave now and count yourself lucky I won't have the guards carry you off for mishandling royal property."

"Okay, that seems a bit harsh." Fíli finally joined the conversation, rather enjoying the way the stablemaster jumped when he saw and no doubt instantly recognised the crown prince walking closer. "I mean, I certainly agree on the two first points, but the third isn't necessarily proof of anything amiss. Maybe they're just extremely efficient and organised. It's unlikely, I'll admit, seeing how this place seems to be run, but not entirely impossible."

"Every day, Fíli. I checked the dates when Kíli, Tauriel, and Gimli were hunting orcs. Apparently
the stablehands here are very efficient indeed, as our stablemaster here had marked down the exact same exercise time for their mounts even when they weren't in the mountain."

"Somehow I'm not surprised you'd know the exact dates off the top of your head." Fíli shook his head. "No, you're quite right. That's enough proof that these records aren't reliable. Whether the ponies have been properly cared for or not, there is certainly no evidence of such."

"Your Highness." And, sure, now he was all polite and respectful, when he realised there might be consequences. "I assure you, I've had no intention of —"

"Of what? Deception? Forging official royal records? Neglecting your duties? I'm sure you had absolutely no intention of striking my betrothed, either. Good thing, too, as believe me, if you had harmed Ori your case would not have ever made it before the court." He allowed himself a malicious little smile, now. "My uncle sees little point in passing judgement on corpses."

This seemed to be enough of a hint, as the stablemaster finally turned and rushed out, grumbling under his breath. Ori glanced after him, then turned to look at the stablehand who still lingered nearby. "You. Can you read and write?"

"Ah. Yes?" She got closer, looking hesitant. "I'm not very fast, but I can. I swear I didn't know about the records, though, the stablemaster never let anyone else look at them. And I've been exercising all the ponies I'm responsible for whenever I'm working days, I swear, I wouldn't allow them to —"

"Calm down, I'm not accusing you of anything." Ori's smile softened into something more sincere. "How much do you know about everything that's done around here?"

"I know a lot, I guess? I mean, of course I mostly focus on my own tasks, but I help the others every now and then. I've taken on a lot of work lately, my father's too sick to work right now, so I've seen a lot of what everyone does."

"Well, that's lucky for you, then. I do believe the position of the stablemaster comes with a rather significant raise in pay."

"What?" Her eyes flew wide. "But I can't —"

"Sure you can." Ori patted the book. "I'll send someone by later on to go through everything with you, to see how badly the records are off and to make sure you know what should be marked down and how. They'll also bring your official assignment papers, so you'll know I'm serious. What was your name?"

"Ah. I'm Talli, daughter of Hepo, but —"

"Right, of course. Thank you for your assistance, Talli, you have been very helpful. Now, I'm afraid we really must get going, but I would appreciate it if you could send word to the royal quarters if Gimli and his pony return." Ori smiled. "I'm sorry to have been so much trouble."

"Um. Not at all." She blinked at him as though she still wasn't sure what was going on.

"Oh, and if the stablemaster tries to come back and cause trouble, don't hesitate to call the guards, all right?" Fíli gave her a small wink. "I'll make sure they know you're in charge around here now, so you shouldn't have anything to worry about." He wouldn't exactly put it past someone like the stablemaster to try to get her in trouble with the guards.

Ori was quiet as Fíli lead him out of the stables. It wasn't until they were out of earshot that he spoke. "I think I'm still shaking."
"Well, either way, you were brilliant." Fíli reached an arm around Ori's shoulders, drawing him closer. "I'm so proud of you, you know. Still a bit shocked at that whole spectacle, but also very proud indeed."

"I couldn't have confronted him like that if I hadn't known for sure you were right there." Ori sighed a little, but there was a hint of a smile playing at his lips. "Well. Now we know Gimli left around noon and wasn't planning on returning any time soon."

"Which isn't good, but it's also more than we had to go on before." Fíli nodded. "Let's go see what the others have to say, hmm?"

"Let's." Ori was nice and warm at his side, sticking close even as they walked further along the corridors.

Not that Fíli was going to complain.

* * *

Gimli's room was a mess, but for once, Kulta didn't care much.

She was used to finding chaos in his room, particularly when he'd been working on a project of some sort, and lately most of his free time had been spent either designing or working on the piece he was making to show Fíli his level of skill. She might have thought he had been working on it for long enough, but then she understood his will to show the absolute best he could manage. For all that they had known each other all their lives, Fíli hardly had a thorough understanding of Gimli's skills in this area. Besides, with Fíli busy with his other duties, it wasn't like there was much time that he might be losing from instruction.

This, however, was not the mess that resulted from dropping things about because his head was too deep somewhere else. This was the kind of a mess that was created in a hurry, tossing things aside to find something else that might be hidden beneath. It wasn't easy to see what might have been missing, with everything spread about so, but there was one thing she could see amiss at a glance.

"He took his axe." She frowned, looking at the hooks embedded into the wall that should have held the large axe Glóin had given Gimli to keep as his own after they had all arrived in Erebor. Gimli treated his first proper weapon like one might a baby; there was no chance he would have simply set it anywhere but its proper place. "Seems a bit of overkill for a night out at town, don't you think?"

"Aye. This isn't a good sign at all." Glóin sighed, stroking his beard. "Oh, I hope our lad hasn't gotten himself into too much of a mess."

"Well, if he has, he's got hard enough of a skull to beat his way out of there." Not that she wasn't worried, but one of them had to stay calm or things would get entirely out of hand. "How about I look for clues over here, and you take a look at that end of the room?"

"Yes, darling." Glóin seemed almost relieved to get clear instructions. Though then, he probably was just glad for something hopefully productive to do, considering the time he had already spent fretting and imagining up all sort of horrible possibilities.

She could only hope this got resolved without too many tears.

Even at a cursory search she could tell things weren't exactly as they should have been. Gimli's bag was missing, the nice one he'd been so happy to get as a gift a couple of years ago, the one he'd secretly had packed ever since they heard of Thorin's plans until it had been absolutely clear Glóin would not allow him to come along on the quest. Whatever Gimli was up to, he hadn't been planning
to actually return before the end of the day.


"Oh?" She turned around, frowning as she saw Glóin looking at what seemed to be a piece of paper, standing next to Gimli's desk. "Is that a note?" The desk was covered with his tools for the most part, with a neat wooden box standing at one end, its lid open. When Kulta walked closer, she realised the box was full of folded papers. Letters?

"Of a sort, aye, but not one left for us." He shook his head as she frowned. "I didn't go snooping, this one was open on the desk, he must have left it there for us to see. And, well. It seems to tell us quite enough."

Still frowning, Kulta reached for the note in Glóin's hand. As she quickly scanned through the text, rounded Westron cursive instead of rough Khuzdul runes, she suddenly felt terribly cold.

"My dearest friend Gimli,

I find I grow rather impatient to see you, for all that I know we will be meeting again soon. Indeed, this letter might reach you only scarcely before myself, and thus I will keep this brief.

I have arranged for myself and a few guards from Mirkwood to accompany the delegation arriving to Dale for trade negotiations. You will no doubt hear of their arrival; know that I am in the city of men when they are, and will be waiting for you. Pack for a few days on the road, and take a mount with you, so that we might cover more ground. After all, it's unlikely we'll find any prey too close to the city or the mountain.

I almost pity any foe foolish enough to still be hiding nearby. Between the two of us and my companions, I cannot imagine there could be a party strong enough still in the hiding that they would bring us much trouble. We may await a few delightful days on the hunt, I'm sure, and more importantly a few days in each other's company.

I hope to see you soon.

Always your friend,
Legolas"

"I told you it was the elves," Glóin grumbled. "A bunch of elves tempted our little lad out of the mountain and took him to the wilds all alone."

She should have agreed, might have agreed, except she was still staring at the letter. This was no devious plan, no sort of scheme, whatever the end result might have been. This was a simple message from a friend, one who genuinely wanted to see someone they cared about very much.

Somehow, she didn't think this was any better than the alternative.

*

"Are you sure you saw something?" Legolas frowned down at the ground next to his horse's hooves, then over to Sadin, who was riding next to him.

"Well, I could have been mistaken." The tone in which this was said rather suggested the guard he was speaking with did not think so at all. And, well, Legolas had to admit he was probably correct. While Legolas himself knew something of hunting, and was certainly the best shot the Greenwood Guard had produced in a while, tracking down prey was not his best skill.
"No, no, I'm not doubting you." Legolas hopped down from his horse, patting her neck before stepping away. She was calm enough, but even so, if there were indeed orcs nearby it wouldn't do for her to get spooked and run off.

Their little hunting party had scattered about the area, partly hidden from each other by the large rock formations. It wasn't mountain as such, but Legolas supposed these could still be counted as foothills of Erebor, though they had been travelling for a full day already. Certainly they weren't in the plains anymore, that much was clear. With little caves and holes scattered about, these were certainly perfect surroundings for some forgotten orcs or goblins to hide.

"The ground seems to be softer a bit further away, you might find better traces there." Sadin smirked. "Or I could take a look instead, if you'd prefer."

Legolas snorted. "Thank you, but I think I'll manage." With one last pat to his horse, he started walking down the sorry excuse of a path. This was treacherous ground even for her sure hooves, for all that Gimli's sturdy little pony had traversed the same ground earlier. Gimli was standing further, about where Sadin was indicating, having also dismounted to get a better look at the ground. Glancing back over his shoulder, Gimli waved to him, then led his pony further along the path.

Sadin snorted. "Just go," he said, bringing his own horse closer. "I'll look after your mount while you go frolic with your dwarf."

"He's not my dwarf." And no, he was not going to flush at such implications. That would have been ridiculous.

"Of course he isn't." Sadin's lips twitched into something like a smile, and, well, that was probably the best Legolas could ask for right now. He knew the guards he'd taken along weren't entirely happy about his decision to bring Gimli with them, but then, few people in Mirkwood were too pleased about his supposed connection with dwarves. There was no such connection, of course, he was only friendly with Gimli and tolerated the rest for Tauriel's sake, but that still didn't stop people from shaking their heads and murmuring unpleasant things whenever he headed out of the forest.

At least now he could stop worrying about such things.

He followed the path that Sadin had spotted orc tracks on, but couldn't find anything just yet. He saw some marks of Gimli's passage, first the hoofmarks and then the footprints joining them as he'd dismounted, but that was all. Clearly his tracking skills were even more lacking than he had thought.

He'd almost made his way over to where Gimli had moved behind a large rock formation when the pain hit.

There was no warning of any kind, no shouts or howling wargs, though then he supposed some scattered remains of the army would not have their mounts anyway. The first sign he got of anything being amiss was the sharp pain of an arrow burying itself in his thigh, making him stagger and seek for support from a nearby rock.

"Gimli!" This didn't even strike him as strange at the time, not when he could barely think for the pain that started spreading through him, sharp and bright like fire in his veins. It should have, really, he should have wondered why his first instinct would be to call for Gimli instead of finding shelter or turning to fight, but the word had left his lips before his mind had even fully registered what was happening.

Perhaps the pain in his voice alarmed Gimli, but he was there as soon as Legolas managed to stagger his way past the rock wall. He took one look at Legolas and rushed to him, large hands settling at his
waist and picking him up from the ground as though he'd been a mere child and not a grown elf.

"Gimli," he managed to get out. "We must return — they must have been hiding —" His guards. If he was out of sight, Sadin was the clear next target, and then the rest, if indeed they hadn't already been picked off from afar. Elves had keen eyes and ears, but even they weren't invincible, certainly not if the enemy was hidden and far away.

"Aye, I'm sure they were." Gimli's voice was gruff as he deposited Legolas on the back of his pony, lying over her back like a particularly inelegant sack of potatoes. "Try not to fall." And, with nothing more than that, he grasped the pony's reins and started to run down the path, leading them to higher ground again with large rocks towering either side of them.

"What are you doing?" Legolas protested, gritting his teeth against the pain. "We can't just flee! You must help me, I need to bind the wound and then we need to return!"

"Sorry, my prince, but we aren't turning back." Gimli sounded grim, only picking up his pace as they heard shouts from behind. "If your people have gotten themselves into trouble, that's on them."

"What are you talking about?" They turned a curve in the path, now with a hillside rising to one side and a drop to the other, the path narrowing down to just barely enough to lead the pony along. Here Gimli paused, setting his hand on the side of a large rock. "Gimli! I fear the arrow is poisoned, and I know you have little skill in healing such. If we abandon my companions, then there is none that can help me!"

"And for that reason, we must hurry." Gimli frowned at the rock as though not liking what it told him, then took the large axe he had strapped to his back, reaching with its shaft to strike against a particular point higher up. This caused a small avalanche, rocks tumbling down to break away the path at the curving part. Then he was edging his way past the pony on the farther side, no doubt so he would not jostle Legolas and his injury.

"Gimli. Please, explain to me." This didn't make sense. Why would Gimli be taking him away from the rest of their party?

"I don't know if you took a good look at your injury, pained and hurried as you were." Gimli's voice was quiet, now, tainted with fear and rage, but even through the spreading pain Legolas heard him well enough. "However, even with my lacking knowledge of such matters I know one thing… that's no orc arrow that struck you."

Legolas should have protested, wanted to protest. However, the words died in his mouth as he remembered Sadin's face, the curl of his lips as he spoke of Gimli. At the time he had thought it innocent enough, but now it brought up rather chilling possibilities.

He'd already known there were people who would have preferred for him not to return to Mirkwood.

He just hadn't thought they might actually take action to that end.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Kíli, Tauriel, Dwalin and Nori set out to look for Gimli. What they find instead is a rather suspicious group of elves. Gimli, for his part, seems to only be getting into deeper trouble... while Nori decides some secrets aren't worth the cost of keeping them.

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter features a character getting captured and threatened/tortured for information. It also features the death of a minor villainous character. Please read accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dwalin was almost inclined to think Kíli was being a bit too eager about riding out.

Not that he could blame the lad, not really. He'd always been a bit of a wild child, as content wandering about the side of the mountain as he was to walk deep under the stone. Perhaps it was part of why Mahal had chosen to give him an elf for a mate, to better suit his nature.

Goodness knew why Nori had been made for him. Not that he was complaining, mind, just perhaps wondering a little.

It was fairly early in the morning as they set off, having gathered more than enough evidence to know where Gimli would likely be found, and some brief information about the elven party from the delegates. Besides, if new information came to light, those back in the mountain could always send a raven after them; the birds were rather faster than any rider could hope to be over long distances. Dwalin was one of those mounting a pony and riding off after the wayward dwarf, with Kíli speeding up to the front of the party and Nori lingering next to him, while Tauriel followed along at a peaceful pace on her large horse.

Honestly, there was no reason for Kíli to be quite so delighted. It wasn't like they were out on a trip just for their own amusement.

It wasn't silent, exactly, but Dwalin himself was content not to speak much, instead listening to Kíli's almost constant chatter and Tauriel's or Nori's occasional response. He loved the lad as he would have his own, he really did, but there was only so long he could listen to him prattling on at a time. Better he not get too involved in the discussion.

Of course, then Nori decided to turn the conversation to rather more interesting topics than the latest shipment of arrows from Mirkwood, or whatever it was that had held Kíli's attention for the past fifteen minutes.

"So, my prince, I'm curious." Nori wasn't smirking, not quite, but then Dwalin knew perfectly well the lack of any outward signs of mischief was little proof with his beloved. "Can you tell me why
exactly the four of us were sent out like this?"

"What do you mean?" Kíli lifted his eyebrows. "I doubt you're asking about why we're going at all, that should be clear enough. But are you asking why there are four of us and not more or less, or why us four and not someone else?"

"I'll accept any and all answers." Nori shrugged. "The point is to test your thinking, anyway, so the more of them you can answer, the better. Or perhaps it tests how well you know your uncle's thoughts, which is a skill in itself."

"Let's see, then." Kíli took on a thoughtful expression. "I know Thorin sent four of us because it's the optimal number. From what we heard in Dale, there's three or four elves besides the prince; he won't fight against Tauriel, so with four of us we're their equal if worse comes to worst, especially since three of us are trained warriors. We don't want to send too many of us, though, or that might be seen as too hostile and provoke them into fight even if we might otherwise avoid it. So, not too few, not too many, four is the best number."

"Hm, not too bad thinking for a princeling." Nori grinned, now. "So, why us four and not some others? Why not Glóin, for example? He's been worried about his son, after all."

"Again, we need to be good enough but not too much." Kíli nodded at his beloved elf. "Tauriel is friend to Legolas, and as a prince of Erebor so close to the mountain I'm his equal in rank, so we are not easily dismissed. Another Captain of the Guard and his partner are understandable companions for a prince, especially going out in the wild. Glóin would also be understandable but he'd be a poor choice, with his temper and his prejudice toward elves; we'd soon have a war at our hands if he got near Legolas, after that letter they found."}

"Well! I suppose you're not altogether hopeless, then." Nori nodded. "I think you got all the main reasons, really. Also, Gimli's likely to listen to you if that might be a problem otherwise, since you're friends, and both Dwalin and I are good at staying calm when the situation calls for it. Tauriel, too, I suspect; it seems a rather necessary trait in one who has to deal with you on the regular."

"I'd take offence at that, but I know a truth when I hear it." Well, at least Kíli didn't seem overly bothered by this accusation. "There's a reason Fíli's the heir and not me, and it's not just because he happened to be born five years earlier."

"Of course there is." Dwalin couldn't help but chuckle. "You always were faster at running away from the unpleasant things."

Kíli laughed. "Indeed! He can have fun running court or whatever, I'd never had the patience for that." Which was not entirely true, Dwalin knew for a fact he could be endlessly patient on the hunt, but then that was quite different from sitting upon the throne all day.

They made good progress, Kíli and Tauriel and Nori all looking around for signs of the elven party while they rode on into the direction they had been pointed to in Dale. Dwalin made a cursory effort, but left most of the tracking to those better skilled in it. He'd never been a hunter, didn't much care for anything that wasn't right in front of his face. His only such experience was in chasing down criminals, and the tricks that were useful in finding a lowlife in the mountain were not quite so practical for finding someone out in the wild.

Of course, all this turned out to be rather useless as they came across a group of elves that evening, also apparently in search of something.

"Halt!" called out the elf in lead of the party. He eyed them suspiciously as they neared, and Dwalin
saw the others reaching for their weapons. "Who goes there?"

"We might ask the same of you." Tauriel rode to the front of their group, Kíli sticking close to her, both sitting straight and proud on their mounts. "You are an awful long way from your forest, elves of Mirkwood."

"As are you, my lady." There was no respect whatsoever in the title, the tone mocking if anything. "I ask again, who are you?"

Kíli seemed about to speak, but Tauriel silenced him with a mere glance. How she did that, Dwalin did not know. He hadn't been sure there was any force in the mortal realm that could reliably make Kíli fall silent. Now free of any interruption, Tauriel turned back to the elves.

"We are the party of Prince Kíli, son of Dís, in search of one of his kinsmen, Gimli son of Glóin. I am Tauriel of Erebor, Captain of the Guard and betrothed of the prince." There was no hesitation in her voice even as she named herself, nothing but calmness and a quiet sort of pride. "Given that we are currently on Erebor scouting grounds, I must ask your names and your purpose for being here, far from home as you are."

This seemed to unsettle the elves somewhat, and they exchanged glances. Good. Dwalin was not about to hear any such haughtiness from Mirkwood elves when they were still practically in the shadow of the mountain.

"My name is Sadin," the elf said at last, his tone and gaze implying that Tauriel might have known this already. Though then, chances were they had recognised her in turn, and yet refused to acknowledge it. "We are in the party of Prince Legolas."

Kíli tilted his head a bit, a smile tugging at his lips. "Funny. I don't know many elves, but I recognise him well enough, and he doesn't seem to be here. Nor can I see my cousin, and I know he's supposed to be with the prince, they hoped to hunt some boar, going by a note he left."

"This is true. However, we were struck by misfortune, I am afraid." One of the other elves spoke up now, voice quiet and measured. "We were tracking our prey when we were beset by some orcs. None of our number were slain, thankfully, but in the battle we got separated from our prince and the dwarf. We are growing afraid they might have been injured."

"We have been searching for them ever since, but have not been very successful." Sadin glanced at first at Tauriel, then Kíli, ignoring Nori and Dwalin. "But if you are on the same search, perhaps we can all cover more ground?"

"That seems sensible." Kíli nodded. "Just tell us the direction. We've encountered no one on our way here, so they're not that way, but it would help if you could give us an idea of the area you've searched? Or tell us where the battle took place, so we might look for tracks there?"

"We followed the tracks from there, so we know they are not nearby, but the path was broken by an avalanche. There was no way around, and we're not sure where the path lead, so we've been scanning the surrounding areas ever since, trying to find the other end." The other elf who had spoken earlier glanced around, then pointed them toward a small hill. "We haven't looked back there yet. Perhaps you will have better luck than us?"

"Thank you." Kíli's face took on a sweet smile. Dwalin knew that particular smile well. It was the one Kíli always wore when he was up to some sort of mischief or another. "Do send someone to tell us when you find them. Gimli's parents are very worried for him."
"We will." Sadin nodded at Kfli, then at Tauriel, before leading his party away. Kfli spurred on his pony to the direction indicated and the others followed, none of them speaking until they were out of earshot and then some. Elves did have rather interesting ears sometimes, after all.

"So." Kfli sounded almost cheerful, but there was an undercurrent of tension to his voice. Then, Dwalin could hardly blame the lad. "How many suspicious things did you guys count?"

Dwalin grunted. "He didn't correct you when you said they were on a boar hunt. Even the diplomats in Dale knew they were planning to hunt orc; there's no way the hunters themselves would get that wrong, unless they just went along with it to look more helpful. There aren't even any boars in these parts to hunt in the first place."

"None of them looked like they'd been in any actual battle," Nori added. "I saw enough elves after the battle to know that even they get trashed on the battlefield, yet they had nary a hair out of order, and almost full vines, still. If the battle was big enough they lost sight of their companions, that ought to show, especially if they have been searching ever since, with no time to rest."

"Gimli's stone sense is too damn good for him to walk on an unsteady path unawares," Kfli himself offered. "If there was an avalanche, it's more likely that he caused it to cut off pursuers. And he knows better than to be split from his companions on purpose on strange ground, unless there's an immediate threat."

"If they truly wished for our help, they would have asked for it first of all." Tauriel shook her head. "Sadin knew very well who I am, I know that for certain, yet he didn't mention a word of Legolas being missing until we demanded answers. Not asking dwarves for help with following the path I might understand, they might not trust you well and if it's been long since our target would have travelled a long way anyway, but there should be no reason why their first words would not have been to ask if we have seen Legolas and Gimli."

"The area they pointed out is in a different direction from the one they are headed to, separated by this vale we're in," Dwalin added. "Which wouldn't matter much, except there's no way Legolas and Gimli would have made it there over the vale without making some sort of tracks, there's enough soft ground here that mounts and boots would both make traces, unless it were a single elf on foot. They have to know which side of the vale the two are, because either there's tracks crossing it or there aren't, and they'd know where this so-called battle took place."

"And finally, they didn't seem to be in too much of a hurry." Tauriel sighed. "If indeed they were concerned for the safety of Legolas and Gimli, their concern is strange. They only started riding faster after meeting us, as though before that they were in no hurry at all."

"All of which leads me to suspect we're being made fools." Kfli shook his head. "Well, we'll see how that goes. They might be good hunters, but even the best hunter can't read the tracks of someone following them."

"Aye." Dwalin nodded. "Besides, it'll be dusk soon enough. Elves may not need sleep so much, but light is a different matter. If this drags on, we should easily follow them, since I have a feeling they are headed for much better hunting grounds than the ones they pointed us to."

"Indeed." Kfli's expression steeled. "And if they think they can get away with this, they have another think coming." His lips curled into a smile, now, one that was without much humour. "What do you think, might we still find a raven somewhere before we set after them? I've a feeling we'll want reinforcements, whichever way this turns out."

Dwalin had seen Kfli grow from cradle to this day, had seen him on the battlefield and in all his court
finery, but never had he seen him look quite so much like a prince of Durin. He was proud and fierce, forged of steel and stone and never-bending will, and any who thought they might harm his kin had better reconsider.

Dwalin felt proud, of course he felt proud, but even more he wished he wouldn't have needed to be in a situation that would draw such a look to the surface.

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Gimli did not like going out, but he felt he had little choice.

He'd travelled as long and fast as he dared, leading his pony with its precious load across the rocky terrain, trying to find the places least likely to hold any sign of their passing. Finally, when Legolas' pained groans had grown too terrible for him to bear, he'd found them a small cave just big enough to hold the two of them and his pony, setting up camp there. It was far from ideal, but the entrance was hidden by large rocks until one was right in front of it, so he was hoping it might hide them for a while.

Oh, how he hoped it would hide them for a while.

As soon as he was sure his pony would not spook or cause trouble, he turned his attentions to tending Legolas. He knew the basics of such things well enough, managed to cut out the arrow and bind the wound without too much more damage, but he rather feared it was too little too late. The arrow was a nasty thing, the shaft and fletching fine and elegant as usual for elven arrows, but its tip was the nasty, ragged shape of an orcish arrow, designed to tear and ruin. A deception from the start, he concluded, not looking any different from the rest in a vine but leaving a wound that would be easily mistaken for the doings of a foe.

And, judging by the fever that seemed to have taken Legolas, he was quite worried it had been laced with poison.

This wasn't something he knew how to deal with. He wasn't a healer, had never aspired to be one. He could do basic first aid, and had learnt bits and pieces from seeing his uncle work over the years, but poisons were not something he was familiar with. All he could do was keep the wound clean and Legolas comfortable and hope against hope that it would be enough.

Which was why, as the evening started to darken, he had to crawl out of the cave in search of fresh water. He'd had some in his supplies, but they all needed to drink and the wound needed washing, so there wasn't much left. It was better to go searching at night, when he might better evade elven eyes, than during the day when they would see him at great distances. He was in luck, here; it didn't take very long for him to find a small brook that moved swiftly enough to still be running even in the winter cold.

He was less lucky to feel the tip of a blade pressed against his back.

"Thought we might find you sooner or later." The voice belonged to the leader of the elves, Sadin his name was, and Gimli assumed the blade did as well. "Where have you hidden our precious prince, dwarf?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." As though he would betray his friend like that.

"Oh, please." The other elves emerged from behind rocks, and Gimli cursed himself for not being more careful about checking his surroundings. Elves might have been quiet, but he should have known the mountainside better. All he could say in his defence was that he'd been quite worried and
tired and thus distracted, but even so, it was shameful of him to be trapped so. "We know he ran to you, and you fled with him. Where is he now?"

"I don't know," Gimli replied, keeping his voice as steady as possible. "I put him on top of my pony, but she got spooked and ran off with the prince. I've been trying to find them both ever since."

"A likely story." Sadin snorted. "We'll see if we can't get you to speak."

Gimli tried to dodge, of course, he wasn't about to give himself up that easily, but he was surrounded and alone against four, and he hadn't even had the chance to draw his weapon. In the end all he had to show for his attempt was a gash on his arm as the elves dragged him over to where they had their horses and supplies. Gimli's blood ran cold as he realised just how close they were to where he had hidden Legolas, but he did his best not to show any of it on his face. He couldn't let them find out. He couldn't.

"So." Despite his struggles, the elves overpowered him easily; for such weedy creatures they were surprisingly strong. They'd quickly tied his ankles to two stakes they'd driven deep into the frozen ground, two of them holding down his shoulders, not budging much as he tried to throw them off. Sadin was standing some ways away, looking almost disinterested, while the fourth elf, the only female one in their party, knelt down with one knee pressing against Gimli's chest. "I don't suppose we can convince you to remember what we want to know?"

"You bloody orc-droppings," Gimli growled. "I don't know where he is, and even if I knew, I would not tell you."

"It would be in your best interests to tell us." The she-elf leaned closer to him, a mean smile on her face as she drew her knife closer to him. "It's your choice, you know. We can make this very unpleasant for you."

"What does it matter to me? You won't let me live anyway, not since I saw the arrow."

"Perhaps not," Sadin admitted, perfectly calm. "Still, it's a choice you can make. A choice between a quick, clean death and a slow, agonising one. There's a lot of pieces we can cut off and still have you capable of talking."

"Go fuck a goblin, tree-shagger."

"What's that?" Sadin smirked. "I think he wants to be rid of his beard first of all. Not that there's much to lose, with such a pitiful one."

Gimli bit back any remarks he might have made of the elves' own lack of any beard at all. This was no laughing matter, now, certainly not when the she-elf brought the knife right next to his face.

"Tell me," she purred, voice soft like velvet and rather reminding him of a snake. The knife lay cold against the side of his face, a reminder of what was to come. "Tell me where you've hidden that useless little thing, and I will only cut your throat instead."

Clearly, there was only response to that. Gimli was really quite proud of himself, managing to spit her in the face even with her looming over him like that.

"Well, then, I'll take that as a no." She wiped the dripping saliva off her face. "Such a pity, really. Your family probably would have preferred to believe you died with at least some honour."

He might have tried to struggle, but it would have been useless with both his shoulders pressed to the ground. At best he might have succeeded in having her cut his face instead. Besides, he didn't want
to give them the satisfaction of seeing him react. He lay still, rigid, eyes locked up to the darkening sky as he felt his beard being shaved off, little by little, exposing his skin to the cold air like it hadn't been in years.

It wasn't shameful. It wasn't. It was only a shame to lose one's beard if it was due to a crime. To have it lost like this was not mark on him, just like it had not been shameful for Ori to have his braids cut by a wrongful hand.

He was not going to give them the satisfaction of seeing him cry.

"Well, that was disappointing," one of the elves holding him down commented with an airy tone as his tormentor was done. "I'd have thought he would at least curse us some more."

"I see he's decided to be quiet." Sadin shook his head. "That won't last long. Take his ear next, perhaps? Only one, wouldn't want him claiming he can't hear us. And after that, get started on his fingers."

Now, Gimli tried to jerk his head away as she reached for him, but there was only cold ground behind him. She smirked meanly as she grasped his ear in one hand, bringing her knife close with the other. "Such big, round ears," she commented. "So easy to —"

The sentence was cut off by a cry as an arrow suddenly embedded itself into her eye. She stared at nothing for a moment, then went limp, the knife falling from her hand right next to Gimli's head. She was the next to fall, collapsing to the side, still half on top of him.

This arrow he knew, knew without a doubt who had loosed it. There was only one fletcher allowed to gather the raven feathers for his work, only two archers who might have carried such arrows, and this was just slightly too short to have come from Tauriel's bow.

Kíli was here. Somehow, from somewhere, rescue had arrived.

The elves stared at their fallen companion in shock for a moment, then looked around warily. Sadin reached toward his weapons, only to stop when someone spoke.

"I wouldn't recommend it." A cold, steady voice carried from the shadows, making the elves freeze. "It may be getting dark for you, but I promise, it's quite light enough for dwarven eyes to tell the difference between friend and foe, and Prince Kíli has a steady aim and a quick draw." Nori stepped out of the darkness, a knife in each hand and a murderous look in his eyes.

"I'd listen to him if I were you." Dwalin's voice was next, from the opposite direction, and the situation seemed to be dawning on the elves. "Don't even think of making the lad your hostage. There's three of you left, and we've two archers, and besides Nori here is quite handy with a throwing knife. You wouldn't manage to do anything before you dropped fucking dead."

"You'll regret this, dwarf," Sadin growled. And yet, his hands were moving away from his weapons.

"Away with what? Preventing you from killing our young kinsman? Strange laws you elves have, if that's a good thing to do." Nori stepped closer. "Well? Will you leave him be, or shall we drop a few more of you? We only need one alive to get the answers we need."

The elves seemed to consider this, and for a moment, Gimli was certain there would be a battle. Then, however, Sadin glanced at his fallen companion, before apparently coming to a conclusion. "We have done nothing wrong," he said, his hands moving away from his weapons. The other two finally let go of Gimli, and he quickly scrambled to push the fallen elf away from himself. "He
refused to tell us where our prince was, so we were forced to conclude he was colluding with the enemy."

"You lying piece of filth!" Gimli spat. He was trembling all over now, and really he shouldn't have been mouthing off when he was still more or less trapped in the middle of the elves, but he would not listen to such nonsense. "You shot at him! Do you think I don't know an elven arrow when I see one?"

"They did what?" And that would be Tauriel, her voice cold and sharp as a midwinter breeze. Her bow was drawn, the arrow aiming at each elf in turn.

"They shot at him." And now, Gimli almost choked on the words, the tears he'd been fighting against trying to flow at last, tears of fear and anger and grief alike. "We barely made it away, and he's in really bad shape. The tip's from an orcish arrow, I think it's poisoned, and he — I couldn't help him, I couldn't —"

"Don't panic, Gimli." Kíli appeared as well, another one of those black-feathered arrows drawn, and that certainly got the elves' attention. "We'll get him, don't you worry. First we just need to make sure these three don't cause any more trouble."

Dwalin and Nori did quick work of the three while Kíli and Tauriel stood guard, disarming the elves before tying them up with their own ropes, a humiliation that frankly was not quite enough. Gimli was still tugging at the ties on his ankles with shaking hands when Tauriel came and crouched down next to him, nimble hands starting to work on the knots.

"Where's Legolas?" she asked softly. "You must know, I know you wouldn't just abandon him. Where is he?"

"He's in a cave nearby, together with my pony." Gimli shook his head. "He's badly hurt. I got the arrow out, but he's still sickly, he has such a high fever. I — I didn't want to leave him, but I needed to get us some water, I didn't have much in my supplies, and then they found me and —" He shuddered, unable to continue.

"It's all right, I promise." Tauriel touched his arm, a calming little touch, and he tried to push down his fear. "Can you show us where he is? I know something of healing and herbs, I'm sure I can help him."

"Please," Gimli murmured, his voice almost breaking. "Please help him, I can't, just please…"

And if he did then break into tears, shuddering as the cold trails ran down his now terribly bare face, well, nobody said anything about it.

*  

Gimli was asleep.

Nori might have wondered if it was wise, or even if whether it was truly sleep or unconsciousness that had claimed him, but he supposed it was for the best for now. It was clear enough the lad was exhausted, from pain and fear and exertion all, and now that he knew his princeling to be in safe hands he could rest safely. Not that Thranduil's spawn was out of the woods yet, not even nearly, but at least he wasn't about to die just yet, and Tauriel seemed determined to save him.

Once the traitorous elves had been tied up nice and proper, and any imminent threat eliminated, Gimli had been quite happy to lead them to where he had hidden Legolas. It hadn't been all that far from where the elves had been holding him, which made sense if indeed Gimli had only stepped out
to find some water. Not that it made any difference to Legolas either way; it had been clear from their first glimpse at him that he wouldn't be walking anywhere just yet. Gimli had done his best to bind the wound with his limited skills and resources, yes, but it was clear the arrow had been poisoned, the elf's body wrecked with fever as it tried to fight the rot reaching its tendrils through him.

A day or two longer, and the elves would have only found a corpse anyway.

They were safe now, though, the remaining traitors under careful watch, and Tauriel wasn't half bad in the matter of healing arts. Which meant that as soon as they'd set up a rudimentary camp, with Tauriel tending to Legolas's injury and the rest watching their captives, Gimli had more or less collapsed on the ground then and there. Best let him sleep through the worst of his shock.

With the traitors tied up and Kili and Dwalin keeping rather fierce watch over them, Nori had appointed himself as a general busybody, not feeling like sitting down just yet. He got together what few herbs he could find nearby for Tauriel to work her art, then gathered some dry branches from the sparse trees to start a fire in the middle of their little camp. He didn't need to be a healer to know that freezing was not good, and the blanket he'd spread over Gimli would not be enough to keep him warm on its own in this weather.

"Master Nori?" He looked up, seeing Tauriel watching him. Her face was pale, her hands busy on her friend's skin even as she spoke. The prince looked better now, at least, though Nori suspected he still had a ways to go, even with the most definitely magical little show Tauriel had given them earlier. "I hate to ask this, particularly as I suspect I would not have this knowledge if you'd had a choice, but…"

"Yes?" He had a feeling he already knew what she was going to ask.

"You wouldn't happen to have any spare bandages, would you?" She bit her lip. "If not, I'll make do with some of our clothing, but I thought you might have some at hand. Ah. For you to wear, that is."

"I don't have any spares, no." Nori paused, considering. "I'm willing to part from the ones I'm wearing, though, if you don't think them too filthy from dwarven sweat."

"I wouldn't ask you to do that." And yet, she looked so very relieved.

"I know you wouldn't. Still, I don't hate your princeling quite so much I'd keep my secret at his expense." Certainly not when Gimli had already risked so much for his sake.

"Thank you, truly. If there's anything I can do…"

"Consider it payback for your guards making sure I had my tea even in your dungeons." He started to quickly undress, deft fingers working on the buckles and belts of his outfit to remove the layers covering his chest. He could tell the rest of their party were now watching him, curious about his actions. Dwalin's eyes were especially heavy, knowing what he did.

"It was the least we could do."

"Still, you helped me not bleed all over the place. I think it's only fair I offer the same dignity to the princeling." He felt the cold before he even took his last tunic off, the breeze biting through the soft fabric. It didn't burn quite as much as the gazes when he shed the tunic as well, leaving his chest bare save for the layers of bandages wrapped tightly around it. "I've several lengths here, and my chest's certainly larger than his wound. Maybe use the outmost ones for now, as they should be cleaner than those against my skin, and with the fire we should have the rest washed and dried before he bleeds through the first ones."
"That sounds like an excellent plan." Tauriel waited for him to unwind the bandages, averting her gaze as he took off the last layer. Please. It wasn't like Nori had anything she hadn't seen before.

"You're in luck, really. I've been mostly wearing a vest lately; Dori's made quite an excellent one to my exact measurements. It's a bit stiff for fighting in, though, so I wore bandages instead just in case." He tugged on his tunic again, followed by the rest of his clothes. It felt strange, having anything but bandages or a binding vest directly against his chest, but it was still better than freezing.

"I thank my luck, then, and your foresight." She nodded. "And whatever you say, I am in your debt."

"I keep count of my own debts, and those that are owed me." Nori shrugged. "There's only one person awake here who didn't already know I'm not all I seem, not counting the elves who wouldn't know either way, and that's your best beloved. Seems to me you ought to be able to keep him from making too much of a fuss." Of course, his clothes couldn't entirely hide his shape when Gimli and Legolas chose to join the land of the waking, but he'd worry about that in due time.

"As you wish, Master Nori." She paused. "How is Gimli? I'm afraid I haven't had time to give him much attention yet."

"Not too badly injured. We came just in time, it seems. Well, a little late, really, but we saved him from the worst of it." Nori shook his head. "He had a cut on his arm, though not too deep. Bound that with a piece off my tunic, should be fine if all goes well. Plenty of bruises and such, but for the most part he's going to heal soon."

"That's in body, though." Her voice was quiet, and she wouldn't quite look up to him. "What about the rest of him?"

"We'll see." It was never an easy question, that. "He's a proud one for a lad so young, thanks to Durin's blood no doubt, and he probably would have rather given up an arm than his beard. We're a resilient folk, though, so I hope he'll get through it." Mahal knew what Thorin would do if his young cousin got broken by some good-for-nothing elves.

"I hope he will, then." Tauriel sighed. "I know Legolas would never have wished him such grief."

"I don't think anyone asked him." He rolled his shoulders. "I'll go stretch my legs a bit. Shout if you need anything."

She didn't speak as he walked away. Run out of things to say, he'd wager.

A part of him wanted to head over to where Dwalin and Kili were watching the elves, well within sight but just out of earshot, but instead he directed his steps a bit to the side, looking out over the rocky terrain, though still within shouting distance. He'd managed to pack and light his pipe by the time he heard footsteps approaching. That'd taken longer than he'd expected.

"You could have just shouted for me, you know." He didn't bother to turn to look, knew who it was by the footsteps. Too light for Dwalin, too heavy for an elf. "My turn to watch the rats, aye?"

"Actually, Dwalin said we should both get some rest. It's been a long day, and since Tauriel doesn't need to sleep it's enough for one of us to sit with the elves."

"Funny. He's not usually the first one to be concerned about things such as proper rest."

"You're telling me. Don't think this is a usual situation, though." Kili was quiet for a moment, standing beside him. "We sent off the raven we found earlier, now that we know the situation. We're
not that far from Erebor, and the mountain should be clear enough to find even at night. If the raven flies true and they set off immediately when the message reaches someone in charge, we should have reinforcements before the next night."

"Here's hoping." He drew a drag of his pipe, blowing out a smoke ring. "Your elf seems to be working well enough on the princeling, but we've little enough in the way of healing things, and while I don't doubt the fighting skills of anyone here I'd be much happier with more friendly eyes watching our backs."

"Indeed." Kíli was clearly hesitating, not that it surprised him. "Ah. Are you a lass?"

Well, at least he was asking. "No, I'm not." Nori shrugged. "Either Mahal was in a hurry when making me, though, or he thought it'd be funny to put me in the wrong body, because I rather look like one without clothes. Or with clothes, as you can see, if I don't take the trouble of binding my chest one way or another."

"Who knows about it?"

"Not many. My family, obviously, and Dwalin, and I told Balin after I took Dwalin's braids so he wouldn't be shocked if it came up. None others I have told. Tauriel knew, and some of the elves in Mirkwood; I had to ask them for my herb tea because dealing with my cycles in a dungeon didn't seem like my idea of fun."

Kíli just nodded. Good, at least he wouldn't have to explain the specifics of that. "And now me."

"Aye." He paused. "It's not a secret as such. I'm not ashamed of how I've been made, and I know who and what I am. However, some people are quick to draw conclusions, and I'm not one for unneeded attention. I haven't the time or patience for correcting everyone who thinks they know better than me what I ought to be called, given that it's none of their damn business what I have between my legs."

"You could tell the Company at least, you know. I'm sure nobody would give you any trouble. I mean, of course you don't have to, but at least you wouldn't need to worry about things like who you can share a bath with."

"Mm. Maybe I will, when I feel like it." Balin hadn't given him much trouble at least, and he was rather pleasantly surprised by the way Kíli was reacting. Yes, he just might let the others know, if even the brat of a prince knew better than to argue with him about what he was.

Kíli was quiet for a while, and Nori almost expected him to leave. Then he spoke, though, fast as though afraid he might not finish otherwise. "I shave my beard, you know. Because of the bow and all. Takes some timing, keeping it to a respectable stubble when I have to be in public."

Well. That he hadn't expected, really, though it did explain a lot. Clearly he was slipping, if he hadn't even noticed that much. "And why don't you simply shave it all off? You know you get talk either way."

"I'll have to, sooner or later. It's getting to be pretty hard to keep people from noticing." Kíli touched his own cheek, running fingertips against the dark roughness there. "I was thinking I might do it now, in fact, before we get to the mountain. Might draw some of the attention away from Gimli."

"Just be careful about how you present it to him. He might think you're making light of him, or trying to imply he shouldn't be upset over his loss." Kíli gave him a surprised gaze, which made him snort. "I only offend when I mean to, my prince. When your life and living both depend on what people
think of you, you learn the value of a quick tongue and pleasant face early on."

"Right." Kíli rubbed his cheek in thought again. "I might just tell him that's why I'm doing it. He already knows I shave, and I mentioned I'll have a smooth face eventually, so at least he won't think it's only because of him."

"That might work." Nori cricked his neck. "We should get some of that rest, though. Don't think Dwalin will hesitate about dragging one of us up for watch just because we spent our time talking instead of sleeping."

"It's me he'll kick up first, anyway, because apparently it's not inappropriate for me to be alone with Tauriel if the lot of you are snoring ten feet away. Which is fine by me, really. You old ones need your sleep, and I think Dwalin will want to cuddle you for a bit."

"I should probably let him know you've lost all your healthy fear and respect for him. I don't think that'll end well for you."

Kíli laughed as they turned back to the camp, so clearly there was no proper fear whatsoever there.

If Nori was later startled awake to find Dwalin's bulk settling behind him and an arm reached around him, well, at least he was going to be warm.

Chapter End Notes

...And with that little revelation, you can now read the Dwalin/Nori sidestory, Stealing Touches (And Hearts) without fearing any spoilers, if you're so inclined.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Once again, Fíli is woken up in the middle of the night by a message about Gimli. This time, though, it's his turn to ride out. Thranduil is not ungrateful, though even Legolas is surprised at how he shows this. This is not the only surprise the Company will face, as Nori makes a dramatic entrance to the baths and Glóin is in fact not lopping off elven heads.

Even with everything seeming to take a turn for the better, Dori worries. And, as usual, he soon finds an actual reason to do so.

Chapter Notes

Gah, this chapter just would not be written in time. I blame Glóin.

