Biriz Akmâth

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Biriz Akmâth

by YMR

Summary

It didn't start well with the Easterling Thief. First she took dinner, then the handkerchief. Too soon her Dog's teeth latched onto Thorin's wrist, and this one who said she was not of Middle-earth, who claimed to know their future as if it were written in books, stole her way into his Company. Thorin had no time for it, not while the Dragon kept his people from their homeland. Eventual Thorin/Sona. Beta'd by JennyWren28.

Adventure/romance.

Biriz Akmâth: A Companion Story to "On the Road to Find Out" by JennyWren28.

For DaniellaBlue.

Notes

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They said they would not come. Thorin tried not to think about it as he searched through the brush for a suitable place to set camp. He had been searching a while, fighting with the urge to keep going, and finally made headway toward a place for the night by telling himself that, being lost as he was, he would have no better luck finding his way in the dark.

They said they would not come. His attempt to evade thoughts most pressing was not working, evidently. He did not feel particularly upset about it. Just, numb. And who would have expected a different result? He found an elevated spot with a log near a burned out pit where previous travelers had set camp before, threw his pack on the log and dragged out his bedroll, rather too ornate for this homeless life, but Dís insisted. Speaking of, her package: he reached into his sack and withdrew the bundle wrapped in one of his favorite handkerchiefs. One she had gifted him years ago, on Durin’s Day, just before they set out to reclaim Khazâd-dum from the Orcs of Moria. Thorin’s fingers traced their family name she’d embroidered in silver, remembering. Frerin had gotten its match, the gem-like velvet only lighter in blue. She always found such practical ways to gift them things. He almost smiled as he unpacked the parcel of food assortments, biscuits and dried meat. There had been cheese and nuts, but these he had finished three days ago. But no less, this would do. He took a bite of meat and wondered what the others would think once he found them. Surely they would be disappointed. He followed the meat with some biscuit. The Quest is ours and ours alone.

Should it be?

He had agreed with the Wizard and changed his path, and yet his ’Adad, still—roamed. No one
believed him, but Thorin knew better. He felt this. Still. There had been not a single lead; no one had seen Thráin in so many years. Would he ever find him? Perhaps, with the Mountain recovered—he had to hope.

He set his food aside and pulled out the harp, contemplating playing it for himself and the owls. He could use the calming he gained when he sang and played. He struck middle high notes and sang low, humming a song of the Mountain before it was lost, and the day it happened, pondering new lyrics. But no words came. The playing did not serve its customary purpose; he was not anymore calm than before. No. Agitation continued flaying his nerves.

For a while he sat, letting his mind wander, wondering where the pent and awkward feelings had come from.

He had passed the strange fogs nine days ago, and that was when he started feeling it, like he was in a hurry to be somewhere, more so than he had ever felt in his life. He came to feel it like a pull on his mind, heart and center, all through him, and began wondering if Tharkûn the Grey One had set a spell on him when they spoke back in Bree. He also wondered why it was taking so long to find the place they were to meet? By all counts, he had really only gotten lost once, turned around by the thick fogs, but it cost days when he took note of the calendar and the way the leaves started turning gold to green. Seemed things happened fast in the Shire, once Spring came.

He returned to the food on the napkin, taking another bite of meat followed by biscuit, when, of a sudden, he heard a growling sound and sprung to his feet, sword in hand, dumping the napkin with his dinner on the log. "Who's there?" He looked past the trees for the next move. Nothing, except a sigh he thought he heard, from somewhere straight ahead, toward a cluster of maple trees. "Show yourself," he commanded, searching the brush.

He took a step, and a brown flash leapt at him from the side, not far from where he had heard the sound, but slightly to the left of it. Blaring and growling, the beast flung himself upon him, knocking him on his backside before springing away. Thorin jumped to his feet in the direction the beast ran, and cursed. Blast it, how many were there? At least two, likely more. Since meeting the Wizard at Bree, he knew all manner of people and beasts could prove dangerous, seeking after the bounty the Orcs had placed on his head.

Thorin gave chase to this one, sprinting after in the direction he had fled. He would not rest before reaching some satisfaction…

On hitting a small clearing he watched the dark streak dash into the cover beyond, and saw he was a Dog, a rather big one, dark brown, of stout muscle. Whoever he was with kept good care of him; so surely these were not Orcs. He slowed his chase, and followed, eventually losing the trail along with his way. He spent the better part of the evening, first finding his own trail, and then re-tracking his steps back to camp.

It was hours later. In the meantime, he discovered, the thieves had stolen his dinner along with the embroidered handkerchief from his Sister. He cursed and began packing the remainder of his belongings, muttering under his breath. Shortly after he was on his way in the direction of Hobbiton, or at least he hoped he was.

As he traveled his mind kept wandering back to that Dog and his thieves for keepers. Perhaps they would meet again. The idea of catching them curbed his anger and he almost smiled as he slowly trudged on, closing the distance toward his destination.

He stopped to set camp somewhat early that evening, and he was not sure if it was an invitation or a challenge for them to find him. He did not care. What he had left of food he set out on a log. Leaving
his last meal as bait, he pulled the flask out of his pack with the dark ale, and drank it, numbing
the mild feeling of hunger in his gut. Cursed thieves. But they would be back. He had something they
wanted. And he would catch them. He fetched his pipe and his tobacco and stole behind one of the
bigger trees to wait.

Sure enough, they had followed and found him. He watched the youth hover warily at the edge of
camp for a good quarter hour. He was slender, of Men, but not so tall for a boy of that race, and
dark, perhaps of the Easterlings, but why so far west? No armor, no weapons, his toothy Dog
sniffing about from another side, snooping for more food. Thorin laughed to himself, glancing at
what remained on the log, his bait. But his curiosity peeked as he wondered at the Thief's strange
manner of dress. Small, tight laced boots with carvings in the soles, strange, the soles looked like
they'd been cast in metal, but that was no metal, nor leather for that matter. He had no idea what they
were made of. The breeches appeared flimsy and too tight to move well in, with invisible stitches and
many unnecessary seams. He wondered at the reason for them, but his eyes kept wandering up. The
strange green tunic appeared too tight as well, and way too short. Perhaps the Thief had out-grown
these, and needed coin to purchase something more fitting. Certainly these bits of cloth would
provide no warmth at night. A long braid fell down the backside. The hands were empty. No knife.
Nothing. Thorin's mind was filled with questions, but the biggest one, considering the oddness of it
all, was where in Mahal's name did this Thief come from?

Never mind, Thorin said to himself as the youth hissed for quiet, admonishing his Dog. Thorin took
this moment and rushed at him from behind, slamming into him and knocking him to the ground.
"Thief!" he cursed, pressing his knee into the youth's back. "You should not have returned."

The boy choked, pulling his hand up as best he could, waving Dís's hanky. "I came to apologize."

Thorin huffed a singular laugh, but stopped at the voice. He eased the pressure off his knee, and the
Thief flipped over, allowing Thorin to see the gentler features. "You're a woman—"

Just then the Dog snarled, very close. Thorin whirled about, hands at ready, but the beast was
already airborne, his teeth so close to Thorin's face that he could feel his heated breath and smell the
jerky he had eaten before. Thorin rammed his vambraced arm into the Dog's jaws and pushed with a
twist, flinging him off, but not before his teeth opened a gash in the underside of Thorin's wrist. The
Dog circled, biting and snapping, and, though quite tempted, Thorin kept his blade at bay. There'd
been something in the woman's expression, and he found he did not want to kill her Dog. He rather
meant to ask questions. Why was this woman of Men traveling alone? He had never seen such a
thing. And stealing his food? And returning the cloth? It made no sense, and his blood rushed. The
Dog lunged and sprung several times, and Thorin was getting impatient, needing to know, but when
he turned he saw the woman was gone. Just as quickly, the Dog jumped high and into the brush.
Cursing under his breath, Thorin gave him chase, hoping his trail would lead to the woman.

And, aside from a few quick glimpses of the dark brown mass bounding ahead and away from him,
Thorin got nowhere besides lost. Soon the brief excitement he felt from meeting the Thief faded back
into numbness, but he kept on. It took him a few extra hours to find his way back to camp, where,
full of a sour mood, he packed his belongings completely and set off in the direction of the Shire. At
least, he hoped that was where he was headed. It was about time to meet with Tharkûn and the
prospective Burglar he had enlisted to aide them on their Quest…

Fortunately, the Shire was in the direction he thought. Finding the door to the Burglar's house was
another matter altogether. He circled the area twice, over the weaving paths that lead from one
Hobbit hole to the next, each looking very much like the last, before centering upon a large oak tree.
He veered in its direction peering at each round door he passed, until finally he saw the mark left by Tharkûn—a rather small one, truth be told, when one was left to searching in the dark.

"A fine day is a day I don't get lost," he muttered, opening the gate before the Hobbit's round green door. The motion pulled the tear in his wrist, and he cursed, bringing his other hand up to rub the wound. "And Mahal save me from Dogs," he groused, too tired from the fruitless chase, too aware of an agitation he wasn't used to. An agitation that hounded him since the day of the fogs, bothersome like the bite of the Thief's pet, a fiend he could not catch. He slammed the gate behind him and stomped up to the door. But just before it, he stopped, his shoulders easing at the sound of his Company singing within. A smile turned the edges of his lips and he felt warm. At least he was with them again.

He knocked twice. Hard. Unwilling to wait. Craving light, food, a good ale, a smoke. And to be among his Company once more. Just then something shifted to his left, and he startled, looking into the darkness, half expecting the blasted Dog to jump at him.

He was about to check further when the door opened and Tharkûn stood before him, a Hobbit at his back. Thorin bowed his head in greeting.

"Gandalf." He glared at the Wizard. "I thought you said this place would be easy to find." He glanced at the Hobbit fidgeting just beyond the Wizard. "I lost my way. Twice." He left out the part about the Dog and the Thief. No one needed to know they compounded his delay. "I wouldn't have found it at all had it not been for that mark on the door."

"Mark?" The Hobbit asked, frowning almost as hard as Thorin was. "There's no mark on that door, it was painted a week ago."

Tharkûn pulled Thorin in, and they proceeded to spend the next few hours trying to employ an apparently unwilling Hobbit Burglar to fill the Fourteenth spot of his Company. More times than once he glared at the Wizard, who clearly had not informed the Hobbit of any such plans... The Hobbit, a rather fussy being, appeared neither able nor willing to join, and Thorin felt nothing much of it, considering the response from his own kin of the Iron Hills. *They said they would not come. This Quest is ours, and ours alone.* And yet, as he said to Balin, his Company was with him. Loyalty. Honor. Willing hearts. He could not ask for more. He ended the evening with a smoke by the fire, preparing to sing the Misty Mountain Song, his last entreaty before their reticent Burglar retired for the night. Balin and Tharkûn had suggested he sing it as persuasion, to wake adventure in the heart of their Fourteenth Member, the Lucky One. Thorin scoffed at this, but as he rather enjoyed singing, and he saw no harm, and so he let his voice rise through the chimney into the dark.

He started with the low bars, humming, and the others joined.

**Hmmm mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm**

For some reason Thorin recalled the fog almost eleven days past. He could feel the dampness of settled clouds as the music hummed through him. It should have felt cold, but he was warm.

**Hmmm mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm**

Thorin smiled slightly, his soul welcoming something new. He would claim this Quest and give his all; for those he loved, he would do this.

And then the words... Composed on the way back from the Blue Mountains... They would sing them together.
Far over the Misty Mountains cold

Around him, outside, just out of reach...

To dungeons deep and caverns old

The road pulled like it never had before...

We must away ere break of day

He had never been so ready...

To find our long forgotten gold.

The window, just beyond it. It was there, and yet far out, beyond what he could see.

The pines were roaring on the height,

It called. Why had it taken so long?

The winds were moaning in the night,

He felt eyes upon him, out of nowhere, without hint of danger, a blending of senses he never placed together.

The fire was red, it flaming spread,

How could one so watched feel safe?

The trees like torches blazed with light.

He glanced at Tharkûn, who gazed beyond the window frame into the dark with a bemused expression, like he had exchanged a joke with himself, something none but Wizard-kind could fathom. Thorin blinked. Did the Wizard just wink at nothing? He took a last pull from his pipe, shrugging off questions as the music faded from the room.

Once the pipe-weed was finished and his companions had tidied the place to the point of seeming they’d never ever been there, aside from the unsigned contract as the final lure for the Burglar, he ordered his Dwarves to make way— Ponies awaited them. The Quest beyond. They would leave before the hour was up and the sky grew light. He would answer the call of his People, and Mahal willing, he would win back their Homeland, for all of them.

They said they would not come. They did not need to come. He would succeed with forethought, where an army could not hold. And with Company such as these? No. He could not ask for more.
Guided by starlight and a sliver of moon, Thorin made his way to the outside of camp while the others readied for supper. He needed to take in the night air alone, to feel the cool breeze brush his face and sift through his hair, and think. But he couldn't help watching. Fíli and Kíli were arguing the merits of sword versus arrow, when Fíli's head shot up at a sound outside camp. Thorin heard it, too... the whine, and recalled the Dog it likely belonged to, and the Thief in its company. They must be out there, following. He looked across the ridge, and frowned. Well, so what if they were. He shrugged off the thought and looked back to camp. Nori clasped Ori's shoulder as he sauntered past him toward the cauldron of soup, where Nori then, all wire and elbow and determination, pressed Bifur aside to secure supper for his brother. Dori was hefting the ale sacks, making sure everyone had some. Balin and Glóin sat at the edge of the fire, heads bowed together, going over finances no doubt. Across the fire sat Bombur and Óin, and Bofur, who played his flute, trying unsuccessfully to get the others to sing along. Seemed the mood was rather quiet now that the Hobbit had not come, as it sank into the consciousness of the Company, this Quest is ours and ours alone. Dwalin stood at the other side of camp, attuned to him and the others just as they both guarded the periphery. Dwalin's head bowed ever so slightly while his eyes widened with welcome, and Thorin returned the gesture.