If you didn't see the notice at the end of last chapter, with Nori's little reveal you can now read Stealing Touches (And Hearts) without fear of spoilers in this story.

**Regarding updates**, I'm currently aiming to post the last chapter of this fic on the 15th of October, for the dwarven new year, with semi-regular updates of at least once a month until then. Of course, I'll still be updating other stuff (mostly Hobbit!) once a week or more. You may especially want to take a glance at King Under the Crown, which is essentially the slow burn, more "adult" cousin of this story. The main pairings are the same, but the focus is somewhat different, and the rating is higher for a reason. Also, there's bonus messing with genders, if that's your thing, and plenty of permanent injuries.

Fíli woke up as Ori climbed out of bed.

It was still strange, waking up in Ori's bed once again. Really, he shouldn't have been there again, not so soon. However, after all the commotion and Kíli's party riding off and all the fuss that caused, by the time night fell he really hadn't felt like being alone. Ori had apparently agreed with him, as they had ended up in the Ri brothers' rooms again in the evening, and when it got late it had been the most natural thing for him to curl up with Ori once again.

And, well, Dori was still in Dale, while Nori was off looking for elves. It wasn't like anyone was going to get on his case for it.

Now, however, Ori was getting up, and Fíli's stomach lurched as he was reminded of the previous night when his ears caught knocking from the front door. It wasn't Kíli's frantic pounding, no, but it could still hardly be anything good at this hour.

He heard Ori opening the door and low voices, and then the door was closed again. Fíli blinked toward the door of Ori's bedroom until it opened again, casting Ori's silhouette against the soft glow.
of the last flickers of the fireplace of the front room. Fíli almost wished he'd seen him better, certain
that his beloved would have made a most delectable sight standing there in nothing but his
underthings and sleep-mussed hair, but this was hardly the time for such fantasies.

"There's been a raven." Ori stood in the doorway as though too hurried to bother to come back in,
and Fíli rolled out of bed as well. This was important, clearly, and something he would not miss.
"They need someone who can speak to it, and since I left them instructions to contact me if a
message arrived, well, they came here."

"Right." Fíli quickly pulled on his clothes, gathering his hair back with a simple tie. There was no
time for finery now, not when they might have a message from his brother. After all, Kíli and Dwalin
were the only ones who had ridden out with the ability to use ravens for messengers, unless it was
one from Gimli himself. Either way, a quick response was needed. "Are you coming with me?"

"Probably for the better." Ori put on a shirt and then a tunic, then quickly pulled on his trousers and
boots. Fíli wasn't going to complain. As much as he liked looking at Ori without much in the way of
clothing, he was enough of a dwarf not to want to share such a precious sight with just anyone. "If
nothing else, there might be talk if they sent word for me and you arrived alone."

"As though there isn't talk already. But then, we're betrothed, there would be talk even if we weren't
doing anything." Fíli went up to Ori and settled a hand on his back. "Shall we go, then?"

Ori drew a deep breath and nodded. "Let's."

The corridors were mostly empty aside from a few guards, not that this was a surprise at this time of
night. The guards simply nodded at them before continuing on their way, nobody paying them much
attention. They soon arrived near the raven nests, where a guard was standing in wait.

"Your highness!" The guard stood up straighter as he saw them approach. "A message arrived for
you!"

"Yes, Ori informed me." Fíli nodded. "Where is the bird?"

The raven was a ragged sort, a wild one by the looks of her, and rather snappish in her answers,
repeating over and over again that she'd been promised a reward. Fíli was about to send the guard to
get something to bribe her with, only to notice Ori was already instructing the same. They shared a
brief smile before Fíli turned his attention back to the bird.

It wasn't until the guard arrived with some leftovers that the raven finally became cooperative. "Two
people spoke to me," she told Fíli between nibbles. "One with a shiny head, the other without any
proper feathers on his face. They said they need fighters and a better-maker, a flock-mate is hurt."

Fíli nodded grimly. Ravens that didn't know Westron were sometimes tricky to interpret, not having
proper words for some things that dwarves might have liked to speak about, but this was
understandable enough. "And how far are they?" Not very far, he hoped, if Kíli and Dwalin had
indeed sent the bird. They'd only left the morning before, after all. "Can you show us the way?"

"Not far. I only flew in the dark, flew all the way here. She flexed her wings, then tilted her head to
the side, eyeing Fíli curiously. "What do I get if I show it?"

"Food for the rest of your life, and all the shiny things you can carry." That was an easy promise, at
least. "Do you have a name?"

She eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then nodded. "I am Varc. Do you have a name?"
Fíli stifled a chuckle. "Aye, I am Fíli. My mother's nest-mate leads the dwarf flock here. The one you spoke to without face-feathers was my nest-mate Kíli."

"And this one?" Varc glanced at Ori. "He doesn't speak much."

"That's Ori, my mate. He doesn't speak to ravens, but he's quite smart otherwise."

Varc made a dismissive sound. "Doesn't sound very smart, then."

"Believe me, he is." Fíli shook his head. "I'll get our fighters ready. You can ride on my shoulder when we set off, I'm sure your wings are tired."

"I could fly another day with these!" Even so, she hopped up to Fíli's shoulder after flexing her wings again.

Ori looked at Fíli questioningly. "What did the bird say?"

"Kíli and Dwalin sent her, she's only flown in the dark so they haven't gotten very far. They need warriors and a healer." And oh, he didn't want to think too closely on that. "Varc promised to show us the way in exchange for food and shiny things."

"Very well." Ori nodded. "I'll alert the guards and the stablehands and leave a message for Thorin, you get ready for the journey. I imagine Óin will like to join you, you need a healer in any case and he'll want to see Gimli."

"You're not coming?" It didn't exactly surprise him that Ori assumed Fíli would be going. After all, someone needed to be able to communicate with Varc, and he wasn't about to let anyone else claim that duty when there was a chance Kíli might be hurt. However, he had imagined Ori would be coming with him.

"You'll be away for at least two days, maybe more. Someone has to make sure everything you're supposed to do gets done here." Ori stepped closer and leaned up to kiss Fíli, then drew back with a small smile. "Go get geared up, my prince. I imagine you'll be riding out as soon as they have ponies ready."

Fíli looked after Ori as he walked away. Varc tilted her head, looking at him curiously. "You're not a nestling, are you? You look grown to me. Why was he feeding you?"

"It's, ah. It's part of our mating displays." Well, close enough.

"Ah. Strange, but you do what you have to do." Varc paused. "Is he supposed to be smaller than you? You should feed him more. Fat mates lay better eggs."

"I'll keep that in mind." And never, ever mention it to Ori, who was a very fine size in Fíli's opinion, anyway. "I need to go to my nest to get some things. While I'm there, I'll pick up a couple of shiny things for you so you'll see I can give you what I promised."

Once in his rooms, he quickly packed a bag for a couple of days on the road and got himself dressed properly for the journey while Varc rooted through a pile of small gemstones and beads he had at hand at his workbench. When he was done, he got a spare piece of string and threaded it through a few small beads Varc had chosen, fashioning it into a loop she could wear around her neck. As he slipped the tiny jewelry over her head, she stretched her neck and preened.

"I like you, dwarf, even if you don't have that many face feathers, either." Varc glanced around with a critical eye before flying up to Fíli's shoulder. "This isn't a bad nest, either. Plenty of shiny things. I
"Show us the quickest way to Kíli, and you can live here if you wish." It wouldn't be a bad thing, having company in the evenings, and he'd already promised to make sure she'd be fed for as long as she liked. "As long as you don't steal any of my important shiny things, that is."

"Well, you'll have to make sure I know which ones are important, won't you?"

By the time he got to the stables, a small group of guards and a grim-faced Óin were waiting for him, bleary-eyed stablehands rushing to prepare ponies for everyone. Talli was leading them, pausing to quickly bow at Fíli before focusing on her duties again. Fíli returned it with a nod, then turned towards his small party.

"I hope you're prepared to ride long and fast," he said. "We're not stopping until we've found Kíli's group."

Nobody complained, which was good, as Fíli kept his promise. Varc was quite happy to doze off at his shoulder after showing them the initial direction, no doubt tired from her long flight. She woke up a few times during the day, flying up to get a sense of the landmarks before swooping down with a new direction for Fíli. By nightfall Fíli saw the gleam of a small fire in the distance, sighing in relief as they got close enough to spot the familiar figures around it. Among the others he counted one, two, three red heads — Tauriel, Nori, and Gimli. So they had been successful.

He wasn't quite as cheerful as they drew even closer and he saw the elves tied up at the side of the camp, the wan-faced Legolas with bandages around his thigh, and the messy stubble covering Gimli's face. So shocked was he that it actually took him a moment to realise that Kíli, who was rushing towards him, was entirely clean-shaved.

"Kíli!" Fíli jumped down from his pony, closing the last few steps between them before drawing his brother into a hug, banging their foreheads together. "What in Mahal's name happened here?"

"Oh, you know, this and that. Assassination attempt, little things like that. Everyone's still in one piece, though. Well," Kíli grinned in a way that showed all his teeth, "everyone who matters, anyway."

"But… your beard." He'd seen Kíli like this before, of course, but never in public. "And — Gimli!" Óin had made it over to Gimli by now, fussing over him. By the sounds of it Gimli was trying to redirect his attention to Legolas.

"Aye." Kíli nodded grimly. "The bastard elves attacked him. Don't worry, the one who took his beard isn't alive anymore."

"Good. I'd hate to start things off by killing someone." He glanced over to where Nori was sitting next to Legolas while Dwalin was walking closer. There was something different about Nori, but he couldn't put his finger on it just now. "And the prince?"

"He was the main target." Kíli shook his head. "We need to somehow get him to the mountain without much jostling about; he's still in bad enough condition that Tauriel doesn't think he can ride just yet. And then there's all these other elves who are no doubt in a lot of hurry to see the dungeons." Kíli glanced at Varc, who had settled on Fíli's shoulder again. "I see you found your way to the mountain, then."

"And you lost even more of your face feathers." Well. Nobody had ever accused ravens of having too much tact, for all that they weren't quite as rude as crows.
"That I did." Kíli chuckled, though it wasn't a very cheerful sound. "Thought it'd be best to match my mate." From his sideways glance toward Gimli, Fíli suspected it wasn't Tauriel he was trying to match, though.

"That makes sense." Varc nodded. "She's the one with red feathers, then? The big one? You're more sensible than your nest-mate here, she looks like she'll be good at laying eggs."

That startled a laugh out of Kíli, and though he sounded tired, it was still a good sound. Dwalin seemed to have taken charge of the guards Fíli had brought along, while Óin had moved over to Legolas, speaking with Nori. Tauriel was keeping an eye on the elven prisoners, stealing the occasional glance towards Kíli. All in all things seemed to be under control.

Then his eyes found Gimli, who looked terribly young and lost with his messy stubble and hurt eyes, and he felt terribly cold all of a sudden.

The elves, Fíli decided, were incredibly lucky Thranduil probably wanted them alive.

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Truth be told, Legolas hadn't expected his father to show up in person.

It wasn't that he thought his father held no love for him, or would not want to know he would be all right in time. However, at best he had thought Thranduil might send some trusted messenger to find the truth, perhaps a healer as he would hardly trust the skills or will of dwarves to tend his only son. That, surely, was all the action he could expect his father to reach outside the borders of his realm, guarded more closely than ever now that he had led his people to war and seen so many of them slain.

As such, he was rather shocked when a somewhat flustered dwarf rushed in to where he was speaking with Gimli in the room he had been given. The Prince Consort had insisted that Legolas be given a proper guest room near the royal quarters, and Gimli had told him the entire section of the mountain was closed off to anyone but the royal family, members of the Company, and a few trusted servants and guards. It might have seemed unnecessary to him at any other time, but considering he was still recovering from an attempted assassination, he couldn't fault the dwarves for being careful.

"Ah, Lord Legolas!" Which was not entirely correct, but it was more than he might have expected from a dwarf in what was not a formal situation. "Your father is arriving!"

"My father?" Legolas blinked. "I hadn't expected him to come."

"Has the king been notified?" Gimli was sensible as ever, of course, though Legolas could see he was growing tense. He had hardly left Legolas' side except to sleep since they'd arrived in the mountain, and seemed wary of every new visitor and situation. Again, it seemed overly protective, yet Legolas couldn't blame him for being so. Not when Gimli's own wrist was still bound.

"Aye, he has." The dwarf nodded quickly in confirmation. "He said since the Elvenking is most likely coming to visit you and not the king himself, instead of a formal reception he would meet him in the entrance room, and you ought to go there too."

"Right, then." It was certainly more sensible than his trying to make his way all the way to one of the formal meeting rooms, or trying to fit too many people into his sickroom. It was nice and spacious, yes, but it wasn't exactly designed to hold a lot of people at once. "Gimli? Would you accompany me there?"

"Of course." Gimli dismissed the messenger, then helped Legolas make himself more presentable.
He hadn't paid much attention to his appearance lately, given that he rarely made it outside his room with his wound, but he wasn't about to meet his father in clothes he had clearly slept in.

He did have a crutch, specially made for him as those the dwarves had at hand were obviously too short, but he relied more on Gimli than anything else to make his way down the corridor to the entrance room of the royal apartments. He'd seen it before once or twice, though only briefly, and in general it reminded him mostly of a large family room, which wasn't exactly a surprise. Now he could feel the tension as soon as he stepped in, for all that the room was still clearly designed for leisure time rather than more grave matters. The king himself was there, as was most of his family, and Thorin nodded at him as they entered.

"Your father should be here soon. The guards have been instructed to bring him here as soon as he arrives in the mountain. We figured he would both like to make sure you are being cared for, and hear about the particulars of the incident, so bringing everyone here seemed the best decision."

"I agree." Legolas sank into the seat he was shown rather gratefully. Tauriel and Óin had done good work on his wound, but it still pained him, so walking for long even with support was painful and made the healers tut and shake their heads at him. Even sitting was something of an ordeal, which was why he had spent most of his time lately in bed on his side, but crossing his legs took away most of the weight on his wound at least. "I have to say, I am somewhat surprised that he would make a personal appearance."

"You are his son." Tauriel's voice was soft, her expression guarded as she stood by Kíli at the side of the room. Legolas supposed it was natural of her to feel wary; after all, her last interaction with Thranduil had been anything but peaceful.

Of course, when Thranduil arrived, he paid little attention to any of the gathered people in the room. Sweeping in with an imperious air, he glanced around the room and demanded, "What have you done with my son?"

"They have done nothing but treated my wounds, Adar." Legolas somehow managed not to lean away as his father's gaze fell upon him. Whatever Thranduil might have thought of the conspirators, he couldn't imagine he was much in his father's favour right now, either, having sneaked away with a dwarf of all things. "Indeed, if it had not been for them, I would not have survived."

"And what is it you survived, exactly?" Thranduil frowned, walking closer until he stood just in front of Legolas and Gimli, who was standing beside Legolas' seat. "I only received a message saying that you had been found wounded and were brought to the mountain for treatment. Considering I was under the impression you went hunting with an elven party, you can imagine my surprise at such news." Well. Considering the many forms the message could have taken, Legolas supposed that was one of the least troublesome ones.

"I left with an elven party, yes, and with my friend Gimli." He couldn't help but reach his hand to take Gimli's. "However, it seems they were unhappy with my acceptance of dwarves, and planned to kill me and Gimli and disguise our deaths as an orc attack. Gimli saved me from the initial attack, and when his kin came looking for him, they found us and captured the traitors."

"You are known to me, Gimli son of Glóin," Thranduil said, inclining his head a bit. "You stood before my court and spoke with a tongue of silver and mithril. Though I seem to recall you were hairier then."
Legolas knew without even looking that every dwarf in the room tensed at that, shifting uneasily at such a comment. Gimli, however, stayed silent even as Legolas squeezed his hand in reassurance, leaning closer to him in support.

"The traitors shaved his face because he would not betray my hiding place." Legolas kept his voice low. The words pained him even to say, and he could not imagine what it was like for the others to hear them. "I doubt they knew in exact detail what it is for a dwarf to lose his beard, but they knew enough to understand it was the greatest insult they could offer at the time."

Thranduil gave a slow nod. "Dwarves are a secretive lot, and speak little of their ways, yet even I have heard they only shave traitors and exiles. And yet you claim he would rather lose his beard at the hands of an elf than reveal you?"

It was Gimli who spoke now, in his usual measured tones. "They took my beard with no right or justice. If any will think less of me for it, that is on them, not me." He shook his head. "I had to keep my friend safe from those who sought to harm him. My beard was a small price for that; indeed, even as they threatened to cut off more permanent parts next, I made to remain silent. If I had bought my pride or the end to my pain with the life of one I call friend, a shaved head and a traitor's price is all I would have deserved, for any who would do so has no honour and no right to call themselves a dwarf of Erebor."

"Not that they would have allowed him to live anyway," Legolas said, shuddering at the thought. "Not when he could have stood witness to their crime."

"Oh, they never promised me anything but death." And how could Gimli say such a thing with such apparent ease? "Just that it would be quick and painless if I spoke, and slow and torturous if I did not. Clearly I made the right call not to speak, for what torment they so delighted in giving me bought us enough time for the rescue to arrive." He shifted just a bit, and Legolas could not help but feel even sharper guilt as he spied the edge of a bandage peeking out from under one sleeve. No, his beard was not the only price Gimli had paid for his silence.

Thranduil had not missed it either, by the way his sharp eyes flickered that way before returning to study Gimli's honest, open expression. "I see." He paused, perhaps considering his next words, and Legolas was not sure what to expect from his father.

What he certainly did not expect to see, yet what his eyes insisted on telling him, was for Thranduil to sink down on one knee in front of a young, beardless dwarf, bowing his head as though he would to one of the highest of their own race. Gimli seemed shocked enough that he allowed Thranduil to take his hand, bringing it to his bowed forehead.

"Gimli, son of Glóin, I owe you a debt I can never repay." Thranduil's voice was not loud, but then none would have dreamed of speaking over him, not in this moment. "You have saved the life of my son and heir, when those I trusted sought to bring him harm. For that, I am in your debt, and if ever the time comes that you might need my aid, consider it already granted by my honour."

Gimli seemed taken aback, but he recovered quickly enough. "I desire no reward for what I did without a choice." His voice was rough but steady, though Legolas suspected he was unsettled by the display. "To betray a friend was never an option. I did not stay silent for the sake of you or your kingdom, but merely out of a selfish desire to bring some safety to one I hold dear."

"So I am beginning to see." Thranduil eyed Gimli for another moment, then stood up again, composing himself. "King Under the Mountain." His tone was formal, almost cold, but without any too obvious hostility as he addressed Thorin for the first time since his arrival. "What was done to those responsible for this crime?"
"Those who survived their foolishness are in our dungeons at the moment." Thorin replied in a similar tone, polite in a formal fashion though Legolas felt he was slightly colder than he had been before Thranduil swept in. "Since they're your subjects, conspiring against your heir, we felt it prudent to give you the chance to question and punish them."

"Oh, they will be questioned all right." The look in his father's eyes was colder than anything Legolas had seen in centuries. "Though I have to admit, I grow curious. What would be your sentence, were they your subjects and your people the only victims?"

"They committed two of the gravest crimes a dwarf could ever be guilty of." Thorin did not hesitate a moment in his response. It seemed clear to Legolas he had been pondering this himself. "First, high treason, to go against the heir of their own king. Worse yet, they attacked one not yet of his full years, took his honour and brought him pain, and had every intent to take his life as well. That, under dwarven law, is a crime against Mahal himself." The dwarven king shook his head slowly. "Were they my subjects, I would have them shorn and branded, then their heads cut off and all of them burned and scattered. Those so without honour deserve no resting place, nor an easy path to the Halls of Ancestors."

"An interesting approach, to be certain." Thranduil nodded. "Once I have the information I may take from them, I will be sure to shave their hair before I claim their heads. It's little consolation, I suspect, but I feel the severity of their crimes should be visited on them somehow, particularly if they indeed injured a child."

"It's not like I'm some wee dwarfling," Gimli grumbled, because clearly no shock was great enough to keep him from grousing from time to time. "I'm only two years short of my first majority."

"My friend, nobody is questioning your maturity here, just the matter of the law." Legolas couldn't help a faint smile. "Indeed, had you been of your full years, then perhaps nobody would have left to search for you, and we would have truly been lost."

"Now, while all this is absolutely fascinating, I can't help but notice we're approaching dinner time," the Prince Consort cut in. "Your Majesty, we're sure you would like to speak with all those involved, and in particular take custody of the prisoners. For now, we would be happy to have you join us for dinner. Besides Legolas and Gimli themselves, Kíli, Fíli and Tauriel can all provide you with details on the matter while we eat, and I will have someone prepare quarters for you and any company you have brought with you in the meantime."

"My party is staying in Dale for the moment, but I personally will accept your invitation." That was, Legolas figured, the most politeness he had heard from his father in ages toward just about anyone. "As for the prisoners, I am sure another day in the dungeons will do them little harm."

"Indeed." Legolas was sure King Thorin was tempted to smirk, if only just, but kept his expression carefully calm. "I have been told you can be patient."

Thranduil might have made some sharp comment at that, but instead, he just lifted his eyebrows, lips curled into the slightest of smirks. "Let us hope nothing tries my patience here in your kingdom, hmm?"

And really, even with the lingering pain and the tension in Gimli's frame, things could have gone a lot worse.

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For all that Bilbo did not share Thorin's prejudices, he had to admit he was somewhat relieved to see
Thranduil leave a few days later.

It wasn't that the Elvenking was being rude or hostile, surprisingly enough. He seemed to be saving all his antagonistic feelings for the traitorous elves, treating Thorin and the other dwarves with a careful kind of civility that, while still tainted with tension, was perfectly acceptable for a king visiting the realm of another. Apparently saving his son and treating him well had bought the dwarves some measure of respect in Thranduil's eyes.

Said son remained even as Thranduil left, though not without some lengthy conversations on the matter. After a long consultation between Óin, Tauriel, and an elven healer Thranduil had brought with him, they had determined Legolas was not well enough to ride back to Mirkwood, nor did Thranduil feel comfortable taking him back before he was sure he had cleaned up any remnants of the conspiracy. Not that he would say that, exactly, but it was clear enough in the way he easily agreed when Legolas suggested he might stay longer. The possibility of Dale was brought up, but even Thranduil had to admit that if elves were the danger, Erebor was the safest place for Legolas until he had recovered. Strangely enough the dwarves seemed to agree, even Thorin and Glóin, who Bilbo had expected to be the first to protest.

In fact, Glóin seemed to be strangely calm about the whole matter. Bilbo had expected him to be terribly upset about the whole thing, and he had indeed been enraged when Gimli had come home shaved and hurt, but for some reason beyond the first greetings and the demands for explanations Glóin had not been hounding his son even nearly as much as Bilbo had expected. The difference from what he expected was so great, Bilbo found himself drawing close to Glóin when the Company gathered in the baths a couple of days later.

"What do you mean, I'm being calm?"

"Well, you know." Bilbo shrugged, running a hand through his hair. "Not to offend, but you do have something of a temper, especially when Gimli is involved. And you were really angry when we found out he'd left, enough so they didn't even take you along when they went looking. But now that he's back, you've barely even spoken to him after the first couple of days."

"I suppose that's true enough." Glóin stroked his beard. Even soaking wet, it was a rather magnificent sight, especially now that he'd taken off all his usual clasps and beads. Dwarves might not have been comfortable braiding their hair in public, but in the baths they did take out most of their adornments. "You know, not long after I started courting my Kulta, she hurt her ankle rather bad. Couldn't walk without a crutch for weeks, not that she let it slow her down."

"Right." Bilbo frowned. That didn't seem relevant at the moment, but while Glóin seemed to always find some excuse to talk about his family, he was not in the habit of avoiding a topic by doing so. "I don't imagine you were very happy about it."

"Oh, he really wasn't." Kulta chuckled, moving closer to them through the water. Bilbo still felt a bit strange about being in the baths with female dwarves, but nobody else seemed to mind much. And, well, he had gotten plenty of practice in the family bath ever since Dís moved into the mountain, seeing how she wasn't at all shy about herself. "Wouldn't leave me be for a moment, as you'd expect of him. Sometimes I almost thought he'd crawl right through my window at night just to ask how I was faring."

"Probably would have, except her mother was a light sleeper and had a sharp axe." Glóin chuckled. "In any case, I couldn't stop worrying about her for a moment, even when she assured me it was all right."

"Well, that is rather what I would expect of you." Goodness knew he'd been quite well informed
about Glóin's feelings toward his family within the first couple of days of their journey. "But aside from your demands that the elves be brought to justice, and the initial worry over Gimli, you haven't involved yourself much at all."

"Look over there." Glóin nodded to the other end of the small bathing area the Company had claimed at the side of the public baths. Gimli had somehow convinced Legolas to come along, and the two were now speaking to each other in one of the corners where Legolas could sit and rest his leg. The poor elf still looked somewhat awkward, much like Bilbo himself had felt the first time. From what he had gathered, while elves did have public baths of some description, they were no more fond of mixed baths than hobbits were. Tauriel still wouldn't join everyone else. Gimli seemed to be doing his best to distract Legolas from any potential awkwardness, with Kíli, Fíli and Ori occasionally chiming in from where they were gathered nearby. It was good to see the young ones starting to get along so well, given what it promised for the future of the kingdom.

"They seem to be getting along quite well." Bilbo shrugged. "Not that it's much of a surprise for Gimli, if indeed he has been writing to Legolas all this time, and the other young ones know Tauriel quite well."

"That's not the point, my friend." Glóin shook his head, and somehow he managed to look amused and wistful at the same time. "No, it's not the friendship that catches my eye, though I suppose it's better than the alternative."

"What then?" Bilbo frowned. Was there something here he was missing?

"It's the look Gimli gets whenever he looks at the elf." Kulta's voice was soft, probably didn't carry to anyone but Bilbo and Glóin. "It's the same one I saw in Glóin's eyes when he was fussing over me back then."

"Trust me, when I got the word that my son returned hurt, I was ready to take my axe to any skull that needed splitting," Glóin grumbled. "When I actually saw him, well, those pointy-eared bastards were lucky Kulta hadn't let me go to meet the party armed. I was quite prepared to take the princeling to task for taking my baby boy into danger, too." He shook his head slowly. "When I saw how he looked at the elf, though… well. I knew then and there it didn't matter what I said, I could not change his mind."

"Wait." Bilbo blinked. "Are you comparing Gimli's friendship with Legolas to your courtship?"

"If my lad is anything like myself, then that's where it's headed. Whether he has realised it yet, I'm not sure, but I know better than to try to stop it."

"That is… rather sensible of you." Certainly more so than he had expected.

"I know to pick my battles, sometimes." Glóin paused. "Also, I had a very long talk with Kulta about the matter."

"Indeed he did." Kulta leaned in to kiss Glóin on the cheek. "Together we came to the conclusion that if Gimli thought the elf prince is worth losing his beard, there is hardly anything we can do to persuade him otherwise."

"He's a good lad, that's for sure." Bilbo smiled a bit. "I really hope you're proud of him."

"He saved the life of an ally and withstood torture like a grown warrior. How could we be anything but proud?"

"Will be mighty difficult, making beads that will stay in that slippery hair," Glóin grunted. "But I've
time to figure it out. Whether they get their heads together or not, Gimli's too young to court, still."

"I suppose it's a good thing not everyone is rushing into things." Bilbo chuckled. "Not that it didn't work out for me, but then Thorin and I did know each other for a little while before we started courting."

"Speaking of Thorin, it seems he's missing you." Kulta nodded toward where Thorin was indeed looking at them. "Perhaps you should go see what he has to say?"

"I probably should." Bilbo nodded at the two, then waded back to Thorin through the water. He had to say, it was very nice to be so deep in warm water. Though sometimes he did need to be careful about finding a path that still kept his head above surface; the middle of the bath was clearly meant to be deep enough for grown dwarves.

"There you are." Thorin smiled as Bilbo got closer. He was a very pleasant sight with his hair mostly out of braids and skin glistening with water. But, it would not do to get too distracted right now. They were in public, after all. "Did you have a good talk?"

"Very much so." Bilbo sighed happily and slid closer to Thorin through the water. "Just wanted to make sure Glóin wouldn't suddenly change his mind and try to attack Legolas for leading Gimli astray."

"And are you now convinced that he won't do so?"

"More so than I expected, I have to say." Now that he looked closer, Thorin's eyes were not quite matching the smile on his lips. "Thorin? Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure about wrong. Interesting, at least." Thorin glanced toward the edge of the bath. "Dwalin said he would be coming along."

"And?" Bilbo frowned. "Doesn't he usually do so?"

"Yes, but he also usually doesn't bother making sure I know about it. Which makes me wonder if there's something else going on." Thorin nodded toward the door. "And there he is now."

"And not only him, I see." Bilbo blinked as he saw Nori following Dwalin into the bathing area. "He hasn't come here before, has he?"

"No, I don't think so. Even on the journey, Nori preferred to bathe with his brothers rather than with the rest of the Company." Thorin glanced toward where the young ones were. "Ori seems rather surprised as well."

"Indeed." Now, wasn't this interesting.

It seemed they weren't the only ones who paid attention to this new occurrence. The general chatter seemed to die down a little, and an awful lot of eyes turned to watch Dwalin and Nori. The two of them must have noticed, it wasn't like they could accomplish their jobs without being aware when they were being watched, but they were doing a good job at hiding it.

Bilbo almost wanted to think there was nothing the matter and they were all just imagining things, but there was no denying that Dwalin was acting somewhat strange. He seemed to all but hover about Nori as they started undressing, and what was stranger still, Nori didn't immediately snap at him for it.

Bilbo didn't think much of it when Nori took off his tunic only to reveal some sort of a vest
underneath. It was what was revealed underneath the vest that made him pause.

Then, of course, Nori took off the rest of his clothes, which rather put things into new perspective.

"Hey, Nori!" And of course Bofur would be the first to speak up. Well, really Bilbo had half expected one of the princes to do so, but for some reason they did not look at all surprised. "You drop something along the way?"

"Don't think so, but I'm sure if I did, it's somewhere near your lost wit." Nori set his hands on his hips as though to dare people to say something. "What, feeling inadequate now that you know I have more balls than you without actually having any?"

"Oh, you wound me!" Bofur gasped. "And here I was all concerned for your lack of essential equipment!"

"Lack of it? Have you actually seen Dwalin? I promise you, there's more than enough prick for two dwarves in this relationship."

"Why am I not surprised that this would get to bickering right away?" Bilbo murmured, leaning his head against Thorin's shoulder.

"Because you know the Company."

"And I do prefer the bickering to actual insults."

"Yes, I have to agree." Bilbo chuckled as he watched Dwalin and Nori getting into the water. If he knew his friends at all, there would be plenty of questions because there were some horribly curious people in the Company, but the tension of earlier seemed to be gone for the moment. "I would hate to have bloodshed in the water just as I established Glóin would not cause any."

And if he was joking about that, well, clearly it was for the better that he had chosen to live in Erebor rather than the Shire.

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At this point, Dori was more or less just waiting for the next blow, wherever it was going to come from.

Not that things had been going especially badly, thankfully. Nori's little reveal to the Company had gone without any trouble, Legolas had recovered enough to head back to Mirkwood, young Gimli was finally starting to worry about things other than his injured friend and missing beard, and even his work on the wedding outfits was going well. The greatest thing to shake Ori's life lately was the addition of a pet raven to Fíli's life, and from the sounds of it Ori and Varc were getting along quite well despite their lack of a shared language. All in all, there didn't seem to be much to worry about at the moment.

Of course, this worried him greatly.

It wasn't that Dori always sought to find doom and gloom everywhere, but his life had taught him that things rarely went well for too long. Not that he would describe things as well just yet, when the rumour mill still hadn't gotten over Kíli's shaved face and Gimli's letters to Mirkwood, but at least there was no current crisis right now. And, well, he just couldn't help but wonder where the next one would come from.

Really, nobody would have blamed him for feeling the cold grip of fear when Bain appeared at the door of the guild hall one day, looking a bit awkward.
"Ah. Master Dori?" Bain stood in the doorway, glancing around at the couple of dwarves working in the hall. "Could I talk to you for a moment?"

"Bain! Come in, my boy." Dori set down the piece he was currently working on, rushing over to the door. "What are you doing here? Not to say you shouldn't be here, but we're rather deep in the mountain."

"I told the guards at the gate who I am and that I'm looking for you." Bain let Dori usher him further into the guild hall and towards the small office Dori had at the back. "One of them brought me all the way here."

"Oh, I'm sure they did." It wasn't like they were going to ignore the prince of Dale. "Master Lanka, if anyone asks for me, I'm busy. I trust you'll see to things for the moment. Now come along, Bain, I'll make you some tea, it must have been quite cold walking over here."

Bain followed him easily enough into the little office, sat a bit awkwardly in a seat while Dori fussed with his tea things. He still had plenty of growing to do, if his father was any indication, but he seemed to be getting into that awkward age where the young ones were nothing but elbows and knees for a while. Ori had resembled nothing as much as a startled deer throughout his years of the same, lanky and lean for a dwarf as he had been. He was finally starting to grow into a proper dwarf, at least, and Dori suspected Bain was still had a ways to go until he got to that age, the short years of men notwithstanding.

"So." He was probably puttering about with the cups a bit more than strictly necessary. "What's the matter?"

"Huh?" Bain blinked. "I didn't say anything was wrong."

"No, but you came here. Which, again, I don't mind you visiting, not at all, but you haven't ever come on your own before. And I visited just a few days ago, so it can hardly be that you simply miss my company. So, what is it? Your secret is safe with me, whatever it may be."

Bain seemed to resist another moment, but then he sighed. "It's about Sigrid, actually."

"Sigrid?" Dori frowned. "What about her?" When he had last visited, she had certainly seemed fine. Still a bit unused to being treated like a princess, but fine.

"It's... there's this guy who seems interested in her." Ah. Dori should have known. "He's old and gross — well, not that old really, but older than her to be sure — but for some reason all the people in the council seem to listen to him. I don't know why, really. I don't like him at all."

"Right." Dori had a feeling he knew where this was going. "And does Sigrid like him?"

"I don't think so. I mean, I'd know if she did, I'm sure she would tell me. But... I'm afraid she thinks she should like him."

"I see." That reminded him of far too many a talk with Bard. "You know your father doesn't expect any of you to enter political marriages, right?" At least the man had been quite adamant on that.

"I know that, and I think Sigrid knows, too. But, well, father is always so busy nowadays. If Sigrid agreed to that man's proposal, I'm not sure father would even notice she doesn't actually like him."

"And let me guess. You want me to speak with your father about it?" Dori frowned. "Why would
"You not do that yourself?"

"I'm worried he'll think I'm just being jealous or just don't want Sigrid to go anywhere. And, I mean, I don't want her to go, but I wouldn't cause trouble if I thought she was marrying someone who's actually going to make her happy."

Dori sighed, shaking his head. "I'm sure I'll never understand your habits," he murmured. Then, seeing the gloomy expression on Bain's face, he made up his mind. Not that he had ever intended to let such a thing happen. "Well, I suppose there is something I can do, at least."

"Really?" Bain perked up a little. "So you'll speak with father?"

"Not as such, no. He is not the crux of the problem here. No matter what I say to him, it won't make a difference if there's a chance that Sigrid herself might try to deceive him because she thinks it's for the better."

"So… what?" Bain blinked. "You're going to speak with Sigrid?"

"Better, my dear boy." Dori poured them both a cup of tea, adding some extra honey to Bain's cup. A little extra sweetness never went amiss with the young ones, in his experience. "I'm going to teach her exactly what she's worth."

And when a dwarf taught a lesson about worth, it rather tended to stick.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Dori has an excellent plan for how to deal with Sigrid's situation, but that doesn't mean his own family can be neglected, either. Distracting Ori from his worries over his masterpiece being judged turns out to be quite easy -- and of course, he's not the only one trying to keep Ori happy. Another target of Dori's little plots, Gimli is finally advancing in his studies, for all that he isn't entirely sure if he's ready for the responsibility.

And Thorin isn't worried. Of course he's not.

Chapter Notes

For anyone interested, I have posted a new side story to this one, Learning Words (And Customs). Do note, however, that it is set after this story, and as such contains minor spoilers.

Bard was not sure he would ever get used to having a servant inform him when he had a visitor.

It wasn't just the fact that he had servants, that he needed them to have the time to attend to his duties. All his life he had lived in a small house that was little more than a hovel, where anyone entering was immediately apparent. Now, even though he had done his best not to claim more space than he and his family needed, there was no way he could detect a visitor all the way from his office.

"Your Majesty?" Bard actually managed not to cringe at the form of address, though it took some doing. Allowing it seemed to make people happy. Perhaps there was something to the idea of people wanting a leader. "Master Dori is here to see you."

"He is?" That was strange. Dori rarely visited without advance notice, for all that he had become something of a frequent visitor in Bard's household amid various negotiations and trade discussions. From what Bard could recall, he was not due for another visit for a week at least. He hoped this didn't mean anything bad was going on in the mountain. "Show him in."

This gained him a quick bow and no questions. At first some had wondered at the way he was so free with his time with a dwarf, but from his experience dwarves in general were an honourable lot when not affected by madness, and Dori in particular had been quite helpful as Bard tried to puzzle out the various intricacies of the economics of a city. Dori was no grand merchant, perhaps, but he obviously knew the ways of supply and demand and the politics involved in guilds and trade, and had offered some invaluable advice as well as kept Bard from going completely spare in his attempt to keep the budding city from falling to its ruin right away. However unexpected his visit might have been, he was a welcome guest in Bard's house at any time, and anyone working for Bard had quickly learnt as much.

"Master Dori." He stood up from his desk to greet his guest as Dori arrived, striding confidently
ahead of the servant who was supposed to be showing the way. Then, Dori no doubt knew the way well enough by now. "I have to say, this is a surprise. A pleasant one, but a surprise nevertheless."

"Right. I do apologise for not informing you of my arrival beforehand, but I did not wish to wait too long." Dori nodded in a polite greeting, but didn't bow and scrape as most others were wont to do. That was another reason Bard rather liked him. Of course Dori had been very polite indeed with the Majesties and bows and such, but once Bard told him not to bother, he had entirely eschewed such things in private. Bard supposed it was all the exposure to Thorin in less than formal situations that allowed Dori to shed the formalities so easily, as he was most definitely not an impolite dwarf.

"Really?" Bard frowned. That didn't sound good. "And what is so urgent that you needed to see me right away?"

"Before I go into too much detail, there is something I must ask first." Dori looked quite serious right now. "I wish to speak with you and Lady Sigrid both."

"Sigrid?" Well, that wasn't a surprise either; Dori seemed to get along well with her when they visited one way or another, and often remained chatting with her and Bard after any official business had been concluded. Bard had always been glad for it, as he was for all the friendships his children were making with the dwarves; such things kept them grounded when everyone else suddenly treated them like, well, royalty. However, something in Dori's expression made him suspect this wasn't just an idle social call. "Certainly. I think she is in the sitting room at the moment, if you would follow me?"

Dori readily agreed, for all that he walked next to Bard more than following him, knowing the way quite well by now. They indeed found Sigrid in there, embroidering some piece or another, though she set her work aside as she saw them coming.

"Father. And Master Dori! I didn't expect you today." She certainly didn't seem displeased, though.

"Yes, I do fear I arrived quite without warning." Dori smiled, offering her a quick, polite bow. "I was hoping to speak with you and your father, if you would have a moment."

"Ah. Certainly." Sigrid seemed as confused as Bard felt, which was strangely enough something of a relief. At least he knew there hadn't been too much scheming going on without his knowledge. It also made it less likely that this would be about the most obvious reason why an unmarried person would wish to speak with the parents of a likewise unmarried young woman — while there were some who might have considered the woman's opinion rather trivial in the matter, Bard trusted that Dori wouldn't have brought up actual proposals if Sigrid herself wasn't at all aware of any attraction.

They seated themselves, and Bard turned to look at Dori, waiting for him to start. The dwarf cleared his throat and straightened himself, not that it made much of a difference to his height.

"Ah. I would go straight to the matter at hand, if you would allow." As Sigrid merely nodded, clearly curious, Dori forged on. "I consider myself a busy dwarf, but lately I have not been as busy as I once was. Both of my brothers are courting, Nori has practically moved out already, and Ori is about to present his masterpiece to the guild any day now. As such, I now find myself with some extra time on my hands, and feel a need to occupy myself somehow."

This did not seem like it was going straight to the matter, really, but then Bard supposed someone as formal as a well-raised dwarf could be might spend much longer when approaching a serious subject, particularly when dealing with what was supposed to be neighbouring royalty. "As a result of this, Princess Sigrid, daughter of Bard… I wish to offer you an apprenticeship."

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And to think that they now had a room designed for nothing but spending time and receiving guests.

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occurrence, as we dwarves are jealous of our crafts and secrets even when it isn't about smithing and other more traditional crafts. However, I have seen your skills in sewing, and I believe you would be a more than suitable student at the dressmaker's guild."

"Excuse me?" Sigrid blinked, clearly as surprised as Bard was. "You want me to... study under you?"

"Indeed." Dori gave her a serious nod. "Now, a full dwarven apprenticeship would take a much longer time than what I believe your people consider common for such things, but on the other hand you already have skills of your own, so I believe we can cut down on the standard time requirements. However, there are still some things to consider, before you give your answer either way."

"Things such as what?" Sigrid sounded genuinely curious, if not a bit wondering still.

"Aside from the time of the apprenticeship, you would be treated as any dwarven apprentice. This means you would have the same rights and privileges as any other student of the guild, but also the same responsibilities." Dori glanced at Bard in a meaningful manner before adding, "Among other things, a dwarven apprentice is not allowed to marry before they have become at least a journeyman. This is the main reason why I wanted your father to be here, as I believe this is a significant point for young women among your people."

"That is Sigrid's call," Bard hurried to say before she could say anything. "If she marries or not is her choice. I could not have offered that choice before," he added as Sigrid glanced at him. "Not when we were struggling to survive, and finding someone to support you would have been a relief. Now, however, there is no such consideration to keep in mind. Who you want to marry or whether to do so at all is for you to decide, and none else."

"I'm glad to hear that," Dori said, nodding. "Particularly as it ties to my next point." Again, it was Bard he was looking at, not Sigrid. "If we are to train her in our craft, we will expect her to be treated as any dwarven crafter, even among your people. To do otherwise would be an insult to all dwarves. That means that even after her apprenticeship is over, we would expect her to be free to choose whether to actually work on her trade or focus on her family, regardless of whether she chooses to marry or not."

"I will certainly not expect otherwise." Bard shook his head. "There was a time not long ago when all I wished for my children was survival and some measure of comfort. Now, I can offer them very nearly anything they might wish for. Freedom is the least of the things I can hope for them."

"Then, there will be no trouble regarding that, I'm sure." Dori nodded, looking back to Sigrid. "You do not have to give your final word yet. There are more details and rules that are rather too long to be explained here. If you think you would be agreeable, however, I will have a scribe write it all down in Westron for yourself and your father to read through before you give your final answer. For now, I only need to know whether you would like to learn under me."

"Are you sure there will be no trouble?" Bard asked as Sigrid seemed caught up in thought. "As you said, you dwarves are known to be jealous of your secrets. Will there be protests if you choose to teach them to Sigrid?"

"Who would oppose?" Dori seemed almost amused at the idea. "I am the Guildmaster of my own guild, and I have already spoken with Lady Dís, who is the Head of Guilds. As we are both in agreement, the only ones who could overrule us are King Thorin, Bilbo, and Prince Fíli, and I don't think any of them is likely to make trouble."
"I'll do it." Sigrid's voice was a bit quiet, but there was no hesitation in her words. "I'm not sure if I'm good enough to be your apprentice, but I do want to learn."

"My dear, I have seen apprentices in the guild who didn't know one end of the needle from another. When I said you have already have some of the relevant skills, I most certainly meant it. I am not quite so desperate for something to do that I would waste my time offering to train a hopeless case."

"In that case, I will do my best not to disappoint you."

"Oh, I am certain you will not do so." For the first time since he had arrived Dori smiled properly. "I will get a contract of apprenticeship written at once. We can go over the terms in more detail once we have the basic frame."

"That sounds quite agreeable." And then Sigrid, his calm, practical Sigrid all but rushed out of her seat to hug Dori. The dwarf seemed surprised for a moment, then gently hugged her back. Watching how happy she seemed, Bard wondered not for the first time if he had failed his children even more than he had suspected.

Luckily for him and them, it seemed they had friends who were more than willing to stop Bard from making even worse mistakes in that regard.

*

"Ori?"