All the same he still felt watched. The odd part was he sensed no threat, two things rarely experienced together. More strange to feel this, after the trouble with the Thief and her Dog. Keeping an ear out to hear what he was missing, he lifted his wrist to check the bandages, grown loose after the day's tasks. Now was good a time as any to change them. He removed the wrappings, pulled the clean strips Óin had given him from his pocket, and rewrapped the wound, pleased to see it had not festered.

After a while, Fíli brought him a bowl of the soup Bombur had prepared, with Kíli at his side, both lads more somber than usual, very like the rest of his Company. They stood and waited while he took a few bites, Fíli stared over the ridge while Kíli took turns looking from his brother to Thorin's bowl. "What is it, Fíli?"

Fíli frowned into the distance, as if he waited for someone coming.

"What of Mister Boggins?" Kíli asked, crossing his arms and looking directly in Thorin's eyes. "Wizard was sure he'd come, and so where is he?"

Thorin cocked a brow. "Who am I to say?" Kíli held his gaze like a shield. Thorin bent in closer. "How am I to know?"

Kíli shrugged, looking angry.

"Did you lose the bet?" Thorin asked, lips twitching in the direction of a smile.

Kíli only frowned more.

"Who will take on the job, N'adad?" Fíli asked, still watching the star-lit horizon. "We needed a Fourteenth Member, Tharkûn said, and the Wizard insists they must be a Burglar, and that they should not smell of Dwarf..."
"We are Son's of Durin, and Durins are not superstitious, not when we have each other and this Company." The brothers looked to each other and back at him. "The Wizard thought it best." He pulled them into himself, brushing each across their forehead with his brow. "As for his concerns, we shall see. Go, get rest. We ride early."

They each smiled as they made their way back to their bedrolls by the fire.

Still feeling something about, Thorin settled in against a tree out of the light, and waited.

Sure as he expected, once the others had fallen asleep, except from Dwalin who watched from the opposite side, the Thief and her Dog came out of the woods and crept about the camp. Thorin stood, watching her case the edges before she entered, seeing her hand held no weapon. His own went to his hilt, and he stepped in behind her as she crossed the line, passed Glóin, where for some odd reason she stopped, her face hovering a sword length above Glóin's, eyes going over the elaborate braids in his beard, like she knew each one. Impossible. She did not know him, not any of them; Thorin would have heard about someone so strange... She pulled back slightly, blinked, and tiptoed on, stepping just beyond Fíli, who evidently also remained awake. His Sister's Son's hand flew out and caught the Thief in her tracks. She yelped while Fíli smiled as though he just won the bet Kíli had lost. But then the Dog shot in, gnashing and snarling in front of the Thief. Fíli let go and backed off just as Thorin picked up speed and the others scrambled up from their rolls, grasping for weapons.

The Thief proceeded to speak of damming things. What? There's no water—Then she muttered something about her ties being loose, and Thorin frowned, trying to understand, giving up as quickly as confusion set in.

"Thief," he hailed low.

All of them heard him, and stilled, at the ready.

As the breeze shifted against his face, she slowly turned to look into his eyes.

She had the nerve to enter here, and look innocent about it? His anger sparked, but still he waited.

But the blasted Dog, registering his presence, snarled, hunched and jumped at him. She grasped the leather about his neck and yanked him to her side. "Heel, Sasha!"

The ties again. What? No, that's what she called the Dog.

She had him stopped at her feet. Thorin glanced from him to her and continued to wait, wary of the Dog, curious to see what the Thief would do next.

"I am not a Thief," she lied.

He looked deeper into her face. "Are you saying you did not steal from me?"

Her hand on the leather jerked, and he thought she would release the Dog, but she pulled him closer. "Well, I did only just the once—"

"—Once is enough once you're caught," Dwalin retorted from Thorin's right flank, waving his ax, waking the others to Khuzdûl curses and jeering.

"—and I apologized; I was desperate!" She shouted over them.
Thorin just stared at her, amazed at the nerve, while his Company muttered on. Her expression shifted from shock to indignation before settling into a frown, as if being caught stealing was somehow unjust.

"Come now, Thorin, can you not see she is starving?" Tharkûn thrust a steaming cup into her hands, a bit of the remaining soup. A second later she had downed it. And after that, the Wizard had his arm around her, and steered her toward a log to talk.

The Wizard. Leave it to the Wizard to confound situations. He followed them to the log, where Tharkûn had the gumption to feed the toothy beast some of their jerky. "Gandalf, I am not finished with her." The Dog bared his lips to him at his words.

"Ah, I see you three have met." Tharkûn took the time to sit. "Splendid."

"No, it is not splendid," Thorin gritted through a clenched jaw. "That beast attacked me—"

"Only because you threatened me with a sword the first time we met." Bare handed, she took a step at him, signing to her Dog for stillness. "And then attacked me the second time."

"You stole from me," Thorin filled the remaining space between them, torn by the fire in his gut. What did she expect, a peace treaty?

"I came to you for help." She met him head on. Help? Thorin studied her, frowning.

"How did you expect me, a woman lost and alone in a strange land, to react to you waving your sword around?"

Where did this one come from? "You could have started by asking for help," he retorted. That would have been the reasonable thing to do...

"Kind of hard to do when you tackle me before I even get a chance to say anything!"

Thorin bit his tongue, irritated by the fact that she had a point. Then he blinked, feeling the heat off her face, realizing they stood so close.

Then the Grey One muttered some nonsense about the lengths she had come to steal one of Thorin's biscuits, and they both stepped apart, thankfully. Thorin felt terribly uncomfortable within her aura, like he should know her. Infuriating. Impossible. Then, acting as if he weren't there, she turned to Tharkûn and said something about seeking his advice, "for help. I need a Wizard."

Thorin nearly choked. This was bordering ridiculous. "What for?" He demanded slowly, taking in her form, wondering about the nature of her odd manner of dress. Her face colored at his question, but he felt no urge to spare her, she was experienced enough, he could tell it. She was well beyond the age of a maiden of Men—Not to say she was old, no. Certainly she was not plain; her single braid fell far down her back, clearly unattended from days of traveling alone. It was thick, and loosened her hair would fall below her waist— He shut his eyes briefly to stop admiring. Surely she was married, and this was all so utterly irritating. "Why are you out here, woman? You need to go back to your husband. Back where you belong."

The Thief stood tall and her Dog began to growl. "How dare you—"

Tharkûn cut them both off. "Sorry, my dear." He shot Thorin a pointed look for silence. Thorin forced his breath down through his teeth. "But let us go back to why you think you need a Wizard."
And there she proceeded to weave the most outrageous tale of coming from another world to Middle-earth, and that Middle-earth only existed in some 'book' from hers. As she said it, Thorin could not help looking her over yet again, at all the strangely placed seams, everything oddly cut, and her pack, full of buckles made of... he could not tell what, and a silent argument ensued in his mind as he listened.

She was not lying. This could not be true. His mind looked to the evidence, but he would not believe it.

She spoke of magic and the Wizard agreed he was the one to come to for aide. And her name was Sona. Sona, Thorin thought of song and cursed himself just as the sun began to cut light through the trees. He would listen no more. "Gandalf, you cannot possibly believe this thieving Easterling—" he said, focusing on her skin tone, placing her as near as he could to any place she may have fit beyond the Mountains he came from.

"Whoa, how about you lay off the name calling and the racism—"

Racism? What was that? He glanced over the new word but did not stop his speech. "—and all this foolishness about a 'book' and how this has all been written." Thorin turned his back to her, eyes resting on his Company, who watched, some curious, some worried, all hovering at the edges of earshot. This — Thief behind him — claims to know their history? All of them? Before they have lived it? How can that be? "No one’s future is written. I will listen to this rubbish no longer," he said, ready to go back to his own.

"Erebor."

He stopped, and as unwilling as he felt, he looked at her again. "How came you to know of Erebor?"

"I told you... I’ve read the book."

'The book'. Mahal save us. This was too much. "Lies," he spat. He would have the truth. The blasted Dog stopped him just as he realized he was coming for her again. Instead he turned to Tharkûn, gripping his hilt. "She is a spy, Gandalf. A filthy, Easterling spy," he growled out the words, fully exasperated. "What proof do we have that she is as she says—a lost traveler from another world—other than her word? And what good is the word of Men?"

"Now you listen to me, Thorin Oakenshield—"

Oakenshield? Her voice had risen and he wondered if the others had heard, held still by what she’d said. How would she know this? His honor name? Not many beyond the Dwarves knew it, the name he had bitterly won at a cost he could never forget.

He looked up at her, caught in the fire of her amber eyes. Her nose, now flared in anger, held a tiny gold stud that winked in the dawning light. Her flushed face was dusted and streaked with dirt from days of travel, framed by loose strands of hair that had pulled free from her messy braid, dark with golden honey wisps streaked through it, so bedraggled and unkempt... He felt a twinge of guilt; perhaps he was being too harsh. But now she was beyond the Dog with her finger thrust in his face. He clenched his hands into fists to stop himself from smacking that finger.

"If one of the Maiar trusts and believes me, that should be more than enough for you." How she spoke to him—as if he were some miscreant! And what— What did she call Tharkûn, the wise one now scrambling for his dropped pipe? In the Common Speech, Gandalf. Elven, Maiar, Istari, in Khuzdûl, Tharkûn, Thorin’s brain filtered through names he had learned long ago. Aside from his name in the Common Speech, who among the race of Men knew Tharkûn’s other names, much less...
the nature of his being, that he was one of the Maiar? But he could not think further, because she would not stop. "And for your own edification, I'm an American, not an Easterling—"

Amer—

"—but even if I was, there's no reason to assume I'm a spy or somehow beneath you in any way, shape of form just because I'm from the race of Men and have slightly darker skin than you."

—what did that have to do with anything?

"I am a living, thinking, intelligent being just like you—"

—you are nothing like me.

"—and am in every way your equal."

You certainly have no fear. He stared at her, wall in place, set not to move a hairbreadth out of her way, as if to dare her to move through him.

"I will not be spoken of as if I'm not here."

I should not speak to you at all.

"And when you do talk to me it will be with courtesy and respect."

I would rather not.

And finally she stopped admonishing, though her voice still echoed forcefully in his head. What was he to make of it? She had not lied. She made him feel like a fool. And he had absolutely nothing to say about it. His stone face set firmly, he gave her his shoulder and walked back to his Company.

They immediately all came at him asking who the Thief was, how they met, what she stole and what they were going to do with her, except for Fíli who was looking back, assessing that infernal Dog.

Thorin rolled his eyes and slapped Fíli on the shoulder to refocus his Sister's Son's attention upon the pressing concern of the stranger in their midst, who now appeared to be in some deep and emotional discussion with the Wizard. He watched her make a circular motion toward them all and wondered if that was a dismissal. Clearly she did not think much of them. And this was all the same to him. Why should he care? His heart still beat fast in continuing annoyance. Surely he did not. Then she reached into a hidden pocket in her breeches and pull out a kind of circlet, a shiny black three-quarter band she put on her forehead and lowered over her eyes, tiny holes on the upper edges clearly not large enough to see though— Thorin squinted at her, wondering how she could see now, with the world of trees around her reflecting back at him. Shaking his head, he turned toward the others.

"The lass doesn't seem too threatening, Thorin," Dwalin muttered, looking back at her over Thorin's shoulder, "rather flustered and pink in the face at the moment, but nothing more 'n that."

"You did not have dealings with her Dog, Dwalin." Thorin muttered, fingering the bite wounds through the bandages, holding his wrist out toward his friend to see. "He has sharp teeth, and he listens to her."

"She listens to her." Fíli corrected, eyes again focused on the blasted animal. "She has a sweet face. She's watching us."

"She's a she?" Bofur asked, glancing studiously toward the Dog.
"Of course she is," Fíli retorted, indignant. "But I've not seen her kind before—"

"Oh, come on, Fíli, you act like you've just met your One." Kíli moaned as if this were a dry lesson added to an already full day.

Fíli smacked him. "What do you know about that?"

Kíli shrugged, a superior expression working itself into a smirk across his face.

"But the lass, Thorin? What do you intend to do about her?" Bofur asked, the tips of his hat nodding with the question. Balin's intelligent eyes strayed from Bofur to Thorin, as his old friend repeated the question silently.

"Nothing. She will not stay with us. She can go back where she came from."

Balin pointed his head forward with that look in his eyes, as though he just caught Thorin stealing some sacred scroll from the Thrór's private library. Thorin frowned at him, wondering what in Mahal's name *that* look meant now. "And what if she cannot? What if she's lost, or without a place to return to, as we have been?"

"What if she is, Balin?" Thorin shot back. "What am I supposed to do about it? I have my own people to look after, and this should not include every stray we meet on the way."