Ori looked up from where he was lying on his bed, blinking as he saw Dori standing in the doorway. "Dori?" He sat up. "I'm sorry. Did you need me for something?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that." Dori shook his head. "Are you quite all right? You've been lying here for hours. Are you ill?" He rather hoped that wasn't the case, knowing that Ori had a lot on his mind right now, but he couldn't help worrying anyway.

"Just nervous, I guess." Ori sighed, staring up at his ceiling again. He had been studying it for a while now, so Dori wasn't entirely sure what he expected to find there now, but one never knew. Ceilings could be surprising sometimes. "I know I shouldn't be, not really; Balin wouldn't have let me present my masterpiece to the guild if he didn't think it's good enough to be accepted. But I can't help but worry, you know?"

"Oh, I know. Even so, you really shouldn't fret too much." And wasn't he one to speak, given his own tendencies to always expect the worst. "You've worked very hard, and it shows in the end product. I'm truly proud of you, Ori. You've really accomplished a great deal."

"I just hope it's enough." Ori bit his lip, and for a moment he looked so very much younger than his years. He was a grown dwarf, now more so than ever, yet a part of Dori wanted nothing as much as to draw Ori into his arms and never let go.

This was no child, though, certainly not the little dwarfling he sometimes still recalled, and it was about time he learnt to remember it. Ori had earned that much at least. "Perhaps a little distraction would be in order, then, while we wait for the decision of the guild." Not that he expected it to be anything but positive, of course, but he remembered well enough how nerve-wracking the wait had been for himself, back in the day.

"Distraction?" Ori looked up at him, curious. "Like what? I don't have any work to do today, and I don't want to knit while I'm like this, you know my tension gets awful when I'm nervous."
"Just come here for a moment." Dori beckoned him, trying to mask his own nerves. There was no backing away now, not that he truly wanted to. A small part of him did consider it, suggested that it might be good to keep the secret a little longer, but Dori silenced such thoughts. The lad had been in the dark for long enough.

Ori didn't hesitate, getting up from his bed and walking to the front room behind Dori. Once he got there and saw what was on the table, though, he stopped. "Is that…"

"I think you know what it is." Ori had seen it before, of course, had known it was forbidden from him for now. Dori had taken the bead from Nori's father out of the box earlier, leaving only the two wooden beads and the hair clasp behind. "It's about time that you learn where you come from, I think."

"Right." Ori swallowed, taking a hesitant step forward. "Are you — are you sure?"

"Do you not want to know?" Dori walked to the table, setting a hand on the lid of the box. "I can wait if you truly want me to, but you need to hear it some time, anyway. And I rather think now would be an excellent time, when you are in need for something else to occupy your mind."

"No, I want to hear." Ori shook his head vigorously. "Just, you've never even given me hints before."

"It's a somewhat sad tale, that's all, and involves a promise besides. However, I rather think the conditions of that promise have now been satisfied, with you waiting for your Master's braid."

"I'm not a Master yet." Oh, the stubborn little thing.

"You will be soon enough." Dori shook his head. "We've told you before that your father was a good dwarf."

"Yes. Not much more than that, though." Ori looked a little sad at this, and oh, the poor lad. He would have deserved so much better, but the circumstances hadn't worked out like that.

"There's not much more we could tell, that's all. You see, we never knew him, never even met him, in fact. However, I can tell you the story of how our mother met him, from what she told me in turn."

Ori frowned but nodded. It was understandable, really; he knew Dori and Nori were certainly old enough that they should have known about his father if it had been anything more than a brief affair. "Right."

"I wasn't very old then, just barely turned seventy-five. However, our mother thought this meant I was responsible enough to look after Nori while she went off with a trading caravan. She had a way with words and a sharp head, and she was supposed to help the traders with negotiations."

Ori nodded again, quiet. Of course, there wasn't much he could have said in return.

"There was a dwarf with the caravan, hired as a guard and a general helper. He was calm but cheerful, or so Mother told me in her recounting, with a deft hand for woodwork. She found herself rather taken with him, enough so that when he offered her a fine clasp he had made as a courting gift and the promise of beads for her marriage braids, she happily accepted. They were still on the road, but planned to marry as soon as they made it back to the mountain. It was hardly the done thing, but she was the head of her family and he had little wish to wait, so they handled their own negotiations."

Ori's eyes widened, now. Then, Dori wasn't sure if they'd ever told him their mother had gotten as
"Far as courting."

"Sadly, it wasn't to be." Dori sighed. "He wasn't quite done with his second bead for her when the caravan was attacked by orcs. He saved her from a warg when she got overwhelmed, but lost his life in the fight in her stead." He ran his hand along the lid of the box. He could still remember the sadness in her eyes when she spoke of it, the gentle way she had held what little remained. "She buried him herself, and made sure the caravan leaders would see that his family received what he was owed. She only took the hair clasp and beads that were her by right, and returned home to us, not knowing he had left her something else as well."

"His family?" Ori stood up a little straighter, looking almost alarmed all of a sudden.

"Aye. He had a family, a brother and two cousins. However, mother didn't want to go to them after he died, even after she found out she was bearing you. From what he had told her she knew they were struggling even more than we were, barely putting food on the table even though they had no children to tend to. She also knew that if she had gone to them they would have honoured his responsibilities, good dwarves that they were. No doubt they would have taken care of you and us all just as they would have if he had lived to marry her, even if they could ill afford it."

"Mother wouldn't have wanted that," Ori murmured. "Not if she was the dwarf you and Nori have told me about."

"Indeed not." Dori touched Ori's shoulder. "Before you were born, she made me promise that even if something happened to her I would not seek them out, not unless it was our only way to survive. She never even told me their names, only that of your father, so I would not know who they were unless I sought them out on purpose. When she died all I had left were his gifts to her, his name, and my promise I would not tell you the story until I was certain we would not be a burden on his family." She always had been so proud, even when it hurt her. She would have rather lived her life alone than let anyone think she was seeking charity from a mourning family.

"You could have told me when we got the mountain back, though." Ori toyed with his mitts, a familiar nervous habit. "I haven't been a burden after that, not since we got our share of the gold." And oh, he probably believed that was what Dori and Nori thought of him, the poor little thing. Dori would have to correct that assumption, as ridiculous as it was, but first, he had to finish his explanation.

"At first, I thought I would wait until the caravan got back and I got the beads from Kulta, so I could give them to you when I told you his story." Dori drew a deep breath. "Then, however… then I actually got the beads back, and I took a proper look at them, and I could not do it quite yet."

"Why?" Ori's voice was quiet, his eyes full of hurt. "Why would you keep that from me?"

"I… I think you'd best see for yourself." Dori opened the box at last, picking up the finished bead from within and offering it to Ori. Ori took it from him, eyes widening in recognition as he inspected the small piece of wood. Of course. He always had been so observant. It would have taken him no time at all to make the connection.

"This is…" Ori trailed off, his voice sounding choked. His eyes were locked on the bead, on the tiny crest carved into the wood. It was delicate work, the small images recognisable even in such a small scale. A mattock and a pickax, and beneath them a whittling knife.

"Your father's name was Timpur, son of Kaivur," Dori said quietly. "And I think your family has waited long enough for a chance to meet you."
Bifur did not get many visitors.

This was, he had decided a long time ago, a good thing. Most dwarves seemed to assume his inability to communicate properly was a sign of his being slow, and even those who understood otherwise often grew frustrated with his limitations before long. Not that he could fault them, Bifur himself was the one most frustrated with his difficulties sometimes, but it did mean he rarely wished to spend much time with others. He was always welcome in his cousins' rooms when he wished for company, and made good use of that welcome; in return, Bofur and Bombur mostly left him alone when he was in his own rooms, knowing he needed the solitude from time to time.

This wasn't to say he was displeased to hear a knock on his door, no. Surprised, yes, but not displeased, particularly not when he opened the door to find Ori on the other side.

"Ah. Sorry for coming by with no warning." Ori gave him a little smile that somehow seemed weaker than he was used to receiving from the young scribe. "May I come in?"

Bifur motioned for Ori to enter, stepping to the side to let him in. The lad was wearing his hair differently today, Bifur noticed, with a simple wooden clasp at the back creating something of a contrast with the shining beads on his braids. Good work, too. It was a bit strange, though; far as Bifur knew, neither Fíli nor either of Ori's brothers had much of a penchant for woodwork aside from some simple whittling to pass the time around a campfire, and it didn't seem like the kind of a piece Ori would have purchased for himself.

"I, ah. I spoke with Dori today." Ori looked down at something he was holding in his hands. A small box, Bifur realised as he closed the door and turned toward the lad. "I was nervous about my masterpiece, it's being inspected right now, you know. And he thought to distract me with something, except now I'm almost more worried about the other matter."

Bifur frowned, signing his request for clarification. What would upset Ori so? He could hardly imagine Dori would say anything that would cause him such distress.

"Dori told me my father's name." Well. Bifur supposed that could do it. "And, well. He is dead, I knew that already. But that name… well. I've never heard it before, but it's not entirely surprising either."

Bifur frowned and nodded, ushering the lad into a seat. He looked like he could do with a proper sit-down right now, and a cup of tea as well.

"I just…" Ori ducked his head, still looking at he box in his hands. Then, he thrust out the box, offering it up to Bifur. He didn't say anything, but the request in his eyes as he finally looked up was clear enough that Bifur halted in his plans to prepare tea and carefully took the box out of the lad's hands.

Bifur wasn't sure what to expect as he opened the box. It certainly wasn't two beads, one only half-finished, the other carved with a familiar crest. He had seen it just the day before as he visited his cousins, proudly sewn on the back of Bofur's coat that lay thrown over the back of a chair while the lord himself stretched out on the floor to play with his nephew.

"It's the beads he was carving for my mother. Timpur, son of Kaivur was his name," Ori said quietly, but Bifur hardly even heard him, only half listened as the lad proceeded to tell the story Bifur had only known from the other side for far too long. However, he heard well enough as Ori finished with, "So, if all that is true, I think… you are my uncle."
Uncle. It was not a word he had ever expected to hear directed at himself, not like this. He was
cousin to little Bilbur, after all, had never expected to marry someone who might have siblings for
him to share. Yet here was this young dwarf he already knew, a fine young scribe Bifur had already
grown quite fond of, who was calling him uncle. "Yes," he said, his voice rough with emotion.
"Yes, I am."

Then he had to set the box aside and hug his nephew, because he finally had one to hug.

"I wanted to tell you before anyone else," Ori murmured, hugging him back tight. "Of course I must
tell Bofur and Bombur and everyone, too, but — you were his brother. And I have no cousins —
well, I never did before — but I do have brothers, and I know if something like this had happened
with one of them, I would want to know, and —"

The lad was rambling, Timpur had always been the chatty type like Bofur was and Bifur already
knew Ori could be rather the same when he was either very excited or very nervous. He rather
suspected right now it was a matter of both. That was fine, though. Bifur was excellent at listening.
And for his brother's son, he would listen to anything Ori had to say.

* 

"Is there an actual reason you've apparently decided to put a window on your door?"

"Ah, Gimli." Fíli smiled as he opened the door and stepped aside to allow Gimli into his rooms. "It's
not a window, clearly, it's a door."

"Yes, because a door on a door is so much more sensible than a window." Gimli glanced at the small
hatch that had been set into the hole that someone had carved into the thick door of Fíli's rooms.
"And is there a particular reason for the door, then?"

"Ah, it's for Varc, actually. She doesn't like having to always ask someone to open the door for her,
so I had a couple of woodworkers come by and put in the door. It's too far from the lock to pose a
security risk, I had Nori check, even if someone actually managed to get into the royal quarters."

"Ah, right, the raven. So she is actually living with you now? I heard something like that, but I
haven't actually managed to see it for myself yet." He had been somewhat busy right after the raven
had joined Fíli, after all, and even after Legolas had left the mountain things had been somewhat
chaotic for a while. It certainly didn't help that his father was apparently even more afraid of letting
him out of his sight than he used to be before. Which, well, Gimli supposed he couldn't blame him
for it too much, after what had almost happened.

"Oh, yes. She decided she liked it here so much, she made her nest right here," Fíli chuckled,
nodding toward what indeed looked like a raven nest on a high shelf in a corner. "Not that she
spends much of her time here, really. She's learnt her way to where the other ravens roost — the
guards let her in and out of the royal section, before you ask — and seems to rather like spending her
time with Ori, too. I suspect it's because he keeps sneaking her snacks, though Varc claims it's the
opposite; she's trying to convince Ori to eat more, since apparently I should have a well-fed mate."

"And how does that work?" Gimli lifted his eyebrows. "From what I hear she doesn't speak
Westron, and Ori can't speak raven."

"He's actually trying to learn, believe it or not. Which means I get stuck translating between the two
of them, of course. He has managed to learn some basic words, so apparently it's possible. I'm not
sure if it's the Durin blood in him, though, or if any dwarf could learn given the opportunity."
"Well, Ori does seem to have a better head for languages than most, that's for sure." Gimli rather envied it, just a little. "He certainly knows more Elvish than I do."

"But you're going to learn more, aren't you?" Fíli smirked teasingly, being the annoying cousin he had always been, prince or not. "After all, you'll want to know what kind of sweet nothings your woodland prince whispers into your ear in private moments..."

"Oh, blast you and your insinuations!" Gimli felt his cheeks heating up. "Just because you fell for the only dwarf who has ever managed to befriend you without being obliged by relation to like you doesn't mean we're all the same!"

"Sure, sure. If you say so, little cousin." Fíli chuckled. "And you only like me because we are cousins, right?"

"You assume I like you at all." Of course he did, but he didn't feel too keen on admitting it after the other teased him so.

"Of course you like me. Everyone likes me." Fíli actually had the gall to grin at that. "Even Ori likes me, even though he's too busy with his own family woes right now to pay much attention to me."

"Woes?" That didn't sound right. He had heard the news, of course, that Ori was actually Bifur's nephew, but he could hardly imagine how that would cause anyone any grief. From what he knew, Ori got along quite well with Bifur, and for all that neither Bifur nor Bombur were the most communicative of dwarves Bofur had certainly announced to all just how pleased they all were about the revelation. "And what would those be?"

"Mostly? He is trying to decide what to call himself. It's especially important now, he has to know how to introduce himself when the guild presents him with his Master's certificate, but he's having some trouble figuring it all out."

"Why so?" Gimli frowned. "I would hardly think the Urs would deny him the name. And aren't there rules for this sort of thing, for which one to choose?"

"Oh, they wouldn't think of denying him, Bifur is fawning like he got a newborn nephew and not an adult one and I don't think Bofur and Bombur have stopped grinning since they heard. However, Ori's spent his whole life as son of Vuori, and while Bofur may be a lord, Kaivur's line has no such decorations. So since neither line takes precedence through rank, and his parents never had the time to marry, with permission from the Urs this means Ori has to actually make a decision."

"I see." Well, that did sound complicated. "So he must choose between the name of his mother and his father."

"Exactly. He never knew either of them, so that doesn't enter into the picture, and everyone is very carefully trying not to tell him which one to pick."

"And do you know which one he will choose?" Because if anyone would know, it was Fíli.

"Well, I can't say for certain, when he hasn't even made up his mind yet." Fíli shook his head. "I know what I suggested, but whether he chooses that, I don't know."

"And are you going to tell me what that would be?"

"Son of Timpur, from the line of Ri."

"That makes sense." Gimli nodded slowly, considering the implications of the name. "His father has
none other to his name, while his mother's name is carried through his brothers. However, the line of Ri is not something to cast aside, particularly since his claim to the house of Durin is so important in the politics."

"Indeed." Fíli sighed. "I wish he didn't have to consider such things, it's not like one name or another will change who he is, but some people are already doubting him enough now when he claims the name of Ri. If he casts that aside entirely, there will no doubt be those who claim that somehow makes him less suitable to court me."

"Well, those people are idiots." Of that, Gimli had no doubt. "He'll be married to you soon enough, and then he'll belong to the royal line, and any doubters will have to deal with that or choke on their rage."

"That is true." Fili's smile returned with a slightly dreamy quality, the one that always crept onto his face whenever the subject turned to Ori and their betrothal. "I really can't wait for that to happen."

"I'll keep that in mind once we're two days from the wedding and you're contemplating running off to Mirkwood." Gimli's eyes caught on a few scattered papers on a desk in a corner of the room, covered in what seemed like design drawings. "Oh, are you working on something?" Of course he was curious. Not only was Fíli a goldsmith, he was supposed to be Gimli's master.

"Yes, I am. I'm working on a rush commission for Balin, in fact."

"Balin?" Gimli blinked. He couldn't imagine what need Balin had for a rush commission.

"Aye." Fíli grinned, the familiar, playful grin Gimli had known all his life. "Apparently this young apprentice of his is about to be declared master. Since Balin is his Master, he's responsible for getting the beads for his braid, so he commissioned me to make the best ones I could."

Gimli couldn't help but laugh at that. Oh, he could imagine Fíli had jumped at the chance. "So you get to put your beads in Ori's hair after all."

"Well, I had to get it done somehow. I gave my father's beads for his courting braids, and Thorin is making his marriage beads, so I have to take the opportunity to get my handiwork in his hair. He's not too given to decorative braids, after all, so I probably shouldn't count on making him some just for the fun of it."

"I suppose." Gimli nodded. "So, I was told you had something for me to work on?"

"That I do." Fíli grinned. "More than that, I have something that you could work into your journeyman's piece."

"Really?" Gimli hadn't expected to go directly to that, not as his first assignment under Fíli's tutelage. After all, he had only barely shown his skills before, and there he had chosen what to make to show off the best of his skills.

"Really." Fíli nodded in confirmation. "There's the commission, and you can continue from that into the piece that you will present to the guild. You have shown me your skills in design and construction both, and it seems clear to me your actual studies are more than done with. If you feel ready for it, I will give my permission for you to start your work on the piece."

"Ah." This was sudden, yes, but then, he had rather hoped to get further in his studies. Perhaps this surprise wasn't a bad thing. "If you think I'm capable of it, I will do it."

"Excellent." Fíli gave another nod, beckoning him over to the desk. "I received a request, not really a
commission, from a rather high-profile client. They asked me to replicate an old family bead; there used to be a pair, but they misplaced its companion years ago. Now they wish to have another made so their son could inherit one of the two."

Gimli frowned. "And you think they are fine with you giving the task to me?"

"I already asked, and they said yes." Fíli's lips twitched. "I'm not altogether stupid, cousin dear, particularly not when dealing with kings." Completely ignoring Gimli's shock, he went on, "So, your first task will be to study the bead thoroughly, and produce as identical a duplicate as you can possibly manage. I expect you to take clear notes of your study and designs both; these will be presented to the guild as well. After you are done with the bead, you are to design and construct a larger piece — a headpiece or a necklace, for example — that borrows from the design of the bead. This will be the piece you hand over to the guild as mark of your skills."

"King?" Gimli finally managed to blurt out. "You don't mean…"

"Aye, it was Dáin who asked me for the favour." Fíli picked up a small wrapped package on his desk. "He said he'd rather have close kin make the bead than just any goldsmith, that way it will have more meaning, particularly as he plans to hand down one of the pair. You are kin as well, of course, so he agreed to my plan." Fíli opened up the package carefully. Its contents consisted of one single bead, silver with precious gems embedded into its surface. "I know this sounds like a simple task, but the setting of the gems is a peculiar one, and probably not something that has been covered in your studies so far. This is a learning experience as much as it is an exam of your skills. As such, you can ask me for help with the bead, but I expect you to make the final piece all by yourself."

"Right." Gimli carefully took the bead from Fíli as it was offered to him, turning it around in his fingertips for closer inspection. "This certainly is a unique design. I'm not sure I've ever seen jewels set quite like this." It wasn't entirely unfamiliar, though; he was certain he had seen a similar approach before, though not in anything he had studied very closely. With enough time, he should be able to do it.

"It should be well within your skills, however." Fíli ran a hand over his hair. "There's a couple of restrictions on the project, though. The original bead must not leave my rooms, as the royal apartments are better guarded than any of the guild workshops. Secondly, Dáin hopes to get both beads personally when he arrives for the weddings on Durin's Day, so that gives us a time limit. Not that I believe you need more time than that, judging by what I have seen of your work. This is supposed to be a challenge, not an obstacle."

"I hope I can meet your expectations." Gimli nodded slowly, still studying the bead. Yes, he had definitely seen this kind of settings before, though he couldn't recall where. That was a good sign; it meant it couldn't be so unique that no one could remake it. "And King Dáin's, of course."

"I'm sure you will." Fíli clapped his shoulder, a companionable gesture that was not too unfamiliar, but somehow there seemed to be more weight behind it now that they weren't discussing things as cousins, but as master and student.

No, Gimli would not disappoint his master.

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Thorin was absolutely not worried.

Why would he have been? There was no reason to worry. His kingdom was growing every day, his people were content, his family were happy and healthy. Fíli had finished the beads for Ori's Master's
braid that Balin was going to present to the lad in a couple of days. Thorin had seen the beads; they were very fine work, even to his eyes that were still more used to sword blades and axes than beads and jewel settings. Which reminded him that he should have already started work on the marriage beads he was to make, at least the designs of them, so he could make them as perfect as the partners of his beloved nephews deserved. Really, there was so much for him to do, he should not have had any time for worrying.

He didn't even know enough to worry, not really. Perhaps he was imagining it all, seeing threats where there were none. After all, what did he know about gardening? He had learnt that plants required light and water but not too much of either, had seen Bilbo moving about with his little chores as Thorin accompanied him to the garden every morning and every evening yet learnt little of the knowledge required. Surely he was simply misunderstanding something. This was not his craft, not his knowledge.

Perhaps the golden edges of the plant in the middle of the garden were supposed to be turning closer to a sickly yellow? He had no way of knowing, clearly. Bilbo had said the plant would start growing more soon. At the moment there was only a little seed of a fruit in the middle of the leaves, more of a tiny berry really, but according to Bilbo it would soon gain more size and weight, and rapidly at that. Perhaps the plant was simply gathering its strength from the leaves to channel it all into the precious little fruit that was supposed to grow so much larger before their child was done. What did Thorin know about such things, anyway?

Except then one morning Bilbo turned to look at Thorin from where he was kneeling in the dirt, eyes dark and troubled. "Thorin," he said, and his voice might have shook, just a little. "I — I think it's not growing as it should."

Thorin had felt many a painful blow in his life, but never anything quite as devastating as this.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Thorin is worried, but there's very little he can do to help the situation. Fíli is aware of this, but there is very little he can do, either -- though he will certainly try.

Kíli, on the other hand, has a Plan. A Plan that is not without its risks -- but he is willing to take the chance. Surely Thorin loves the little seedling more than anything else... or so Kíli desperately hopes.

And how much exactly does Fíli know about everything?

Chapter Notes

Super-speedy update, because I figured the cliffhanger from last time was too cruel to leave you all hanging for ages.

From now on, expect a schedule of roughly one chapter a month until October, when we'll be wrapping up.

Thorin did not like feeling helpless.

It was a feeling he had become all too accustomed to over the years. He had been young yet when the dragon had arrived, tearing away everything he had ever known, had been helpless to fight the attack or indeed do anything but grab those closest to him and run. He had been helpless to turn Thranduil's heart when the elf turned away from their plight, had been helpless to help his people as they scattered in all directions. He had been helpless in Azanulbizar to save his brother or his grandfather, had found no way to bring his father back from his wanderings, had struggled in vain to help the people who had been left in his care for lack of anyone else to lead them. Oh, Thorin knew helplessness all right, knew the nauseating cold clutching his heart when his nephews were hungry and he had nothing to offer them.

In most of those situations, however, there had been at least something to do, for all that he was helpless against the cause itself. He had survived the dragon and Azanulbizar, had brought his people to Thorin's Halls and forged them a new life that, while not wealthy, could at least be called comfortable by the time he had set off on his Quest. That had always helped somewhat, knowing there was something he could try to ease the pain of the situation, even if he could not truly make everything better.

Now, watching his husband worrying over the little plant that looked weaker by every passing day, he found there was nothing he could do.

Oh, he could at least attend to his duties, and delegate other matters so Bilbo didn't have to worry about any of that. However, it seemed to be very little, when he still was left standing there with his hands empty and idle at the end of the day while Bilbo worked himself to exhaustion in the garden.
He would have offered to help Bilbo there, but knew he would have been more of a hindrance than help. Bilbo was trying to get the rest of the garden to as good a state as it could be, at least, hoping that the living plants all around would give their little fruit the strength it needed to grow. Thorin could not help him there, not beyond some of the most mechanical tasks. He knew nothing about growing things, except that they needed dirt and light and water, and all those were already provided. All he could do was cover the crystals each evening and uncover them every morning for Bilbo to get to his work, and that seemed like woefully little when it was his own child in question.

Sometimes there was no helping it, he reminded himself, bit his tongue so he wouldn't say it aloud to Bilbo as well. Bilbo knew it as surely as he did, after all, having read his father's accounts of every withered little plant in the garden far away in the Shire. Thorin himself remembered such things, too, remembered his sister's tears and frustration when the child she so desperately longed to love would not be born, returning to Mahal time and time again. He had told her that then, had reminded her that there was nothing she could have done differently if their Maker was not finished with her work, but even then he had suspected that knowing that to be true and truly believing it were two very different things. He knew the growth was finally in the hands of Mahal and Bilbo's gracious Lady Yavanna, yet he couldn't help but wonder if he might do anything to help, however little.

At least not having his hands idle might distract him from the worry, he figured, and headed for the smithies.

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Fíli had not truly expected to find Thorin in the royal smithy.

He wasn't sure why he had thought otherwise, really. He knew already that Thorin often turned to the forge when he was troubled by something, preferring to distract himself with heat and hard work so he would not have to think about the matters that would otherwise occupy his mind. And really, if ever there had been something that Thorin might wish to turn his thoughts away from, this was one such thing.

They had heard about it, of course, had been informed over a very solemn family dinner. Bilbo had spoken quietly, yet calmly, clearly weighing every word carefully, Thorin's hand on his arm. The plant that was to grow into a child was not doing well, he had told them, something disturbing its growth. It wasn't lost yet, no, and he was going to work on it as best as he could, and yet — and yet, even his hardest work could not truly guarantee anything, not in this kind of a matter.

So, yes, Fíli did understand why Thorin would retire to his forge. However, a part of him had thought Thorin would rather be close to Bilbo and the little seedling in this situation. Fíli knew that when he and Kíli had been sick as children, Thorin had spent every spare moment by the side of their beds.

The royal smithy looked like he had been working there for a while. The forge had certainly been working for a while, judging by the heat in the air, and the work desk was covered in drawings and designs. Thorin was working on something at the anvil, dressed in nothing but his trousers and a heavy smithing apron, hair gathered back in a loose bun to keep it out of the way. He nodded as he noticed Fíli walking in, but didn't say anything. Fíli stayed likewise silent, walking closer to take a look at the designs.

Blacksmithing might not have been his main trade, but like his brother he had learnt enough of it to help Thorin and Dwalin where needed, and he could certainly read designs well enough. Glancing between them and what he could see of what Thorin had already done, it was clear he had been working for a while, to have so much ready.
It was an inspired design, really. Thorin seemed to be working to replace the thin poles that held the light crystals in the little garden, incorporating a mechanism that involved a closing shade around each one instead of separate covers. If Fíli read the designs right, there was to be a handle lower down on the poles, allowing someone shorter than Thorin — say, Bilbo — to operate them as well.

Well. He supposed this was Thorin's way of sitting at the bedside, this time.

The sounds of the smithing hammer quieted for a while, and he turned back to look at Thorin. He had set the piece he was working aside to cool it down, wiping sweat from his forehead. "Did you need me?"

"Not as such." Fíli set the last design down, shaking his head. "I was just wondering where you were. It's not like you to hide from problems."

"Which is why I'm not hiding." Thorin looked determined. "There is nothing I can do in the garden, not now. Bilbo does not need my help there. If I can help in any way, I will do so, and right now this is all that comes to mind."

"Aye, I saw the designs. It is a good thought, I think, and will certainly be useful." Fíli nodded. "Bilbo will be happy, I think. Seems like this would let him adjust the level of light, too, not just either have it or have none."

"That's what I'm hoping for." Thorin nodded. "I will still visit the garden, of course, as I do now, even though installing these means he won't need my help. I just — I need something to do."

"I know." Fíli understood that feeling, understood the will to set his hands to work to help when those close to him were in pain, when he feared for them. He had felt much the same when he had come out of his madness to realise that Ori had been hurt, had spent more time than was strictly necessary right after the battle of the armies when Bilbo had been badly hurt and everyone else had been shaken as well. He couldn't even imagine the pain and fear Thorin must have been feeling right now.

He wondered how his own mother and father must have felt, having to give him back to Mahal so many times.

"I hope it turns out all right." Fíli wasn't sure if his words would help at all, if there was anything he could offer that Thorin hadn't thought of yet, but he wished desperately to do something at least. "I mean, you could always try again if Mahal decides there's more work to do, still, and mother said that Bilbo himself apparently took a lot of tries to get right, but — I hope you won't need to."

"As do I." Thorin sighed. "Bilbo is made of stern stuff, I know as much by now, but I would never wish that sorrow on him."

"Of course you don't. He is your One." Fíli couldn't imagine seeing Ori in as much worry and fear as he had seen in Bilbo's eyes the last time they met. Not again. He had seen quite enough of it during his first days back from the claws of madness.

"He is. And that child, whether it chooses to grow now or later, is my child. I will do everything I can, for both of their sakes."

"I know you will." Fíli paused for a moment, then reached into his pocket, drawing out a piece of ribbon. It had been closing a letter from Dale earlier, but it was just long enough for him to tie back his own hair. "How can I help?"

Thorin offered him a faint smile and started to give him instructions as Fíli peeled off his usual layers
of tunics and grabbed another apron before setting to work. There were other things he should have been working on, other places to be, but right now none of them were as important as this, as important as working beside Thorin for a little while.

It wasn't just Bilbo and his little seedling cousin who needed support, after all.

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Why Thorin was staring into his ale mug, he did not know. It had been empty for a while now.

Their rooms were quiet, not that it was much of a surprise. It wasn't too late in the night, he knew there were still people out and about outside, but it was well enough into the evening that nobody would come bother the king unless there was an emergency. Which was all for the better, really, he didn't feel like being companionable right now.

Of course, that was when there was a knock at the door.

He didn't answer as much as grunted, a bit surprised to see Kíli walking in. He usually didn't bother knocking, but then, it might have been because of the late hour. Or perhaps he was finally growing up, it was anyone's guess.

"Kíli." He finally set his empty mug aside, sitting up a bit straighter in his seat. "What brings you here?"

"I wanted to talk to you." Kíli seemed almost hesitant as he closed the door and stepped closer. "Ah. Is Bilbo not here?"

"He went to bed early." Thorin had thought of going with him, for a moment, but had decided against it. He would follow when he felt more settled. Whenever that was.

"Right." Kíli walked closer slowly, as though approaching a skittish animal. "I… I heard about the cousin. Is it true?"

"I know very little of what is true." Thorin sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "What I do know is that the plant's not thriving as it should. Bilbo's spent his every spare moment these last few days in the garden, yet every day it only seems worse. Bilbo says sometimes that just happens, just as sometimes Mahal takes back his spark to work it over a bit more." Thorin wasn't entirely sure if it was himself or Thorin that Bilbo was trying to convince the most.

"But it's not dead yet, right? So there's still hope."

"I suppose." He had to think that, still. Had to cling to what little hope he could find, until he couldn't find it anymore.

It was the only thing he could do.

"See, I was thinking about it." Kíli came to a halt, fidgeting with his sleeves in a manner that almost reminded Thorin of Ori. "Remember that story Bilbo told us, about how his parents got him? About how hobbits sometimes bury things in the dirt, as offerings to Yavanna?"

"Aye, I remember." He had been thinking of it, too. "No, I don't know if it's possible to do that later, after the planting and all. Perhaps once the fate has been decided, there is no changing it. And in any case that which is offered is supposed to be precious. How could I truly call something a rich offering when no matter what I do I'll still have a treasury full?"
"You've got to remember this is Hobbit reckoning. His mother buried the leaves, clearly it's not about monetary value." Kíli paused, but Thorin didn't speak. It was clear the boy was looking for words. "I, ah. I thought of something you could use. It's precious in both ways, in riches and in esteem, but I'm not sure if you'd want to give it up."

Thorin frowned. "Go on." He should have felt hopeful, eager even at the possibility of something he could try to do, but something about the way Kíli was going about this made him wary instead.

"Right. First. Please know that I don't like saying this, but for both of our sakes, I feel I must." Kíli drew a deep breath, straightening himself. "Several people know I have come to meet you now. At least two of them know what I am going to do, and are waiting for me elsewhere. They wanted to come with me, but I wished to show that I trust you." Kíli's gaze fell for a moment. "Please be worth my trust."

"You speak as though you're afraid of me." Thorin's frown deepened. "Please. What is it you're here to talk about?" And why would it put that look in Kíli's eyes? He hadn't looked like that since… not since Fíli had been lost in his madness.

"I told you, didn't I? When I heard about the baby not growing well, I remembered what Bilbo said, about burying other things as offerings to Yavanna, and how they would be gone if the offering was accepted. And, well, I thought I had something that might work, but it won't mean the same if it's not you doing it."

Kíli fidgeted a bit, like he had as a child when he felt guilty about something, and all of a sudden Thorin got a horrible feeling. "Kíli," he breathed. "Please tell me you didn't." Not him, too. Not the one who was supposed to be strong.

"I didn't look for it!" Kíli hastened to say, and that, that was answer enough. "I found it entirely by chance, and when I did I told Tauriel about it — my finding the stone, not the location — so she could keep an eye on me. I was trying to think of a way to dispose of it for good, but… well. It's not that simple, even after…"

"After what?" Mahal, what had his nephew been doing?

"I guess you'd best see for yourself." Kíli reached inside his tunic and brought out a small leather pouch. He hesitated for a moment, but then handed it over to Thorin. Taking it with some apprehension, Thorin slowly loosened the ties around the mouth of the pouch.

He expected the faint shine from within. He did not expect it to come from countless tiny shards.

"I figured this was the safest way until I found somewhere to put it." Kíli's voice was quiet. "Couldn't break it myself, though I'm not sure if it was because I wasn't strong enough or because it tried to convince me not to shatter it. Lucky for me, there's someone much stronger than me who also had good reason to see it in pieces."

"Ori." He almost expected anger to rise within himself, even rage. For all that he had been willing to cast it away, it was still an heirloom of their line, the symbol of his throne. He had feared some seed of madness still remained, might be rekindled by the sight of the Arkenstone, but nothing within him stirred. It tried to call to him, he could tell, but it was a distant whisper rather than the ever-present roar he remembered.

"Aye." Kíli nodded, still looking apprehensive as Thorin glanced up at him. "He didn't have much trouble breaking it apart. I offered to have him keep half the shards, so it wouldn't be in one place, but he refused. In the end we decided to have Tauriel hold onto them until we found a solution, since
we knew she has no weakness to it."

"You did not go to others." Which would mean Ori and Tauriel were the two who were aware of the reason of Kíli's coming here.

"No. Figured that the less people knew about it, the better. Bilbo would have been too obvious to anyone who wasn't in on it before, and, well. Too many people already knew that Bifur was supposed to know the location." People like Thorin himself.

"And you think this might work."

"It's worth a try, isn't it? It's the most precious treasure we have. But you sent it away once to keep us safe, so I thought…"

"That I could cast it away once more for the sake of my child." Thorin nodded slowly. "You've been very clever about this all, Kíli. However, on one count you were wrong."

"Oh?" Kíli sounded afraid now. Thorin didn't blame him, not after how he had been at his worst.

"This is not the most precious treasure." He weighed the pouch on his palm. It felt terribly light for something so important. "But this might help us save the thing that is."

A smile lit up Kíli's face, bright and cheery, the kind Thorin remembered from when he'd been but a dwarfling. "So you're going to try?"

"I will try anything." Thorin stood up. "Come, you can make sure I do it. I thank you for your trust, but I think it's better for both of our peace of mind for me to have a witness at hand."

"Right." Kíli seemed more relaxed, now, easily following him deeper into the apartments and down the corridor towards the garden. As they stepped in, though, his smile fell. "It's… it really doesn't look good."

Thorin gave a grim nod, walking closer to the little plant. Its leaves were drooping, looking limp and lifeless. Thorin was almost certain some of them were turning brown around the edges. "Hello, little one," he murmured, kneeling down next to it and gently touching one of the leaves. "No need to worry, it's just me and your cousin here."

"Hello, baby cousin," Kíli said as well. "You really should stop worrying your parents. They're working very hard to raise you, you know, and they haven't even met you yet."

"Because you're one to speak about giving your parental figures a hard time." Thorin carefully started digging small holes in the dirt, careful not to go too deep or too close to the plant so as not to damage its fragile roots.

"I grew up all right, though." At last Kíli walked closer, starting to mirror him on the other side, fingers digging more holes in a perfect arc.

"Yes. Yes, you did." If he'd ever had any doubts about that, they were chased far away as he glanced up at Kíli just as he was dropping the first shining shard into the ground. There was no anxiety, not even hesitation. Rather, Kíli was smiling as Thorin buried the pieces of the Arkenstone in the ground, one by one.

He did not know just what he was supposed to do here, if there was something specific he was supposed to say; Bilbo had not exactly told him the details, if he even knew them in the first place. However, Thorin felt he should say something, so he was going to try at least, speaking quietly as he
continued hiding the shards in the ground.

"Lady Yavanna." He cleared his throat, trying to find the words. "I do not know much about you, except that you are the wife of our Maker, and have given your blessings to my husband's people. I do know that my people may not be very dear to you, we who dig the earth and fell trees rather than grow and cultivate. However, if you might find some love for us for the sake of our Maker's love for you, I ask you to please listen to my plea."

He was covering up the shards now, hiding each one under dark earth with as much care as he had seen Bilbo giving to seeds he put into the ground. "We are a hard people, hewn from stone and raised by the mountains, and to those outside it might seem we love little but gems and gold. However, any true dwarf not driven by madness will know that the true treasure of our people are our children, few and precious as they are." He swallowed. "I do not ask you to give your blessing to my entire people, because I know we have no right to that. I do not even ask you to smile upon me, for I am a smith and warrior, a creature of fire and death, and while I have been told you love my Maker I cannot ask you to love me in his name. I can promise you no living garden or gentle hand, for those belong to the one I love, and while he is the other half of my soul I will not make demands in his name."

He took one of the leaves again, ever gentle, not wanting to risk any damage. "I offer you the greatest treasure of my people, even as I know you have little love for such. I offer it to you, even as I know I am asking for something much more precious. Stones I have a mountain full, shining gems of every hue, but I have no children of my name, for all that I have those of my heart." He did not look up at Kili, now. He couldn't, not quite yet. "I ask you for the sake of my child, the one who is yet but a spark in Mahal's forge: please, let them grow so I might hold them in my arms, here in the mountain where my father held me, and not only in the Halls of my Ancestors."

It took him a moment to stand up, but at last he did so, dusting off his knees as he looked down at the plant. It seemed so small, so small and fragile, hardly capable of bearing life even to a single flower, never mind what he was hoping for. Kili stood as well, and for a moment Thorin thought he might say something, wondered how he would respond. Instead, Kili simply walked over to him and drew him into an embrace, holding him tight.

After a moment Thorin reached his arms around Kili in turn, startled to realise they were almost of a size. Kili was the taller one, if only just, but that Thorin had known; however, the lad had grown when he wasn't looking, still slim of build but now with broader shoulders and a steadier width, a grown dwarf to be sure for all that he was still young.

"You are my father, you know," Kili murmured, his forehead leaning against Thorin's. "Not of my name, but of my heart. I know some pity me because they think I never knew my father, but really I could not have asked for a better one."

"I only do what Tuli would have, and not half as well, I'm sure." It should have been Tuli doing so many things, seeing his wee dwarflings grown into brave warriors, but he'd never had the chance. All Thorin could do was fill in best as he could so he could still look his sister's husband in the eye when they finally met again in the Halls.

"I can't imagine how he could have done better." Kili drew away, his hands sliding to Thorin's arms, and though there was a hint of tears in his eyes he was smiling. "Thank you, Thorin. For knowing what's important."

"I learnt the hard way." He managed a weak smile in return. "Thank you for trusting me. I… I would not have blamed you if you hadn't."
"I knew you wouldn't let me down." Kíli grinned brightly. "I should probably get back to Ori and Tauriel before they decide you attacked me and rush to my rescue. You go get some sleep, you look like you haven't had much lately."

"Right." It was true enough; he hardly would have been able to sleep peacefully while worrying about the plant. "It would be quite embarrassing if we ended up waking Bilbo by fighting in the sitting room."

"And nobody likes it when Bilbo's woken up before he's ready." With one last pat on the shoulder, Kíli stepped away. "Let us know when there's any change, okay?"

"You know I will." Thorin looked after Kíli, then went to cover up the crystals for the night. If he murmured good night to the baby before leaving, well, nobody needed to know. Nor did Kíli need to be informed that Thorin spent a long time lying still in his bed, listening to Bilbo breathing in the darkness and trying not to fear the dreams that were sure to come.

When he woke, hardly even aware that he had fallen asleep first, it was to an excited Bilbo shaking him awake and rambling on about how green and strong and alive their baby was looking, please Thorin you have to come see this, it's almost like the whole plant is glowing.

And if Bilbo was not the only one murmuring thanks to the Green Lady, well, Thorin was sure it was heard by those who needed to hear it.

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Ori was still not quite used to the weight of the Master's beads or the new braid in his hair, but he figured he had plenty of time to grow accustomed to them.

It should have been such a little thing, really, finally having his Master's braid and certificate, when it didn't actually affect his work in the slightest. However, after spending so long worrying over his masterpiece and everything associated with it, to have the confirmation that it had been accepted felt like an incredible weight had been taken off his shoulders all at once. He had nothing to worry about now, nothing to fear, and everyone who had ever doubted him or his skills could see just how wrong they were from the gold in his hair.

Perhaps he was feeling the slightest bit vindictive, but really, after the life he had led, Ori felt he was entitled to a little bit of it.

For all that his masterpiece was not a worry anymore, he still had plenty to do. Fíli had been busier than usual with Thorin worrying over the little plant, and that meant Ori had plenty to do as well, and for all that the plant was now feeling better, thank Mahal, things had not quite settled down yet. There was also the matter of his newly expanded family. Not that he had ignored the Urs before, of course, he had been on friendly enough terms with them and especially Bofur, but with the recent news it was only natural that they all wanted to learn to know each other even better.

Dori had embroidered the Ur crest on one of his better coats, right next to the crest of Durin. Ori still couldn't help but feel warm whenever he saw the symbol in pride of place.

He was wearing the coat now, along with his best outfit. It was time for a council meeting, and a special one at that. There had been no regular activity with the council while Bilbo and Thorin worried over the baby in the garden, so it was understandable that the members who were not part of the Company and thus not privy to the news were somewhat agitated and looking for explanations. As things still needed to be decided, Fíli had taken the lead for a couple of brief meetings during Thorin and Bilbo's absence — and oh, those had been quite stressful meetings for Ori, as Fíli's lead
meant he had taken the seat of the head adviser instead of Balin — but had offered no explanations, and now it was time for those.

"Hello there, stranger." Fíli grinned as they met up at the door to the council chamber. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Indeed, this past hour has been simply unbearable." Ori chuckled and then nodded in thanks as Fíli opened the door for him, seeing how Ori's hands were occupied by his writing supplies. "Do you know what Thorin plans to say to explain everything?"

"Not quite, though I have my suspicions." Fíli smiled at the curious gazes of the other members as he walked over to his customary seat, Ori taking his own some ways from the actual table. It was something of a relief to be once again an observer instead of being in the middle of the attention.

"Ah, Prince Fíli." Master Karhu nodded at him. "I take it your choice of seat means we can expect the King to be back on duty?"

"Indeed. He should be arriving soon, along with Bilbo." Fíli continued to wear his pleasant smile, the one that was not quite as genuine as most people might have thought at a glance.

"And are they going to offer any explanations for their absence?" This was the sharper voice of Master Murina from the other end of the table, one of the more irritable ones who everyone had expected would head back to Iron Hills with Dáin being crowned king yet had remained. Fíli's theory was that he was not satisfied with his position back there and hoped to gain more power in Erebor. He certainly had seemed rather jealous of Tauriel's gaining a seat on the council, but was at least smart enough not to say anything aloud.

"Sadly, I am not privy to their exact plans for the meeting. I am sure they will share as much as they feel is necessary." Fíli's expression didn't waver at all, and Ori wondered just how long he had trained to be so good at masking his emotions. Mahal knew Kíli was not quite as skilled; he could do it when the situation absolutely required it, but most of the time he wore his heart on his sleeve. Not that Fíli was much different in private, of course. Certainly he could not lie to Ori the way he did to the council.