The answering spark in his old friend's eyes only fueled Thorin's agitation, an unease that showed no signs of abating anytime soon. "And you remember how it felt when we were overlooked by those we thought would help—"

"Enough, Balin. I never met that ... Thief in all my days, nor made her promises I now fail to keep, so do not compare me to old faithless allies of our past."

"You are not faithless, Thorin. That is my point." Balin said, never one to back down. Thorin only stared at him for many long moments, until they both looked back in her direction. She was standing now, rigid and pale and looking like the wind had been knocked from her lungs, but surely the Wizard had done nothing to harm her. No, Tharkûn was staring back the way they had come, with a look of sadness that made him look older than old.

Just then, the Thief began pacing and raising her voice, "What do you mean he didn't show up?" and Thorin could not help it, he walked back toward them.

The Wizard muttered something under his hat.

"No, see, you don't understand...the book is called *The Hobbit.*"

Thorin frowned. Did she mean the grocer?

"He's the story's hero!" The Thief's clear voice was rising above them like bells pulled with increasing force. He found himself wondering if the Thief could sing, and quashed that thought as quickly as it came. "It does not work without him!"

The Wizard did not seem to notice the growing storm right in front of him. She grabbed his arms. "There are *things* that need to happen—"

Whatever she was about to say was cut off by a suddenly woken Wizard who clamped a hand over her mouth and muttered powerfully, "Do not say anything about what has been written. You could ruin it all!"
She wrenched herself free, tripped over her Dog, and yelled at the top of her lungs, "THE STORY IS ALREADY RUINED! YOU HAVE TO GO BACK!"

"We do not go back." Thorin let his words fall like a hammer.

The fire-crazed Thief spun about, searching the road and the fields around them for the missing Hobbit.

This had to stop. "Not for some straggling grocer. He had his chance." He glanced pointedly at Tharkûn. "It is time to go."

That look came into the Wizard's eyes. The one that spelled trouble. "A moment, Thorin, if you would. I have had a rather brilliant idea, if I do say so myself."

The Thief tensed at the comment, holding her Dog closer, and Thorin wondered how well she knew the Wizard from the 'books' she spoke of.

Thorin braced himself.

"Your Company needs a Burglar," Tharkûn beamed like a Dwarfling in Bifur's toyshop. "And I promised you a Fourteenth Member."

"No." How dare he suggest it?

"Oh, hell no!"

Hell? Thorin wondered for the briefest second. But she agreed. That was new.

Then the Wizard singled him out, his brows raised in challenge. "And why not? Has she not already proven she can steal from you quite handily?"

Thorin glanced at her sheepishly, already knowing he would never hear the end of this. And it was utterly annoying. "Aye," he grumbled, settling himself in the bad mood he kept for company in these tiresome moments. "But I sought a Burglar to employ. Not a Thief to steal from me." He glanced down at the blasted Dog, who, as if on cue, growled back at him. "Nor one with a Dog she can sick on me undeserved—"

"Oh, it was most certainly deserved," the Thief muttered, clasping hard to the collar of her Dog.

"And you," Tharkûn persisted in his useless persuasion. "I have already told you I cannot get you home, but will gladly take you to those who can."

And who might that be? Thorin wondered, but he dared not ask, truly not wishing to know.

"Those who can? I thought you said El—"

"And besides, Thorin," Tharkûn cut her off, clearly hushing her, also not wishing for Thorin to know. Elves. Surely it was about Elves... "Are you truly going to leave her here, alone, in the wild?"

Thorin clenched his arms over his chest. "She is not alone. She has that infernal beast for company." He pulled a hand up over his shoulder to point the way behind them. "The Shire is less than a day's walk. If she seeks civilized society she can join the grocer—"

"Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór!" Tharkûn bellowed, towering above them, his presence
expanding like a mountain about to heave the earth-core's fire. "You tasked me with finding a Fourteenth Member for your Company. Well I have found her. Sona is my choice. She will be your Burglar."

"No, Gandalf." Thorin would not be swayed, no matter the power behind the Wizard's argument. "You had your choice. You picked the Hobbit, and for whatever reason, your gamble failed. I will not let you saddle this sacred Quest to restore our Home with a stray you picked up on the road. Or her Dog."

The Thief's mouth dropped and her wide eyes glanced Thorin's way, a flicker of admiration peeking through her awe, followed by her customary scowl. Did no one deny the Wizard in the 'books' she had read?

"I am very sorry to hear it," Tharkûn muttered, looking older than old yet again. "Very well," he glanced to the sky, an aura of hope straightening his stance. "If you will not take her, I will."

"What?" The Thief asked.

"You will travel with me, my dear," Tharkûn answered, as though he had solved all the world's problems.

"But how is that any different than what you were just proposing?"

Thorin wanted to laugh, however bitterly, at the accuracy of her statement, but he kept his peace. The Wizard had practiced stubbornness for years upon years, far beyond the measure of Thorin's lifetime. "Very well," he capitulated grudgingly. "But she is not one of us. I cannot guarantee her safety. And you will be responsible for her fate."

"Yeah, I'm standing right here, thanks."

He would not grace her a glance. He would not speak to her. He would not. Instead he returned to his Company, ready to set out.

But setting out had to wait as Tharkûn brought the Thief forward for introductions. Thorin watched his Company assess her as the light of day expanded. Dwalin had put on his war mask, aimed to intimidate, while most of the others looked on with varying degrees of curiosity.

"Sona will be traveling with me for some time," Tharkûn announced over everyone's mumblings. Some time, Thorin echoed in his mind. How was he likely to endure it? Dread mixed with a strong desire to move all mingled together in his agitated state. The Quest. He would focus on the Quest, and it pulled him, he felt it. He would reclaim their Homeland, and who cared for the extra company they kept?

"Sona," the Wizard spoke her name gently, "this is the Company of Thorin Oakenshield. You have met their leader."

She laughed, looking like she smelled a dead Warg. At least the distaste was mutual. Dwalin swelled at her, intensifying his war mask, causing her to fidget. Thorin signed for him to curb it, she was intimidated enough, and peaceful traveling was a greater priority, and having her at ease would help that.

He glanced back at her. She was chewing her lip while taking in the names of her new travel companions, clearly overwhelmed by the number of them. Thorin realized the similarity of family names would no doubt cause her some confusion. She likely thought like any other outsider, that
they were all the same, hairy, greedy, smelly and closed to the world. It could not be helped. He stared past her, resigned, and feeling a weight he could not define.

But then she startled at Balin's name, like she knew it, but could not place it. Fear touched the corners of her eyes, followed by indignation when she caught Dwalin glaring madly. Thorin signed him again, more forcefully now, and with his own glare for emphasis.

Dwalin gave a slow nod in return, gentling his edge and pulling in his ax. Thorin laughed inside at the futility of it; the Thief would not be able to tell a difference in his Warrior's regard.

His Sister's Sons were charmed. Too charmed. After thumping them he glanced back, wondering what they saw. And she was smiling, nodding her welcome. Thorin's mouth went slack, caught off guard by her openness. She shined. How in Mahal's name had he not seen it? He searched for lies in her expression, but found no hint. Suddenly her Dog barked at Fíli, wagging her tail. Thorin could have sworn she was smiling.

He glanced to the ground, feeling a hint of regret that they had not met on better terms. But it could not be helped now. What was done was done.

But he was jarred from these thoughts when she called out Glóin's name. "As in Gimli son of Glóin?" Stunned silence followed as all eyes were on hers.

"Aye, lass." Glóin stared at her star-eyed. "And if you don't mind me asking, how do you know about my son?"

Fortunately the Thief was lost for words. But there was admiration in her gaze, and hope, and respect? and warmth?

And he watched her struggle to tell them. No. Thorin moved. She could not tell them. Foreknowledge was nothing to trifle with—What were they to do with it? His Company did not know about her 'books.' and he was not about to start explaining now. He would not let her knowledge harm them, or control them, or confine them. He took a step in front of her, toward the Ponies, toward departure, looked deep into her amber eyes and signaled "no."

She nodded back, eyes questioning, before turning behind her as if someone should be there.

That was it; he could look no more. He took that moment to address his Company. "Mount your Ponies. We have tarried long enough."

They were moving again. High time for it. A cool wind brushed through them, and the air was fresh. He could feel some of them watching as the Company followed, listening to the Ponies steps and laugh-filled chatter behind. Finally they were on their way. And the Mountains called, and the Mountain Song rose in his mind, and he wished to, but he hesitated singing. He had been an arse. To have ruined a friendship before it ever started. He could have just listened to Balin, always the calmer one until battle struck. But now the Thief was back there, and he wondered if she was one of the ones he felt watching. Not likely, not after his blundering. Sona. That was her name. Why did he keep thinking of song? He focused on the Mountains ahead. They would pull him through. They pulled now. He started humming low, and let the air fill him. A smile tugged its way to the corners of his mouth. One step closer, one at a time.
A/N: My thoughts on Thorin, and my process here:

Bagginshield is my OTP. I'm all over it, from the rocky start, to friendship bromance, to romantic love that was never expressed in time, to heartbreak: very much like the tragic love we see in Yule Brenner and Deborah Kerr's "The King and I."

I never thought I'd consider working on a story with Thorin where Bilbo is not in it. But then my friend JennyWren28 asked me to Beta her AU, specifically to help make sure Thorin stays in character, and I couldn't resist that call even knowing there would be no Bilbo. So, that being said, I started off a bit worried. Fortunately I did not need to worry long. The story is an Alternate Universe: What if Bilbo had not come along, for whatever reason? (And I have ideas about that which may one day be expressed, ohhh plot bunnies…) What if there were someone else Thorin could find as a romantic interest? AUs give me the freedom to check out another scenario. JennyWren28's story works exceptionally well, Sona and Sasha feel so real, and when Thorin began showing up more and more, I found myself moving beyond JennyWren28's Beta, projecting Thorin's PoV until I was writing scenes. Now here we are, my friend and I in a collaborative effort that has been beyond amazing…

I am not new to writing, but this is my first foray into FanFic.

Repeating here, in case anyone is worried: Tolkien's characters are not mine. Sona and Sasha belong to JennyWren28. She has given me permission to use them in this story. In fact, she is very happy I'm doing it.

The rating will most likely rise as the story progresses.

Y
Thorin set his pack against a rock outcropping bordering the ridge, as far from the others as he could get and still have them in view. It had been a long day riding, with all of them following, and that feeling of eyes on him, not knowing whose. He wished his mind would give it a rest, but it kept pulling back to the new one, the Thief. What was he going to do about her?

Just then she dashed away through the brush. Dwalin signaled Thorin he’d check on her before slipping out after with a frown as wide as Moria was dark. His Warrior friend did not trust her yet, or maybe he worried for her, Thorin was not sure which. He chortled briefly. But why was he not as wary? This was a strange and uncomfortable thought, so he shoved it aside. He kept watch on the edge of the brush where she had left them and Dwalin had followed, waiting for their return, his mind still agitated, and for a split second he worried she might wander off, lost. But then he saw the Dog, and had to suppress another laugh. The Thief was not leaving. Not while her Dog hovered near Fíli as though he were her new choice morsel, barking and wagging her tail for his hands and his playful tone. And again, Thorin would swear the Dog was laughing. He snorted and looked out over the ridge, willing his mind on something else, calculating the days it would take to cross over lands to the Misty Mountains. They were a day out from Bree, and after that, wilderness between...

After a while Thorin leaned against the rock and just watched, enjoying the solitude as the sounds of his Company’s bantering cheered him. But their bantering ceased when Dwalin and the Thief returned, and many of them looked sidelong at her, evaluating while they carried on with the tasks of a fire, a meal and bedding arrangements.

They had known well enough to stay clear of him through the day, but this changed once camp was settled and supper was stewing over the fire. Dwalin found him on the periphery, passed him an ale sack, took a drought from his own, and then crossed his arms and looked back toward the Company, now more somber than was usual. Dwalin’s bushy brows wagged obviously within Thorin’s peripheral vision as his friend made a point to draw his attention, his brooding expression rivaling any of Thorin’s best.

Dwalin never tread lightly when he harbored an opinion, particularly a pressing one, and this night would be no exception.

Thorin decided to hurry his friend along, and stared at him with his eyes raised until the words began to flow, loosened by the ale, no doubt. "Why do you let her stay when you don't want her here?"

Thorin glanced from the Thief to Tharkûn and then back to Dwalin, not sure where to begin.

Dwalin, hand fisted over his ale sack, pointed his finger at Thorin. "None o' that. Wizard's got nothing to do with it. What happened back there?"

Thorin eyed him plainly, shook his head slowly and shrugged.

"Fine. Keep your secrets. I'll find out soon enough. But you shouldn't be trusting strangers, you know better 'n that."

Thorin just nodded, and left it.

And Dwalin’s brows shot up and sank into a frown almost all at once. "You do trust her! How
"I cannot explain it." Thorin said simply, eyes strong on Dwalin, meeting with force.

"Meaning you will not."

Thorin gave a nod, confirming, looking back toward the Company and the Thief on the edges of them, hands restless like she wanted to help. Thorin and Dwalin each drank again from their ale sacks and began walking the perimeter, letting silence fill the space between them. Dwalin walked farthest out, a deeply ingrained action of protection Thorin recognized as second nature to the Warrior. Dwalin's questions were not born of idle curiosity; they were survivalist concerns, Thorin knew well enough. And in this situation, time would tell how long it took before his friend knew too much.