No, he did not believe Fíli was simply good enough at lying that Ori couldn't tell. After all, he could always tell when Fíli was lying to others or hiding something, knew the signs and tells that he couldn't quite hide.

Everyone else was present, Ori noted, and thankfully Thorin and Bilbo finally arrived just then, meaning he didn't have to worry about such ridiculous notions any longer. Bilbo sat down first, leaving Thorin as the last one to take a seat, signalling the start of the actual meeting. Ori prepared himself for notes. Certainly he wasn't the main scribe responsible for that any more — one of Balin's scribes sat at the side of the room, ready to mark down everything — but Ori still preferred to keep his own notes about everything that might be relevant to Fíli's duties. It was usually a good idea to have something he could refer to besides his own memory and someone else's markings, after all. Not to say that he didn't trust the official scribe, Balin wouldn't have picked anyone untrustworthy for the job after all, but — well. Just because he trusted them not to lie or deceive didn't mean he trusted them to pick up every last detail, so it was easier to take his own notes than read through everything to try and remember if anything had been overlooked.

Perhaps he was a little bit obsessive about these things. He figured it was only right, though, given that he was supposed to be the head adviser for the crown prince. If he had been lax in his duties, what good would he have been for anyone?
"I'm sure you have all wondered about my absence, and that of my consort." Well. At least Thorin wasn't circling around the issue, or waiting until someone brought it up. "The truth is, there has been something of an incident in our family that has kept us quite occupied beyond the most necessary things. Now, however, everything has been cleared up, which means we can return back to normal."

This launched a few questions, of course it did, but despite the persistence of those still curious Thorin remained vague about the cause and nature of said incident. Ori supposed it was for the better, anyway. There was no need for everyone to know about their pain.

"There is another family matter we would like to speak about, however." Thorin glanced at Bilbo, who smiled and nodded, and Ori couldn't help but tense. If he was right about the subject matter, this wasn't unexpected, not as such — if they had been two dwarves, the words he suspected were about to be spoken would have been said a long time ago, after all; it was only Bilbo's hobbit customs that had held them back. However, it did seem like a big step, especially after what they had just been through.

Or perhaps that was precisely why they wished to share the news? Either because they were now more confident in the survival of the babe, or — Ori tried not to feel too sick at the thought — so others might better understand if they were struck by grief. Either way, it was their decision, and not his place to wonder about it too much.

"The truth is, Thorin and I are expecting a child." Bilbo smiled, entirely unaffected by the shocked sounds around the table. "We are not entirely certain when the babe will arrive, as hobbit faunts and dwarflings apparently take quite different times to prepare, but we are hoping to welcome him or her within the next year."

Thorin lifted his hand before the inevitable flood of questions started. "Fíli is, and will still remain, the crown prince and my first heir. This will not be affected by the birth of any child I might have, now or in the future. However, my child will be a prince or princess of Durin's house, and in line of inheritance after Fíli and Kíli. This will not change. If you have any other questions or concerns, voice them now or stay silent for good."

This, of course, launched another flood of comments. Ori relaxed a little in his seat. He doubted there was anything in this conversation that he needed to take particular note of, though some of the reactions of the council members were quite interesting. Master Karhu, who had seemed doubtful of Bilbo from the start for all that he rarely spoke, was now weeping openly and declaring what a joyous day this was, for Mahal to have blessed the royal house so.

Ori's gaze met that of Tauriel, who was one of the few calm and quiet ones around the table. She had clearly grown used to the antics of the dwarven council by now, her expression betraying no emotion whatsoever though Ori was sure she was amused at the commotion. He certainly was, though a part of him was also somewhat irritated, knowing that there were still other things on the agenda for the day that would not get addressed until everyone had calmed down somewhat.

He should have taken some knitting along. At least then he might actually get something productive done.

It was indeed a good while later that the meeting ended, enough so that he was beginning to feel rather famished. At least he didn't have to worry about being late for dinner and thus potentially worrying Dori, as it had been agreed beforehand that he would join the royal family for dinner tonight. At least there, most of the other participants were just as late.

As he walked out after Thorin and Bilbo, Fíli settled into step with him, a hand settling at Ori's back. This was definitely a good thing, Ori decided, leaning a bit closer. Fíli led them to a slower pace,
falling behind Thorin and Bilbo and even Tauriel, who walked past them without remark.

"So." Fíli's voice was hardly more than a murmur. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

Ori blinked. "What do you mean?"

"The babe didn't just suddenly get better, whatever Bilbo might say. Well, it did, but something
happened, and I think you know what."

"And why would you say that?" Well. He supposed it was time to test how good he was at lying to
Fíli, in turn.

"Mostly? Because when I told you that the baby was feeling better, you weren't surprised. Happy, of
course, but not surprised. There was no way anyone could have told you, not when Bilbo rushed to
tell us first thing in the morning and I caught you at breakfast." Fíli's hand was still just lightly resting
on Ori's back, but somehow, it almost felt like burning.

"I was just hoping it would turn out all right, that's all."

"Hm." Fíli's voice was still quiet, almost light, as though he were musing to himself. "Kíli was the
same, as I recall. All happy smiles but no surprise."

"We were both hopeful." Ori nudged Fíli's side, trying to sound teasing. "Just because you give up
hope sooner than even Dori doesn't mean we must all be quite so miserable."

"True, true." Fíli nodded sagely. "And it is only coincidence that the guards mentioned you had
visited the royal quarters the night before, yet never came to me. Or that Kíli mentioned earlier that
he was planning to visit Thorin, even though he hardly ever bothers to keep me up to date on his
comings and goings."

Ori swallowed. He couldn't exactly keep denying everything, but he also didn't want to break the
trust given to him. Certainly not in this matter. "Fíli…"

"If you'd rather not tell me, you don't need to." Fíli sounded sincere enough. "I will not push, I
promise. If you are not telling me, I trust that you have your reasons for it. I only wondered if it was
something you could share, that's all."

"I've promised not to tell," Ori murmured. "And I will not break my word, not even for you."

"And I will not ask you to do so." Fíli paused for a moment, walking along in silence. "I could hear
the Arkenstone, sometimes."

"What?" That startled Ori enough to bring him to a halt. Fíli turned to look at him, and for all that his
tone had still been somewhat light, Fíli's eyes were deadly serious.

"It was the clearest when I was deep in my madness. I was never quite sure if I truly heard it or if it
was just my imagination, just my mind working against me. However, even after it was taken away
and I recovered, I could sometimes feel it at the back of my mind, like a distant hum. Never anything
strong enough that I could track it, nothing like that, just… it was this feeling that it was out there
somewhere, and I could find it if I just looked hard enough."

"You never told me." Not that it was a surprise, not as such. Ori knew very well the thrall that
blasted stone could hold,

"I didn't. I suppose I should have, but, well, I didn't want to scare you away. And yes, I know that's
an awful thing to say, when that is precisely why I should have told you, so you could decide if that's a risk you want to take." Fili looked him directly in the eye. "If I had thought for a moment I would follow that call — if I had even suspected the madness was returning — I would have told you. You know that, don't you?"

"I do." And he did, he truly did, he wasn't just saying it for Fili's benefit. "You are a good dwarf, after all."

"A good dwarf would not hurt his One." Fili's hand moved from Ori's back to touch his side ever so lightly, right where his knife had cut, and Ori shivered. Fili then traced his fingers up Ori's arm and then his shoulder, not holding on, just resting his hand there.

"That wasn't you, though. That was the dragon inside you."

"I suppose."

"My point is — my point is. When I woke up that morning, with Bilbo banging on my door to share the news, I knew it was gone." Fili offered him a small smile. "I don't know how I could tell, or what was different. All I know is that the night before there was an Arkenstone, and the morning after there wasn't."

"Oh." That — that was a relief, actually, not that he was going to say it aloud. It meant that the Arkenstone was gone, would not return to plague them ever again.

It meant that the Green Lady had taken her payment, and she would surely not be so unfair as to deny the boon that was asked for in return.

"So, I will not ask what happened, but I think I can put together some of it at least. If indeed it is what I think — well, then it's for the better you lot didn't involve me, anyway. Mahal knows I could not guarantee I wouldn't have caused any trouble."

"Not even Bilbo knows," Ori murmured. "Well, unless Thorin told him after. It's not that I didn't want to tell you, I just…"

"Peace, love. I did mean it when I said I will not push." Fili leaned in to press a light kiss to Ori's forehead. "I know what I need to know, which is that the babe is better, and nothing else matters right now."

"Right." Ori tried not to sound or look quite as relieved as he felt, but he probably failed. This conversation could have gone much worse. "So, ah. If we're done, can we go now? Not that I don't enjoy talking with you, but I'm actually getting really hungry."

Fili chuckled. "Of course." This time the kiss was to his lips, and oh, he was definitely not complaining about that. "Wouldn't want Varc nipping at my ears for not feeding my mate properly, again."

"It is good to know that someone is looking after me, at least." Ori smiled. "Now, let's go before the others start to wonder just what is keeping us so long."

"Indeed. We wouldn't want them to wonder about us, now would we?" Fili's eyes twinkled as he set a hand at the small of Ori's back again, nudging him to continue down the corridor. "Mahal knows we don't need any more rumours going around."

"It's not just us, if that's any consolation," Ori pointed out. "Did I tell you about that rumour Nori heard recently about Bilbo, Thorin, and the council room table?"

And, well, perhaps it would be a while until he could look at said table without getting distracted
after recounting that particular tale, but it was well worth it for Fili’s laugh.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

For once it seems things are peaceful in the mountain. Gimli and Legolas are writing more letters, Sigrid is starting to get her bearings, young courting couples are discussing their future, and Thorin and Bilbo have a bright view of theirs.

For once, nothing seems about to go wrong.

Chapter Notes

I figured we all deserved a chapter where nothing bad happens.

My friend Legolas,

My apologies on not writing to you sooner. Things have been rather busy around here, and besides I did not want to bother you overly much while you are still recovering. As such, I have quite a few things to tell you now that I am finally taking the time to put pen to paper.

I have to admit it is a relief to be able to openly write to you without fearing the consequences of a reveal. Certainly, I suspect neither of our fathers is overjoyed about our continued acquaintance, but mine at least seems to have reached some sort of a grudging acceptance of it. I must say I hope this state of things continues, as I find myself quite missing your company even though we have not been separated for long.

I have great news on the matter of my studies! Fíli has found a project for me to work on that will work as my journeymen's piece. It is a challenging one to be sure — I am to replicate a family heirloom bead with a peculiar setting to the gems, and then design another piece based on my experiences with that — but Fíli is confident it is within my skills, and I will not let him down. I will be working hard on this, and will deliver nothing but my very best. I would not think to bring shame to my cousin, not after he has agreed to train me.

I am not the only one who is working hard, though. Princess Sigrid has started her studies under Dori as an apprentice of the dressmakers' guild. There are some who grumble about it, but there will always be people who grumble about everything. Why, some of them even find fault in the glad news of King Thorin and Bilbo!

Indeed, have you heard the news? They are now officially expecting a child! I know I have alluded to this before, but now it has been announced to all, so I have no qualms about sharing the glad news with you. You may let others know as well if you wish, Mahal knows all of Erebor and half of Dale is buzzing with excitement. And yet, some still think Bilbo is a hobbit lass and bearing the child herself! Well, I suppose they will realise their folly when time passes and he does not grow any rounder than he is now. Well, not much rounder, in any case. He is a hobbit after all, and rather fond of his food.
I hope you do not judge me too harshly if I confess that I am somewhat glad for this new source of gossip. Not because I wish for people to be talking overly much about the babe to be, certainly not in malicious tones, but it is a relief not to be the most interesting source of conversation anymore. Kili's little trick did draw some of the attention and gossip, particularly since he has indeed kept his face clean-shaven ever since, but I am still the dwarf who gave his beard for an elf, and people don't forget that easily. Do not misread me, my friend, I still hold no regrets about what I did, but it is still something of a relief not to be the main object of interest for the rumour mill in the mountain. I have enough of a reminder of what happened every time I touch my face or catch my reflection somewhere, I hardly need the addition of others whispering about it.

Now, because I am certain this is what you truly care about, for news about Tauriel, there really isn't much to tell. She still seems perfectly happy, unless you catch her in a moment when she is complaining about the wedding attire. Dori is doing his best to meet her preferences and create something suitable for her form, but it is tricky when she would prefer to wear no gown at all. At least for the ceremony itself she can be suited up with armour and weapons, though there is some fuss as to whether her usual armour will suffice. Not like we have much of a choice, in any case; I rather doubt there is armour fit for her form anywhere this side of your woods at the very least. We dwarves are quite different in shape and size, after all, while the men of Dale rarely suit their women for battle. I'm sure they will solve the problem one way or another, though. If nothing else, Kili will threaten the armourers until they make her something suitable. He takes these things very seriously indeed, not that I blame him. Of course he would want his bride to be presented at her finest on their wedding day.

Besides these, there isn't much more for me to share, save that Ori has found his other family it last. If you'll believe, it turns out his late father was actually the long-dead brother of Bifur, making him a nephew and cousin to the Urs. Such news almost seems too great a coincidence, but I have seen the beads that bear this truth with my own eyes, and the marks on the beads and Bofur's crest do match, as do the stories each side could tell of Timpur's last journey. It has been quite the glad discovery in all, for all that I doubt it matters to many beyond their families and friends.

But my letter draws long and I find myself without much to say, save that I miss you, my friend, and wish I could hear your voice as I did before. If I close my eyes and imagine I can almost hear it, but alas, it is not quite the same. You would have a more clever tongue than my imaginings, I think, and certainly be quicker to correct me when I sometimes grow maudlin. But as I have you not here, I will have to content myself with reading your old messages, and awaiting your reply to this one.

Until then, I ever remain,
Your faithful friend,
Gimli

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It took Sigrid probably longer than it should have to admit that she must have gotten turned around somewhere.

It wasn't like she held onto some stupid pride about never losing her way, or wasn't aware that the mountain was quite different indeed from Dale. It was hard to find her way when she often could see no further than the street or tunnel she was in, with stone walls lifting up everywhere when she wasn't in one of the great caverns. However, she had imagined that by now she would at least know the way to the guildhouse, having walked there and back several times. Evidently, this was not the case.

It was also difficult to admit but nevertheless true that she was starting to grow somewhat nervous.
Not that she doubted her safety with dwarves in general, all the ones she had made the acquaintance of had been either open and friendly or at least perfectly cordial, but it was hard not to feel somewhat unsettled when she was the only human in an endless stream of dwarves. Not many humans ventured into mountain proper, and fewer still went beyond the large marketplaces. Here, in the deeper corridors, she hadn't seen another human in ages. In her nervousness, it was quite easy to imagine that every curious glance was a suspicious glare, every murmured conversation something nasty about her.

So now she was nervous, lost, and quite probably late. This was not going well.

"Sigrid? Is that you?"

Sigrid spun around, smiling as she saw a familiar face hurrying towards her. She recognised him even at a distance; it wasn't that hard to tell apart what was probably the only clean-shaven face in the entire mountain. "Ah, Kíli! I'm so glad to see you. I'm supposed to meet Master Dori at the guildhouse, but I think I've quite lost my way."

"Not as badly as you'd think, you're at least in the right part of the mountain." Kíli reached her side, grinning up at her. It was strange to think sometimes that he had lived many times as long as she had, when he looked so very young sometimes. "I can show you the way if you'd like."

"Oh, I would be so grateful." Sigrid smiled, then thought to add somewhat belatedly, "If it's not too much trouble, of course."

"No trouble at all! I'm headed to visit the goldsmiths' guild myself, so I'm going that way anyway. The dressmakers' guild is right along the way." Kíli flashed her a grin. "Come on, let's go. No reason to make Dori wait any longer."

"Right." Sigrid sighed as she settled into step beside him. "I'm so embarrassed about this. I was certain I knew my way by now, but evidently not."

"Eh, it happens. It probably doesn't help we don't have much in the way of signs and such, with most dwarves just using our stone sense to tell when we're headed in the right direction." Kíli shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Dori will understand. Even Bilbo and Tauriel still need help when they're headed somewhere unfamiliar, and they've both been living here for quite a while."

"I suppose that's true." Her earlier nervousness was starting to fade, even the passers-by seeming much friendlier now that she had someone familiar by her side. "I'll have to learn my way, though, if I'm to finish my apprenticeship." And she absolutely was going to do that. Nothing was allowed to get in the way of that, not when she finally had the opportunity.

"Well, in the future, you can always ask one of the guards to show you the way. All the guards have been thoroughly vetted, and they're fine with dealing with people who aren't dwarves. Not only is that pretty much necessary with Tauriel as one of the captains, but Thorin didn't want to screw up the alliance from the get-go because of some overly enthusiastic idiot." Kíli thought of this for a moment, then added, "Actually, we could make sure there's always a guard ready at the gate to take you to the guild in the morning, and to bring you back in the evening."

"Ah, I'm sure that's not necessary." The thought of it! "I don't want to be any extra trouble. I'm supposed to be just the same as any other apprentice, remember?"

"Oh, it won't be trouble. It'll be a good task for new guards, it'll keep them busy and they think they're important, looking after a visiting royal." Kíli chuckled. "And don't worry about that, either. I know Dori enough to say he would never treat you any differently from another apprentice, he
respects you too much. But outside your training you're still a princess, and if you got lost or hurt or something that would be bad."

"I suppose you're right." Even if she still didn't always feel like a princess.

"Oh, I am. Trust me, Fíli and I were treated just the same if not stricter as other apprentices in our respective guilds. That doesn't mean Dwalin still wasn't worried about our safety outside our training. Someone making sure you get to the guild and back safely, especially when you're having trouble moving in the mountain, is not special treatment, it's basic courtesy."

"Well, if you say so." Sigrid paused, casting for another topic of conversation. "So, ah. Why are you visiting the goldsmiths? I thought that was Fíli's craft, not yours."

"That's true, but it's not for myself." Kíli gave an exaggerated look around as though to look for any eavesdroppers. "I'll tell you if you can keep a secret."

"Ah, I'd like to think I can." She smiled at his theatrics. "I did grow up having to hide quite a lot of things from the Master's men."

"Right, right, you're a downright professional already in secret-keeping." Kíli grinned. "I'm going to see how they're getting on with making a diadem for Tauriel for our wedding. It's going to be my provider's gift for her, so it's got to be absolutely perfect."

"Oh, that's so wonderful." Sigrid had grown quite fond of Tauriel in the time the elf had lived with them in Dale, so it was always nice to see just how much in love with her Kíli seemed to be. "Are they also going to make something for Ori?"

"Not quite. You see, the problem with Tauriel is, an elf head isn't quite the same shape and size as a dwarf head. Bilbo's had to be made special as well, Uncle was going to get something meant for younger dwarves at first but then decided Bilbo needed something especially for him. Ori, though, he's a dwarf, and we have plenty of crowns and coronets suited for dwarves. He'll probably get a crown made just for him when Fíli's crowned king, there's plenty of tradition for getting something special made for the consort, but for now they're just going to find a suitable coronet and maybe add an amethyst or two."

"That seems reasonable." Sigrid nodded. "I can't even imagine how he's dealing with all this. Ori, that is. I have trouble enough adjusting to suddenly being a princess, and at least nobody will ever expect me to act as a consort to a king."

"Be thankful you're not a dwarf, then." Kíli's lips twitched. "If you were, you would be the first heir, being the oldest. But you're right, Ori isn't always entirely happy with his place, either. Everyone is introducing him to his duties little by little, and he's certainly more confident and comfortable with it than he was just a couple of years ago, but it's definitely a good thing Fíli won't be taking the throne for a while yet. Not that I think Fíli's ready for that either, but he's at least been raised as Thorin's heir all his life." Kíli shook his head. "I'm quite happy to just be the spare. Sure, I still have duties to attend to, and I'll be helping Fíli when he takes the throne, but I'll never be the one with the final responsibility."

"It doesn't seem easy at all." And she probably wasn't supposed to be speaking about these things, but she trusted Kíli, and he was opening up to her in turn. "I worry about Da, sometimes. He was never taught how to deal with these things, and now he's responsible for the entire city all of a sudden. I know he doesn't want to show how much it affects him, I don't think Bain and Tilda have any idea, but sometimes I wonder how he does it."
"He's a good man, your father. He'll figure it out. And the mountain supports your line, so at least in that way his position is secure."

"I suppose so." Even if sometimes it seemed impossible any one man could shoulder all that. "Sometimes I hear him complaining to the birds, you know. He says it makes him feel better because they always agree with him that all people without wings are idiots." And that she definitely should not have said, but thankfully Kíli only chuckled.

"Sounds like birds all right. Fíli's Varc seems convinced we're all slightly stupid and need her to look after us." Kíli gave her a curious gaze, now. "So, is he talking with the birds, or at the birds? I think Uncle said something about how it's not just the ravens around here who are smart, but he wasn't sure if that was true anymore, after the dragon and all."

"Ah. With them, actually. He can speak with thrushes at least, says it's because of Girion's line." Sigrid managed a smile. "It's — I'm still a bit nervous about saying that. In Laketown, we were never allowed to even mention it, because the Master reacted badly to any indication of our line. I'm still not sure I could truly talk to the thrushes, I was always so careful not to, though I do understand them. Not that there were many of them in Laketown, mind. I'm glad Tilda gets to grow up without that fear, though. She's always chattering away to the birds."

"That's how it should be." Kíli nodded. "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you, though. If it's anything like our connection with ravens, it's not a matter of practice, not for you. I've been able to talk with ravens as long as I remember, and so has Fíli. Gimli, too, even though his father doesn't have the knack, so sometimes the skill can show up even if you're not taught it. And Ori's learning it now, with Varc, he says it's like learning another language but I'm not sure he could even learn it if he didn't have some of the same blood." Kíli paused. "My point is — if you have the skill, you have it. It's in your blood, not your head. I don't think not using it would make it go away, and even if it did, I'm sure you could learn it again."

"I suppose you're right." Sigrid nodded. "Maybe I should try talking to them one of these days."

"Just be careful they don't get you thinking everyone without wings is an idiot, too." Kíli grinned, his usual bright, infectious grin that made it quite easy to forget he was a royal prince with royal duties. Sigrid liked that grin. It made her feel her life might not have entirely changed just because her father was now called King. "Anyway, we're almost there. Are you ready to face Dori? Because if I know him at all, he's more likely to be worried about your having been lost than angry that you're late."

"He probably is, isn't he." Sigrid sighed. "Well, ready or not, I shouldn't keep him worrying any longer. Even if he'll probably make me spend the whole day sorting needles as punishment for making him worry so."

"Probably! But he only does it because he cares." Kíli reached up to pat her shoulder. "I'll speak with Tauriel or Dwalin later about assigning guards as guides for you. There should be someone waiting for you in the evening, but if not, just ask Dori, he'll get someone to show you the way."

"Right. Thank you for that."

"Any time, Your Highness." And oh, now the grin was definitely teasing, no doubt about it. For him to call her that was just downright cheeky, when he was so very clearly a prince, more so than she would ever be a princess! Before she could even protest, though, he dropped down into an exaggerated bow, then disappeared around the corner. Sigrid was left alone in a rather familiar corridor, seeing the door to the guild's halls just a little ways ahead.

Well. It was true that making Dori wait any longer would only make him more worried.
Taking a deep breath, Sigrid walked the rest of the way to face the music.

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"One day, you are going to grow tired of braiding my hair."

"Sure I will." Kíli did not exactly sound sincere, his hands never stopping in their task of weaving strands of her hair into some overly intricate pattern. "That'll happen approximately three days before I give up my bow and two days after I admit that Fíli is the good-looking brother."

"It will be a very busy week all told, then." Not that she was complaining, not really. It was nice, sitting with Kíli in the relative peace of the royal entrance room. It wasn't exactly private, but for now they were the only ones there, which did not happen very often. "What exactly are making back there, anyway?"

"It's a variation of the warrior's braid, actually. I thought you might want to wear it some time when you're dealing with the guards, remind them that you're not just there to look pretty."

"I rather doubt any of them would call me pretty, actually."

"Then more fools they." Kíli leaned down to press a kiss to her hair. "Actually, that reminds me. Did you set those guards I asked you about a few days ago?"

"You mean, specific guards to show Sigrid the way to and from the guild hall? Yes, we did. You were right in that it seems an excellent task for training new guards, and makes them feel useful besides." Tauriel almost nodded, but was stopped by the firm grip Kíli had on her hair. "It was a good thought."

"Just makes me wonder why we hadn't thought of it before." She could hear Kíli's hands starting to move again, swiftly dealing with the long strands of hair. "So did you know Bard's family can talk to birds?"

"You mean the thrushes? Yes, I did. It came up a few times when I was staying with them." She suppressed a chuckle. "Tilda made me ask the birds to come down sometimes just so she could speak with them. I am honestly not sure if the birds understood me at all, I certainly could not make any sense of what they said, but I got enough of them to draw close that Tilda could chatter at them, so I suppose that was good enough."

"I bet that was adorable." She could practically hear the grin in Kíli's voice. "Now hold still, let me get this clasped."

Tauriel waited until Kíli had let go of the braid before shaking her head. "You say that now. It was not quite so amusing around the mating season. Birds are not exactly subtle about their wants, as you might know, so that was an interesting time."

Kíli chuckled. "At least it was educational?"

"One could say that." Tauriel turned her head to look at him over her shoulder. "And no, no hypothetical child of ours is ever getting their education in that particular matter from the ravens. Or in any other matter, either."

"Duly noted." Kíli still grinned, but then his smile softened a little. "Do you think we'll ever have any? Kids, that is."

"I honestly do not know."

She turned the rest of her body now, setting a hand on Kíli's knee. "I do
not think I would mind bearing them, if I am given the chance, but I have no way of knowing if that is even possible. I know an elf and a human may have children together, of course, but they are much more similar in form than elves and dwarves. And then, I do not think there has ever before been a dwarf and an elf who loved each other, not before us."

"I kind of hope we will. I'd love to see a little babe with your hair and my eyes, or even the Durin nose and your elven ears." Kíli took her hand in a hold that would have been surprisingly gentle if she had not already known him to be capable of much gentleness, bringing it up to his lips and pressing a soft kiss to her fingers. "But I will be happy either way, whether we are gifted that or not."

"I know I will be, too." Tauriel smiled at her lovely, ridiculous dwarf. "You already make me so very happy, my love."

"No more so than you make me, that's for sure." Kíli's other hand rose up, tracing the side of her face in a gentle, fleeting touch. "I am the luckiest dwarf alive for having you, and I'll fight anyone who'd like to disagree with me."

"I think we'll do just fine without fighting anyone." Tauriel chuckled. "For one thing, I am given to understand that just about any dwarf who has found their One would disagree, as each thinks their own happiness to be the greatest."

"Yes, well, all those others are just clearly wrong." Kíli's eyes twinkled with amusement. "But I think I see your point. I'd hate to fight Fíli for one thing."

"Why, are you afraid you would lose?" Not that she doubted her beloved dwarf's skills in battle, she had seen them for herself after all, but it was hardly a secret that Kíli devoted most of his energy to his bow while his brother had worked hard to master just about everything else.

"Afraid I'd beat him too soundly and then I'd have to take the throne instead." Kíli let his hand fall from her face at last, though his other still held onto hers. "Speaking of beating someone, I don't think I've had the chance to challenge you on the range for a while. Care to give it a try?"

"If you can bear to lose, I have no opposition." Tauriel smiled, getting up to her feet and tugging him up with her. "Come, then. It has been far too long since I have shown you just how far you still have to go." Though truth be told, Kíli was quite remarkable in his skill, when she wasn't teasing him so. He had devoted himself to his bow, after all, in a way not even all elven archers did.

"I will take that as a challenge, if you don't mind." Kíli was still grinning, though, so clearly he did not mind, settling easily into step with her as they walked out of the entrance room and into the mountain beyond.

The dwarven braid was still in Tauriel's hair, quite comfortably keeping company for her courting braids, but that was, she decided, nothing but appropriate.

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"Well." Fíli drew a drag of his pipe, blowing out a ring of smoke and watching it dissipate. "That was an experience."

"You sound like you've never dealt with them before." Ori did not even look up from his knitting, though he did smile a little. "I would hope at least Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur are quite familiar to you."

"From the road, yes. It's quite different to meet them as your family." As Ori chuckled, Fíli sent him what he hoped was a convincingly hurt look, not that Ori was looking. "Don't laugh! You were
nervous about meeting Thorin for the first time after we started courting, too."

"I was nervous about meeting Thorin because he is king, and because I hadn't had much cause to speak with him privately before outside my position as a scribe. You'll notice I had no problem with talking to Kíli." Ori clicked his tongue. "It's just amusing, that's all, since you weren't even this worried about meeting my brothers after you gave your courting gift to me."

"Then I had already spoken with them, and they knew beforehand that I was going to give my gift to you. This was newly found family who already seem very protective of you." Fíli leaned an elbow on the table. The servants had worked quickly, cleaning out any sign of the dinner that had happened there. "And don't tell me Bifur can't be intimidating."

"Bifur? He's a sweetheart." And oh, the smile on Ori's face very nearly made Fíli's heart ache. He wanted to take that smile and put it in a jar and keep it for the rest of his days.

"He also gets berserker rages."

"Only on the battlefield, and you know he won't draw his weapons first." It was easy for him to say, he hadn't been getting glared at. "Besides, they respect my choices. I've told them you make me happy, so they won't question my decision to be with you. They just wanted to get to know you as family instead of as a friend."

"If you say so." Fíli blew another smoke ring. "I suppose it was nice in the end, especially talking with Olvi. I've only met her in passing before, so it was good to talk with her more. After all, when I marry you and she marries Bofur, we'll be cousins. Seems appropriate I would know her at least somewhat."

"I agree. I didn't know her more than that, so it was good for me, too." Ori's lips twitched. "You know, I don't think Bofur told her just who his surprise new cousin was."

"Oh?" Fíli blinked. Clearly he had missed something. "What makes you think that?"

"Oh, just the look on her face as you introduced yourself, and the way she elbowed Bofur. I mean, she is from the Iron Hills, she might well not have known there aren't that many Ris, so it's not unthinkable she wouldn't draw the connection between Bofur's cousin Ori and the Ori betrothed to Prince Fíli." Ori shook his head. "That must be quite the surprise, really, if one hasn't expected it."

"Well, I guess. She didn't seem to have any problem with talking with me, though."

"I wouldn't imagine so, no. From what I have heard — and believe me, Bofur talks about her an awful lot — she is a very practical dwarf. She wouldn't waste her time tiptoeing around someone who doesn't demand it, and probably not even for many who would demand." Ori finished his row, turning his work around and continuing with his knitting. "It's good, I think. She'll work well with Bofur."

"Aye, he needs someone practical like that. Don't think anyone else could deal with him for too long." Fíli smiled a bit. "It's good to see they all like you so much. Bilbur especially." And Fíli had to admit his heart had been doing interesting things as he watched Ori playing with his baby cousin over the dinner. Interesting, but not unpleasant.

"Oh, Bilbur likes anyone who lets him climb into their lap and listens to him babble. He loves attention, that one." Ori's smile softened a little. "I'll have to knit him new booties soon. I've made him some before, but he's quickly growing out of them."

"I'm sure he'd like that." Fíli paused, thinking about how to put his feelings into words. "I liked
"Oh?" At last Ori looked up from his knitting, the soft smile still on his face. "How so?"

"Just… it seemed right, that's all. You holding a wee one." Fíli smiled, mostly to mask his nerves. "I… wouldn't mind seeing it again, in the future."

"Well, I don't suppose it's that unlikely that I might hold him again." And oh, Ori had to be teasing him on purpose, he was too smart not to realise what Fíli meant. And yet he was forcing Fíli to say it.

"That's not what I meant." Fíli turned to his pipe for some comfort for a moment, trying to find the right words. "I… I keep thinking I would like to see, well. You holding a child of ours, one day. And I know that's not truly an option, but…"

"It could be." Ori's voice was surprisingly quiet, but as Fíli glanced at him, he looked certain enough. "It's… I mean, it's true that neither of us could bear a babe. But if we found another way… I wouldn't mind raising a child with you." Ori looked down at his knitting again. "Back in Ered Luin, we had this neighbour, a single father with a wee dwarfling. He died in a mining accident. A family friend stepped forward to take his child in after a while, and from what I heard she was quite happy in her new home, but before we knew anything certain Dori mentioned he considered adopting her. It's… I know that's not often done in the noble families, and you in particular have to consider your lineage, but I, ah, I wouldn't mind doing something like that. If you didn't."

"Ori." Fíli touched Ori's arm, waiting until he was looking up again before continuing. "I will never father a child." He was aware of this, had been aware of this ever since he had realised his heart was lost to Ori. "Because as you said, neither of us can bear, and I would not bed another, not even for an heir. I have Kíli, and will have Thorin's child soon enough, and that's all the heirs I need. But if Mahal gives us the opportunity, in an orphan dwarfling or some other way… well. Then I would love to have a family with you." As Ori smiled at him, still looking a bit hesitant, he continued, "And if we have a child, whatever way it may happen, I would consider them as an heir the same way I would any child born of Kíli's marriage, or whatever wee thing Bilbo and Thorin might grow in their garden. I will choose my successor based on their ability, not the purity of their blood, and any who don't agree with that do not have to reside within my mountain."

"Well." Ori's smile turned amused now, and that was so much better. "Considering who Kíli and Thorin have given their hearts to, any child of theirs would face another set of protests."

"True enough." And maybe he even might challenge those protests in time. Right now the mountain was not ready for such announcements, but then he wasn't king right now, either. There was plenty of time. "My point is — my point is, the matter of heirs was never going to be a simple one, and I was already told off for worrying too much about it before I made my offer to you. I will need an heir, that is true, but that has very little impact on whether we ought to have a family, and in what way we ought to have it. After all, if I will never have a blood-born heir, then my choices are an adopted child or no child at all, and I would like to see anyone tell me that an empty throne is the best for Erebor."

"I guess you're right."

"I am." He squeezed Ori's arm gently. "Besides, I have been told I ought to consider the matters of heart with nothing but my heart. I'll give enough of myself to Erebor in time, and so will you, as you have chosen to stand by me. That doesn't mean all of us belongs to Erebor. If we want a family, then a family we will have. Perhaps not yet, I don't think either of us is ready for such responsibilities just yet, but one day, if we are still in agreement, we will have that one way or another."
"I really would like that." Ori lowered his knitting properly, now, leaning in to steal a quick kiss from Fíli. "And until then, we have wee cousins to cuddle."

"Aye. Yours for now, and hopefully mine soon as well." And that was a good thought, that soon enough Bilbo and Thorin might have a babe of their own. "Now, I think we've lingered long enough at an empty table. How about I walk you back to your rooms? I can finish my pipe and we get to stay together a little longer without Dori giving me glares for keeping you out too late."

"Right." Ori carefully set his knitting in his bag and stood up. "Varc still hasn't gotten around to liking the smell, huh?"

"Not at all." Fíli stood up as well, settling into step beside Ori as they started walking. "She complains so much, it's easier just not to smoke in my rooms. Usually I'd just do it in the entrance room instead, but right now I suspect that would just lead to people questioning me about how the dinner went."

"And you don't want to answer that, then?"

"Not when I'm still not sure how it went, myself." Fíli shook his head. "Mahal knows it's good I made my offer to you before you found out your father's name. I don't think I would have ever had the courage to go up to Bifur and tell him I had a mind to court his nephew." Of course, back when he had made his offer he also hadn't demonstrated just how bad he might be for Ori.

"He wouldn't interfere, not when he knows you make me happy. I think he's just a little overly protective, still, since he thought for so long there was nothing left of his brother and then found out that wasn't true. He'll ease off once he gets used to having me around, and even now I don't think he would do anything worse than glare." Ori's smile turned slightly teasing. "If Dori and Nori haven't hurt you yet, you have nothing to worry about. And believe me, I have made it clear to everyone that there is to be no threatening or hurting, anyway. I'm a grown dwarf and quite capable of protecting myself, never mind choosing who I court."

"Well, they have made it quite clear what will happen if I hurt you again, and I can't say I blame them." If he lost himself to madness again, he would want them to stop him before he hurt Ori again, no matter how it was done. "But let's not speak of that now. We have met Olvi as future family, not just as members of the Company, and everyone made it through the evening in one piece. That is a good thing, wouldn't you agree?"

"I cannot say I disagree." Ori leaned against his side, and Fíli reached an arm around him, holding onto his pipe with his free hand. "I have to say, I rather like having extended family. It was always just my brothers and I, and Nori was away half the time, we never had uncles and cousins and the like. It's... new, this new family, but not bad."

"Not bad at all." Fíli nodded. "And soon enough you get to share mine as well."

"Is that a promise or a threat?" And again with the teasing. Truly, the things Fíli endured for his love!

"You have met Kíli and my mother. You ought to know it can be both."

"I suppose that is true enough." Ori was quiet for a while, walking beside him in silence. "Fíli?" he then asked, voice quiet but audible enough in the empty corridor.

"Yes?"

"If you think you have a difficult time proving yourself worthy to my family, spare a thought to whatever poor soul will one day wish to court any child of ours."
It was obviously complete coincidence that Fíli just happened to inhale enough smoke to send him coughing and spluttering for a while just then, but apparently Ori found it appropriate to snicker at him anyway.

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There was a fruit among the leaves.

It was a small thing yet, not even the size of Thorin's fist, but Bilbo assured him it would soon grow to be much more capable of housing a child. It was round and smooth, a pale green colour dominating its surface, with a soft gloss of gold that reflected the edges of the leaves. It was nestled in the middle of the bush, shielded from the light of the crystals by the leaves spreading across it, their colour deep and rich like pure emeralds save for the edges which very nearly glinted golden in the light.

Thorin had never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

If he'd made a habit of speaking to the plant before, now he could not hold himself back, knowing that the seed of their child was most definitely present and growing. His visits weren't required now that they had built and installed the new holders for the crystals, which Bilbo could dim or reveal on his own, yet he still did his best to visit the garden whenever he could. It was his child as well, after all, he ought to have a part in growing it, even if he could only offer his support.

"You seem deep in thought."

Thorin looked up from where he was gazing at the fruit, smiling up at Bilbo. "Just thinking the fruit is growing well, that is all." He stood up, dusting off his knees. "It's truly fascinating, I must say, thinking that there is an actual life within."

"Hardly more fascinating than the belly of an expecting mother, I would think. And they at least bear that weight everywhere." Bilbo shook his head. "I rather think we hobbits would not have so many wee ones if our mothers had to deal with the sort of thing Dís speaks of."

"Yes, well, my sister rather likes to speak of it. She seems to take pleasure in knowing she has won a challenge I cannot ever enter." Thorin reached out to take Bilbo's hand. "I was thinking, actually, that we ought to get thinking about a nursery. We might not know how long it will take for the babe to arrive, but eventually they will be here, and I would rather be prepared early than be caught unawares."

"Oh, I agree." Bilbo nodded. "As to that, I was thinking. My old rooms are not used much now, save for my personal office there. Since they are linked to here, we could move your office there, and have your current office decorated for the babe. That way the child can be close to us, even when they grow enough not to sleep beside us, and we can have some more separation between work and family."

"Not a bad idea. Also, it allows for more peace if either of us needs to concentrate on something, but won't be as far as my office proper." Thorin ran his thumb along the back of Bilbo's hand, marvelling as ever at the softness of his skin. "We ought to think of a cradle, I think, or several. Besides that, most things for a baby are quickly acquired, things like clothes and toys and such. However, a proper cradle is not so easily found, and I find myself thinking just one won't suffice. We'll want one for the bedroom at least, and one or two bassinets that can be easily moved, lest we want to have a separate one for each place where we spend time." Of course, he rather suspected the child would also be doing a lot of sleeping carried by one parent or relative or another, but from his nephews' early years he remembered that often nothing could soothe a tired child as quickly as a rocking cradle and a
I like that thought. Do dwarves have some sort of significance to them? Back in the Shire, most families would use the same cradle for each child, and carve on the names of each babe who slept there. They'd be either passed on from older relatives, or ordered from a carpenter to be made special for the first child. Do you do that sort of thing?"

"You need to ask? We are dwarves, we show our love in the works of our hands." He brought Bilbo's hand up to his lips, smiling. "Dwarven parents like to make the cradles for our children, if at all we have the ability. Passing something down within the family is fine, but you would only ever get an outsider to make the cradle if you had no skill in any trade that might suffice, and even then you would ask a friend or relative rather than a stranger. It's good for the child, resting somewhere that has been prepared for them with love."

"Then I suppose I should not ask if you wish to make one yourself." Bilbo chuckled. "How about this, then? You can make the one for the bedroom, as grand as you find the time or inclination for, and we'll ask our friends if they'd wish to make smaller, simpler ones to be moved about, or help with making the bedding for any of the beds. All I ask is that you leave a space on the cradle for a name, so we can follow my traditions, too. In the Shire it would be made of wood no doubt, and I suspect many would be horrified at the thought of cradling a child in iron and steel, but as long as the inside is soft and it's not too heavy for me to rock, I would rather our child have one you made with love in the smithy."

"That would be good, I think." Thorin smiled. "Thank you for understanding."

"You don't need to thank me. Our child will be a dwarfling as much as they are a hobbit faunt, after all. Who's to say they won't like the iron cradle better, anyway?" Bilbo shook his head, now. "I'll have to start thinking of getting a nanny goat soon, so we'll have milk for the babe at first, and how exactly we'll handle that. I don't know the first thing of feeding infants, mind, only that the families with small babes always had a goat or two for the milk."

"You could ask some relatives of yours, perhaps? Send a letter by raven, see if they have advice to give. You do have relatives you still like, don't you?" He was only half teasing. Bilbo spoke of some of his relatives with affection, but most often he only seemed to mention the ones that were nosy or judging or otherwise intolerable.

"Perhaps, yes, if I want the news of our child to be all over the Shire before the end of the week." Bilbo chuckled. "But perhaps I will, once we're a bit closer to the fruit being ripe. We could ask around here as well, I'm sure there are cases where a dwarf mother cannot nurse properly for one reason or another."

"Aye, that's true. Dís never had a problem with that, but Bombur's wife might be a good choice to ask. From what I hear from Bofur she knows other young families, I'm sure someone will be able to advise us." Now, Thorin couldn't help but grin a little. "We are going to be parents, Bilbo."

"We are!" Bilbo chuckled. "Some days I still don't believe it myself, yet here the babe is, growing and thriving."

"Our little garden child." Now, he made full use of his hold on Bilbo's hand, pulling him close enough that Thorin only needed to lean down for a kiss. Bilbo answered happily, settling his other hand against Thorin's chest, and truly, for the moment Thorin could not imagine he could ever wish for anything else.

As long as he had this, the happy little hobbit in his arms and the sweet round fruit growing under
emerald leaves, everything would be all right.
A family dinner goes awry when it seems there has been more on Bilbo's plate than simply fresh vegetables. While Thorin worries over his husband and Dori worries over everyone, it falls upon others to track down the culprit.

Sometimes, Ori is quite glad he has learnt a thing or two from Fíli, too.

Please note that this chapter contains references to poisoning and intentionally caused miscarriages/attempt thereof. Please read accordingly.

My apologies that this chapter has taken so long! RL crashed down on me hard this spring and I've spent most of summer just trying to recover.

Kíli rather enjoyed eating with the whole family.

It was the same almost nostalgic feeling he got from sitting around the entrance room with everyone, except this was even more reminiscent of the best moments back in Ered Luin, when everything was warm and happy and they got their stomachs full for a change. The table they gathered around was larger this time, and the family that surrounded it was larger when they all got together, but it was still the same sweet, comfortable feeling he remembered from back in their old home.

He rarely ate dinner alone, of course, always finding someone to share his meal with, but it wasn't that often that they were all gathered together. Sometimes Fíli would eat with Ori and his family, or one or more of them would be busy with their duties and could not make it there in time, or they simply ate at different times rather than all gather together. Dís and Bilbo were both insistent that there had to be at least a couple of times a week when everyone got together, though, just as they insisted that every now and then the entire Company should come together, though that was even less frequent an occurrence as they all grew busy with their various tasks.

Today was another evening of sharing with the whole family, and Kíli was enjoying every moment of it. The food was good, of course, it always was, and the company was even better. Fíli and Tauriel were discussing the finer points of fighting with two blades while Ori and Bilbo talked about some of the latest inks the merchants had brought, with Dís and Thorin currently both focused on their food after having settled a particularly tricky matter of the guilds despite Bilbo's protests that such things did not belong at the dinner table. Even Balin was there, giving his occasional input to Ori and Bilbo's discussion, though the majority of his attention seemed to be on the food, while Dwalin was very much focused on just that. Nori was not here this time, though sometimes even he would join in alongside Dwalin, and really it was so much like the old times and yet so much better that Kíli felt his heart was about to burst.