"I see what's happening," Dwalin groused low, eying him with an intensity that was not quite anger.

"And what might that be?" Thorin shot back, pressing his weight into the Warrior's blocking space in obvious challenge.

"Ach," Dwalin shoved him off. "Wait until morning, and we're sparring. I'll get you good then."

Thorin laughed.

Dwalin shot his finger out again. "My observations are accurate, Thorin. You're letting her stay, 'cause you want her here." He glanced over the camp. "Fool everyone, including yourself. But not me." Then he pointed at his brother Balin across the way, without looking to be sure where he was, because, as Thorin knew from past experiences, Dwalin knew exactly where everyone was from his last visual scan of the group just moments before. "He knows it, too, and for some reason he doesn't see fit to share, he thinks it's sweet." Dwalin looked like he just bit a lemon, and Thorin grimaced. Both Dwalin and his brother had a knack for uncovering the secondary concerns hiding in plain sight, however different those 'concerns' might be from one brother to another. "I know my brother got to you," Dwalin nodded, and then pointedly glanced back at the Thief. "You're feeling sorry for the lass. She does have a pleasant way about her." Dwalin flashed a hard smile toward Thorin.

"What does pleasantness got to do with anything?" Thorin balled his hand.

"Ah, come, know I have your back, but see to it you refrain from foolery, aye?"

"Foolery?" Thorin repeated low, angling his brow toward his friend, questioning, pressing back. Did he think he would actually—

"Hmmm. You know it."

Thorin's jaw clenched. He was so close to letting his fist fly. "I have a Quest to think about—"

"Even so—"

"Enough, Dwalin, you see more than what is there." Thorin let his voice settle on the command. He would not give any more thought to this particular 'concern.' Not now, not ever.

"She poses no threat in any regular sense," he then added, changing the subject, weighing how best to explain her presence and her problem without saying where the danger truly lay, this thing of foreknowledge he cared not to think about—"The Wizard has taken her on, and now even if he had not—" Thorin stopped, considering. "Remember when we were forced to flee the Mountain, all the loss of loved ones and our place, but we could look back?" He looked at Dwalin, who was frowning
again. "The Lonely Mountain is still there. We have each other. I believe her when she says she has no one." He could not tell Dwalin the extent of her loss, but something of the measure of their own was surely a start—

"So you do take on strays..."

His Company settled in, quiet and carefully talking amongst themselves, and Thorin saw no reason to move from the stone. He went back to his planning. He knew the days it would take. But he needed to decipher the map, to find some hidden clue within it that showed the secret to the back door in, the door his key would open.

As the night grew darker, the sounds of crickets and owls took hold of the evening. He looked up to see the Thief feeding her Dog the meat from her bowl. Generous of her, to give her pet the filling parts. His eyes crossed over his settling Company, wondering why he felt no hunger. Most of them were finishing the soup Bombur had fussed with the last hour. Now the Thief returned her empty bowl as Bofur and Bifur made way for her, curious and hesitant all at once. He watched carefully to see how this would go when she turned as if called, looking straight at him. It was too dark to see, but he remembered the amber shade of her eyes. And then he remembered his harshness, her scolding words, and their clear distaste for each other. What in Mahal's name was he to do about her?

Without moving, his eyes turned back out across the ridge into the distance, taking in the hills slowly, one by one. He did not need to decide tonight.

And then she was there, right next to him, offering him a bowl. "I noticed you haven't eaten yet."

He looked. Assessing what she was about. Why was she bringing him soup? Why did he care? He did not wish to speak with her, and yet. He would not be rude. "I always eat last." He wondered if she understood why as his Company spread out their bedrolls near the fire for the night.

She lowered the bowl and her face, biting her lip contritely. "Oh."

Perhaps she did.

Then she glanced quickly over her shoulder, he watched her eyes do inventory before she turned back to him, raising the bowl again. "Everyone's eaten."

Observant. He was not about to accept the bowl from her. And yet, he would not be rude. He nodded to the boulder at his side, and that is where she left it.

And then she left.

Thorin still did not feel hungry, but he would eat it all the same. He drew a hand up to his face, and pressed a fist over his mouth. Why did she do this? Why did she care?

Before he could think of an answer she was back. "Thorin—" That was the second time she said his name. She was mighty free with it. To his utmost annoyance, hearing it this time was better than the first, more pleasing, perhaps because she said it softly and welcoming. She swayed from foot to foot, like a young sparring partner mustering nerve, and he nodded, his hand spreading over his beard to hide a smile that was building in his cheeks. "I want to apologize."

What? At that he could not help looking directly into her eyes. They seemed surprised to be held there in his gaze, and her head pulled slightly back, but now that he looked he would not let go.

"Uh," she swallowed. "That is, I'm not sorry for what I said," at that her chin jutted forward with the
confidence of hardened metal, "but I am sorry for how I said it."

He could not stop staring, with no idea how to respond. This was unexpected.

And now she was looking down, away from him. "I shouldn't have yelled at you."

He blinked and almost smiled, stunned by her deed. Then she looked back into his eyes. He tipped his head, accepting her apology in silence. And then he let the moment pass and moved his gaze across the ridge.

She went back to the space she had made for herself, on the opposite side of the fire from Fíli and Kíli, farther from camp, her head tilted to one side, sad eyes, missing inclusion. He could see it when she looked around at the others. A shiver went through him when he thought of where she came from. He and his had lost their home. She has lost her world. He could not stop thinking of it, once he started. What was he going to do about her?

He reached for the bowl of soup and drank the broth, tipping carefully to keep it out of his hair. It was now cooled but still quite good, and he was surprised to find himself hungry as he nibbled on the little bits of spiced meat and roots she had kindly sought to bring him. He glanced to where she had settled herself, wondering what motivated her. Surely her biggest hope was to find some way back. He sighed, leaning against the rocks to watch and rest, wishing there was something he could offer, when her infernal Dog sprung onto her bedroll and started spinning like a giant toy top. He settled easier, remembering she was not quite alone.

Thorin stood looking out over the ridge when the Warg cry split the night from across the ravine. It was far off, but that never stopped the dread-chill.

"What was that?" the Thief called low, bolting upright like a quivering blade, eyes fastened hard on his Sister's Son's across the dying embers of the campfire.

Thorin shifted on his feet, breathing deep, taking his fill of the clean night air.

"Orcs," muttered Kíli, trying to hide his shiver in his oversized tunic. He looked keenly at his brother who, also tight with nerves, nodded silent agreement and then resumed smoking his pipe, eyes wandering past the ridge. Kíli settled back, following Fíli's glance to the open space.

Thorin took a few steps toward them, watching and listening.

"Orcs." The Thief got up. "Welp, that settles it."