He had heard from Fíli that Dís and Dori had worked out a schedule to make sure the dinners of the
royal family would not coincide with the times Dori wished to dine with both his brothers, and did not doubt it for a moment. If anyone would go to such lengths just to make sure everyone was present when they were supposed to be, it was those two. One day they would probably unearth a precisely drawn chart of weekdays and names, all made out in Bilbo's neat script, and nobody would bat an eye on the discovery.

Kíli listened to the conversation flowing around him, ears perked for any hooks he might catch onto but not terribly desperate to find an opening for joining any of the current discussions. He had very little to say about any of the current topics, and was sure he would be consulted if anything came up that fell under his areas of expertise. Right now he simply enjoyed the atmosphere of, well, home. It had been a long day, and for once he was in no hurry to inject himself into the conversation, not unless it somehow involved him.

The food was good, at least, it always was. Bombur's wife cooked it herself for the royal family, took particular pride in doing so, even when there were different requests from nearly everyone. She had an amazing memory for preferences and dislikes, and had taken it upon herself to learn several new recipes just to please Bilbo's and Tauriel's rather different tastes in addition to the usual dwarven palate. Even now there was a fresh salad for them both to enjoy, though Bilbo seemed to be eating the most of it. Tauriel had once confided in Kíli it had been a while since Thranduil's court had enjoyed fresh greens in abundance, with the plight of the forest creeping into every aspect of their lives, and even now that she had more of them available she was slow in learning to enjoy them again. Not that it mattered, though, when Bilbo was quite happy to eat everything she didn't.

At least Bilbo was happy to eat it all, until he suddenly excused himself, stood up from the table, and staggered away for a couple of steps before being sick.

Suddenly, things were not quite so enjoyable anymore.

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Dwalin wanted to hit something.

He wasn't even being picky, not really. Axe, hammer, even his fists, anything would do. He just wanted a face he could smash in and maybe feel a bit better about himself. Not that he deserved to, not really.

Bilbo was sick. Worse, it seemed Bilbo had been poisoned, with how suddenly the sickness came about. Óin was doing his best but couldn't do much when he wasn't sure what the poison was, Thorin refused to move a step away from his bedside, and everyone else was worrying themselves sick. Everything was in shambles, and Dwalin had allowed this to happen.

He had failed in his task.

It was a sorry attempt at making up for his failures, standing in front of the door to the king's rooms, making sure nobody went in and disturbed them. The whole family and half the Company besides would have been inside if they'd been allowed, but such crowding would hardly make Bilbo any better, and would make it harder for Óin to do his job. So, aside from Thorin who would not leave his husband's side, everyone else was left languishing about the entrance room in various states of distress.

The door flew open, and he almost started, for all that he knew the guards would not allow anyone but one of the Company in, not now. A small part of him relaxed as he saw the familiar form of Nori in the doorway, quickly walking inside the room with the door closed behind him for some privacy.
"Right." Nori glanced around at the gathered crowd. The entire royal family was there, Ori and Tauriel included, with Dori and Balin murmuring to each other in distressed tones in a corner while Bofur whittled anxiously in another, having arrived when he heard the news. "Time to get a move on, people."

"And what do you propose we do?" Dís wasn't speaking in a mocking tone, not really, but there was a note of sharpness to her voice that was perhaps not the kindest. Dwalin couldn't blame her, of course. "There is hardly anything we can do to help Bilbo."

"No, but the situation's not going to fix itself." Nori sniffed. "Lady Dís, there is some unrest among the people. It might be for the best if you and Balin addressed things; we can't be sure how long Bilbo will be indisposed, and Thorin is hardly going to leave his side until he recovers, so it's better to take a hold of things now before everything falls apart. Bofur, your brother was asking for you, he'd like for you to go home. Dwalin, Fíli, I'm going to have need of you."

"Right." Dwalin straightened. If Nori needed him right now, that had to mean he was of a mind to find and punish whoever was behind this atrocity. "Tauriel, I trust you'll guard the door in my absence." She nodded, lips pinched into a tight line, her face pale but determined. It was still strange, somewhat, realising that he was quite willing to trust the guarding of Thorin to an elf, but then she had proved herself capable many times over.

Nori wasn't done yet. He waited until Bofur was out of the door and Fíli had stopped his restless pacing before whirling on the dark-haired prince who was looking somewhat dejected, no doubt for having had his brother picked over him. "Kíli, go take a message to Óin. Ask him if he's considered damsblight as the poison."

Kíli perked up, nodding, too eager to go see his uncles to notice the way Dís gasped at Nori's words, followed by a sharp intake of breath from Dori. Dwalin, however, didn't miss it, nor the sharp nod Nori sent their way, along with a few quick gestures of Iglishmêk that Dwalin didn't quite catch from his vantage point. Interesting. So there was more to this than just the name of the poison.

Nori twirled on his heels, apparently ready to go, only to pause when a third figure joined him besides Dwalin and Fíli. "I didn't ask for you, Ori."

"Well, tough." Ori set his jaw, a flash of fire in his eyes. It seemed to take even more of an edge as a large black raven flew closer, settling on his shoulder. "If you're asking for Fíli now, with all this going on, I'm assuming he's going to be needed for his position. That means I'm going to be there, too."

"This won't be pleasant." Even so, Nori was already walking out of the royal apartments.

"You think I can choose to only hear pleasant things for the rest of my life?"

"I suppose not, no." Nori sighed and shook his head. "Very well. Come along, but don't say I didn't warn you."

That was the last any of them spoke before they were out in the hallways, well out of earshot of even the guards at the door. Nori paused with his hand on the wall, a pinched look on his face, and Dwalin could only presume he was reaching out his stone sense to check for any eavesdroppers. Nori's ability to find weak stone was average at best, but he was very nearly Thorin's rival in tracking down signs of life nearby. Probably explained how he got away with so much villainy when he wanted to.

"Right." Nori looked at each of them in turn. "I think you know what I wanted you for."
"You have an idea of where to find the culprits." Fíli spoke before Dwalin could, an undercurrent of cold fury in his voice. "You must have, if you can even guess the poison."

"Mind you, I'm only guessing. There are other things that could give this reaction, but considering the circumstances, it's the most likely." Nori sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Damsblight is… well. It's usually not fatal to the direct victim, unless consumed in large quantities, but then we can't be too sure about how a hobbit's system would react to it. If it indeed is that, though, Óin should know how to flush it out, so I wouldn't be too worried about things."

"You said direct victim." Ori's voice was quiet but clear. "Who is the indirect victim, then?"

"No one in this case, though only by the grace of Mahal." Nori's expression was grave enough that Dwalin felt cold even before he explained. "It's rarely used for actually killing a grown dwarf, because the needed dose is so high. However… it has its uses in causing a miscarriage."

"You're sure." Dwalin didn't need to ask, not really.

"I am. Never had to use it myself, but I like to know my options." And Dwalin hated that idea, oh how he hated it, but he couldn't deny the truth of it. "As you can imagine, it's not often used in the mountain, so finding someone who purchased it here would not be that difficult. However, I suspect it might be more common in the city of men, so that could complicate matters."

"You think someone would use that as a weapon?" Fíli's expression was bordering on murderous. "That — that's despicable!"

"It's the most likely explanation." Nori nodded. "Clearly the target is Bilbo, as nobody else has shown any clear symptoms. Probably put it in his greens, some powder should work well enough mixed in there. You know a large number of dwarves still think he's female, so with the recent announcement it makes sense they would think he's bearing the child."

"That's why you wanted us, then." He'd had his suspicions before, but this confirmed it. "Even if the poison is not lethal to adults — and I pray to Mahal that includes hobbits — if the poison indeed is damsblight then this is high treason, trying to kill the next heir to the line. Even if Bilbo isn't actually bearing the child, the attempt is the same regardless."

"And with the king too busy to attend the matters, the crown prince and the Captain of Guards are quite enough to pass a sentence and execute it as needed." Fíli nodded. "You have a thought as to where we should start, then? The kitchens, or the servants?"

"Neither. As I said, Bofur is needed home. Apparently Vati has taken ill." Nori took on a grim look. "You know she makes sure to always cook the meals for the royal family herself, and from what little I do know of her, she always tastes her cooking, even when it's something she might not otherwise like. Even if nobody else tasted Bilbo's salad, she would have. And since she's taken ill, we know the poison was already there when she did her preparations."

"No doubt the poisoner thought to frame her for the crime, not knowing she might taste it herself." Ori was remarkably calm, though he looked rather pale. It might have been just the dim light in the hallway, though, or simply the way his Ur blood made him naturally paler than the three of them. "However, she wouldn't be suspected anyway, even if we didn't know she would never do such a thing. Unlike the poisoner, she knows very well Bilbo's not bearing."

"Indeed. So the poison must have been in the ingredients when she got them. The previous link in the chain would be in on it; any further and there's no guarantee it would end on Bilbo's plate. The poisoner must have known the vegetables were going to the royal kitchens. So, when we find the
person who sold them to her, we'll know at least one name for sure."

"I can help with that." Ori nodded, one hand coming up to stroke Fili's raven on his shoulder. "The kitchens should keep records of everything they buy, for use of the treasury. Nobody should think much of it if I look at the papers."

"I'll go ask if Bombur knows anything, just in case the records aren't up to date," Fili agreed. "Should I tell them what's going on, though? Or just say we think some of the vegetables had gone bad? I noticed you didn't speak of poison until Bofur had gone."

"Tell them, but try not to shock them overly much." Nori sighed. "They'll probably already have a healer at hand, and any half-way competent healer should know how to deal with it. Not that Vati's likely to need treatment beyond making her feel less miserable for a while."

"We'll head to the market," Dwalin decided, nodding at Nori. "The kitchens make most of their purchases in the mountain, for easier transport, and there should still be plenty of shopkeepers around at this time. If we can't find the culprit, we can at least ask around for information on them. Once either of you has a name or other information, come meet us there. I'll get my guards to track down the bastard as soon as we have any leads."

"Right." Fili nodded. "Do try to get them alive. We do need to make sure this conspiracy doesn't reach any further."

"Oh, I'm sure we can make them talk." Dwalin gave him a grim look. "And once we have that information?"

"Then I'll sit court, unless Thorin can spare the moment to come from Bilbo's side, and we can remind any who might have lost their memory that there is only one price our laws give for high treason." Oh, yes. Definitely murderous. And yet he was proposing to sit court, for at least the appearance of the way things should go, instead of a knife to the back or a hammer to the skull somewhere dark where nobody would see. He'd make a fine king, yet, some day.

Dwalin could only hope he'd have a better Captain of the Guard, so they might never be in this situation again.

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"Are you all right, my dear?"

Tauriel almost seemed startled by Dori's question, which he supposed was fair enough. She was standing guard, yes, but it wasn't like any threat could get to her without actually entering the room, so it made sense she would not have been paying attention to someone already there with her. And, well, she did not look like she was entirely all right.

"Of course I am," she said, recovering quickly from her start. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you do look a tad pale to my eye, if you don't mind my saying." Dori paused, then added, "That, and Nori asked me to check in with you, seeing how you often share Bilbo's greens."

"I suppose he would be the one to think of that, huh." Tauriel's lips twitched into some approximation of a humourless smile. "Well, let me assure both you and your brother that I am quite well. I did eat the same salad as Bilbo did, yes, and if indeed he has been poisoned that would be the most likely route, but I ate much less than he did and we elves tend to be rather resistant to most such plights, anyway."
"And yet you seem pale and not entirely at your best." Dori shook his head, far from convinced. "It occurs to me you might be trying to hide your pain so as not to concern everyone even further."

"I promise you, it is not as bad as that." But she wasn't entirely denying the truth behind his words, either. "I will be quite fine after I've had some proper rest. For now, I may not be feeling my best, but it is nothing bad enough that I would want to worry everyone else."

"And you think you can truly avoid that? You rather underestimate your dear prince if you think Kili won't come to the same conclusion as soon as he's not sick with worry for Bilbo." Dori touched her arm lightly. "Please. It will cause people more worry if you strain yourself needlessly."

"I'm needed here, though." And, well, that was something he could not deny, in turn. "True, it is unlikely anyone would try for a direct attack, but we both know the presence of a guard — a trusted guard, at that — is something both Dwalin and Thorin need for their peace of mind right now. They already feel they have failed Bilbo, no doubt; if my being here can ease that burden at all, then it is worth some more pain on my part. And there are precious few who could take my place, since most of the people who they might trust have other duties to attend to."

"You are right, of course. I wouldn't even try to deny that." Which didn't mean he was just going to give up. "But you said yourself that you need rest to recover fully. How are you meant to rest and stand guard all at once?"

"What else do you suggest I do, then?"

"Why, I'm delighted you thought to ask." Dori might have allowed himself a bit of a smirk, but he was not truly in the mood for such levity. "I suggest that I go speak with Bifur. He has less duties than most of us, and not even Dwalin can deny his fierceness when need be. I'm sure he would gladly stand guard tonight so you can get some rest."

Tauriel still seemed dubious, but at least she nodded, albeit slowly. "That… I suppose I might work."

"I'm not quite done, my dear." He lifted a finger to make his next point. "Now, any moment now Kili will come to his realisation, at which point he will no doubt rush out and demand you to get checked by Óin, and then refuse to move from your side. I believe we both know it would be utterly pointless to try and stop him when he gets such ideas in his head; in that, he's a Durin through and through."

"You are right, of course." Tauriel's expression rather suggested she was not entirely displeased by her beloved's usual antics.

"I know I am." There was a time for modesty, and this was not it, not when he was indeed correct. "Now, my next suggestion is this: I assume either your bedroom or Kili's has some sort of a seat in it. For tonight, I would be quite happy to doze off in a chair, so Kili can indeed stay by your side while you rest without causing undue scandal."

Again, Tauriel looked startled, though probably for a rather different reason. "You would do that?"

"Of course." He touched her arm again. "We are to be family soon enough, though in a somewhat convoluted manner, and I would imagine both Kili and you will need some comfort after such a scare, particularly since you are feeling ill. If I can help you have that comfort, I would be happy to help."

"Ah." Tauriel rather looked as though she were uncertain whether to cry or laugh, until she recovered and returned to the usual elven calmness. "Do you aim to play a surrogate parent to every
princess around the mountain? Because if so, I wonder what you have in mind for little Tilda."

"She already calls me Da-Ri whenever she thinks I am getting too insistent about the proper behaviour for a young lady. I would say the damage has been done." Which Bard apparently found hilarious, though at least he tried to restrain himself from showing his amusement around Tilda. "I do not think you are in need of a parent, though, for all that this is not the first time I have been accused of mothering people. Which is why I only offer my help as a friend." Dori reached up to squeeze Tauriel's shoulder. "I'll go get Bifur. I'm sure you will be fine, but it would help me worry less if I know you are getting the rest you need."

"...Thank you." Tauriel nodded, and Dori had already turned to go as she added, "I know you are worried about Ori as well, but he is stronger than you give him credit for."

"Oh, I am sure he is," Dori agreed. "But I would much prefer if that strength did not have to be tested."

Even if right now such a test seemed inevitable once again.

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"No, I don't know if there are any snacks for you." Ori tried not to sound too apologetic, but couldn't resist petting Varc's head as he spoke. "I'm sure we could find some if Vati were there, but she's sick at home, and I'm not sure whoever is left in charge will think well of feeding ravens in the kitchen."

Varc said something that Ori didn't quite understand, besides that it was rather impolite and probably aimed at the hypothetical kitchen workers. Though then, she was usually impolite towards anyone who wasn't directly involved in feeding her, and sometimes even then. Ori himself had certainly received more than one sharp comment, only some of which he understood with his still rather pitiful vocabulary.

As it turned out, everyone in the kitchens was rather too busy to pay them much mind at all. The workers were few in this late hour, and they were too absorbed in their work to do more than briefly nod at Ori as he wandered past. He wasn't exactly a frequent visitor to the kitchens, but he had been there sometimes, especially after finding out about his cousins, so nobody seemed to think twice about seeing him walk past.

Of course, this also meant nobody thought to tell him off when he picked up a few small scraps for Varc. It was only fair, he figured, as her food came from the royal kitchens anyway, living with Fíli as he did.

Nobody still came to him as he made his way through the kitchens into Vati's office. What passed for an office space for the royal kitchens wasn't exactly small, but it felt cramped either way due to being full of shelves and tables, to the point where it was hard to see very far. The first few steps took Ori past shelves packed so tightly with spices and seasonings that he couldn't actually see the rest of the room until he turned around the corner of the shelf, giving him the familiar view of even more shelves and a few warm candles. This was usually where one could find Vati when she wasn't either home or in the actual kitchens, writing up plans for large meals or going through the thick book of records to prepare for new acquisitions. She had expressed her doubts at first about her being suitable to running the kitchen for the royal household as Bombur took responsibility for the public side of things, but then taken charge with a kind of ruthless efficiency that Glóin seemed to find both amusing and gratifying in someone responsible for tracking large parts of royal expenditures.

This time Vati wasn't here, of course, being held home to recover. Except instead of an empty room, Ori found himself looking at an unfamiliar dwarf with a merchant's braids busily flipping through the
That wasn't right. No merchant or trader should have had any direct access to the kitchen's records. There were too many ways such access could be abused, from falsifying records of purchase to finding out prices and undercutting them unfairly. Yet here was a dwarf Ori had never seen, wearing a merchant's braids and going through the record books without anyone even thinking to stop them. The latter was somewhat understandable, of course, as Vati being sick probably left the kitchen staff in something of a chaos for the moment, even if it was late enough for the night staff to be now in charge. However, that still didn't explain why the merchant would have come here in the first place.

Unless the unlimited access was precisely what they were after. Which could not bode well in any way.

He hadn't been noticed yet, the stranger's attention on the book, but he probably didn't have much time. As quietly as he could, Ori stepped back behind the corner, reaching up to unclasp the courting braids he had attached to his hair. Slipping one into his pocket, he gave the other one to Varc.

"Take this to Fili," he murmured, backtracking to the door to open it for her, slowly and carefully so as not to cause any extra noise. "As quietly as you can. He should have headed to Bombur's home, you know that, don't you? He always gives you scraps, and their baby tries to pet you when we visit."

Varc eyed him for a moment, then reached a foot to grasp the braid before she took off from his shoulder, silent like a shadow as she flew down the corridor. Ori looked after her for a moment before drawing a deep breath and closing the door, this time with considerable force.

"Isn't there anyone working here?" He dropped the hood from his head, marching into the office proper with the air of someone who believed himself more important than everyone around him and his current task far beneath his position. It wasn't a hard act to put on, considering how many such people he had to deal with on a rather regular basis. "I can't believe my time is being wasted like this!"

The dwarf spun around, startled, but recovered quickly as he saw the arrival. Without his courting braids Ori looked like nothing much except just another scribe, perhaps dressed more richly than most but otherwise unremarkable. "And what is it you're doing here, lad?"

"Well!" Ori sniffed with great offence. "I'll have you know I work for the royal scribe, so I'll thank you not to call me a lad! It's not a position many can ever hope to achieve, that's for certain."

"Oh, really?" The merchant lifted his eyebrows. "And I heard they only picked those who weren't fit for other work, just so the future consort of the prince could feel better about his pitiful skills as he pretends to lead them."

Ori very carefully did not show his reaction, though he supposed he could have passed any annoyance off as being offended on behalf of his imaginary position. "Truly? You think the king would have incompetents working for him? Besides, we were picked to replace him, not work under him. Mahal knows he rarely does anything useful these days." He made a face that he hoped adequately showed his disdain for those of higher position. That, too, was an expression he had encountered quite often.

"What nobles do?" The dwarf was starting to relax, now, no doubt thinking himself in similar-minded company. "All they seem to do these days is bring more and more dirty blood into the royal house! Soon we'll see a man on the throne, the way things are going."
"Well, at the moment our only hopes for the next heir seem to be a half hobbit or a half elf." It was difficult to put the expected amount of disgust in his voice, when he was so very fond of Bilbo and Tauriel both, but he supposed his efforts were appreciated as the dwarf just nodded grimly.

"Oh, I doubt that. Mahal won't allow that to happen, I'm sure of it."

"The prince consort has taken ill, or so I hear." Ori did his best to keep his face neutral, hoping that his probably failed efforts seemed like he was trying to hold back a grin rather than anything less pleased. "Don't know how much of that is true, but the royal family's closed up in their apartments, I hear. Which is why I got stuck running errands."

"Right. You got something to do here, didn't you?" The dwarf was smiling, but Ori had been dealing with politics to recognise a hidden edge when he heard one. "Anything I can help you with?"

"If you can point me to where they keep the records, sure." Ori shook his head. "I haven't been down here before, and can't say I regret that, but I need the total expenses from the kitchens from last month so I can check them with the treasury."

"Well, you're in luck, then." The dwarf waved a hand toward the book he had been going through. "That would be right here."

"Thank you." Ori gave his best put-upon sigh. "Now, to decipher whatever unintelligible scrawls there might be." He internally promised to apologise to Vati later for making fun of her actually rather clear runes, but he had a role to play right now.

He half expected the dwarf to leave now that he got the chance, but instead the merchant lingered nearby, as though waiting to get his turn again. Then again, if Ori indeed had been merely the arrogant bureaucrat he was pretending to be, he probably wouldn't have cared much about whatever schemes the dwarf was up to when nobody was watching.

It only took Ori a little while to find the first sign of tampering. It was difficult to see, and would have probably passed notice entirely if he hadn't been looking for it, but for one thing Ori was indeed looking and for another he knew books. The page had been expertly removed, sliced deep enough within the folds of the thick book that it wasn't immediately visible yet not so deep it would have risked damaging the binding, with the page numbers on either side smudged for a few pages so it was hard to notice the missing entry without actually counting. Flipping through the book, murmuring under his breath about lack of organisation and how difficult was it to date things properly anyway, he found a few more places where the same had been done. Clearly the dwarf sought to remove all evidence of his dealings with the kitchens from the book.

Ori was just starting to wonder how much longer he could stall when he heard the minute change in the dwarf's breathing. He could only thank all his training with Nori and Fíli that he was already starting to move when he felt more than heard the blade approaching his back, swiftly sidestepping the swing and turning to face his opponent. There wasn't much room for him to move away, with the room being as cramped as it was, but he did manage to grab a chair and swing it between them, buying himself some distance.

"Well, you are a patient one," he said, because apparently all the bad company he was keeping had left its marks on him and made him unable to keep his mouth shut. "I half expected you to draw your knife on me the moment I walked in."

"I'm not some sort of a criminal," the dwarf spat, brandishing his knife. Ori withdrew a hand into his sleeve, ready to flick his own blade out at a moment's notice. "And you're not a scribe, now are you?"
"I think I'm going to have to disagree on both points." Ori started backing away slowly, turning his head just enough to make sure there was a gap between the shelves behind him and he wasn't backing into a corner. The dwarf followed him just as slowly instead of just turning tail and running, which would have been the preferable option for Ori. "I don't just wear my Master's braids for decoration, and I'm pretty sure high treason is against the law."

"I am only doing Mahal's work." There was such a calm certainty in the dwarf's voice that it sent chills down Ori's spine. "He would not wish to allow such warped seed to grow in his house."

"Then how come he allowed it to take root in the first place?" Ori let the knife slip into his hand now, ready to fight if he needed to. "Mahal's work is to create, not destroy."

"Yet every smith knows that a failed work must be destroyed to make way for the pure."

"Except I was taught that every child is pure, and to harm them is to defy Mahal himself." Ori shook his head. "There is no way out of this for you, not now. If you had left when I came and fled the mountain, you might have made it out before Vati could give us the names of the people she dealt with. But even if you killed me now, the gates would be closed before you made it out, and all you would gain is another crime on your name."

"Would hardly be a crime to free the prince of your charms." The dwarf advanced on him slowly, pushing the chair out of the way. Ori backed away just as slowly, keeping his eyes on his opponent. He certainly wasn't about to look elsewhere, even as he saw a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye. "He'd probably thank me, if he has any sense left."

"Then I'll happily admit being without sense." The new voice startled his opponent, who made to spin around, only to be met with the solid chest of a guard who immediately grasped the dwarf's armed hand. Fíli stepped out into view as well, and Ori finally let himself relax. "Because I promise you, I'm not happy with the thought of you harming my betrothed."

"Fíli." Ori still didn't put his knife away, knowing better than to think himself entirely safe just yet. It would only take a moment's lapse from the guard for the murderous dwarf to charge at him. "You took your time, I see."

"And you scared me half to death, sending Varc to me with your braid like that! I don't think she's terribly happy with you, either. I believe the words 'idiot fledgling' were uttered." Fíli lifted a hand to stroke the raven sitting on his shoulder, then glanced at the guards who were now all swarming the criminal, all but filling up the cramped space of the office. "Take him to the cells, and find Captain Dwalin and notify him. He should be down at the market. Oh, and if Nori is with him, let him know as well. I think he'd like to hear about someone trying to attack his brother."

"Aye, Your Highness." The guard holding onto the criminal gave a rather nasty grin. "We'll be sure to let them know."

"Excellent. I'll come by later myself to see what else Dwalin finds out."

"Examine him properly," Ori added, somewhat proud of himself that his voice wasn't shaking. "I think he has some pages from the record book hidden on him, he wouldn't have had time to get rid of them yet."

"Understood, Your Highness." Ori almost protested — they were not married yet, so he had no claim to a title — but before he could correct her, the guard yanked her prisoner toward the door, the other guards flanking them as much as they could in the small space. Some of them glanced questioningly at Fíli, as though wondering if some of them should stay, but at his nod, the last of
them left the room.

"So." Ori finally slipped his knife back into its sheath, drawing in a shuddering breath. "Did you just collect every guard between wherever you were and the kitchens?"

"Very nearly so." Fíli was at his side in a flash, drawing him into his arms, and oh, that felt good. "Are you all right? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"Not a scratch on me, I promise." Which didn't mean he wasn't shaken at all, but it could have been much worse. "I managed to fool him for a while, he seemed to only just catch on shortly before you arrived."

"That's not exactly comforting." Fíli let go of him and stepped back, though his hands were still running up and down Ori's arms. "If I'd been just a little bit slower —"

"Then I would have fought him back. I'm not entirely helpless, you know." Ori leaned his head against Fíli's chest. "I'm still glad you came, though."

"I'll always come for you." Fíli's hand stroked up to his hair, then paused. "You look wrong without your braids."

"Yes, well, they are more or less my most distinguishing feature. I had to act fast." Ori looked up to offer Fíli a faint smile. "Want to put them back for me?"

"Always." Fíli reached into his pocket, drawing out the braid Ori had offered Varc as a message, then accepted the other one Ori handed him. "And then, we can go see Vati together, and after that we'll go let Thorin know what's going on."

"Right." Ori nodded. "And then?"

"And then," Fíli gently clasped the courtship braids back into Ori's hair, one by one, "then I will hold you and not let go, you foolish, brave little thing."

And really, Ori had no complaint at that.

* *

"How is he?"

Thorin glanced up from where he was sitting by the bed. He supposed he might have laid himself down next to Bilbo, but he feared he might fall asleep if he did, even with all his fear and worry. Not that he wasn't in need of rest, but he had forced himself to stay awake until he could learn news of the culprits. Which, by the looks of it, had just arrived. "He is resting." Thorin sighed, running a hand over his face. "He's… well. Óin is reasonably certain he will be better by morning, though it seems the dose was much worse for a hobbit than it would have been for a dwarf."

Fíli nodded, taking a couple of careful steps into the room. Ori was with him, hovering around the doorway. "Nori told us about his suspicions," he said, his voice low. "I take it he was right, then?"

"Indeed he was." Thorin closed his eyes. "Damsblight. To think that someone would wish such misfortune on us, on Bilbo… I can't imagine there are such people in my own kingdom."

"Well, you'll be happy to hear they are no more, then." There was steel in Fíli's eyes that he hadn't seen in a while, the kind of steel that Thorin usually associated with battles and pain. "We found the culprit, for now. Nori and Dwalin are currently questioning him, to make sure no others were
involved in the plan."

"If they are asking the questions, there will certainly be answers." And Thorin would not ask them just what methods they used, either. "I… should I ask for the details?"

"It was a crime of opportunity, it seems, and not a well-planned one." Ori's voice was quiet, and he still stuck close to Fíli even as they both walked closer to the bed. "It was a merchant in the mountain, who heard the news about the royal baby and was not too happy about it. They thought to slip some poisoned greens into the order to the royal kitchens, knowing that nobody but Bilbo was likely to eat them."

"Right." It sickened Thorin to think that anyone would want such evil against an unborn child simply because of who their parents were. "And how did you find them, then?" Suddenly, Fíli didn't seem too keen to meet his gaze. "Fíli. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Well, we had a good idea already, when thinking about who could have slipped in the poison and why." Fíli's hand reached back towards Ori, who grasped it, seemingly for support. The raven on Fíli's shoulder simply nodded in agreement, but didn't comment on the matter at hand. "I mean, it's not like any of us were going to suspect Vati, even if she hadn't also been poisoned. And since nobody else was showing symptoms, it had to be something only Bilbo ate, and it couldn't have passed through too many unknowing people, not if they wanted to make sure of the target."

"So, with that in mind, we decided to check the most likely places." Ori still wouldn't speak loudly. This was worrying to say the least. Certainly he had been shy in the past around Thorin, but he had more than learnt out of that particular habit by now. And the way he drew close to Fíli… "I went to check the record books in the kitchens, since I was the most familiar with how things ought to be there."

"Except he was there." Thorin didn't even need to hear it, he saw it in the way Fíli and Ori were huddled together, the way they flinched when he said it. "What happened then?"

"Fortunately, I wasn't there alone, even though Fíli had gone elsewhere." Ori glanced at the raven. "I sent Varc off to find Fíli, figuring he would understand to bring guards with him. Then I managed to hold the culprit off, mostly by talking, until Fíli showed up."

"I thought my heart was going to stop when Varc arrived and told me Ori was in danger." Fíli lifted the hand that wasn't currently holding Ori's hand and stroked the raven's head. "She has certainly earned some more treasure for this little bit of heroics."

"Indeed." Thorin nodded, looking at the raven. "Thank you for delivering the message," he said to her. "You may well have saved Ori's life."

"Someone has to look after them," Varc replied, puffing up her feathers in not so quiet pride. "They're still little more than fledglings, really. The one who feeds me would be unhappy if his mate was hurt, and that would not be good for me."

"I am sure." Though he rather suspected Varc had her own reasons for keeping Ori around as well. After all, there weren't many dwarves who would have taken the trouble of trying to learn raven language, even if they were given the opportunity and the help of a more knowing speaker who could translate for them. "You will be rewarded for this, be sure of that."

"Yes, you all seem to be very keen on rewarding such trivial tasks." And yet she was practically dancing on Fíli's shoulder, twisting her head this way and that as though to show just how shiny and clever and charming she was. "Is your mate all right? I heard someone tried to hurt him and your
"Our egg is fine, and Bilbo will be, as well." He had to believe that, had to tell himself that, or he might well lose hope entirely.

"That is good to hear." Varc nodded again. "It seems awfully difficult, the way you nest. Only one egg, and it takes so long to hatch! It's a wonder any of you have nestmates at all, I'm not sure I would ever bother if it were that tricky!"

"Yes, we can be quite peculiar like that." Thorin managed a small smile before looking at Fíli and Ori again. "So, what will be done with the culprit once the questioning is over with?"

"They'll be taken to court for high treason. Tomorrow, if Nori and Dwalin are satisfied with their questioning." Fíli's expression was hard, unyielding. He had grown so much, had been forced to grow, and while Thorin mourned the little lad who was lost forever he was simultaneously proud of his strong, mature nephew. "For trying to kill the next heir to the line… and for attacking my intended."

"Right." Thorin nodded. "And you plan to sit judgement?"

"You need to stay with Bilbo. Even if he improves, I doubt he will be out of bed by then." Fíli didn't flinch away from Thorin's gaze, now, even though he was certainly aware of the implications of his words. The judgement was clear already, if indeed the culprit had incriminated themselves by attacking Ori during his investigations. And if Fíli was the one sitting court… well. It would be something he had never done before, to be certain.

"Very well. …Thank you." Not that he didn't wish to see justice brought down to anyone who wished to harm his beloved, but Fíli was right. Bilbo needed him, and he needed to see Bilbo getting better, needed to see him opening his eyes and complaining about the unfairness of anyone tampering with his food. He would no doubt be utterly scandalised by the very idea of being poisoned, and then horrified if he heard the reason behind the attack. "Other than the trial, do not worry about your duties tomorrow, either of you. Balin promised to stop by before the evening gets too late, still; I will speak with him and make sure both of your duties are covered for the day."

"Thank you for that." Ori spoke clearer now, and though he still clung to Fíli, he was meeting Thorin's gaze straight on. That was another sign of maturity, another thing that both saddened Thorin and made him proud all at once. This was not the meek scribe who had first signed up for the quest, not even the one who had stood as the victim in a trial in the very same halls before. The steel in Fíli's gaze was in him as well, more concealed beneath his gentle exterior than in Fíli's warrior bearing but no less real for it. Thorin could easily believe this Ori had indeed calmly conversed for a while with the dwarf he suspected of trying to kill Bilbo and the babe. "I think we all need some rest after this day."

"That includes you, too, Uncle," Fíli added. "You know Bilbo will be furious if he wakes up to find out you wore yourself out sitting beside him when he's doing nothing but sleeping."

"I know, I know." Thorin managed a weak chuckle. "I promise I will join him after Balin has stopped by. You two get plenty of sleep as well."

"We will." And from the way they were still clutching hands, Thorin was rather confident he would not find Fíli in his own rooms come morning. That was fine, though. They knew what they were doing, and he doubted either Dís or Dori would have frowned at such a thing after the day they had all had.
Thorin watched the young ones walking out, then turned his gaze back to Bilbo. Balin would arrive soon, he hoped, and after that he could finally get some sleep as well. Not that he expected to rest peacefully, of course, but he needed to at least try, for Bilbo's sake if not otherwise.

For Bilbo's sake, he would not let this break him.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Things are slowly getting back to normal after the assassination attempt, though it may be easier for some people than for others. Kíli finally presents Tauriel his final gift, making the approach of the wedding all the more official, yet Tauriel finds herself worrying over some more trivial things.

Chapter Notes

So I haven't exactly been regular about updates, but, well, life happened. It's still Durin's Day in some parts of the world, though!

Thorin wasn't sure when he had last had so many papers strewn over his desk without at least one requiring his signature or seal.

Not that there weren't a few of those lurking about, still, he never seemed to be able to clear out all of the paperwork after all, but the majority of the sheets lying about had nothing to do with his duties. Well, not his duties as a king, anyway. The papers were all covered in various iterations of the same thing, a rounded shape from different angles, scratched on small scraps of paper, drawn with more care on previously empty sheets, doodled in the margins of less important documents. And yet for all his trying, he couldn't get it right.

The design did not look right at all. It should have been a simple matter, really, family seals were always an easy choice to fall back on, but he felt rather pressed to make something more meaningful, something with more careful consideration behind it. This was, in all likelihood, the last pair of marriage beads he would ever craft; any others in their family would more likely than not be made by Fíli himself. Except this pair he was making for Ori in Fíli's stead, to celebrate his nephew's marriage, and nothing he could think of seemed truly adequate.

Thorin let the tip of a pen hover right above the surface of the paper, watching the ink slowly gathering at the tip, about to fall down as though hoping to escape his hesitation. This was ridiculous, he knew as much. He hadn't even agonised this much over Bilbo's beads, and those he had made for his own husband.

Perhaps he should ask Fíli what he was planning on making for Tauriel. If Fíli had any ideas at all, it might not be a bad idea to reflect those in his own design.

"Thorin?" The familiar voice drew his eyes to the door of his office. Bilbo stood there, looking equal parts amused and worried. "Did you not hear me calling for you?"

"I did not, I'm afraid." Thorin sighed, wiping off the excess ink from the pen and closing the ink well. Clearly he was getting nothing productive done here. "Do forgive me. My thoughts were elsewhere."
"I can see that." Bilbo walked closer, and Thorin found himself following each step, some part of his mind looking for any sign of weakness, any momentary falter. Bilbo had recovered well from his poisoning, with both Óin and Tauriel assuring him that there was no apparent sign that he had suffered any such thing in the first place, yet Thorin couldn't help but remain acutely aware of every small movement. He was certain it would ease over time, this was hardly the first time this happened after all, but for the moment he was still constantly keeping an eye on his beloved husband.

Anyone who thought they could harm his family would have to get through him first.

"What are these?" Bilbo picked up the closest sheet of paper, examining it. "This is the seal of Durin, right?"

"That's right." Thorin sighed, running a hand through his hair. The marriage braid caught his hand, a comforting weight between his fingers. "I'm trying to design the beads I am to make for Ori, but I cannot seem to settle on anything."

"That's certainly clear." Bilbo glanced at all the different iterations. "My goodness. Did you agonise over mine this much?"

"No, I didn't." Though now he almost felt as though he should have. Had he not considered them just as important? "When I was working on yours, I knew from the beginning what I wanted to make for you, the designs and the materials. Now, though, I am less settled."

"I suppose that's understandable, though." Bilbo smiled, so at least he wasn't taking offence at this different reaction. "I mean, the beads you made for me are supposed to reflect you, right? Of course they would come to you easier than than the ones reflecting Fíli."

"This isn't supposed to be so complicated, though." Thorin groaned, frustrated at his own indecisiveness. "I should just include some sapphires, gold or perhaps a sliver of mithril, and the seal of Durin on one bead and Fíli's own on the other. But instead I'm wasting my time and getting no closer to having the actual beads made."

"Well, I'm sure you can still get them done. Granted, I don't know much about how much time these things take, but if there was too much to do before the wedding, you would not be spending your time agonising over the design choices. I know you won't let Fíli down, after all."

"Even so, I would rather be done well beforehand." Thorin shook his head, gaze following Bilbo as his dear hobbit walked around the desk. "I was just thinking I might ask Fíli what he is planning to do with Tauriel's beads."

"That's not a bad idea. Though I have another suggestion, if you'll hear it."

Thorin nodded eagerly. "Any help you could offer would be invaluable."

"Why don't you ask Dís for help?" Bilbo came to a stop next to his seat, leaning close to his arm. "She certainly knows her sons, and I would imagine she would be happy to have a part in the process, even if her craft doesn't quite allow her to try her hand at actually making the beads. It would mean a lot to the young ones, too, if she had a say in the design."

"You truly are quite ingenious, my love." Thorin smiled, leaning in to steal a quick kiss from his sharp-witted hobbit. "Of course. I should have thought to ask Dís for her opinion from the start."

"I'm sure you would have thought of it on your own if you hadn't been so focused on getting everything done by yourself." Bilbo returned his smile, running a hand down his arm. "Should I even ask how you are getting on with the plans for the cradle? Is that giving you trouble as well?"
"It did, at first, until I thought to ask for help for that at least." Thorin pushed aside a few papers before he unearthed the one he was looking for. This one had been lying on his desk for a while now, the ink nice and dry, showing the general design of a beautiful little cradle. "The cradle where my siblings and I slept as infants is long lost, Smaug tore it apart for the gold and gems on it, but I asked Balin for help in remembering it. Together we put together an image of our memories for it, except this one will be made for use rather than the show of wealth. I rather suspect that gold and gemstones would not suit your hobbit sensibilities for something that ought to be practical and simple."

"Not really, no." Bilbo leaned closer, looking at the picture. The cradle was simple enough in shape, a sturdy yet elegant frame with the bed proper attached on hooks that would allow for easy movement. Bilbo's fingertips traced the sketching of the sides, delicate bars topped with swirling shapes like waves. "It looks like it will be beautiful."

"Aye, that is my wish. I have already started work on it, and will be done soon enough." He covered Bilbo's hand with his, moving it to another part of the design. "And see, here? Here we will put the name of the child, once we have decided on one."

"You remembered." Bilbo sounded almost astonished at this simple fact.

"Of course I did. It was your one request, how could I possibly forget?" Thorin stole another kiss. "Our friends have joined in, if you must know. Dwalin insisted that he should be the one to make a simple bassinet for elsewhere, and the Ur family wish to make another. Dís has made it her mission to ensure we have all the clothing and bed things we might need, seeing how she has more experience than either of us."

"That is certainly true." Bilbo chuckled. "Soon we won't have anything to do to prepare for it. Vati said she'd take care of the goats when I asked her, said it would be easy to do while acquiring things for the kitchens."

"We are lucky to have a lot of people who care for us." Thorin squeezed Bilbo's hand gently before letting go. "Just as I am lucky to have you and our future child in my life."

"My, you are getting rather sappy today." Bilbo gave him a teasing smirk. "Are you not afraid having the child will make you entirely soft, my sweet warrior king?"

"If a love and a child make me soft, then I will be a better king for it." Thorin reached up to tug gently at Bilbo's marriage braid. "But you were seeking me out, I believe, and I hope it was not only for the sake of teasing me. What did you want of me?"

"It's actually not me who wanted you. I happened to run into Nori, and he wanted to talk with you about the new security measures in the kitchens. He said it wouldn't take too long, he just wants to deliver a quick report, so I promised to tell you to expect him after dinner." 

"Excellent." Not that he would admit it, not when Bilbo already accused him of fretting, but he had been worried ever since the whole poisoning incident. They had taken some measures immediately, along with the very public trial and execution of the one responsible, but he would still rest easier once Nori assured him everything was in place.

"What exactly are the new security measures, anyway? Nori didn't mention, but I doubt you are going to post guards at every corner."

"Nothing quite that absurd, no." Thorin shook his head. "We are merely making sure nobody can use food as a way of attacking you or anyone else close to me again."
"And how do you propose to do that?" Bilbo lifted his eyebrows. "You already have a most trustworthy dwarf in charge of the kitchens, what else can you do?"

"Well, for one thing, the servants handling and delivering the food will be working in pairs from now on, to minimise the chance for contamination. Which still doesn't remove the first problem for this, which is that it was easy for the attacker to target you when only you and Tauriel were eating such foods in the court." Thorin paused, waiting for this to sink in before he added, "As such, the best way to prevent any new attacks is to make sure that anything that one of us eats are also shared by the rest of the court."

"Wait." Ah, yes, his hobbit had always been a sharp one. "Are you saying you're making dwarves eat salad for my sake?"

"We are not all quite as averse to green food as young Ori is, you realise. A proper dwarf will eat any food put in front of them, as long as it's in addition to a proper meal and not in stead of it." Then, as Bilbo kept looking at him with a dubious expression, he added, "Yes, we are making dwarves eat salad for your sake."

This actually startled a laugh out of Bilbo, but Thorin could quite easily forgive that when he then leaned in to press a kiss on Thorin's cheek. "You are hopeless, my darling king," Bilbo announced, which, really, Thorin would have thought he had made that clear ages ago. "I appreciate it, I truly do. But you are still hopeless."

"I would have thought you would rather have me hopelessly in love with you than the alternative."

"I did say I appreciate it, didn't I?" This time the kiss was to his lips, which Thorin found much better. Not that there was anything wrong with cheek kisses, either. "Now, come on, it's almost dinner time. If we go early, you can speak with Dís about the design before the boys get there."

"And you get to be the first one at the table, of course." Perhaps he was teasing, just a little, but it was all in good fun, which Bilbo certainly knew perfectly well. "Lead the way, then, my beloved consort. And Nori will be coming by after dinner, then?"

"That is the plan, yes." Bilbo waited for him to stand up before very easily slipping his hand into Thorin's. It felt terribly fragile there, small enough to be almost entirely engulfed by Thorin's fingers. And yet he knew just how reliable that little hand was, knew that it had saved his life and his sanity and succeeded where he had once failed.

Perhaps he didn't need to be quite so worried, so protective of his precious treasure.

And perhaps he might learn to fly while he was at it, if he was dreaming of impossibilities.

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Fíli had been quite content sitting in the bath, eyes closed and enjoying the warmth, when he was startled by the sensation of something cold dropping down on him.

He splashed about for a moment before calming down and opening his eyes to glare at his brother. "What are you doing?"

"Me?" Kíli grinned, shaking off the last droplets of cold water from his hands before stepping into the bath as well. "I just thought you were going to fall asleep so I figured it was my brotherly duty to wake you up before you managed to drown yourself or something unfortunate like that. Mahal forbid I actually end up as the heir."
"And you couldn't just make some kind of a noise? It's not like that's hard for you." He was impressed by how silently Kíli could move when he needed to, particularly given his brother's usual boisterous nature, but he wasn't about to say that. Kíli knew it all too well anyway, he wouldn't have been a very good hunter otherwise.

"Oh, but this was so much more fun." Kíli submerged himself just in time to avoid the splash of water Fíli sent his way, coming back up with rivulets of water running down his face and chest. "So, what were you dreaming about?"

"Nothing important." At least, nothing he wanted to bother his brother with.

"Yeah, because I'm going to believe that." Kíli came closer, looking more serious, now. "You don't think I know what you look like when you're thinking too much?"

"Actually I was doing my best not to think of anything, but it's not like you're going to believe that." Particularly since he had not been very successful. Even in the relaxing heat of the bath, troubling thoughts kept bubbling up to the surface no matter how many times he banished them.

"Indeed I'm not." Kíli took a seat on the bench by the edge of the bath, starting to work open the couple of braids he had in his hair. Fíli knew the diversion for what it was, but he wasn't going to complain, not now. "Can I make a guess?"

"Nothing stopping you, is there?" Fíli sighed, starting to work on his own braids. "Mahal knows I've never been able to get you to stop talking either way."

"Oh, you know me so well." Kíli hummed to himself as though deep in thought, even though Fíli rather suspected he had planned what he was going to say a while ago already. "You seem tired, and have for a while. I don't think your nightmares have been getting any worse, that's always worst in the mornings, so I'll just assume your duties are starting to get to you."

"And can you blame me?" He was not even going to deny that he still had nightmares, sometimes. Kíli would have immediately known such a claim for the lie it was. "Just today, I have attended two different meetings, gone through a heap of paperwork, reviewed Gimli's progress on his project, selected the gemstones for Tauriel's beads, and spoken with Balin about the details of the wedding. After dinner I still have to speak with Thorin about our plans for the mining district. Anyone would be tired with all this going on."

"And not so long ago, you sat judge in a trial."

"Yes, I did." Now, he could not quite bring himself to look at Kíli. "I did what I had to do."

"What is it like?" Kíli's voice was surprisingly quiet, just barely audible even though they were not seated that far apart. "Being the judge."

"It's… different." Fíli sighed, eyes focused on the strands of hair he was unravelling from his braids. At least this was simple. This was something he understood. "I know battle, as do you. Battle is simple. There's no time for thinking, it's either you or them, and if you don't make the decision there won't be time for thinking it over. Afterwards you know if you did well just by looking at whether you're still standing or not."

"But a trial is not a battle." As they both well knew, having tasted the rage and fear and misery of a true battle.

"No, it's not." It was nothing like it. "I thought it would be easy, at the time. I was so angry, both for Bilbo and for Ori, I wanted nothing more than to see them dead. When I found him threatening Ori I
was woefully close to just gutting him then and there, never mind that we needed the information. But then, at the trial... I had to look at a dwarf, a living, breathing dwarf who was flanked by guards and had no way of harming anyone just then, and I had to tell everyone I didn't think he deserved to live."

"Do you regret it, then?" Kili's voice was even softer, now.

"Not for a moment." This, at least, was an easy answer. "That bastard knew what he did, knew that it was an atrocity to even attempt such a thing, and even so he went forward with it. He tried to harm those closest to me, and went against our most sacred laws. He deserved nothing else, and he knew that going in."

"But that still doesn't make it easy, now does it."

"No, it doesn't." Fili shook his head. "Even if I know I did the right thing, both for my family and for the laws of my people, I still wonder what gave me the right to pass that judgement."

"You are the crown prince." And oh, if it only were that simple. "One day, you will be king. Who else would pass the judgement if not you?"

"There are others." And yet he suspected it was no easier for them, either, judging by the look he had sometimes seen in Thorin's eyes after other trials in the past. Not that Thorin would have ever shown it to others, he had to seem firm and unquestioned in all such things, after all, but Fili was close enough and knew him well enough to tell that even his uncle did not always find his duties easy.

It was a relief, in a way. He did not miss the brief but all too painful period when Thorin had found it very easy to demand death and destruction on anyone who wronged him in any manner.

"I'm glad it's not me." As Fili glanced at him, Kili gave him a sheepish shrug. "I mean, not because I want you to do difficult things or anything like that. Just... I'm not sure I could do it, not like you."

"You could if you had to." He knew that without a shadow of a doubt. Kili had a habit of rising up to meet expectations, even when he sometimes voiced doubts about himself. "You are of Durin's blood, as much as I am. If our people needed it, you would take that place."

"Then I pray to Mahal that they never need it of me." Kili's expression was honest and serious, meeting Fili's eyes without any hesitation. "Make no mistake, I will do anything you need of me. I'll be your general and your adviser and your executioner if need be. But for all that, I hope to all my ancestors I won't ever be wearing the heavier crown."

"I hope it never falls to you, either." And not just because that would have meant that Fili had either died or been found somehow incompetent before any other heir had been established. "You know I would never demand those things of you, right? Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to know that you'll be there when I take the throne, but if you wanted nothing to do with it all, I wouldn't blame you."

"I know. And I'm still not going anywhere." Kili managed a faint grin, now, though his eyes still held very little humour. "You're not getting rid of me so easily."

"I'm not trying to get rid of you!" Hadn't he just said he was glad to know he had Kili's support? "I just don't want you to be burdened by what are actually my duties."

"I have duties, too, you know. You are not the only prince our mother birthed." Kili's grin turned into a chuckle. "I'm a poor enough excuse for a dwarf, anyway, with my bow and bare face and my beloved elf. The last thing I wish to do is turn my back on my family as well."
"You are the best dwarf I know." Perhaps he sounded more fierce in his response than he strictly needed, but he wanted to make the point clear. "Blast anyone who tells you otherwise. You know your bow better than Dwalin does his axes, and nothing is more dwarvish than claiming your One regardless of what the rest of the world tells you is right or proper." He paused, then added with a grin, "Though you are right, the bare face is a bit of an eyesore."

Kíli splashed some water in his direction, which he figured was entirely deserved. "You're glad for it, really. Makes your little excuse for a beard look much better in comparison."

"Hey! Mine is growing out quite nicely, I'll have you know." His beard had always been quite thick, even when he kept it cropped short out of respect towards Thorin. Now that he was finally letting it grow, it was forming out to be quite the respectable beard, well worth the fame of the Longbeard line. "Ori certainly doesn't seem to have any complaints."

"He wouldn't. He somehow fell in love with you, it's clear he doesn't have much in the way of standards." This time Kíli was the one dodging Fíli's splashes, because, really. That was not something to say to a long-suffering brother!

"I'm the prettier out of the two of us and you know it!"

"To dwarven eyes, maybe. But I'm not in any hurry to please dwarven eyes." Kíli's grin turned almost giddy, now. "And Tauriel certainly has made no complaints about the way I look."

"Makes me wonder if the stories of the great eyesight of elves are all fabrication and lies." Fíli snorted. "We shouldn't complain too much, though. From the looks of it the future of the line of Durin does not look any more attractive than the present."

"And what do you mean by that?" As though they weren't both entirely aware already.

"Unless we see some true miracle, any heir I might have will be half a dwarf and half something else." Kíli looked startled, which was ridiculous. Wasn't this obvious already? "No matter what Varc may claim, it doesn't matter how much I love Ori or how well I feed him, our love is unlikely to bring us any children of our own. I would be happy to raise a family with him, of course, and if there is any way we can take in a child or otherwise become the parents of one, we will certainly take the opportunity. But as it stands, our greatest hope for the continuation of the line of Durin is the fruit in Bilbo's garden and the stars in your eyes when you look at Tauriel."

"You know the people would never accept that." Kíli looked almost mournful as he shook his head. "Even if they have accepted Tauriel as my bride, to some extent at least, it would be too much to try to bring a half-elven child to the throne."

"Right now? Perhaps so. But then, I'm hoping I won't be taking the throne in quite a while, and that it will be much longer before any heir of mine will bear the crown in my stead. If things have changed enough for Thorin to plan to declare an elf a princess of his house, in front of Mahal and all our people, who's to say how much they will change by the time I step down from my throne?" Or was brought down, either way. He still hoped it wouldn't be for a while. "If I have no child of my own at that time, then the closest heirs I could have are Thorin's child and any offspring you might bring forth. And believe me, I don't plan on going off to pore over family trees to find some suitable cousin or another if there are alternatives closer by."

"On your head be it, then." Kíli's expression was… strange. Fíli couldn't quite tell if he was relieved or troubled by it.

"Aye, so it will be." Fíli moved closer now, reaching out to cup the back of Kíli's neck with his
hand. "You are my brother, Kíli. Any child you might have would be as dear to me as either of us is to Thorin. You are of the blood of Durin, and so will your children be. And if anyone would like to dispute that, they may find themselves going against the King Under the Mountain, whether it be during Thorin's reign or mine."

"It would still be much easier for everyone not to have to struggle with such things."

"Perhaps. And then my choices will be limited to someone with half Hobbit blood, and that is going to be interesting as well." Fíli's lips twitched into a small smile. "We've won the mountain, my brother, stolen it back from a worm and defended it from all the orcs who would have claimed it. Those who do not like how we plan to rule it are welcome to leave."

"Not all of them will content themselves with simply leaving. We've seen that already."

"Aye, so we have. And yet, there have been more threats to my One than yours." Which was not something he was ever going to take lightly, not threats to his precious Ori, but it was, at least, something he could live with. For all that the culprits would not do the same. "Either way, it's useless for us to worry about such things yet. For the time being, Thorin is the king, and my duties are those of a prince. It's going to be a while before I have to start worrying about heirs or lineages, and until that becomes important, I don't plan on spending too much energy on worries that won't come to nothing."

"Which is why you keep worrying yourself over the judgement you already passed, instead."

"Yes. And if it did not weigh on me, I would worry all the more that I'm not qualified to bear those duties." That was, at least, the defence he was going to cling to. "Now, stop worrying about me, you big lunkhead." He leaned forward to bring their foreheads together, though it was a rather gentle touch. "I'll be fine, I promise. It's just going to be a little while before I process it all, the trial and Ori being in danger again and all that."

"Right." Kíli let out a deep breath, and Fíli could see some tension leaving him. "You know you can talk to me if you need to, right? Or if you need me to do something, or whatever. I mean. Just because they're your duties, doesn't mean you need to do it all alone."

"I know, and I'm grateful for it, I promise." Fíli grinned a bit. "Now, we should get back to working on our hair if we want to be in any way presentable by dinner."

"Oi! Some of us don't need ages to open our braids or do them again."

"Oh, I am aware," he said, stepping back just out of reach before he added, "And some of us actually know how to do it all."

There was a lot more splashing after that, but it was worth it for chasing away the last shadows from his brother's face.

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"Is this better than the previous version?"

"Much better." Tauriel smoothed a hand down the waistline of her dress, then belatedly realised how her words could be heard. "Ah! That is not to say that the previous one was in any way flawed, it's just --"

"Don't fret, my friend. I know it wasn't to your liking." Dori's lips curled into a grin around the pins in his mouth as he finished pinning up the seam on the hem. "I'm glad to hear I've managed to bring
"It really is quite lovely." The dress was turning out quite nicely, for all that she had very little experience in judging such things. The bodice was a firm shape that reminded her of her leathers, the sleeves cut in a manner to leave her free movement. Even her skirts, which should have been quite a hindrance with their volume and length, were surprisingly light around her as she took a few steps. "And you are certain this will satisfy any onlookers?"

"Believe me, when I finish my work on this, you will be eyed with admiration or envy and nothing besides those." Dori straightened himself, setting aside the extra pins. "Will you do a turn for me?"

Tauriel turned around, pleased to find the dress moving easily with her as she did so. She still did not foresee herself taking on a habit of wearing skirts all the time, such things were hardly practical in the line of her duties, but she had to admit that for an event where she would have to wear a gown as a matter of course, there could have been worse choices. Dori truly was skilled in his art, there was no denying that.

"You really look lovely," Sigrid said, clasping her hands together. "I can't wait to see you at the actual feast!"

"Well, it won't be too long now, will it?" Dori shook his head. "Goodness, it feels like only yesterday we were just leaving Thorin's Halls and hadn't heard of any engagements, never mind any fiery elves who might steal the hearts of princes! And yet here we are, a world and a lifetime away, and you look quite ready to be a bride."

"Oh, but I would not bring you shame by bringing forth unfinished work from you, Master Dori." Tauriel smiled. "This is quite impressive. And I only mean that in a way of praise."

"I'm only going to take it as such, if you please." Dori stroked his braided beard, looking immensely pleased with himself for his accomplishments. "Sigrid has also been helping me, as it happens. She has been quite helpful in pointing out anything I might need to consider because of your different shape."

"Ah, it's only because I've been working on my family's clothes for so long," Sigrid hurried to counter him. "It's not like I have any special knowledge or anything."

"Nonsense! For us dwarves there's little consideration for things such as sex, especially since many of our lasses don't really have much in the way of bosoms, and those who do are shaped quite differently from you ladies. For most of us any differences in dress are a matter of preference rather than shape. Why, I've been told I'd make quite the fetching dwarven lass if I wished to be one! But you, you are an entirely different shape from your counterparts, and that brings forth some points I would not think to consider if I wasn't reminded of such."

"Well, I certainly find my shape quite flattered in this." Tauriel glanced in the highly polished mirror, a once grand luxury that had been provided for her as a matter of course when she had moved into her rooms in the mountain. They had agreed to do the fitting in her rooms, since as Dori had pointed out, it offered them rather more room and privacy than his workroom, especially with Sigrid also fussing about her. Even without all the final details she could see that the dress would be quite lovely to the eye, and through the magic of Dori's skills she found she did not even dread wearing it.

"I should hope so! I would be quite ashamed if my work for your bridal gown was not flattering, when I have been entrusted such an important task!" Dori seemed about to get started on a lecture about how unthinkable it was for him to do anything but his very best at his work when he was suddenly interrupted by a knock at the door. Not wasting a moment, he glanced at Sigrid. "Do go see
who is at the door, dear."

Tauriel was so taken aback by this easy assumption of liberty in her own rooms that she did not quite manage to speak up as Sigrid hurried to the door. Never mind that she had absolutely not expected such a thing from the usually so very well-mannered and polite Dori, she could have sworn both of her friends were trying to hide smiles. Clearly some sort of a scheme was unfolding, but she had no idea what it was about.

It seemed it was not to stay a secret for long, however, as Sigrid opened the door wide, revealing a broadly grinning Kíli. His grin faltered as his gaze met hers, and for a moment Tauriel almost felt uncertain of her appearance, but then the grin was replaced by a very nearly enraptured smile.

"Well! I knew you would be beautiful when Dori got to do his magics, but I never thought you would be this stunning!" Kíli stepped inside, not caring to wait for an invitation, not that doing so would have changed a thing of course. "I see I'm right on time, then."

"Indeed you are," Dori replied, nodding and thus confirming Tauriel's suspicions. Something was definitely being schemed here. If she'd needed any further proof of it, the fact that her ears caught movement from beyond the still open door would have been quite enough.

"What exactly is going on here?" Tauriel set her hands on her hips, eyeing them each in turn. Clearly something was going on, yet nobody seemed to have seen fit to inform her.

"Oh, you know, just a little thing." Kíli gave her a mischievous smile, taking something from behind his back. It was a small package, wrapped in soft cloth. "I may have asked Dori to do the fitting here so I could present my last gift to you."

"Oh!" Well, that certainly explained the sounds from beyond the door that sounded very much like someone getting elbowed for trying to get too close. As she had been informed when Ori had presented his gift to Fíli, the last official gift of the courtship was something of an occasion, so it made sense that friends and family would want to be nearby to witness it. "But… why would you need to do that? Certainly it is not that rare to find me in my rooms."

"It's more that I wanted you to be wearing your gown when I presented this. Makes everything more proper and all." Kíli stepped closer, and Tauriel was only faintly aware that Dori was stepping away. "Tauriel, my love. I'm here today to present my provider's gift, and the final gift of our courtship. As is the custom, I wish for my gift to show my feelings for you, and also reflect my status and wealth."

Tauriel nodded. "I know." It had been explained to her, after all, several times in fact. The gift of a prince was supposed to be precious indeed, and for all that she would have loved him all the same if he had been a simple hunter rather than a prince brought back from exile, she would not have dreamed of denying him the joy of showing how much he appreciated her.

"You are already my beloved princess from the stars." Kíli's smile had softened into something almost fragile, so intimate it almost felt wrong for him to be showing it with anyone else but her in the room. "When we marry, however, you will also be one by all our laws. And as I know many will protest at our union, my uncle and I both agreed that it would be for the best if my gift made it clear to everyone that you are to be regarded as a princess of the house of Durin."

He handed her the package, now, and through the cloth she felt the clear shape of a circlet. Carefully she opened the package, not sure what to expect. She had been told there would be a circlet made for her before the wedding, for her to wear on formal occasions, much like the princes already had theirs and Ori would receive one as well. However, it hadn't been mentioned for a while, and she had simply assumed someone was doing something about it, somewhere along the line.
Now, as the fabric fell away and left her holding the shining object, Tauriel found herself speechless. The diadem was quite unlike the usual rough lines of dwarven jewelry, its curls and curves even more delicate than the vines and leaves of Bilbo's crown, a fine silver web that rather reminded her of naked branches reaching for the winter sky. What truly caught her eye were the gemstones, though, small, shining things scattered about the web of branches, pale little berries that glittered like distant stars.

"Aren't these…" She trailed off, not quite sure how to finish her sentence. What she was holding in her hands should have been impossible.

"Starlight gems," Kíli finished, confirming her suspicions. "To go with your necklace. Turns out Thorin secreted away more than just one when dealing with Thranduil. The silver, in turn, will match my own circlet." He tilted his head, looking awfully worried for a moment. "Do you like it? I suppose we can have another made in time if we hurry, but it's rarely good to rush these things. It's why I wanted to present this to you now, so there's time to adjust it if it doesn't fit."

"I love it." It was the bare truth of it, after all. "I just… to be perfectly honest, I am not quite sure I am worthy of something like this." The dwarves had plenty of gold and silver, she knew as much, but the starlight gems were something else entirely.

"Nonsense." Kíli stepped closer, his expression earnest as he reached up to grasp her shoulders. "You are my princess, Tauriel, and the house of Durin has precious few of those. The dwarven heart in me wants to wrap you in gold and silver and gemstones, but I know that's not your wish. So at least accept these few things, which carry not only my wishes for you, but also the will of my family to mark you as one of ours."

"I do not feel like a princess, though." And yet she was reaching up to set the diadem on her head.

"I don't feel like a princess, either, and yet people keep telling me I am one." Sigrid stepped closer, now, smiling at her. "If it helps, you look wonderful."

"You really do." Kíli was grinning at her, now. "Of course, you always do, but I also really like seeing you like this."

"You truly are a hopeless dwarf, are you not?" She leaned forward to press a kiss on his forehead. "This feels like exactly the right size."

"Great. There's time for adjustments but it's always better if things are simple." Kíli's grin grew a bit wider. "So, you accept my gift, then?"

"Of course I do. It is absolutely amazing." She smiled, bringing a hand up to touch the diadem again. "I am once again very impressed by the skill of dwarven smiths."

"You should be, we hired one of Dáin's best right away from under his nose." Apparently those outside had decided it was now the time for them to join the moment, as Thorin himself walked in. "The same smith made Bilbo's crown, but since this one had to be a surprise, we needed to estimate the measurements."

"Well, rest assured that it is a perfect fit." Tauriel allowed herself a small smirk. "Should I be concerned that you are apparently using me as a way to get back at Thranduil?"

"Isn't it only appropriate that it will be an elven maiden wearing the gems that his own ambassador couldn't keep track of?" Thorin seemed to have no regret as he stepped forward, drawing Kíli into a quick hug. Then, much to Tauriel's surprise, he gave her an embrace as well. "I have been told you
belong in starlight, after all."

Tauriel tried to come up with a response but found none. Before she could truly recover everyone else was flooding the room, surrounding them with more well-wishes and congratulations and fond gestures, and if Thorin's embrace had surprised her then the one Dís gave her squeezed the breath out of her. The chaos didn't settle until Dori finally announced that they needed to get the dress off Tauriel and would everyone please just leave, and by that time the king had already stepped out to give the others more room.

As everyone started to file out of the room, shooed off by Dori and a surprisingly firm Sigrid, Tauriel carefully took off the diadem, turning it in her hands, watching the gemstones shine and sparkle. It still seemed like more than what might have been appropriate for her, but she could not refuse a generous gift like that. Besides, it wasn't just about her, not anymore.

This was a diadem fitting for a dwarven princess, one who might one day stand beside Kíli as he took his place next to his brother's throne.

And truly, was that not precisely what would be fitting for her?

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"Excuse me?"

It took Olvi a moment to realise that the voice was addressing her. As the question was repeated, though, along with a mention of her name, she spun around, eyes drifting up as she found herself staring at someone's chest instead of their face.

"Your Highness." Hey, just because she was a former soldier and a current tavern owner didn't mean she couldn't have manners.

"Not quite yet, I don't think, and I would not wish for you to call me that anyway." The elf seemed somewhat uncomfortable, though Olvi wasn't sure why. She'd certainly seen Tauriel speak with dwarves before, so that couldn't be the problem, and for all that they hadn't exactly spoken a lot they weren't complete strangers either.

"Very well, then. Tauriel." That made the elf relax a little bit, which Olvi supposed was a good thing. "Did you have need of me? Whatever it is, I hope it can be addressed while we walk. I only have so much time to get my purchases done before I need to get back to the mountain to get everything ready for customers."

"Ah, of course." Tauriel seemed surprised at this, but settled into step alongside her easily enough as Olvi continued her way through the marketplace. There wasn't a lot she needed to pick up, the bulk of her purchases for the tavern were ordered and delivered to the mountain, but she did enjoy stretching her legs occasionally. She enjoyed her job, but even a dwarf could get bored of staring at the same walls all day every day.

"So, what is it you needed me for?" She wasn't one for dancing around the subject, and she rather suspected the elf wasn't, either. Tauriel was a decent enough lass, from what Olvi could tell, though then a warrior maid would always be close to her own heart. Just because she'd left the army didn't mean she couldn't appreciate someone skilled, and she had seen enough training sessions to know that Tauriel was very good indeed for such a thin little slip of a thing. "No offence, but we're not exactly close enough that you would seek me out in a crowd just for a chat."

"Ah, I suppose that is true enough." As Olvi glanced at the elf on her side, Tauriel worried the bead
on one of her courting braids between her fingers, as though that was giving her some strength. "Truth be told, I was hoping you would do me a favour."

"A favour?" Olvi echoed. "And what exactly would you need of me that a closer friend could not provide?" Of course, they would be as good as cousins once everything was said and done, but for now she barely even knew the elf.

"Ah."

"So, out with it. We all need more amusement in our lives."

"It is about the baths."

"It is about the baths." Well. Not that Olvi had been sure what to expect, but that certainly wasn't it. "I mean — whenever the Company gathers in the baths, someone will ask me if I would join them. And every time I turn them down. I know it would not be viewed as inappropriate, not among dwarves, but it still is not something that I am use to."

"Right."

"Well."

"And you'd feel less awkward if it's a dwarven lass advising you, I reckon. And one close enough that you can trust them with the problem, but not so close you'll have to face them every day if you do find it embarrassing." Not waiting for the elf to confirm what she already knew, Olvi nodded. "Fine, I'll go to the baths with you. Are you free tomorrow, around this same time? We don't open until just around when the miners get off work, so there will be plenty of time to get ourselves sorted out."

The elf looked surprised again. "So you agree? Just like that?"

"Should I not?" Peculiar things, elves, asking for something and being startled when it was granted. "We're going to be cousins, we ought to act like it. And it's not like going to the baths is much of a hardship." Even if she had never expected to do so in the presence of an elf, and a future princess no less.

Bofur certainly hadn't mentioned this sort of thing when he had made his offer.

Not that she thought it would have discouraged her, anyway.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

When things take a turn for the worse, the mountain has to spring to action. It's the little things that bring them the solution, though, such as a suspicious stable master and a chattering bird.

Besides new crimes, it may also be time to put some old grudges to rest.

"What's going on here?"

"Thorin." Dwalin frowned, stepping aside as Thorin strode closer. He was standing in front of Bofur's quarters, which in itself was enough of a cause for alarm even if Thorin hadn't been summoned with word of something bad going on. Dwalin was clearly standing guard, here, and he only ever did that if he was forced to do so either by command or actual need. He didn't even look this fierce when standing beside Thorin in court, and at least he was supposed to be guarding the king there. "Something bad has happened."

"Yes, I gathered that much." Though not much more than that, considering that the young servant who'd come to get him from his office hadn't been able to tell him more than where to go and that he ought to hurry. "Is Bofur all right?"

"Aye, Bofur is. It's his betrothed who isn't, and we rather fear there's more to it than that." Dwalin nodded towards the door, and Thorin walked inside. Dwalin didn't follow, but then, he would have made a poor guard indeed if he'd left his post without being told to do so.

Bofur's quarters weren't large, certainly not for a noble, consisting of only a couple of rooms. With such a small size the number of people gathered inside made them seem quite crowded, particularly as all of them seemed to be concentrated in the front room. Thorin frowned as he saw both the princes and Ori there, wearing expressions of various states of anxiety and agitation, with Glóin scowling to the side and Bombur all but wringing his hands.

"Thorin!" Kíli looked up from where he'd been studying a knife, a look of relief passing over his face for a moment before it was replaced with worry once again. "Do you know anything?"

"I know nothing, I'm afraid. I was only told to come here, and that something alarming has happened."

"Ah, yes. We sent for you." Fíli frowned, looking more angry than worried, and that only made Kíli's obvious agitation even worse in Thorin's eyes. There were few enough things that would have made Fíli angry but Kíli worried, and he didn't like any of them very much. "There's been an... incident."

"Right. What kind of an incident?" He almost wanted to shout, to demand answers, but that probably would not have gone too well, not with everyone clearly in some kind of a state already.

Ori sighed. "Olvi was attacked in the baths." Thorin's mind quickly filled in the connection between the name and Bofur's betrothed. They'd only met a handful of times, but he remembered her well
enough. A sensible young dwarf, and a veteran of the battle. "Someone sneaked up on her in one of
the side chambers. We don't know much for now, she was unconscious when she was found by
some others coming to the bath, but it seems she tried to fight her attackers. She doesn't seem to have
any serious wounds that might threaten her life, and Óin is seeing to her now, but we don't know the
details until she wakes up."

"That's not all of it, though, is it." Not with Kíli looking like that, about to bite right through his
lower lip if he wasn't careful.

"Tauriel was there." Kíli's voice sounded choked, his eyes downcast. "I mean, we don't know for
sure, we haven't been able to speak with Olvi yet, but — we found her clothes set aside with Olvi's.
They're hers without a doubt, not many people in the mountain wear such a size, and they were
clearly undisturbed, folded aside before the bath. But — we can't find Tauriel anywhere."

"And you're sure she didn't just change her clothes and forget the old ones there?"

"Even if she had done that, it's doubtful she'd forget these." Kíli reached out the knife he'd been
holding. It belonged to Tauriel, Thorin realised, recognised the familiar shape and form. "All her
weapons and jewelry were there. She wouldn't have left those behind, not like this."

"And I'm assuming we haven't had any reports of a naked she-elf wandering the corridors." Of
course not. A little gossip would have been far too easy an outcome of such a mess. "So you think
she was in the baths with Olvi?"

"That certainly seems to be what the evidence points to." Fíli nodded. "So until Olvi can tell us
otherwise, we'll have to assume Tauriel was in the baths with her when she was attacked. Except if
that is true, then it's much more likely that Olvi wasn't the actual target at all."

"You think Tauriel was attacked and Olvi only happened to be there by chance." It certainly seemed
more likely than the idea of an ordinary tavern keeper being assaulted out of the blue, betrothed to a
lord or not.

"That seems to be what happened, yes." Fíli glanced at Kíli, who was even paler than usual. "Nori's
got his people looking for clues, and we have already alerted the guards to look for Tauriel, but for
now we have very little to go on. We're hoping Olvi can tell us something about the attackers, but at
the moment we can do little but wait."

"We had the lass brought here because it's safer." Glóin finally broke out of his brooding, speaking
up from where he was leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. "Her own apartment is
behind her tavern, near the mining section of the city, and there's a lot of people running around over
there. We figured it's better to have less people to keep an eye on, just in case."

"Wise." Thorin nodded. "If someone is ready to attack Tauriel, they won't hesitate at getting rid of
witnesses. Have her moved to the royal quarters as soon as Óin gives his permission, those are even
easier to guard."

"We also sent word to Bilbo. He should be in the library with Balin right now; we told him to stay
where he is until someone comes to get them." Ori was almost as pale as Kíli, but he was standing
straight enough as Thorin looked at him again, speaking with a quiet but clear voice. "We figured
that if someone was about to attack Tauriel, they might also target Bilbo."

"Good thinking." He could certainly focus a little easier when he didn't have to spend his time
worrying about his husband just now. "Glóin, I want you and Dwalin to stay here for now. I'm
assuming Bofur is with her and Óin right now, he can also stay with you. Don't leave until Olvi can
be moved or until we have a change of plans. Bombur, Kíli, you come with me. We'll stop by the kitchens so you can get Vati home, Bombur, then Kíli and I will get Bilbo and Balin and move them to the royal quarters. Nobody associated with the Company is to go anywhere alone until we have more information." After all, any member of the Company might be in danger if someone had decided to disapprove of Thorin's choice of people to trust.

"And what are Ori and I to do?" Fíli reached a hand to Ori's shoulder, squeezing it in reassurance. Ori was quiet now, fiddling with something. His own knife, Thorin realised, the one Thorin had made for him. This had to be rather difficult for him. After all, he was in much the same position as Tauriel, for all that he didn't have quite as many people disagreeing with his connection to the royal family.

"You two go get the word out to the rest of the Company. It wouldn't do to cause too much panic, and the two of you walking together should not attract too much attention. Also see if you can't get in touch with Nori to let him know where we're going to be. Once everyone's been informed, come join us." He needed all his resources at hand to deal with this kind of a crisis, and a crisis it certainly was.

Nobody attacked a princess of the House of Durin and got away with it.

And if anyone thought to disagree with him over what constituted a princess of his house, well, then they were about to learn a very painful lesson very soon.

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"Are you all right?"

Ori gave a faint smile and looked up as Fíli touched his arm. He hadn't said much ever since they left Bofur's rooms, even as they had now reached nearly everyone in the Company and were just looking for Nori at the moment. "Yes, I am. As well as I can be in a situation like this, anyway. There's no need for you to be concerned."

"You know that I worry whether I need to or not." And he wasn't entirely sure there was no need, not under the circumstances. Not when Tauriel had already been attacked.

"I know, and I wish you didn't. We have more important things to focus on right now."

"This is important, though." Fíli was going to keep insisting, because this wasn't something he was willing to give up on. "If someone attacked Tauriel…"

"If someone wished to attack her just to hurt her, wouldn't we have found her as well?"

"What do you mean?" Fíli blinked.

"To me, it doesn't seem like Tauriel was attacked because someone wished her harm. Well, I don't suppose they are too fond of her, but I don't think it was simply someone who is angry at her or hates her. They didn't even find much blood on the scene, certainly not enough to imply that she was badly injured."

"Then what do you think happened?"

"Someone took her. Which is obvious, yes, but it means that rather than harm her or kill her, someone wants her alive. What it's for, I'm not sure, but at least for the time being, they want to keep her whole or we would have already found evidence to the contrary."

"That isn't much better, you know." Particularly since he couldn't imagine any good intentions that
would inspire someone to do such a thing.

"Not really, no. But it does mean that we have a chance of getting her back mostly unharmed. It also means that unless whoever took her has similar reasons for threatening me, I'm quite safe." Ori shook his head before Fíli could even say anything. "I'm not saying there's no reason to be worried, or that there's absolutely no danger, or that we're overreacting. I could very well be wrong. However, for now, I'm doing my best not to fret too much, or I won't get anything done."

"You're right, of course." Fíli sighed. "Even so, I hope you don't expect me to leave you out of my sight before this has been settled one way or another."

"As long as you are aware one or both of my brothers will probably want to do the same once they hear about this."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise." Fíli moved closer to Ori, leaning in to steal a quick kiss. "We all want to make sure you are safe, after all."

"Fíli!"

The familiar voice made him stop and turn. As he did so, he saw Gimli rushing towards them, and suppressed a groan. Of course. He'd known he had forgotten something important. He just hadn't realised the important thing would be Gimli, whom he had sent out to the jewellers to find gemstones that might work for his bead replica.

"There you are!" Gimli came to a stop in front of them. "I got back from the jewellers' guild and they told me you'd gone to Bofur's place, except when I got there everyone was in a fuss and you were gone again. I've been running up and down the mountain trying to find you!"

"Right, I'm sorry about that." Fíli sighed. "Something came up and I completely forgot." Which was just shameful, he should have remembered something that important, but he hadn't exactly been thinking about anything else but the news.

"No, no, it's fine, clearly it's something important if everyone is rushing about." Gimli wasn't demanding to know, not in as many words, but the curiosity in his eyes was downright burning through Fíli.

"There was an attack." Ori spoke up before Fíli could, not that he was complaining, truly. Clearly Ori was the calmer one right now. "Olvi was injured, and it appears Tauriel is missing. We have people out looking for her, but Thorin said nobody associated with the Company is to be alone in case someone else is targeted as well."

"Right." Gimli nodded, all seriousness and firm determination. "And what should I do?"

This one, Fíli could answer easily enough. "We'll walk you back to my rooms, and then you can stay there to sort through the gemstones. No, don't protest," he hastened to say as he could see Gimli rearing up to argue with him. "I know you would rather help us, but at the moment there isn't much for any of us to do, not until we get more information. Besides, everyone else is gathering in the royal quarters, so if anything comes up that you can help with, we'll be able to reach you quickly."

"But I'm sure I could help with something else!" Of course Gimli would not just listen to him quite so easily. "There must be something I can do!"

"At the moment, the most you can do is not cause more worry for anyone. We will also be retiring to the royal quarters once we have found Nori."
"Then I can just as well walk along with you, right?"

Fíli was about to protest, but then thought better of it. "I suppose it's easier than having you whine."
He made to ruffle Gimli's hair, managing a grin as his young cousin swatted his hand away in
annoyance. "And that way we can keep an eye on you, my young friend."

"I'm not that much younger than either of you!"

"Maybe, maybe not. But I'm your master, and as such it's my duty to protect you, cousin dear."
Now, Fíli actually found himself chuckling, and wasn't that a wonder under the circumstances.
"Don't worry, you'll understand all about responsibility and duty when you're older." Though Gimli
knew protectiveness well enough, and even if Fíli had somehow managed to forget it, he would have
been reminded by the short stubble that did not yet quite cover his cousin's cheeks.

"You sure you want to marry this oaf, Ori? You could still run away, you know."

"Ah, I think it's best for everyone if I do, sooner or later. Goodness knows I wouldn't want to listen
to all the wailing that would follow otherwise." Ori gave them a small but sincere smile, toying with
the many beads in his hair. Fíli knew it for the nervous habit it was, knew that it was only an
extension of Ori picking at his sleeves or mitts, but he chose not to draw attention to it, not now.

Ori was right. There was no reason to work themselves into even more of a nervous fuss.

If Ori had been quiet before, he was now easily drawn into a conversation by Gimli, leaving Fíli as
the quiet one instead. Ori asked Gimli about his progress on his journeyman's piece, while Gimli in
turn asked questions about the various beads in Ori's hair, admiring the wooden mementos of Timpur
as much as he did the golden Master's bead Fíli had crafted for Ori. There was still an undercurrent
of tension to it all that Fíli was sure they all felt, in the way Ori leaned just a little closer to him than
usual as they walked down the corridors looking for Nori, the way Gimli's hand trailed the walls, no
doubt looking for signs of life nearby. Even so, it was good to know they still managed to smile,
even if it was at his expense.

"No, really, you could do so much better than him," Gimli insisted, having apparently taken this
avenue to teasing Fíli as his approach of choice. "He tells the worst jokes, I swear, and let's be
honest, he's just needlessly tall."

"All the more reason to get him down to his knees."

This startled something between a groan and a laugh out of Gimli, while Fíli himself very nearly
choked on air. "Ori!" he protested as he managed to regain his composure enough to at least speak
properly. "Are you trying to get me killed?" Or teased for the rest of his life, really, which wasn't
much better.

"Whatever do you mean?" Ori gave him a gaze that was not innocent at all. "My brothers and
cousins all know that I've shared your bed before, and as I've been telling Gimli, I have every
intention of allowing you to make an honest dwarf out of me."

"Well, that is good to hear." And because Fíli hadn't had enough shocks for one evening, he now felt
a hand settling on his shoulder. "I would hate to hear that the princeling stole my baby brother's
honour and then cast him off."

"My honour is well and truly intact, Nori," Ori replied, apparently not startled at all by the sudden
appearance of his brother. "And we were just establishing nobody is doing any casting off. We have
been looking for you, as it happens."
"Yes, I figured something was going on, what with all the guards in a tizzy." Nori gave Fíli's shoulder one final squeeze before stepping up to their side. "So, why don't you give me the rundown before I start to think too closely about what you were just talking about?"

They had made it almost back to the royal quarters by the time Ori and Fíli were finished with filling Nori in on what had happened and what everyone else was doing. Nori, being Nori, absolutely agreed with Thorin's assessment that no member of the Company should be moving about alone, right before announcing he would be going off alone.

"Let's face it, I'm the least likely to be ambushed," he pointed out as Ori tried to protest, clearly worried for his brother for all that he might have claimed there was nothing to be concerned about for the rest of them. "And it will be much easier for me to catch up on things if I'm moving alone. I'll send word if I find out anything else, all right?"

Fíli couldn't come up with a good enough reason to say no before Nori was already gone, vanishing down the corridor. "Great," Ori murmured, echoing Fíli's own sentiments. "Dori is going to be worried enough as it is, now he's going to fret even more."

There was a lot of fretting going on, as it turned out, with the entire royal family and several other members of the Company gathered in the entrance room. The reactions varied from Kíli's constant agony to Dwalin's barely frowning stoic face, but it was clear everyone was worried in one way or another. Ori was immediately accosted by Dori, while Glóin dragged Gimli away for what Fíli could only imagine was making sure he was, indeed, there. Fíli himself took the moment to find Dwalin, who was currently having a serious discussion with Thorin, and informing him of Nori's plans.

He wasn't sure what was worse, the way Dwalin frowned or the fact he didn't look surprised at all.

Even with Nori and the guards all looking for clues, they had no further information by the time night fell, and the lack of news continued for several hours afterwards. Glóin had taken his family home after some debate, while others found spots in the various seats or quiet corners to catch quick naps. Fíli was still awake, though, quietly keeping watch over Ori, who had fallen asleep against Dori's shoulder, and Kíli, who occasionally glanced towards the door as though contemplating rushing out in search of his love. Fíli rather suspected it was only Thorin's lingering frown that held him back, though he wasn't sure even that would be enough before long.

Truly. How difficult could it be to find one elf in a mountain full of dwarves?

When the door was opened and a guard looked in, Fíli wasn't the only one who shot up to his feet. However, he was somewhat surprised to find himself being addressed. "Your Highness?" The guard's eyes hopped to Fíli after only a brief bow to Thorin and Bilbo's direction, and wasn't that interesting. Clearly this wasn't about the incident, at least not directly. "There is a visitor for you."

"Who is it?" Fíli frowned. He wasn't aware of anyone who would have come to see him specifically, certainly not at this late hour.

"Talli, daughter of Hepo. Says she's from the royal stables."

"Right!" What would Talli be doing here? Fíli doubted she would have come to seek him out in the middle of the night for no reason. "Show her in."

"Yes, sir." The guard vanished from the doorway, quickly replaced by the rather hesitant form of Talli. Fíli strode forward, remembering her shyness around royalty and not wanting to worry her too much with all the people gathered in the entrance room.
"Good evening, Talli." He had a feeling his smile wasn't quite as bright as he could have hoped, but then he supposed it wasn't much of a surprise. People at the stables must have heard something was going on. "What can I do for you?"

"Ah. I don't want to bother you, it's probably not that important." Talli looked hesitant, eyes flickering past Fíli to the other people gathered in the room. "It's just, I heard we were supposed to report anything suspicious happening at the stables?"

"Right." He could barely even remember giving those instructions, wasn't actually sure if it had been him or someone else. It had been a long day, and he couldn't keep track of everything that had happened. He suspected Talli would have come to either him or Ori either way, seeing how she had actually dealt with them before. "Did something happen, then?"

"Ah, not right now, no. It's just, I was away for the day and just came in to check in on the night shift. And, well, when I looked over the records for the day, I noticed something strange." Talli was tugging at her beard in a nervous manner, not quite meeting his eyes.

"What is it?" Fíli could hear footsteps approaching, others no doubt growing curious, but kept his attention on Talli. No reason to scare her further by drawing attention to the fact that there were other people coming up to them.

"There was a shipment going out of the mountain this evening. Not ordered by the court or anything, but they hired the ponies from us, a lot of merchants do that." Talli drew a deep breath. "And that wouldn't be so strange, except for a couple of little things. For one thing, it was a cart of hay. We don't take that out to Dale, we bring it into the mountain for the animals. There's no reason for anyone to take hay out to Dale, they have more of it than we could ever hope."

"That does sound suspicious." Fíli frowned. A cart full of hay would have been quite enough to conceal one elf. "And the other thing? You said there were more than one."

"The one who hired the ponies was the old stable master. The one who signed the records was quite clear on it, they'd given him a discount for the fee, so they wouldn't have had any doubt."

"Do you know where they went?" Dwalin's voice might have startled Fíli if he hadn't already felt the presence looming close behind his shoulder. Talli was not quite as prepared, jumping a little. "You said out to Dale. There any word on who to?"

To her credit, Talli recovered quickly, drawing herself up to answer. "Well, we don't keep any records on that sort of thing, not for anything that's not for the royal court, it's enough that we know the one paying the fee and how long they will be gone. I asked around, though, and one of the stablehands who was also there in the evening said he heard the old stable master talking with the dwarf he was working with. Said they mentioned someone called Loka."

At Dwalin's sharp intake of breath, Fíli glanced over his shoulder. "I take it you know who to turn to?"

"Never met the dwarf," Dwalin replied, but his face was a mask of absolute fury. "But from what I've heard before, I'll be glad to make an acquaintance between his face and my axes."

Well. This was certainly going to be interesting.

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As far as Tauriel was concerned, the indignity of waking up naked in a strange place was only slightly overshadowed by the embarrassment of having been overpowered and knocked out in the
first place, unarmed or not. The pieces of straw she found stuck in her hair were simply the final insult on top of the injury.

Tauriel might have felt grateful that her captors at least tossed her a blanket to keep her warm, but from the grumbles she caught from outside the door, it had less to do with preserving her dignity and more with stopping her from using her vile elven charms to enchant any more honourable dwarves. Which, please. There was nothing vile about her charms, thank you, and she was quite certain Kíli would agree with her.

Aside from the blanket, though, she had very little in the way of comforts. By the time she woke up, she had found herself in a small room that held nothing but dust and a few drag marks where they must have removed some remnants of furniture. Her captors were outside, she could hear them talking well enough, though she had only seen the face of the one who brought her the blanket. They were speaking Khuzdul, no doubt believing this would hide their intentions from her, and she wasn't about to disabuse them of the notion. Certainly not when she had yet to hear anything actually useful.

They were not entirely incompetent, that much was clear. There was a small window in the room they had her held in, but it was far too small for her to fit through it, and though she tried she could not work to make it larger. Then, she supposed if anyone would have paid attention to the stability of the stone, it would be dwarves. Looking out of the window, she saw even in the darkness that they were in one of the abandoned parts of the city, so trying to alert a passerby would be useless. Honestly, she was surprised there was such a well-preserved building left unoccupied, though then she had not seen outside the room she was held in. For all she knew, this was the only intact room left. At least they had enough faith in her abilities not to try to keep her prisoner somewhere without a ceiling. This didn't stop her from passing her time looking for some weakness or another in her impromptu cell, studying the walls with her hands as the darkness kept her from using her eyes, but she could find no sign of a crack or other weakness that she would even know how to exploit.

Hearing the singing of birds outside the window as dawn arrived, she figured they might have been just incompetent enough.

It took her a moment of lingering by the window and whistling, particularly since she didn't dare be very loud, but after trying long enough, she managed to tempt a little thrush to her windowsill. It eyed her curiously, cocking its head one way and then the other, and Tauriel wondered if it might have been one of the birds she had met when she had stayed with Bard.

"You know the king, right? Bard the Bowman?" The bird didn't react, though then, Tauriel had no idea if it could understand her at all. She had never been particularly talented at reading animals, not beyond what she needed to know to hunt, but she knew that the birds of this area were of particular intellect, so she was hopeful. "I need you to take a message to him. I am being held prisoner here, and I need help."

It wasn't something she would easily admit, even in such quiet company. She was a fighter, always had been, and did not like relying on others to keep her safe. However, for all her skills and strength, she was still unarmed and already injured against several armed dwarves. She could defend herself if they tried to get too close, but she doubted they would give her the chance. All she could do right now was avoid drawing their attention and hope the message reached Bard soon.

Someone would pay for this, make no mistake.

*  

The habit of waking up early, Bard had come to notice, was almost as valuable to a king as it was to a lowly bargeman.
Granted, he no more had to steel himself for going out into the cold mists soon after waking, or even wake up in the chill of a morning on the river, which made the habit much less unpleasant to keep up. He didn't even need to make his own breakfast, which was the strangest thing of all. He'd had plenty of time to grow accustomed to eating food that hadn't been prepared by either himself or Sigrid, but somehow breakfast time was the moment when his mind still struggled to remember that this was his reality, now.

He had now made it through this daily moment of quiet disturbance, sitting in his office and going through some paperwork while eating. There was nobody for him to deal with quite yet, most of those involved in politics preferred to wake up at a later hour, but that was precisely why Bard liked to use his mornings to prepare for the day ahead. For one thing, taking care of such things in the mornings meant he could steal away a couple of hours in the evenings to spend with his family.

No matter how much work there was to do, he wasn't about to let this new life take priority over his children. Not when they were the reason he was working so hard.

A chirp drew his attention from the document he had been perusing, not that it took much to distract him from the particularly dull details of recent trade. Looking up, he found a thrush hopping at his window sill, clearly trying to get his attention. Well, wasn't that interesting. The birds rarely came to him unless they had something important to say.

"Well, hello there." He tore off a piece of his bread — freshly baked and still warm, someone had woken up well before dawn to bake this bread for his breakfast, and what was the world coming to when that sort of a thing happened — and walked over to the window. "Are you hungry?"

The bird was, they always were, but to his surprise it didn't immediately attack the bread. "I have a message," it said instead, looking up at him with beady little eyes. "A message for Bard the Bowman."

Moments later Bard was striding out of his office, breakfast forgotten.

He wasn't the only one who had stuck to old habits, finding Sigrid already up and eating her own breakfast. When she saw his serious expression, any lingering hints of sleep vanished from her eyes. "Da? Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid so." Bard sighed, mentally running over everything that needed to be done. "I need you to take a message to Erebor for me. You go to the mountain often enough, nobody should wonder if you go there a bit early today. Dori may not expect you just yet, but I have a feeling he won't mind being woken up for this if need be." He waited until she nodded, then went on, "If anyone but one of the Company asks, you are simply there to see Dori. I don't care if you know someone, or if they seem trustworthy. Do not speak to anyone else."

"Da, I am not actually a child anymore." And no, she wasn't, much though it pained him to admit it. "I managed not to tell any inconvenient truths to the Master's men, I think I can manage a little bit of secrecy."

"Right. Of course." He rather wished he could have offered his children a life where such things were not necessary, but it had not been his call to make. "When you see one of the Company, or better yet one of the royal family, tell them that Tauriel sent me a message. She is being held prisoner in Dale by some dwarves. I will ready my guards and keep an eye on the situation, but I would rather have them here before moving, to avoid any further incidents."

"Tauriel is what?" Sigrid looked shocked, not that he could blame her. She and Tauriel had become something of friends during the time the elf had lived with them, Sigrid having few enough people of
her own gender and relative age to turn to. Of course she would be shocked to hear her friend was
being held prisoner.

"She's in one piece from what I hear, but she will need help. Just take the message, as quickly as you
can. We'll take care of this, don't worry."

"Right." Sigrid rose from the table, leaving the rest of her breakfast waiting. "I'll go right away."

"Just one more thing before you go." Which he didn't truly like saying, but he knew he needed to,
either way. "Find a dress of yours that you think will fit her. From what I hear Tauriel isn't exactly
dressed, and I don't think she'd appreciate not having any alternatives if we have to move in before
the dwarves get here."

Sigrid's expression turned into one of even more dismay before she visibly steeled herself, simply
nodding before she rushed out of the room. Bard glanced after her, then marched in another
direction, calling for his guards. If they insisted on always lurking about, they might as well make
themselves useful for once.

It was, a traitorous part of his mind whispered, still better than another bloody council meeting.

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Kíli was going to kill someone.

This was no exaggeration, no joke or even an empty threat uttered in anger. When he found out the
people who were behind this conspiracy against his beloved, he was going to make sure they all
ended up dead.

It was almost comforting to see he was not in the least the only one with such thoughts in mind, not if
the look on Thorin's face when they received a message in the wee hours of the morning was of any
indication.

Ransom. Someone had the gall to take his Tauriel hostage and then demand ransom for her, as
though his beloved princess were nothing but a trinket to be bartered over. If it had only been gold
that would have been fine, Kíli had as much claim to the treasure as anyone in the Company and
would have gladly paid to ensure the safety of his beloved, except he knew it could not be
guaranteed, not really. Whoever had devised this plan was either bold or desperate, and certainly did
not plan to ever return to the mountain, not if they had not even tried to conceal their identity. Such
things did not bode well for Tauriel's safety if an exchange was made.

Kíli wasn't sure he had ever felt so helpless in his life.

Dwalin let him trail along as he walked around the mountain interrogating his guards the smallest
inkling of a clue as to where in Dale Tauriel was held, which Kíli suspected was mostly to make sure
he didn't run off on his own but was grateful for nevertheless. At least it let him pretend he was doing
something, for all that he was actually doing very little.

It also allowed him to see how utterly offended the guards were to hear that someone had dared to
attack their captain, elf or not. That helped a little when he felt like the entire world had to be
conspiring against him and his love.

Kíli was very nearly ready to announce that they should just march on Dale and scour through every
last building until they found Tauriel, never mind that such an approach would have caused an
incident to be sure and would have only alerted the criminals, when they finally came across a guard
who actually had something to offer. Or, rather, someone.
"Captain!" A young guard, no doubt a new recruit, saluted as she saw Dwalin marching closer. "I haven't left my post, Captain! It's my turn today to escort Princess Sigrid."

"I can see that." Dwalin turned a sharp gaze to Sigrid, who was following the guard with entirely too innocent an expression. Kíli was not aware of everyone's schedules, of course, but he was fairly certain that this was too early for Sigrid to show up in the mountain. "You've made an early morning, my lady."

"Ah, yes. Master Dori sent word yesterday evening and requested my presence early today." Which was a lie, it had to be a lie, Dori had been in the royal quarters all evening and he damn well hadn't had the presence of mind to send any messages or to do much else besides fret over his brothers.

"I see." Dwalin nodded, his thoughts no doubt following the same track Kíli's had. "Well, we can take you the rest of the way. You can return to your post."

"Sir!" The guard saluted again, then hurried off, apparently not even pausing to question the fact that they had just been coming from the opposite direction. Not that Kíli could blame her, Dwalin could be quite hard to question.

"So." Dwalin crossed his arms over his chest. "Something the matter in Dale?"

"Da sent me to bring a message to you." Any hints of a polite smile fled Sigrid's face, replaced by utter seriousness. "Tauriel's being held in Dale and asked for help."

"You heard from Tauriel?" Kíli wasn't even sure if he felt more relieved or terrified. "How is she? Has she been hurt?"

"We haven't seen her yet, but Da said she should be in one piece. He knows where she's being held, and is keeping eye on things with his guards; he said he'd rather not move in unless he has to, not until we've told you."

"Aye, makes sense." Dwalin gave a gruff nod. "There's dwarves scheming, would look awful if his guards came down on a bunch of dwarves without even trying to alert us."

"We have to go there," Kíli said, all too aware that his voice was very nearly cracking with worry. "We have to go to her right away."

"Don't worry, lad." Dwalin set a heavy hand on his shoulder. "We'll be there before you know it."

For all of Dwalin's promises, it felt like an eternity passed as they found another guard to take Sigrid to the royal quarters, and then another as they hurried to the stables, getting ponies from the rather upset young stable master. Kíli knew that the ride to Dale, at least, did not take very long, not with their rested ponies and the well-tended road, but he could have sworn he had aged a century by the time they reached the gates of Dale, a pair of guards flagging them down.

"His Majesty is waiting for you," one of the guards said, a young man Kíli remembered from one of the times he had done archery practice with the men of Dale. "I'll show you the way, if you'll follow."

The streets of the city were still mostly empty, people slowly waking up to the day, yet Kíli could have sworn every last person awake insisted on walking before them, each one slowing them down for another moment of precious time. He refrained from whining, though, focusing only on following their guide. The sooner they got there, the better.

He wasn't too surprised as they were led to an abandoned part of the city, the quiet streets making
way for entirely empty ones. Bard was indeed waiting for them, along with a number of guards, all on edge.

"I see Sigrid found you, then." Bard nodded in approval. He was armed, Kíli couldn't help noticing, and looking even more grim than usual. Then, he seemed to have taken some fondness to Tauriel as well. It was very easy to do so, Kíli had noticed.

"Aye, she did. We came as soon as we could." Dwalin nodded in return, not wasting time on pleasantries even though they were technically dealing with a king. Kíli rather suspected Bard preferred it this way. "What do you know?"

"She is being held in a building two streets down." Bard indicated a direction toward the edge of the city. "I have a couple of lads keeping an eye on things, they're stealthy enough not to get noticed. We thought we'd rather not attack before you were here, not unless we need to."

"Good thinking." Dwalin nodded. "If they are on their guard at all they'll know the moment we approach, there's enough stone around here that any dwarf with a half decent sense for stone will notice us coming. We won't have much time, so once we go in, we'll have to act."

"Makes sense." Bard nodded at a guard captain who was hovering at his shoulder, receiving a quick salute in return. "How do you want to deal with this? They are your people, after all."

"Kill them all." Kíli was almost surprised to hear his own voice, but only almost. It was, after all, what he had been thinking of this whole time.

He expected Dwalin to protest, but instead found his old teacher nodding. "We'll take them down by any means necessary. If that means killing them, that's fine, though I suspect Thorin would prefer someone to take to trial for this." After a pause, he reached into his pocket, taking out a sheet of paper that had been folded over a couple of times. "This one should be left alive, though. We've reason to believe they're behind all this."

Kíli peered at the paper as Bard took it. It was the face of a dwarf, one who looked vaguely familiar though he wasn't sure he had ever met them. Bard nodded, passing the picture then along to his own captain.

"We'll do what we can." Bard gave them a grim look. "At your lead, then."

Kíli was ready to scream, he had waited for this so long.

As Dwalin had suspected, they did not take their enemies entirely by surprise, but that didn't matter. Their opponents fought well enough, but it was clear they relied more on their superior numbers than their skill, which was not much consolation when Dwalin's axe and Kíli's sword started cutting them down one by one, easily picking out targets in the closed quarters, Bard's guards making sure nobody got out.

It was a short battle, but Kíli did still find some satisfaction.

"Sir!" One of Bard's guards rushed to them as Kíli was still torn between cleaning his sword after taking down the last opponent and simply hurrying off in search of Tauriel, all practicality be damned even with Dwalin right next to him. "Sir, we found a barred door further in the building!"

"That would be what we are looking for, then." Bard nodded. "I think this was best left for Prince Kíli, though." Kíli was about to rush off in the indicated direction as he so desperately wanted to, only for Bard to stop him with a raised hand. "Something from my daughter." He drew something from a bag at his side, offering it to Kíli. Kíli took it into his hands, realising with a start that it was, in
fact, a dress.

Kíli remembered the clothes they had found folded away, swallowed, and nodded.

It was a good thing he all but burst into the room as soon as he managed to push the bar aside and open the door, still, as it gave him the momentum to dodge the incoming attack. Putting some distance between himself and the attacker, he then stood, spinning to face his opponent.

"Tauriel?" And it was Tauriel, of course it was, his beautiful Tauriel who somehow looked even more beautiful than before, even with dust matting her hair and an old blanket haphazardly knotted around her body. "Tauriel! Are you all right?"

"Kíli?" Tauriel froze, looking still prepared to attack, before rushing towards him with rather less threatening intentions. She threw her arms around him, and he replied in kind, spinning her about just because he could. "You came!"

"Of course I did, as soon as I knew where you were." He grinned, setting her down on her feet. "Though I would have expected a warmer welcome."

"I could not be sure who was coming, now could I? All I knew was that people were fighting outside, and while I could tell that some of the voices were those of men, that did not mean they were necessarily here to help me."

"Well, I promise you we’re here for your rescue." His grin faded, then, as he traced his fingertips along her arm. There were bruises forming under her fair skin. "Are you all right, my love?"

"Never better." At his dubious expression, she allowed herself a small smile. "My head is still aching from being struck unconscious, and I received my fair share of injuries before that, but I assure you, I am fine."

"Right." Kíli made to offer her the dress, now, but found himself clutching onto it still even as she tried to take it. "You aren't... they didn't..."

"Beyond the fight to capture me, they did not harm me in anyway, my heart." Tauriel gently coaxed the dress from his hands. "They did not even enter the room after closing me in here, except to give me the blanket. I promise you, I am fine."

"That's... that's good." Because he did not dare even contemplate the alternative.

Tauriel did not wait for him to turn around before unknotting her makeshift covering, and so Kíli found no reason to do so at all even as the blanket fell away from her body. There was no arousal in his gaze, anyway, his mind unable to focus on such things with all the worry still filling his mind, instead carefully cataloguing each and every bruise and scrape on her body before they were covered by the dress Sigrid had loaned her. For all that Tauriel assured him she was fine, there were too many such injuries for Kíli to be anything but both furious and worried out of his mind.

"Ah." Tauriel paused in pulling her hair out from under her dress. Her courting braids were still there, Kíli noted, giving him rather mixed feelings. "How is Olvi?"

"She'll be fine, or so Óin says." Small blessings. "She only woke up shortly before we left, and couldn't tell us much except that you were attacked by dwarves she did not recognise, but there should be no serious injuries now that she's woken up."

"I am glad to hear that." Tauriel sighed. "I hate to think that I put her in peril simply with my company."
"It's not your fault, my love. It never could be." He could hear people gathering outside the door, suspected they would soon lose their moment of privacy, but for now there was nothing in the world besides him and his beautiful Tauriel. "The only ones at fault are the idiots who attacked you and no one else, and those of them who still live will soon pay for their mistakes."

"I am sure they will, my love." Tauriel leaned closer to steal a quick kiss from him, then straightened herself as Dwalin's heavy knock echoed at the door, perfectly poised and composed by the time the door opened a moment later and they weren't alone anymore.

"I see you are in one piece indeed." Dwalin nodded at Tauriel, but Kíli could see the relief he was hiding underneath his gruff exterior.

"That I am." Tauriel's lips twitched as she added, "Though, amusingly enough, I find myself rather in need of a bath."

Kíli hadn't thought he could laugh, not now, not yet, not when he still stank of the blood of traitors and his beautiful Tauriel was hiding bruises under her dress, yet somehow the remnants of nerves and rage alike bubbled to the surface in helpless laughter.

If someone called him mad for it, well, it was still the best madness his line had brought forth.

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The dungeons of Erebor were not designed to be a pleasant place.

Granted, they were also not unpleasant on purpose, having been built for justice rather than cruelty, but it was clear enough that the comfort of prisoners was not of very high importance. The stairs down were deep and narrow, and while there were lights here and there, the general area was still very dimly lit. As Dori walked between the rows of cells, most of them empty, he could hear the dripping of water somewhere.

An idle part of his mind wondered if Nori could have escaped from one of these cells. Another part posited that he probably already had, simply for his own entertainment.

He came to a halt just a moment before Balin's steps beside him did, pausing in front of a cell containing a familiar form. Loka was hunched over on his bed, shoulders set in helpless rage, but as he heard movement his head snapped up.

"So it is you, then." Dori was almost impressed at how level his own voice was. "And to think that all this time I hoped they might have been mistaken somehow."

"And you're here to gloat, I see." Loka spat at the ground, standing up and striding to the bars that separated them. "You think this will go well for you, then?"

"Actually, I do believe so." Dori nodded. "Both a stable hand and Lady Tauriel herself heard your name mentioned in conversation, and you were found at the scene of the crime. Even if we didn't have the testimony of one of your henchmen, your sentence would be clear."

"I have done nothing." And could he truly still claim that, even after Dwalin himself had caught him guarding Tauriel's prison?

"I'm afraid the court is probably going to disagree." Balin's voice was perfectly reasonable, almost amiable, yet it drew him an angry gaze from Loka. "Treason is a serious crime. And, coupled with your past offences, there is no doubt of your sentence."
"Do you really think you can get away with this?" And was Loka truly asking this from them? "You want me put down as a traitor? Fine, you'll be the son of a traitor, then. There's no stain you can bring to my name that won't be on yours as well."

"I'm afraid you are quite mistaken." And oh, Dori took no small pleasure in saying that. "You are not, and never will be, my father."

"We both know that's not true." Loka's face twisted into a mad grin. "And I have friends enough to make sure everyone will hear that."

"It will be quite difficult for them to do that when I already have a father."

"Indeed." Balin nodded, quite serious, as he set a hand on Dori's shoulder. "I was quite young back then, perhaps, but people have done more foolish things in their youth. I am glad to acknowledge my son after all these years, if it will keep your lies at bay."

"That's a lie." It was true madness that now flashed in Loka's eyes, brought on by anger and desperation built up over decades and decades of resentment. "That's a fucking lie! He's not your son, he never was!"

"He is now, when I swear so before a court of law. And who would question me? You, who will be declared a traitor before all our people and Mahal himself?" Balin shook his head. "No, you will not take anyone down with you. You will be cast out of memory and leave nothing in this world, your name and your line forgotten."

"You will regret this."

"Actually, no. I don't think I will." Dori shook his head. "Farewell, then. I will be sure to attend your trial, if only to make sure that you are indeed dead."

He heard the impotent yelling echoing far along the hallway as they walked away.

"Thank you for this," he murmured to Balin as a guard led them back up the stairs. "I know you don't need to do that."

"Oh, but I do." Balin offered him a small smile. "That dwarf has tormented you and your brothers quite enough, and as such caused a lot of grief for my own brother, for all that they have never met before. If I can make his last attempt at ruining your life fall apart, I will only be glad to do so."

"Even so, I am thankful." He was all the more thankful as they finally made it out to the corridors of the mountain proper. "He has been a shadow behind my back all my life. I will be glad to be free of him."

"I suspect you will not be the only one." Balin paused, then added, "Ah, before I forget. Gimli said he wanted to speak with you."

"Gimli?" Dori blinked. "What would he have to do with me?" He certainly couldn't imagine any reason for Balin's young cousin to approach him. Their closest connection was Gimli's apprenticeship to Fili, and he couldn't imagine that would require Gimli to have anything to do with him.

"I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. He did say it was something to do with a bead, though." The words were light enough as Balin spoke them, not even noticing that Dori had stopped walking. "Something about a matching one?"
Well, of course.

His life could never truly be simple.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Getting ready for a wedding can be a lot of work. Sometimes, though, the most interesting things happen outside the party, as Thorin finds in the garden.

"My goodness. You really do have a lot of hair, don't you?"

"I do not think this should come as a surprise to you." Tauriel resisted a smile, sitting still as Olvi combed through her hair. "It is quite the obvious feature, I would think."

"Yes, well, I didn't expect it to be so much, you elves have such fine hair after all." Olvi clicked her tongue, setting the comb aside at last. "And where are the others? I wasn't under the impression I would be dressing you alone."

"That isn't the intention, either." Tauriel shook her head. "Dwalin is getting my armour, the smiths wanted to make some last moment adjustments, and Balin is checking in on the princes. I would suspect it has been a busy morning over there, with two of them to be wrestled into a somewhat presentable state."

"Goodness, yes. I'm quite happy not to have to be dealing with them over there. It will be bad enough trying to get your beloved prince into a presentable state for the feast."

"Now, I am sure he won't be that much trouble." Or so she hoped. "Ah. Thank you, for being here. I know we are not very close friends, or anything."

"I would say fighting the same enemies without a stitch on either of us makes us quite close indeed," Olvi snorted, separating out a section of Tauriel's hair. "And we'll be cousins in due time. Besides, you needed someone to help you dress, and I figured you'd like another lass to do that, except all the others you know are busy with infants of their own."

"Well, there is Lady Dís, but she is helping her sons." Somewhere not very far from here, Kíli was being decked out in his most impressive armour, just for her.

"Isn't that what I said?" She could hear the smirk in Olvi's voice. "I'm happy to help where I can. Besides, it means you'll have to do the same for me when I get around to marrying. I've got little enough family left, and none of them in the mountain. Well, unless you count my workers, and one cook and some Dale lads won't be much help."

"I'm sure they would do their best, at least." She had heard quite a few stories about Olvi's employees. Bofur liked to tell stories, of course, and lately many of them had centred around his lovely betrothed, and it seemed no tale about Olvi could be told without a mention of the workers she had taken under her wing.

"Oh, sure, but in some cases enthusiasm isn't a substitute for actual skill." Olvi snorted, and Tauriel could feel the quick tug tug tug of her hair getting braided in some complicated pattern or another. "Did you know Bofur actually included them when he gave me his provider's gift?"

"Really?" Tauriel blinked. "What do you mean?"
"Well, for one thing, he seemed to find it appropriate to gift me a house. A house! I know he's a lord and all, and that he's got a share in the treasure, but still! It's a lovely little place too, not far from my tavern but in a more peaceful part of the mountain. And like that's not enough, he made it a big one, too. Not big as in enough for him and me and a family some time in the future, but big enough that I can have my lads move in there, so I don't have to fret about them not getting up early enough. And that's not just me thinking that, the bloody oaf actually said he chose it just for that purpose, even had the doorways made bigger just for them!"

"It seems he knows what is important to you, then." Tauriel smiled, taking a clasp from the box in her lap and giving it over to Olvi as the dwarf reached a hand forward. Kíli had long since made sure she had plenty of pretty trinkets for her hair if she felt like wearing any. "And wants to keep you safe, I suspect. I heard they were quite worried after the attack that your apartment might not be secure enough."

"What nonsense." Olvi snorted, but she did not sound entirely displeased. If anything, Tauriel could have sworn she heard a tone of something almost like smugness in her voice. "I suppose I ought to start thinking of my own gift for him, now. Can't keep dragging my feet when he's already given me both of his gifts."

"Well, our friends are certainly getting very skilled at the art of arranging weddings."

"Mahal forbid mine be anything like yours." Olvi clicked her tongue, letting the now finished braid fall and taking another section of hair into her hands. "Don't get me wrong, it's all nice and grand and that's good for two princes, but I'll be happy with much less."

"I would be just as happy if it were just the two of us and Eru himself, but I will also not complain about this." For all that it seemed rather overwhelming at times. "I knew when I accepted his suit that he was a prince of Erebor, knew that our courtship would be ruled by that. I knew that, and I still accepted, because wearing a gown and dancing in front of all the nobles of Erebor and surrounding kingdoms is a small price to pay for seeing his smile and knowing it belongs to me."

"My, my. You sure sound smitten with him."

"Is this a surprise to you?" Tauriel chuckled. "I am an elf, about to wed a dwarf, in front of representatives from Rivendell, Greenwood and Lorien, no less. What reason besides love could you imagine for my doing so?"

"Well, some do say you're scheming to bring ruin to the house of Durin with some sort of evil elf magic," Olvi replied without missing a beat. Well, Tauriel had already known her to be quite blunt. "Which is utterly ridiculous, of course. Anyone who's seen how the prince looks at you would know there's no spell that could possibly make him so smitten."

"Ah. Thank you for your reassurance, I suppose." And somehow, it did help settle her nerves. "I would worry about that, but really, as long as his family is convinced that I have no ill intent, there is hardly anyone who could hope to protest." And somehow, Thorin, Fíli, and Dís had all found their way to approving her, along with the rest of the Company.

"You are having the king's cousins help you prepare for your wedding. I would say you have been well and truly accepted by anyone who matters." Olvi was doing quick work of her hair, which was a good thing. Balin had thought up quite the number of braids for her to wear, most of which Tauriel was sure she could not have woven in on her own.

"I will keep that in mind." And she might have said something more, but then said cousins marched in one after the other, Dwalin carrying a perfectly polished armoured chest plate and a chain mail that
Tauriel was quite sure she had never fit a single dwarf, Balin worrying over some document or another only to smile as he looked up at her.

Well. She supposed she should stop worrying about such things and instead focus on the things that actually mattered, such as the multitudes of braids that were to stay in his hair only for a moment before getting unravelled again for the feast, all for the sake of following traditions that were not her own but would become so as she made her vows.

Today, she would not allow anything but happiness.

*

"May we come in?"

Ori looked to the door of the rooms he still shared with his brothers for the day, smiling as he saw Bofur and Bifur peeking in from the doorway. "Please do!" He might have motioned for them to step closer, but Dori had his hair in a firm grip that would probably have pulled out some if he'd tried to move even the slightest bit. "I did ask you to come, after all."

"Oh, aye, but seems still polite." Bofur and Bifur both stepped in. They were dressed in their finest, Bofur wearing the coat Dori had made for him, and Bifur carried a sharp, gleaming spear on his back. "Well, aren't you a sight! Don't think I've ever seen you quite like this, lad."

"I feel more awkward than anything." Ori flushed, looking down at the armour his brothers had put on him. It was very nice and gleaming and everything, but not nearly as comfortable as his usual tunics and robes. "You know I'm not a warrior, I'm not used to this kind of thing. I'll be very happy when I can take all this off and just wear some nice clothes instead."

"I know you don't like it, but this isn't about what you like, not as such." Dori managed to sound sharp even as he wove yet another meticulous little braid into Ori's hair. "It's tradition, and traditions are important. They would be even if you weren't marrying Fíli of all people."

"I know you mean that makes it more important, but it's hard for me to think like that." Ori would have shaken his head if that hadn't been impossible right now. "Of course I know he's the crown prince and everything, but that just doesn't matter, not to me. He's just… Fíli. And that's who I want to marry, anyway."

"Sounds to me like you've got the right idea about this marrying thing." Bofur grinned, walking closer. "So what weapon will you be bearing? Have you given any thought to that yet?"

"I, ah, I haven't thought of it yet." Ori wet his lips. "I mean, usually I don't have more than my knife on me, but this is a wedding, I should have something more obvious than that, right? So I'll probably have the hammer that Fíli made for me."

Bifur grunted. He signed, nodding in approval.

"He's right, it's a good choice for you. Symbolic, certainly." Dori's voice was softer now, at least. "And while the knife would be a good choice as well, something visible is probably for the better. Makes for a nicer image, and all."

"I'd say nobody cares about the image I make, but that's probably not true in this case." Ori sighed. "It's really happening, isn't it?"

"Oh, aye, it seems like it is." Bofur grinned. "My little cousin's going to be a prince for real."
"Don't say things like that," Ori groaned. "I can't be a prince. A prince's husband, maybe, but that's it, I refuse to actually become a royal yet."

"A bit late for you to consider that, isn't it?" Dori fastened the braid with quick fingers, giving it a last gentle tug before apparently declaring him done. "You know you'll be a prince of Erebor as soon as you marry. I've seen the circlet Thorin has picked out, it's going to look very handsome on you."

"Well, of course I know that's going to happen. I just don't expect I'll be very prince-like all of a sudden, that's all." Ori waited a moment to see if Dori truly was done, then stood up from where he had been seated, stretching himself a bit. He didn't have any idea how Dori had even thought of so many braids to put into his hair, but it had taken a while. "You only did this because you're not the one who has to take off all the braids, didn't you?"

"Now don't be silly. Of course I want everyone to see what a great dwarf my little brother is." Dori patted him on the shoulder. "We're all proud of you, Ori, I hope you know that."

"I hope you're not just proud of me for marrying, because that would not be a very grand accomplishment."

"Oh, I don't know, not many of us get a prince. Only two in this generation, even." Bofur's grin was teasing, but not too much so. "You do look quite a sight, though. Your brothers have done a good job indeed."

"Well, someone had to do so, since you weren't here." Of course Nori chose this precise moment to walk out of his room, all sharp and snide as was his habit, though his grin was also more teasing than malicious. He was well dressed, much more so than usual, given the way he usually chose to blend in with the crowd instead of wearing the fine clothes they could now afford. This time he had forgone such subtlety, with jewels in his hair and rich fabrics in his clothes, fancy enough that he almost looked more like a lord than many of the actual nobles. "Really, it's just unseemly for you to lay a claim on the lad and then not be here to help us dress him."

"Don't worry, we'll certainly be there to help you get all the weapons out of Fíli's hands. Pretty sure you'll need more than two to manage that, anyway, I'm not sure he even bathes without a blade or two." Bofur flashed Ori a grin that was bordering on filthy. "We'd better do a good job of it, too, wouldn't want you to run into any unexpected nasty surprises on your wedding night of all things."

Ori did his best not to blush too badly, though he wasn't sure he succeeded too well. "I think I'll worry about my wedding night myself, thank you. You needn't put too much thought into it."

"Does that mean you don't want any pointers, then?" Nori smirked, wagging his eyebrows. "We wouldn't want your wedding night to be unsatisfying, now would we?"

"Considering I'm the one of us closest to being married, wouldn't that be quite inappropriate?" Not that any of them held any illusions about Nori's virtue, of course, and it was hardly any of his business what the others had gotten up to. He didn't even want to know, thank you very much.

"Are you saying you could give us advice instead, then?" Bofur toyed with his moustache, joining Nori in his smirking. "My, cousin dearest, I didn't know you were so bold!"

"Only as bold as the one I'm marrying." Which was precisely as much information as he was willing to give, thank you very much. Let them imagine what they wished. "And unless you want me to recount my wedding night tomorrow, I'll thank you to stop teasing me about it."

It was a gamble, of course, but one that paid off; Nori actually took a step backwards and lifted his
hands to shield himself while Bofur visibly paled. Bifur snorted, and Ori was sure he could see Dori smirking for a moment from the corner of his eye. "Oh, no! There's things I don't want to know, thank you very much, and that would fall under that heading for sure!"

"Then I don't want to talk about it beforehand, either, thank you." He crossed his arms over his chest, which felt strange because of the armour. "I'm sure Fili and I can figure things out between ourselves, and if we can't it's not you I'll be asking for advice." Not like they were entirely inexperienced, of course.

"Fair, fair." Bofur glanced at Bifur, then back at Ori. "Of course, we've got an actual reason for being here. You know, despite the fact we missed you actually getting dressed, sorry about that, but we figured you'd want some alone time with your brothers first."

"Oh?" Ori blinked. "What do you mean? And you know I don't care about that, I'm just happy you are here." Like he was sure his father would have been, if he'd ever been given the chance.

"Aye, and we're happy you want us here, but we do have some reason for our arrival as well." Bofur offered him a small grin. "You see, we asked your brothers about something, and they gave us the go-ahead, so."

"You've done it, then?" Dori looked curious, almost eager. That just made Ori wonder some more. "I did have a couple made just in case, but I was hoping you'd come through."

"Oh, of course. Wouldn't want to let little Ori down." Bofur glanced at Bifur again, who nodded. Bifur stepped forward, then, drawing out a small box that he presented to Ori. "You see, we asked your brothers about something, and they gave us the go-ahead, so."

"You've done it, then?" Dori looked curious, almost eager. That just made Ori wonder some more. "I did have a couple made just in case, but I was hoping you'd come through."

"Oh, of course. Wouldn't want to let little Ori down." Bofur glanced at Bifur again, who nodded. Bifur stepped forward, then, drawing out a small box that he presented to Ori. "You see, we asked your brothers about something, and they gave us the go-ahead, so."

"Right." He'd vaguely known that was the plan, of course, had ever since Dori had told him not to worry about the matter since they would take care of it. "And… you've made them?" For some reason the mere thought of that made his heart skip a beat or two. Certainly he had known that it was a possibility, he just hadn't thought on it much.

His thoughts went to the two beads he had in his jewelry box among all the others, the two little pieces of wood that meant so much more than mere fastenings to a braid or two. They had been carved by his father, the one he had never met, the same way Bofur and Bifur carved their little toys and trinkets.

"Are. All of us did, in part. Bombur chose the wood and the gem, spent ages finding just the right ones, too, and Bifur and I both made a bead each." Bofur nodded at the box Bifur was offering, and after a moment's hesitation, Ori stood forward to take it. Trying not to hesitate too much, this was only beads after all, he opened the box.

There were two beads inside, one in dark brown, the other in a reddish wood that seemed strangely familiar, with a purple stone embedded within it. The brown one held a familiar crest, the same one that Bofur bore on his coat, the crest of the family he now finally had claim to, after all these years. The other, as he picked it up, was also carved with a familiar symbol: his maker's mark, the closest he had to a personal seal, not being of a high birth that would have held any official acknowledgement.

"These are beautiful." They really were, too, with minute detail he hadn't even known could be possible in something carved from wood. "This — isn't this —" He turned the red bead in his hand, examining it. The colour was familiar, or so he thought at least.
"The same wood your father used, aye, if we're not too wrong about it. And an amethyst for your mother, since we couldn't find purple wood and didn't want paint that would just chip away. Had to learn a lot of things to make that one nice and proper, I did, never done jewelled beads out of wood before, but figured it was worth it for you."

"Thank you." Very carefully, Ori closed the box, then stepped over to set it on the table. Then, with his hands now free, he surged forward to grab Bofur in a tight hug, only releasing him to do the same for Bifur. He found himself hugged by them both in turn, Bifur's big hands petting his hair carefully.

"We were hoping you'd like them, even if they're not so fancy." Bofur sounded hesitantly, now. "I mean, they're not going to look like much in Fili's hair, when he has all those other fancy things and all, but maybe it'd be enough for him since it's from you?"

"Don't you dare even think about that." Ori pulled back from the embrace enough to glare at his cousin. "They're absolutely perfect. I wouldn't want gold and silver anyway, not if I can have these to give to him. The marriage beads are supposed to tell everyone who he has married and where I come from, and I have no shame in either of my lines, I'll have you know. Why, if you continue to be so hesitant, I might think you look down on me for my low birth, Lord Bofur!"

That at least startled a laugh out of Bofur, which was much better than the uncertain tone of earlier. "Well! Far be it from me to say that you aren't good enough for that little lout of a prince. If anything, I might be unsure of his being good enough for you, but I guess this is far too late for us to question such things."

"Indeed it is. And if you tried, I would set you right. Fili is all I want or need, and I won't have you tell me otherwise."

"Even if he'll make you a prince as well, just like that?" Nori's hand was on his head now, pushing down for a moment, though not too hard. Nori might tease, but he wasn't cruel. "It's a heavy weight, you know, that circlet, much more so than just the metal in it. And it'll only grow heavier as time goes on, certainly so when Fili takes the bigger crown in time."

"Then he needs me all the more, since his is sure to be heavier." Ori shook his head. "It might not be what I would choose for myself, but then, it never was about choice, now was it? I haven't had a choice in the matter since I first met him, and that was a great many years ago, if I ever did before. I was made for him and he for me, I know that to be true, and I have to trust that it means I will be good enough to support him like he needs me to do."

"Well, those sound like very wise words indeed." Dori set a hand on his arm, squeezing a little. "Just remember that we'll always be there, even if you're moving out and starting your own little family. Prince or no, you'll always be our little Ori, and there's no trouble that you can't bring to us if that's what you need."

"I will remember, Dori." And he would, absolutely, it wasn't like he could forget, not after everything they had done for him over all his years. "Thank you, you know, for everything you've done."

"We have only done that which we must, being your brothers and all." Dori let go, only to clap his shoulder. "Well, then. I do believe it's about time we get moving, don't you? Wouldn't want you to be late for your own wedding, now would we?"

"Eh, where's the rush? It's not like they can start without him." Even so, Nori grinned as he stepped over to the table, picking up the beads. "Let's go, then, before someone comes looking for us. Not that I think we're in a hurry anyway, you really think they've gotten both princes presentable yet?"
"Oh, hush, you." Ori couldn't help but poke Nori in the arm before he walked over to the hammer he had resting against the wall, its proper stand being up in his office in pride of place. "They're certainly less likely to start primping than you are. Mahal save us all if you ever get around to actually marrying Dwalin, there's no way you're going to be done on time unless we get you started the night before."

"Hey! I have it in good confidence Dwalin wouldn't mind if I showed up naked, not that Dori would allow me to do that." Nori was grinning as he watched Dori and Bofur help Ori get the hammer securely strapped to his back, though, so clearly he wasn't actually insulted. "Ready to face your doom, then?"

"Ready to marry my One, but you'd call that the same thing, surely." The hammer was a comforting weight on his back, for all that it might not have been familiar. It was a reminder, after all, of everything Fíli had done for him, of everything he was ready to do for him. Even so, he rather looked forward to setting it down when he was asked, not to worry about fighting or any such nasty things and instead focus on the one who was to be his husband.

The hammer might have been heavy, but his steps were light as he followed his brothers and cousins out of their rooms and toward the Gallery of Kings.

He had waited long enough.

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The boys were bickering.

Much though she might have wished otherwise, Dís was not exactly surprised. She knew her sons too well for that, had more or less expected this to happen. They were nervous, of course they were, and whenever they were nervous they ended up bickering. She wasn't sure if they did it on purpose, or if it simply ended up happening when they were wound up, but it usually distracted them from the worst of their nerves, so for now she wasn't going to worry about stopping them. As long as they were getting dressed, it was better for them to toss quips at each other than be breaking down over their silly little fears.

Dís knew the feeling all too well. She and Thorin had very nearly come to blows on the morning of her own wedding over the colour of her earrings.

She wasn't entirely sure what the argument was about, now, had lost her interest in following it. She was too busy fighting with Kíli's hair, which was as stubborn about staying braided as it always was, which was to say it was struggling against all her attempts to put any sort of braids in. Thorin seemed to have adopted the same policy as her, quietly working through Fíli's hair while making sure the boys were seated just far enough apart they couldn't actually kick each other.

Bilbo didn't tell the boys to stop, either, not in as many words, though the way he kept offering various breakfast items to everyone was probably merely a ploy to keep their mouths too occupied to actually keep arguing about every trivial little thing. The last time Dís had actually paid attention, Fíli had claimed Kíli had misplaced one of his moustache beads, which, really. What would Kíli have even done with such a thing?

Dáin was not of much help, for all that he had insisted on being present. He seemed to try his best at least, running back and forth between each of the princes' rooms to fetch whatever items were needed at each moment, but more often than not he ended up bringing something wrong enough that Dís was starting to suspect he was doing it on purpose. It certainly would have been just like him, fetching the wrong items just to see her eyes twitch. Because this wasn't stressful enough without
such foolishness, obviously.

"Oh, for Mahal's sake," she finally sighed as Fíli made some ill-advised mention about the size of Kíli's ears, making his brother actually shoot up from his seat and yank the half-done braid from her hands. "If you two can't settle down right now, I swear I'll march you to the gallery in chains and gags, see if I don't."

"Oh, I'm not sure you want to do that, cousin dear," Dáin quipped, because apparently he was indeed intent on turning every last hair on her head silver. "The last thing my old heart needs is finding out one of their loves likes to see that."

"Well, if that is the case, it's better for them to find out right away. No sense in wasting time, after all."

"Mother!" It seemed this had finally united her sons, as they both groaned in horror at her words. "We don't want to hear you talk about that!"

"Oh, hush before I decide you need another talk about pleasing your spouses." Which really shouldn't be necessary, not after she'd had a very frank discussion with Kíli about how to treat his future wife and made sure Thorin did the same with Fíli. "You are about to be married dwarves, and I'm fairly certain neither of you is opposed to sharing your bed and not just your lives. It would be childish of me to try to deny the fact."

"There's got to be something between denying it altogether and talking about it with you." Kíli covered his face with his hands. "The last thing I want to think about on my wedding night is you!"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll forget all that quickly enough when you get to your rooms with your bride." Dís snorted. "Now settle down, there are still a few braids I want to work in, and we still need to get your armour on before we head out."

Kíli almost seemed about to protest, but then sat down, allowing her to work in peace. Good. It was hard enough to work braids into his hair when he was being still. Kíli had his father's unruly hair, Mahal keep him, but if there was ever a day when he ought to be wearing his best braids it was his wedding day.

Tuli had never worn anything but the braids she had put in his hair, either.

Dís hadn't thought she would be too affected by any of this, had been preparing herself for the day for a long time already. She was happy for them, after all, she knew today would not truly change anything, knew that the little lads she had sent off on a quest had become grown adults. Truly, there was nothing she should have felt except happy to see them finally take this last step they had both been waiting for.

Even so, when they were both all decked out in their best braids and gleaming armours, adjusting their weapons and looking in every way like the bright princes they were, she suddenly felt herself choking up.

"Mother?" Kíli blinked, no doubt seeing something of her sudden emotions on her face. "Are you —"

She wasn't about to let him finish, though, drawing him into a tight hug. Then, letting him go, she turned to Fíli and gave him a similar one.

"You both look so grown up," she sighed, and both Thorin and Dáin thankfully knew better than to comment on her sentimentality. "My lovely little sons, about to get married."
"You sound like we're going to disappear," Fíli said. "We're not going anywhere, you know that, right? We'll be coming right back to our rooms, next to yours like always."

"It's not quite the same, though." Not that she expected them to understand, not yet. "Now, you are my little lads. When all is said and done, you will each belong to someone else."

"That's not quite true, though." Kíli's smile was surprisingly faint for her usual boisterous little prince. "We've lost our hearts a while ago. This is just showing that to everyone."

"I suppose you are right, yes." Dís resisted the urge to ruffle his hair, knowing it would have probably undone all of her hard work. "It's a very good thing I already like both Tauriel and Ori, or I would perhaps grow to dislike them for stealing my boys away."

"No, you wouldn't," Fíli claimed. "You would be glad that they took us off your hands."

"Well, I suppose it would depend on the day." Now, she placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "Shall we get going, then? Wouldn't do for you to be late for your own weddings, after all."

"I suppose we'll go on ahead, then." Thorin smiled, patting the lads each on the back before walking to the door, Dáin following him. "After all, I'm supposed to be waiting for you when you lot get there."

"Well, get going, then, so we won't have to wait for you instead." Dís shooed the two kings out, waiting for them to close the door behind them before she turned to look at her sons again.

"You're looking all emotional again." Kíli was smiling, looking rather sentimental himself.

"I think I'm allowed, just for today." She squeezed each of their shoulders, looking at them each in turn. "I'm very proud of what you have become, both of you. You are lovely young dwarves and wonderful princes, and I'm sure you will both be excellent husbands as well. Do not ever let anyone tell you otherwise, do you understand?"

"Understood." Fíli nodded, his brother following suit. "You raised us well."

"I've done my best, at least." She patted them on last time before straightening her self, gathering her composure. "Well. Let's go get you married, then."

It was a long walk to the Gallery of Kings, yet it seemed to be over in a flash. One moment they were stepping out of the royal quarters, and the next they were there, in the middle of countless dwarves and men and even elves. Her sons looked like the young warrior princes they were as they stepped forward, yet the moment they each saw their beloved Ones they seemed to forget anyone else even existed.

Dís stood in front of all of Erebor and of Mahal himself as was appropriate for a proud mother, she swore to protect them in their happiness as they laid down their weapons, she listened to each of her sons in turn swearing their love and devotion and loyalty to those they called their Ones.

She might have said she wished Tuli had been there to witness it with her, but she was fairly sure she felt an arm at her waist, so that wouldn't have been entirely accurate.

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"That went well, don't you think?"

"Certainly better than I had any hope for." Thorin rolled his shoulders and walked further into their
rooms. Tauriel and Ori were not quite finished for the feast yet, but Dís and Dáin had chased them off, insisting that the king and his consort could not show up for the feast without being in top shape themselves. "Nobody forgot their words, nobody tried to challenge the unions, and to my great surprise Mahal himself didn't step in to strike down such an unholy union."

Bilbo snorted. "I'm sure many people were sorely disappointed to see their dreams crushed so." He glanced at Thorin. "Let me guess. You're going to be wearing Orcrist even though you didn't swear your protection to anyone specific?"

"But of course. It's part of formal dress, after all." Thorin chuckled at the way Bilbo's lips curled downward. "Don't worry, I plan to put it on a back scabbard, so it won't get in the way if you wish to dance."

"You know, I just might want to." Bilbo smiled. "Well, we don't have a whole lot of time, so you go change scabbards and I'll check in on the baby, and then we can make sure we're both presentable."

"That sounds like an excellent plan." Of course, he still had to lean in to steal a quick kiss before he headed for their bedroom, leaving Bilbo laughing after him.

As luck would have it, he'd barely managed to get the scabbard off his belt when he heard Bilbo calling his name in urgent tones. His heart leapt into his throat as he raced out of the bedroom and down the corridor, hearing Bilbo call for him again before he even made it into the garden.

As he first stepped in, Thorin's heart plummeted. The leaves that had been a vibrant green with golden edges when he last looked in the morning had shrivelled into a lifeless dry brown, curling up and falling down on the ground. Before he got out more than a choked sound of distress, though, Bilbo looked up from where he was kneeling, and to Thorin's astonishment he looked... excited?

"They've fallen, Thorin!" Bilbo's voice was urgent. "The leaves have fallen!"

"That's..." Now that he looked at it, rushing closer, he realised it wasn't all dry leaves and lost hopes. The fruit was still there, resting on the ground as big and shiny and deep gold as ever. "Is that good?"

"It's brilliant." Bilbo's face split into an enormous grin. "That means the fruit is finally ripe!"

"What do we do?" There was something they could do, right? This was a good thing, this was supposed to be a good thing, even though his heart still clenched at the sight of the leaves scattered upon the ground. Bilbo said this meant the fruit was ripe, right? Did that mean... did that mean the baby was ready, too?

"Now, we can finally open the fruit." Bilbo's hand brushed against the smooth surface. "Well, we don't have to do it right away, it could wait until evening, but... I don't really want to wait. Do you?"

"We've waited long enough." He knew it had only been a year, only one year since the last Durin's day when they had laid together on the ground on this very spot, but it still felt like forever. "How do we do it?"

"We have to crack the shell; the child isn't going to do it by themselves, it's not like with birds and eggs. Now, don't look so worried," Bilbo hurried to say, no doubt seeing Thorin's growing distress at the thought. "It's not as violent as it may sound. Usually you just use a knife to get through the hard part, then pry it open carefully. As long as we don't just plunge a knife deep into it, the child will be fine."

"Right. Knife. We need a knife." He had to go get a knife, where did he have a knife, why had he taken Orcrist off even for a moment —
"I do have Sting right here, you know. You've called it a knife often enough that it should suffice."
And indeed, Bilbo was offering him the small sword, a tiny smile on his lips. "I have to say, I never
thought you'd get quite so out of sorts."

"I'm not exactly used to this, you know." Even so, he accepted the elven dagger with gratitude. "I
know I shouldn't be so affected, I was there for the birth of both of my nephews, it's just…"

"It's just that this isn't the same thing at all." Bilbo reached out to cover Thorin's hand with his own.
His hand, Thorin realised with a start, trembled a little. "I know. I'm nervous, too. But we're doing
this together, right?"

"Right." With a deep breath, he turned his gaze to the fruit. It lay there in the middle of the fallen
leaves and shrivelled branches, shining under the light of the crystals. Holding Sting in one hand, he
set his other on the shell of the fruit and started to cut.

Thorin wasn't sure he had ever been as careful with anything in his entire life. Under Bilbo's
watchful eye he made a long cut on the shell, careful not to press too hard, only barely scratching the
surface on the first pass. On the second, he cut a bit deeper, then used the blade to start prying the
sides of the cut apart. It should have felt wrong, using a blade that had taken so many black lives to
bring a new one into the world, yet all he could think of was how appropriate it was that it was
Bilbo's blade and his hand together doing the work.

As the cut widened, Bilbo reached in to get his fingertips between the parts of the shell. Thorin let
Sting drop and joined him, slowly using his fingers to pry the halves apart. There was a loud
cracking sound, and he froze, then realised the two halves of the shell were now coming apart more
easily, falling away to reveal the inside. There was a layer of softer material on the inside of the shell,
like the flesh of an apple, with a large cavity sticky with something almost like juice shining along
the surface of it on one side.

On the other side, like the stone in a plum, lay a curled up little figure.

"It worked," Bilbo breathed, his voice barely above a whisper. "I almost didn't dare believe it myself,
but it worked."

Thorin could only nod, wordless. The little creature was glistening with juice and curled up
impossibly small, but it was clearly a child, there could be no doubt about that. Little arms, little legs,
little hands held in tiny fists and tiny little feet with a couple of wet curls on top. The ear he could see
was rounder than Bilbo's, not quite the shape of a leaf like it no doubt might have been on a
respectable little hobbit faunt, but it was pointier than any dwarf ear he had seen before. Thorin was
all of a sudden so overwhelmed with love and affection for this little creature he wasn't sure he
remembered how to breathe.

Then the child shifted, just a little, and started to cry. The spell of the moment seemed to break as
Bilbo reached in, carefully lifting the baby from the fruit remains into his arms.

"Well, someone needs a bath," he said, wrinkling his nose, and Thorin wasn't sure he had ever seen
something so adorable. "You're all sticky, little one. Not even a day old and already you're making a
mess."

"Good thing I have plenty of experience with bathing babes." Sure, the baby was even smaller than
Kíli had been, scrawny little child that he had been, but Thorin was hardly going to let that intimidate
him. Not when his child needed him, even if it was only for a wash. "How about you hold the babe
while I get the water ready, and then you can go inform Dís while I bathe him?"
"Her, Thorin."

"What?" He blinked, not quite sure what Bilbo meant. Bilbo just smiled at him and shifted the child in his arms, not caring a bit that he was getting sticky juice all over his best clothes.

"While you bathe her, Thorin, not him. I do believe we have ourselves a little daughter."

If Thorin had thought himself blessed before, now he started to realise he might never find an adequate way of expressing all his gratitude for what he had been granted.

But then, just because he had made it this far without tears didn't mean he could not cry now.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

There are a lot of things that may happen during and after a wedding celebration. Things such as proposals, or long lost family found, or a peaceful moment of watching your child sleep.

Chapter Notes

The name in this chapter, Tammi, means "oak" in Finnish.

"Master Dori."

Dori turned, seeing a familiar tall form walking up to him. "King Bard." He didn't bow, knew how much it bothered Bard, and received the faintest curl of lips in return. "Can I help you in any way?"

"I was wondering if you could tell me what was going on." Bard frowned, glancing around at the crowd milling about them. The tension in the air was certainly notable. "I'll admit I'm not an expert on dwarven festivities, yet I don't recall it taking this long for us to go from the ceremony to the feast last time."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there." Dori shook his head. "I helped Fíli get ready for the feast, together with Nori and Bifur, and the rest of the newlyweds were done around the same time. However, the king is supposed to start the feast, and Ori and Tauriel were only accompanied by Lady Dís and King Dáin." He nodded toward the front of the feasting hall. He hadn't wandered far, and they could clearly see the two newlywed couples murmuring to each other, echoing the tension of the crowd. Dís had disappeared some time earlier, leaving Dáin speaking with Balin and Dwalin standing with a deep frown near the head table.

"You don't think anything has happened, do you?" Bard's frown deepened.

"I certainly hope not." Oh, Mahal forbid. He could not allow anyone or anything to ruin this day for Ori. "I'm sure Lady Dís will return soon with an explanation."

Indeed, it was only a moment later that Dís swept to the front of the hall, looking majestic as ever in her finest jewels and velvets, with a grand battle axe strapped to her back. The crowd hushed as she lifted her hand, all straining to hear as she spoke.

"I regret to inform you that the King and Prince Consort will not be joining us for the festivities."

This caused a roar of sound as everyone started to speak at once, speculating to the cause or demanding explanation. However, this was silenced as quickly as it started as Dís brought her hands sharply together.
"However!" Her voice rang loud and clear over the gathered dwarves. "They've left it to me to announce the beginning of the feast, and they both hope that you all make merry and celebrate the weddings of our princes —" She paused, yet nobody dared speak up, not just yet, "— as well as the birth of Tammi, daughter of Thorin, princess of Erebor and Durin's line, and the third in line to the Raven Throne."

If before there had been noise, now it was a right explosion of sound, everyone cheering and shouting. Even the elven guests seemed taken in by the joy, chattering excitedly among themselves. Dori felt himself giving in to the tears he'd been trying to hold back, digging for a handkerchief so as not to appear entirely undignified. "Oh, that's so wonderful! A child, and a princess no less! And born on Durin's Day, too, that's such a fortuitous sign. I'd like to see anyone protest these unions now, when clearly even Mahal himself is blessing the day!"

"That certainly is excellent news." Even Bard managed a grin. "And one more reason to celebrate, not that we needed any more."

"I don't think we've ever had such a grand celebration before, certainly not in living memory. Durin's Day, two royal weddings, and a royal birth! And to think we considered last year's feast a grand affair!"

"Well, I wouldn't think there will be many more royal weddings soon, so we should all enjoy it while we can." Bard's grin faded, though it left behind a hint of a smile. "Perhaps you would like to keep me company, Master Dori? I'm afraid my children have quite abandoned me, and while I'm sure of their safety in the mountain, it does leave me in danger of no company except for those who approach me with political matters in mind."

"Well, we couldn't very well have that, now could we?" Dori huffed. "I would be glad for sensible company myself. My brothers are quite busy, it seems, Ori with his new husband and Nori with who knows what, so I cannot even count on the duty of my family to rescue me from loneliness."

He wasn't too surprised to find Bard striding away from the head table first of all. The man was not one for standing on ceremony when he didn't have to, and few people remained there aside from the newlyweds, who would have to sit still to receive all manner of congratulations and well-wishes. Dís and Dwalin lingered, no doubt in case someone still thought to make their protests known and needed some sharp dissuading, but aside from them and the two couples no one seemed to stay long. Even Dáin and Lady Galadriel wandered off soon enough. A dwarven feast was best enjoyed in the crowd, after all, not put up on display in front of everyone.

They had no such duties, though, and Bard seemed to relax a little as they mingled with the crowd and he didn't receive too much attention despite certainly standing out with his height among the dwarves. Everyone was too busy to concern themselves too much with the king of Dale, and the king himself clearly preferred it that way. They made some pleasant conversation while sampling the food on offer, along with some quite excellent wine and ale. Dori did glance toward the head table now and then, but so far Ori seemed to be bursting with happiness and naught else. He almost seemed like a stranger sometimes, in his grand clothes and with the golden circlet upon his head, yet whenever he glanced at Fíli — which was more often than not — his face split into a beaming smile that rather reminded Dori of a little dwarfling of not yet twenty who had just received his very own pen for the first time in his life.

It was nothing like what he had dreamed of for Ori, yet it was all he could have ever hoped for.

Perhaps it was seeing that happiness that made him bring long-hidden thoughts into words, perhaps it was the realisation his little brother was now an adult. Perhaps it was just the wine, he couldn't be quite sure. Either way, Dori found himself turning to his companion with sudden seriousness. "King
"Master Dori?" Bard looked surprised, though Dori supposed he couldn't blame him. Dori had
eschewed titles for most of the evening, figuring there was no better time for being inappropriate than
in the midst of a grand feast.

"There is something I was hoping to discuss with you." As Bard lifted his eyebrows, Dori went on,
"I was wondering if you could be persuaded to marry me."

For a moment Bard simply stared at him. Finally, he managed a response, though it sounded rather
disbelieving. "I beg your pardon?"

"It would only be a sensible arrangement, surely." Somehow he managed not to lose his nerve
entirely, though it was a near thing. There were so many ways this could go wrong, most of them
without much hope of salvaging their friendship. "I recall you saying before you would not object to
a political match for yourself, and from what I understand, second marriages are not uncommon
among your people. While I may not strictly speaking be nobility, I have a respectable station, and
now my brother is married to the crown prince; none of your people could possibly protest to such a
link between your house and the royal house of Erebor, if indeed alliance is what they seek. Besides,
I have plenty of experience with running a household, and while your young ones may not be the
same as dwarflings, I like to think I might be able to give some support to your children and their
children in turn."

Bard was quiet for a while, watching him with dark eyes. When he spoke, his words were slow and
measured. "I can certainly see what benefits I would find in the arrangement. Pray tell, though, what
would inspire you to offer it? I hardly think you in love with my good self, and if you were, I would
sadly have to let you down."

"You're right, I'm not." Dori shook his head. "I do not seek love, that is not how my Maker shaped
me. That doesn't mean I cannot crave companionship, though, and with both my brothers now
moved out I find that in short supply in my chambers. I have plenty of duties to busy myself with, of
course, yet I find myself wishing that at the end of the day I might have someone to sit with me by
the fireplace and a young one asking for a story or two."

Again, Bard fell quiet, and Dori felt all his fears rising again. Then, however, the man's lips curled
into a smile quite different from his usual grimness. "You have been a good friend, Master Dori, to
me and my family both," he said. "And you certainly present your case in a sensible enough manner.
My only protest is that you might be affected by the day, by wine and emotion alike. No, don't start,
he said, lifting a hand as Dori made to protest. "I know you regard Ori more as your son than as your
brother, and goodness knows I would not be capable of careful consideration on the day I saw one of
my children married. However," and now it was most definitely a smile, "if you still think the same
after a couple of days, I would certainly be willing to consider such an arrangement in more detail."

"I rather expect I will. I have been considering the matter for a while, and a dwarf's mind is not easily
changed."

"I should hope not. Anyone who wishes to deal with Tilda every day will need a will of iron." Bard
chuckled, lifting his half-full tankard. "For now, though, shall we drink some more to the happiness
of the house of Durin, and the continuing line of the Raven Throne?"

"Aye, that seems a sensible suggestion." His own goblet was rather empty, but luckily they were not
too far from a table with plenty more wine. "To a new year, and new beginnings."

"To Erebor and Dale, may they long be friends." And that was a good wish, too, a wish for peace
and prosperity, and for the young ones they loved to enjoy the same peace.

Dori might still cry, just a little, but he rather felt he was entitled to that tonight.

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"So." Nori sat down heavily in an empty chair, setting his tankard down without much grace. "I'd like a moment of your time, if you can spare it."

This gained him a surprised gaze, perhaps for his lack of manners, but then the evening was far and he was going to need all his patience just to get through this conversation. He wasn't nearly drunk enough for this talk yet, but he couldn't wait much further either if he still wanted to make sense. "I'm not doing much, as you can see."

"Aye, that I do." It said something either about his repaired reputation or the state of the party that nobody else paid him much mind beyond a curious gaze that soon turned to more interesting matters. "And I won't ask you to do much, either, save for sit down and listen."

"And what is it I'm to listen to?" His companion took a large gulp of his ale.

"I'm going to tell you a story." Nori kept his words light, his tone neutral. "The problem is, I don't know how the story ends, and thought you'd be able to help me there."

This earned him a lift of a pair of rather impressive eyebrows on the other side of the table. "I'm listening."

"Once upon a time, before many of us here today were born, there was a dwarven lass, born and raised in the halls of Erebor." He paused, then shook himself. "No, none called her a lass, not anymore, not when she had a child of her own. Some called her a dam, others chose less flattering names, since her dwarfling had no father to speak of. She didn't want to have the father, knew they were both better off without him, and if any looked down on her for that, then they were of no consequence to her."

There was an impatient gesture for him to get on with it. Drawing a deep breath, he did just that.

"One day, a caravan arrived from the Iron Hills, with merchants and guards and lordlings all, to do trade and negotiations."

This earned him a sharp breath, though the shock was soon covered up. However, Nori was not stupid. He noticed something that obvious, thank you.

"She thought they would have little effect on her life, as she was a dressmaker, and not in need of new fabrics at the time. She stayed in this belief until one night, soon before the caravan was to leave, she met an Iron Hills guard in a tavern."

No visible reaction this time, except for a twitch of the eyebrows. Oh, those eyebrows. He really should have known earlier.

"Things progressed as they're wont to do, and she brought him into her bed. He left before morning, and she did not see him again; really, she might have thought she imagined it all, if not for the fact that she found a fallen bead in her bedsheets. It was a fine bead, too, finely wrought silver and gemstones, no doubt an heirloom of some kind, or so she thought. As she knew not where to find him, she held onto the bead, waiting for him to come back to get it."

Nori paused, gathering his nerves. This was going to be the hard part.
"He had still not returned by the time she realised she was with child." At last, a more visible reaction, with widened eyes and flared nostrils, if only for a moment. Ha. "She was proud, too proud to make demands of him, and did not seek him out. When the child was born, she made to send him a message, not because she wanted anything from him but so that he might know that he was a father. Only, the merchants who she had paid to deliver the letter returned it, telling her there was no dwarf by that name anywhere in Iron Hills, certainly not one who might have visited Erebor of late. At this, she decided he did not want to be found, and if he could not even give her his name then she owed him no further effort. She didn't even tell the false name to her second child as he grew older, had not told it to her oldest one either. The child grew up without knowing a thing about his father, and sometimes he wondered if he wasn't the better for it."

There was silence for a moment, a serious gaze meeting him from the other side of the table. Then, his companion shook his head. "It's a woeful tale to be sure, if it's true," he said. "However, it's also one easily imagined if one knows the beginning, or stolen from another if it ever happened."

"You're not denying the beginning of it." Of course not. That would have been a lie, and Nori was the liar in the family.

"One does many a foolish thing in his youth." A shake of the head, and still no denial. "And how old would this child be today?"

Nori met the searching gaze head on. "I am a hundred and seven." Younger than many thought, old enough to have lived through things many never would. "And you were young and foolish, were you not?"

Another pondering silence met him. "You said he left behind a bead."

"Aye, he did, and she kept it." He reached a hand into his hair, took out a small braid hidden within. At the end of it was a bead, an intricate work of silver and gemstones, a near match to the one he saw in his companion's hair as he sat there in all his finery. "Then her sons kept it in her stead."

A long breath, now, slow and considered. "And what demand would you make of me?"

"There is little you can offer me." Little anyone could that he would accept. "Maybe I would have had demands when I was young, when I was despised for my birth and my brothers were hungry. Now, I'm content. I've no need for gold or titles or glory, I've won all I wish for by my own deeds." He was the one to pause, now. "All I want is the truth, for the dwarfling who grew up without knowing his father's name."

"You don't ask for a claim?" His companion seemed surprised. "For the braids of my family, for the crests you could bear?"

"What use are those for me?" He shrugged. "You've an heir already, and I want no part in his place. I'm a dwarf of Erebor, and here plan to remain; the highest thing I might ask to wear is the crest of Durin, and that is already mine by birth and by choice, through my mother and my betrothed both. All I want is to know my father's name, even if I may never say it."

"That is a right I could not deny you even if I wanted to." Of course he could. There was very little the nobles could not get away with. It was only the Durin sense of honour that stopped him. "Call yourself by my name if you wish; I cannot and will not deny that claim. I was not married yet, not even courting, so I have no shame to hide; to be the father of one of the Company is a sodding honour and nothing else."

"And if I'd rather go by the name of my mother? If I'd rather be Nori, son of Vuori, as I grew up to
"Then the shame is mine, that you would give me no claim, but it is a shame I have well earned." His father stroked his beard. "I always knew I had a fine son, and one to be proud of, make no mistake. I just never thought I might have had another one just as fine."

There was nothing stuck in Nori's throat, thanks. He was a grown dwarf and far too old for such nonsense. Clearly he was just thirsty, so he acted accordingly and downed the rest of his ale before pushing himself up from the table. "I don't know what name I'll claim, don't even know if I'll tell anyone." He probably would, though perhaps not yet, not on the day his brother was supposed to be the centre of attention. "I'm still a bastard son and always will be, but it's nice to know at least whose."

"Aye, I imagine it would be." His father gave a wistful sigh. "A pity I didn't know earlier, though," he added. "Would've been fun, having courtship negotiations with Balin of all people."

"Dori took care of that, don't worry. There was plenty of yelling and clamouring, you would have been proud." He stepped away from the table. "Well, I'd probably best make sure he doesn't cry himself sick with Ori all grown up and married now. You want to talk more, well, you may not always know where to find me but Dwalin probably does."

"I'll keep that in mind." His father lifted his tankard in a solemn salute. "Well met, then, Nori son of Dáin."

Well. That didn't sound too bad, thinking about it. Might take some getting used to, but really, he could probably learn to live with that.

For now, though, finding his no doubt bawling older brother was infinitely more important than his oh so kingly father.

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It really shouldn't have been this difficult to find an elf in a crowd of dwarves.

Gimli had caught a glimpse of Legolas earlier, yet he had been swept away by the crowd before he could reach Legolas, the numbers of feasting dwarves hardly going to concern themselves with the destination of one young dwarf seeking his friend. It didn't exactly help that there were other tall folk around; for all that Gimli was hardly going to mistake the face of his friend for that of another elf, he couldn't always tell if a head of long blond hair belonged to Legolas or someone else before the elf in question had already moved away. So here he was, in the middle of feasting people, feeling quite alone.

He should have been happy, of course. It was only right, on the day not one but two of his cousins were married to their loves, and on Durin's Day no less. He had stopped by to congratulate them earlier, a part of him hoping he might find Legolas speaking with Tauriel, but the couples had been too wrapped up in their own happiness and his prince nowhere to be seen, and he had soon returned to the crowd.

His prince. As though he had any right to such claims. Thranduil would certainly have scoffed at him for such arrogance, thinking himself worthy of claiming an elven prince in any capacity, even if it was only as a friend.

He was just about ready to climb up to the musicians' stage to get a better view of the crowd when he heard someone call his name. It wasn't Legolas' voice, or indeed the voice of anyone he recognised,
yet he found a foolish hope rising in his heart as he spun around. However, he did not see a familiar face approaching him, a state that might have made him disappointed if his attention hadn't been quite completely captivated by the sight of the person who was coming toward him instead, the crowd parting before her with no apparent effort on her part.

"Lady Galadriel," he breathed, knowing full well they had not been formally introduced yet unable to stop himself. It wasn't like he could have forgotten her name, once it had been given to him at the previous wedding feast.

"Gimli, son of Glóin." She smiled, and he had never seen a more beautiful creature, was sure he would never see another so wonderful in all his years. "So it was you, after all. I was wondering if I got you wrong, though I was certain the description I'd gotten was accurate enough."

Gimli managed not to flinch, scratching at his cheek. His beard was starting to grow back, but for now it was still short and without much design, nothing like his full beard of before. No doubt it would have been quite easy for someone to pick him out of a crowd with very little aid. "I, ah. You were looking for me?" Surely that couldn't be right, it wasn't like she would have had any cause to find him, yet that seemed to be what she was claiming, now.

"Indeed I was," Galadriel smiled. "I have heard many great things of how you saved young Prince Legolas with your courage and loyalty."

"I didn't do much, except save him from further harm," Gimli mumbled, feeling quite taken aback by this turn of conversation. Had every elf heard of that incident, now? Well, of course it would interest them, to have an elven prince found in the care of a dwarf, but really, it hadn't been all that remarkable. "And even there I would hardly have succeeded if my kin had not arrived in time to save us both from traitors."

"Yet without you he would not have survived so long, as I am given to understand."

"Without me he would not have been in such an unfortunate situation to begin with." That, at least, he was certain of.

"I would not be so sure. Such poisonous hearts will always find their time; if they had not found their opportunity then, it would have been another time, perhaps when he did not have a friend by his side to save him from such ill intentions." Galadriel shook her head, and the movement of her hair very nearly mesmerised Gimli just like that. "No, Master Gimli, I do believe we have a lot to thank you for."

"Pray, do not embarrass me, my lady." He was certain he was blushing badly enough for her to notice, now.

"Very well. Then let me ask you a question, instead." She was still smiling, and truly, he wasn't sure how long he could survive being the target of such intense attention. "Is there anything I could offer you in thanks for your kind courage and aid to Prince Legolas?"

"I don't mean to offend, my Lady, but I've told this to others before." He felt the flush heating his cheeks even stronger now, but he would not back down here. "I could not, and will not, accept any reward for doing that which I must. I could not betray a friend; were I to have done so, I would hardly be better than the lowest orc. What I did I did not for reward or praise, but so that I might buy another moment for one I hold dear to my heart."

"And I would not insult you so as to suggest you had made any such request." The lady smiled, and he was sure he had never seen anything quite so fair. "Perhaps I am merely curious. You, a dwarf,
have given up your most precious thing to shield an elf. Perhaps I merely wish to know if there is anything an elf could do for you in turn."

"None that I would ask for, save for your continued kindness." It was quite astonishing enough that she stood here, speaking to him.

"I bid you name it, Master Dwarf. Or am I so lowly in your eyes you think I have nothing to offer?"

The mere idea made him flinch. Lowly indeed, this creature so lovely he could not find the words to describe her, felt quite unworthy to even look at her most of the time. "There is one thing I might name," he said, barely able to keep his voice above a mumble. "I would not make such a request, mind, even if I thought I had cause to expect a boon. Since you bid me to name my desire, though, if I ever were to ask for a thing, it would be for a single strand of your hair. I will not request it, for that would be the height of arrogance, but you told me to name my desire, and that I have done."

"A strand of my hair?" She sounded almost astonished for some reason. Surely she must have been aware of the beauty of her locks. "What would you do with that?"

"I would treasure it, and cherish it, for surely there is naught that is as lovely to gaze upon. It's as though your hair holds the very stars I was named for, for it gleams more precious than gold and mithril and all the gems of the mountains. I would hold it close to my heart, and Mahal willing, if I were to one day find the skill, I would set it in crystal to show all my people that not all beauty is found in gems and gold, and that an elf might yet hold friendship for a dwarf." He flushed again, then, realising he had probably said too much. "I apologise, my Lady. I fear I have grown too bold."

"It is a bold request, indeed, yet more courteous than any I have heard before." She eyed him for a moment, and he resisted the urge to squirm, feeling like a child about to be scolded. "You seem a strange dwarf, Gimli son of Glóin, yet I cannot help but wonder if you do not represent your people better than many of my kin would dare suspect."

"I find all dwarves have an eye for things of beauty, my Lady. Most of us find it in gems and gold, but I do not believe I am alone in finding the same worth in other things of wonder. Perhaps I am strange among my folk, guided astray by my name and nature, but I do claim I would find understanding were I to tell my kin of all things of great beauty I have found that lie beyond the reach of fires of the forge."

"Indeed, if it were your words showing them those things, I have no doubt you would be successful." She smiled at him, and it felt rather like the gleam of sun had been reserved solely for him for one brief moment. "Very well, then. You have not asked me for a thing, and therefore I need not feel any guilt as I give you a gift, for it is not a reward that you might feel undeserved, but rather something I grant you of my own free will, and not in exchange for any word or act of yours." Then, as he stared with disbelief, she reached up to pick apart one of her flowing locks, taking apart and handing him not one but three strands of gleaming hair, more beautiful than the largest vein of gold or most polished gem could have ever hoped to be in his eyes.

"My Lady." His words were hardly more than a breath as he caught the offered strands in an iron grip, not wanting to lose them. "I could never repay you for such a generous gift."

"You will repay this and much more if you continue your friendship with the young prince." She reached a hand to touch the side of his face, and her fingers were so gentle it almost burned him. "It is long past time our peoples bury our past feuds and face the new future together, lest we both perish before even it is our time to fade. Here today a step has been taken, greater than I ever thought possible before, yet more is needed if we are to join our hearts as is needed."
"I could never not be his friend." Of that, at least, he was certain. "He is dearer to my heart than any
treasure, more precious than anything the mines of this mountain could ever bring forth. You should
not ask such of me, my Lady, nor ever think it a favour to anyone but myself, because to stand by his
side brings me happiness that is not comparable with anything I might find in anything that is not his
friendship."

"Such sweet words you speak. Indeed, it has been a long time since a dwarf was ever called Elf-
friend, yet I believe those times have not entirely passed yet." Then, before he could respond, her
gaze shifted to something behind his shoulder, and she smiled. "And now I will take my leave of
you, Master Gimli. I do hope we will meet again. Perhaps, even, you might wish to visit my realm
some day, to see another elven forest than the one you spoke of in such sweet words?" She turned
then, and walked away, and though it should have been impossible to miss her even in the crowd
Gimli could not tell where she went, fading away between one moment and the next.

"Gimli?" This was a voice he knew all too well, would have known even in his deepest despair.
"Gimli, what happened here?"

"I do not truly know." He turned slowly to see Legolas approaching him, a look of curiosity mixed
with worry on the elf's ever youthful face. It must have been him that Galadriel spied behind Gimli's
shoulder, that was the only thing that made sense. "The Lady Galadriel, she — she wished to talk
with me."

"What an honour," Legolas said, then came to a halt as he was just a few steps away from Gimli.
"Gimli. What is that?"

"Hm?" He followed the elf's gaze down, to his hand, and realised he was still holding onto the
strands of hair as though they were the last thing holding him onto life. "She gave me strands of her
hair. I did not ask her!" he hasted to add as Legolas' brow furrowed. "I would never be so bold! It's
only, she asked me to name what I might desire, if I would make a request of her… and, well, I told
her I would not ask, but if I were so bold it might have been a strand, and then she gave me three!"

"An honour thrice over." Legolas stepped closer, his hand hovering over Gimli's closed fist. "Her
hair — Gimli, I have heard legends of others who have asked her for that boon, and been denied.
You cannot possibly understand the enormity of what you have been granted here."

"I understand that I might as well hold the moon and stars in my hand as this." It certainly felt as
unbelievable. "I — would you mind if we stepped aside somewhere? I wish to braid these for
safekeeping, so I do not lose or damage them until I can find a better place to store them than my
pocket."

Legolas nodded, wordless, though Gimli felt his hand hovering at Gimli's arm as they made their
way toward the less crowded edges of the grand hall. That was good, he decided. He did not much
fancy the thought of misplacing his elf again now that they had finally found each other.

And yes, perhaps he might allow himself the thought of his elf, just this once.

"I wished to talk to you." Legolas had waited until they'd slipped out of the hall and found a place to
sit, sounding almost apprehensive as he spoke, watching Gimli start his work of braiding the strands
of hair together. "I have wished to talk to you for a while now, but — well, it never seemed the
time."

"Oh?" Gimli frowned. "We've spoken plenty, though. Why, we last had a long conversation last
night, when you arrived in the mountain." This time it had been given as a task for him to welcome
the guests from Mirkwood and see to their comfort, as of course Legolas was the first among them.
He had hardly complained about such an order, especially when the rest of the elves had very politely but firmly insisted on staying in Dale, leaving him alone with Legolas for the rest of the evening after the first introductions had been exchanged. They had spent a long time wandering about the mountain, visiting beautiful places Gimli had made note of just for the sake of showing Legolas, enjoying a moment that they could spend together without worrying too much about anything but some strange glances from dwarves passing by.

Strange glances were fine with Gimli. They were only a sign of jealousy, anyway.

"That we did. However, I find I have been something of a coward, and found it hard to approach this subject no matter how I have wished to do so." Legolas sighed. "Today, I find myself unable to wait any longer, and yet I know I must."

"You're speaking in riddles, elf. You know I am not that skilled in solving them, so unless you're taking delight in puzzling me, I ask that you speak plainly to the plain dwarf you see before you."

"I would never call you plain!" Legolas blurted out. "Just… this isn't easy for me, Gimli. I keep looking for the words, but they will not come."

"I can wait, then." Wait, and not push. If there was one thing dwarves were good at, it was patience, for all that such a virtue was often at odds with the quick tempers many of them were blessed with. Patience was needed to see a dull lump turn into a polished, faceted gem, or iron ore all the way to a sharp and cutting blade.

"Your dwarven ages are confusing to me." Well, that was a strange start. "You have two ages of majority, right? Why would you need two, and what's the difference?"

"There used to be three, back in the day." Gimli shook his head. "The first majority used to be when a dwarf became battle-ready and could join the field of war, which was usually at fifty years of age, or so I've understood. After Azanulbizar… well. Some say there were more young dwarves fallen in the field than there were mothers left to mourn them. Thorin abolished the first one, then, said no dwarf should be at war before they had come to sixty-five, which is now our first majority. Besides the battle, that is when we can enter contracts in our own name, or make decisions without the approval of our parents. It's why I couldn't join the quest, though I wanted to; my father reasoned that I was too young to sign a contract, and thus couldn't join."

"I see." Legolas nodded slowly. "And the second majority? Which used to be third, as I understand it?"

"Aye, that is at seventy-five. It's less important, or so some say, but it does hold some significance, still. One can't take on an apprentice before turning seventy-five, or hold certain positions, unless it's with direct leave of the king. Fili's already past that, which is why he could become my master."

"Right." Again, Legolas nodded. "And at which point can one start courting?"

"Ah." Gimli wet his lips, which suddenly felt very dry. "Some say at sixty, but others think it's best to wait until the first majority; in any case one can't marry until then, because they couldn't sign a marriage contract. Parents might refuse negotiations until then, too, but they can't after sixty-five, since the choice of a spouse is always for the dwarf themselves to make."

"And as I recall, you are still two years short of that." Legolas wouldn't look at him, now. "That's… good, then."

"Oh?" Gimli was rather proud of himself for managing to keep his voice level. "And why is that
"That means I have plenty of time to make a courting gift worthy of you."

Gimli swallowed, all sense suddenly fleeing him. "Legolas…"

"Perhaps I am being foolish," Legolas murmured. "I do not even know if you will want me. But… I feel I must try, at least, and do it in the manner of your people, because you deserve all the effort I might make for your sake."

"Oh, my elf." And now, he felt he could say that, truly, for all that his voice was tinged with fond exasperation. "You think I would ever refuse a gift from you, whatever it might be?"

"I couldn't know that, could I?" And now the elf sounded more hopeful, and oh, it did lift Gimli's heart to hear that tone in his voice again. He would have hated to think he had caused his elf to be anything but content. "We haven't exactly discussed such things before."

"Well, let me state this now, then, so we are both clear on the matter: I love you, you silly elf, for all that I cannot truly tell you why. And if you think there was ever any chance that I might turn you down, then clearly your elven eyes are not as keen as you'd like to call them."

"I knew you held me dear, at least." Legolas' hand again found its way to Gimli's arm, settling there. "I didn't dare hope that it might be anything but care for a friend, though."

"Yes, well, I'd damn well hope not all of your friends spend as much time ogling your backside as I sometimes find myself drawn to do." That tempted a lovely little blush to Legolas' cheeks, and Gimli couldn't help but chuckle. "I would say I'm teasing, but then you are quite beautiful, and if even a dwarf can see that then surely others can as well. I only hope you do not find a better prospect by the time I have reached my first majority and could accept your offer, or make one of my own."

"That could never happen." Legolas shook his head fiercely. "None other means as much to me as you, and indeed there is none I owe as much to as I do to you. Not that my debt to you would be my motivation," he hastened to say, no doubt seeing the deep frown taking over Gimli's face. "For all that I count my life owed to you, it has naught to do with how I feel for you. If anything, it is the thought of that which gave me the courage to speak to you of this in the first place, as well as the moment I realised just how deep my regard for you was."

"That is good, then. I've told many before that I require no reward for my actions; for you to offer courtship in return would make a mockery of us both." As well as hurt him beyond any reasonable measure, but there was no reason to bring that up right now, now was there. "But, very well, my friend. We can wait until I reach sixty-five, and then start our exchange of gifts, knowing that none can stand in our way then."

"I shall await that, then." Legolas' hand crept down to his, bringing it up to the elf's lips. "And until then, I hope we can continue our correspondence and our meetings as before, for I would very much hate to lose the comfort of your company as we wait for the day we can be together truly."

"It will be a glorious day, if indeed it arrives." Gimli's lips twitched. "And now I wonder if your father would be willing to enter courtship negotiations as custom dictates, or if you'd have to hold your own. I'm certain my father will not pass them by, not if he's the dwarf I know him to be at all."

"You almost frighten me, my friend, and yet I find myself oddly comforted." Legolas smiled, and if Gimli had thought the Lady Galadriel's smile was a miracle to behold, this one filled him with even more warmth and wonder. "We'll do it all by the rules of your people, and perhaps a little by the
rules of mine, just so none can say our love is not true."

"Aye. I'll court you in every way you wish, and in every way that might convince your father's people of my intentions, for all that I know none of them will truly find me a proper match for you." He paused, thinking of the revelry going on at the feasting hall, and one of the couples present. "Are you not afraid, then, of the fleeting happiness I might offer? Of the pain I will bring you when my days run out and the sun of our love turns to twilight?"

"I was, yes. I still am, for it truly pains me to think of losing you. And yet, I cannot deny myself this." Legolas squeezed his hand. "I wondered, back then, how Tauriel could enter such a venture, already knowing what it might bring her. Now I know she never had a choice at all, for I certainly did not choose to follow that same path of delight and pain in one, yet here I find myself."

"I hope that pain is a long time coming, yet, for all I know it's not that far in your elven years." Gimli met his gaze head on, trying to pour all of his sincere love and desire into his eyes so Legolas might see it and be assured. "I will love you, though, for as many years as I have, with as much devotion and care as a dwarf can possibly hold for their greatest treasure, and when I am given to the stone my heart will go on loving you, for even in the Halls of Ancestors we cannot truly be parted from our Ones, not when it is our Maker who made them so."

"You speak heavy words, and yet they make me feel light." Legolas offered him another smile, weaker this time, yet once again it made Gimli feel nice and warm. "Are you finished with your work, yet? I was thinking we might return to the party for a spell, and then perhaps go sit somewhere so you might sing for me. I seem to recall you have promised to do so, and I would much like to see that promise kept, if you would be so generous."

Gimli chuckled, twisting the braid around his fingers into a little loop and hiding it securely inside his tunic. "I'll sing for you if you wish, aye, but don't expect a wondrous experience. I can hold a tune as well as the next dwarf, but none will tell tales of my grand voice or remarkable skill."

"More reason, then, for me to judge it for myself, hmm?"

"I suppose so, yes." He squeezed Legolas' hand before standing up from his seat, his hand finding its way to the elf's arm instead. "Wouldn't want to lose you in the crowd," he explained as Legolas gave him a glance that was half fond, half amused. "I already had such trouble finding you, I wouldn't want to risk losing you again."

"You finding me? I was the one who found you, as I recall, and speaking with the Lady Galadriel of all people."

"Aye, after I had searched high and low for you. How can you hide in a crowd of dwarves, anyway? One would think you'd stand out like the last tree to be felled in the middle of a field, you with your overly long legs. Makes me think of a spider, it does, your long limbs and hair like silk."

"Why, you truly know how to wound with a compliment, and flatter with an insult! If I didn't know better I might think you angry with me, or displeased at least. But no, I know you, my friend, and I know you tease me, I know that curl of a smile to your lips as well as I would know it if you told me you speak in jest. I am not a spider, mind you, and if you do need a comparison you might call me a deer, for they also have long legs and soft fur, and unlike a spider they actually have their place in my father's forest."

"Yet a deer might be hunted, as you well ought to know. Is that what you want, then? To be chased, or trapped, by someone looking to devour you?"
"And if I wanted that, would you oblige?" Legolas smirked, then laughed as Gimli spluttered in a flustered fit. "Come, my friend, let us join the party again. We would not want anyone to think I might have led you astray again, now would we?"

"Would be bad form to cause them all to run out to search for us in the middle of a feast, I guess." And he certainly didn't want to ruin tonight for his cousins, not on his account. They ought to be celebrating their marriages, not worrying about a wayward cousin.

Well. Good thing he had nothing against spending his time at the feast with Legolas once again. Indeed, he would gladly spend all his days with Legolas, if he was allowed to.

* 

Thorin had never seen such a beautiful child in his life.

He had seen beautiful children before, had been charmed by each of his nephews in turn. However, even the sweet little dwarflings in the depths of his memory were nothing like the beautiful thing slumbering in her little crib.

Tammi was smaller than either Fíli or Kíli had been, but she was entirely complete either way, with each tiny finger and toe whole and perfect. Her colours were somewhere between his and Bilbo's, her skin the soft brown of loose, dry earth between Bilbo's golden hues and his own deeper shades, her hair the darker brown of oak bark, their sweet little acorn baby. The few times she had opened her eyes, though, peering curiously at the world around her before returning to her slumber, they had been the piercing blue of Durin's line, leaving no doubt about her heritage even with her pointed tiny ears and wild curls. Not that Thorin would have allowed anyone to voice any doubts about it, of course. This was his child, his precious daughter who was more beautiful than any gemstone or glittering metal, and nobody could argue with that.

Bilbo was asleep now, curled up in bed, and Thorin had been right there with him just moments ago. However, he'd gotten up just to look at the child, not quite able to convince himself that this was real. Yet here she was, sleeping quietly in her crib, her skin soft and warm as he brushed his fingertips against it.

Thorin heard the faint sound of knocking from outside the bedroom and stood up, not wanting to let the baby get startled. He glanced at Bilbo, who had barely stirred, and murmured for him to go back to sleep. He opened the door carefully, letting it close behind himself with even more care. The last thing he needed was more noise to startle the baby.

He half expected to see a servant of some sort, or perhaps a friend checking in on them. It was fairly late already, and those who were still awake were probably still at the party. As he got out to the receiving room, though, he realised the knocking coming from the door did not sound like someone's hand.

"Varc?" He opened the door, letting the raven fly in. "Is something the matter?"

"Not as such, but I thought I'd get a more peaceful perch for tonight." Varc took a seat on the back of Bilbo's favourite chair, stretching out her wings. "The young ones made it home and seem strangely enthusiastic. I thought I'd better make myself scarce for the time being."

Thorin chuckled. "Well, it is a special night for them," he said. "They are now officially acknowledged as mates."

"You big people make everything so complicated." Varc scoffed, stroking her wings in a fussy
manner. "They are mates, everyone knows that. Why would you make such a big fuss about it?"

"I suppose we just like complicated things." Thorin chuckled. "Haven't you also complained that our way of having families is too complicated for your liking?"

"Can you truly argue with that?"

"Well, I do claim it's worth it in the end." For all that he'd had time for a lot of worry and heartache in the meantime. "Did anyone tell you that our egg hatched?"

"Really?" Now Varc seemed actually interested, pausing in her stroking of her wings to look up at him. "And how did that turn out?"

"We have the most wonderful little daughter." He was probably smiling like a fool, but he figured it was understandable in this situation. "The first daughter in our line since my sister was born."

"Well. I suppose that's a good thing, then." Varc nodded. "And if the two of you could have a fledgling, maybe the young ones aren't completely hopeless either."

"I'm sure they'll figure things out in time." Not that they were in any sort of a hurry, of course. If even Thorin at his age could have such a perfect little daughter, his nephews had plenty of time to find their own ways of building their families.

"Well, they definitely need to eat properly and grow bigger first." Varc tilted her head. "Though judging by the noise, they are doing their best at trying, at least."

"I'm sure they are." Thorin chuckled. "Well, you are welcome to spend the night in our rooms, if you wish for some peace and quiet. Our daughter is asleep, so I can promise we won't be making noise."

"Good." Varc looked satisfied with this. "I'll stay here. It's a nice perch."

"As you wish. I'll leave the bedroom door ajar, so if you want somewhere warmer, you can come in." Thorin smiled. "Just don't wake the baby."

Varc snorted her opinion at this, fluttering out her wings one last time before settling down. Thorin headed back to the bedroom, leaving the door just barely open. He paused in the doorway, listening to the sound of the quiet breaths of his husband and daughter.

His daughter. His perfect little princess, soft and perfect and alive as she slumbered in her crib. And Bilbo, his beloved husband, who was sleeping in their bed but murmured sleepily at him as Thorin slid under the covers behind him and reached an arm around him. Somewhere outside their rooms the mountain was celebrating, everyone feasting in honour of their daughter and the marriages of his nephews, and if any of his ancestors were looking down on them Thorin was sure they would have no complaints.

It was the dawn of a new year, a new future for his people and his mountain, and Thorin could not imagine a more perfect way to welcome it.

Chapter End Notes

...Well. That took a while.
First of all, a big **thank you** to everyone who read all the way here. This is the biggest project I have ever finished, and I'm still feeling slightly overwhelmed, to be honest. It's utterly amazing to think that so many people have shared this journey with me, and I hope you have enjoyed reading as much as I have enjoyed writing this!

So, what now? I do have some ideas for a possible sequel, but at present they are not quite enough for me to work on, and I don't want to commit to another large project without more to go on. There are other, shorter stories in the series, which you may wish to read if you haven't already done so. You might especially pay attention to **Building Families**; at the moment it doesn't have much, but at some point I plan to post all the various illustrations from the series there. Either way, if I do post anything more to do with this universe, big or small, it will be posted as part of this series.

Of course, I have also written plenty of other Hobbit fics of various types, though nothing is quite this old. Of special note is **King Under the Crown**, which is quite like this one in that it shares the same main pairings and basic setting, but with a slightly more mature approach. I do have to warn you that it has been in hibernation as of late, but I hope to get back to it at some point.

For this fic, though, this is, in fact, the final chapter of a very long and (at least for me) exciting story. Thank you all for sharing it with me!

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