Settles what? Thorin wondered, slightly frowning.

She proceeded to drag her bedroll closer to the wall and his Sister's Son's.

"Aye, throat cutters," Fíli nudged his brother with a nod toward the Thief.

"I know what Orcs are and what they can do," she shushed them as she curled into her bag until nothing but her big eyes showed. "I'm plenty scared already."

Thorin narrowed his gaze at her; had she seen Orcs before? Had she witnessed their violence? If, then she had somehow eluded them— perhaps a healthy dose of fear had kept her hidden— and here she was, admitting fear with confidence. She was wise, this one. And so unusually honest for the people of Men, who rarely admit what they see as weakness—
His Sister's Sons caved into each other, silently giggling.

Enough. Thorin took another step, irritated. "You think that's funny?" The mirth on their faces dissolved instantly. "You would hide your own fears by mocking her?" Her wide eyes followed him as he got closer to the boys. "She is honest with herself and right to fear Orcs."

Kíli looked away in shame. "We didn't mean anything by it."

Utter nonsense. "No you did not." Thorin turned on his heel. "You know nothing of the world." Such callous teasing by his own kin? He would not abide it. And even if he did not care, he would not let them shield their bravado behind her well-deserved fear.

He went back to the ridge and glared over the wide landscape, his hate catching fire in his gut. His mouth parted and took in the breeze sliding up from the cliff, air clean and cool, and he tried to release his agitation.

"Don't mind him, laddie. Thorin has more cause than most to hate Orcs."

Not now, Balin. Thorin's eyes slid shut. She does not need to know.

But evidently his best Advisor thought otherwise, and for the benefit of educating their newest companion, the resident Thief, Balin began retelling the events of Azanulbizar, of Azog the Defiler who swore to end the line of Durin, how he took that plan to action, starting with the head of his Grandfather. How moments later Thorin lost sight of his Father and watched his little Brother fall.

"We were leaderless," Balin continued. "Defeat and death were upon us."

Thorin remembered. It is where he learned the value of the stone mask, a place where feeling is not allowed to move. This freed him to fight with abandon.

"That is when I saw him," Balin spoke of Thorin with admiration shaking his voice. "The young Dwarf Prince facing the Pale Orc... He stood alone against this terrible foe, his armor rent, wielding nothing but an oaken branch as a shield..."

Battle rage took over, and he knew he would fight until he died with his kin. He remembered the drive in his muscles, in his bones, in his mind. How he hurled himself at Azog in the midst of a losing battle, again and again, until he fell away from Azog's mace, disarmed, sprawled in the debris of crumbling rocks and broken trees, where he grasped hold of an oak branch and a fallen sword and somehow managed to defeat the filth, thus earning his honor name, Oakenshield.

Thorin stretched his eyes into the distance. He had not saved them. He had not earned it. He had only done what had to be done after... all of that.

"Azog the Defiler learned that day that the line of Durin would not be so easily broken."

Numbness was left. Thorin escaped death, taking the giant Orc's arm with the fallen sword, cutting a heart-vein that pulsed black blood in bursts across the muddy field.

"Our forces rallied and drove the Orcs back; our enemy had been defeated... but there was no feast or songs that night, for our dead were beyond the count of grief."

Thrór. Frerin. Fallen. Thráin—Never found. All who followed them in death, and all those left to live in the gap of such great loss. Dió. He had to send word. And so he did. And there were tears beyond count when the stone masks were lifted...
Thorin faced his Company, all standing in his honor, surrounding him with looks of awe, trust and openness. He glanced toward the Thief, wondering how she had taken this tale. She sat upright in her bedroll, flushed, clearly woken by it. Then he looked to Balin and signed for him to stop, but his old friend paid no mind.

"We few had survived and I thought to myself then," Balin nodded at Thorin with eyes full of love. "There is one I could follow. There is one I could call King."

Thorin's face went slack. He could not bear this praise. I was all they had. He looked to his Sister's Son's. I did my best. He walked among his Company that stood with him now, feeling more than he cared to. I would do what is needed. I would make you a place. I would give my all to secure it.

"But what about the Pale Orc? Did Dáin kill him or..." the Thief was asking.

Dáin? She knew of Dáin, but— "Dáin was not there. He was delayed." He looked at the Thief, evaluating, turning toward the ridge and his bedroll. They had to stop all this reminiscing and get to the business of sleeping. But why did she think Dáin had been there? Were her 'books' wrong? And if they were, what did that mean? Never mind. He glanced her way once more. Her foreknowledge was useless and he refused to be riddled by it. "As for the Defiler," Thorin spat, remembering the life-blood pumping from Azog's stump, refusing doubt. "He slunk back into the hole whence he came. That filth died of his wounds long ago."

Why had he spoken to her? He needed to mind his words—

He turned away from all of them, silently willing their focus to turn toward other matters.

An hour later Balin appeared at his side, offering some of the Longbottom Leaf he had purchased in the Shire. "We do not know what became of the Defiler," Balin muttered under his breath.

"I saw him bleed out."

"You saw them drag him off as he was bleeding out. They may have stopped it—"

"Enough, Balin." Thorin did not glance at him, but rather concentrated on filling his pipe. "Why did you go and do that?"

"What?"

"Tell tales to the Thief," Thorin muttered. Was it not obvious? "She does not need to know about our past."

"And why not? I thought it wouldn't hurt her to know a bit about who she's with." Leave it to Balin to be quick and sure of his business.

"She's not with us. She's with the Wizard," Thorin corrected, looking at him sternly as if to underline the fact.

"That's about the same, from where I'm standing." Balin smiled his 'know-it' smile and winked as they each finished packing their bowls. They pulled out their flint lights and tamp rods as one, lit and tamped the leaf in their pipes, lit again, drew and smoked together in silence.

An hour before sunrise Thorin took his sword and his ax and made his way to a nearby clearing just beyond the camp, to move. Sure enough, Dwalin joined him, and sweat poured from the both of them before they were through.
"She brought you that soup last night— Do you begin to admit why you let her stay among us, Thorin?" Dwalin huffed between passes. "Do you like her? At least she made you eat—"

Thorin slammed into him before striking from the backside. Dwalin parried smartly, and they both pulled away, panting. "Stuff it, Dwalin."

"I will when you tell me why. You did see her nose has a gold stud? I think she's married. Certainly old enough for it—"

"She is no Dwarf; the stud means nothing to the people of Men."

"Heh," Dwalin laughed. "So you have thought about it?"

"Why don't you ask her, Dwalin?" Thorin circled, though they were finished, he was tempted to engage another pass. Yes, she likely was married, and he had asked her already, albeit, not so very politely. She had not answered. And what did it matter in any case? Thorin couldn't care less, and he wished Dwalin would stop needling.

"I'm not the one who mostly wants to know, though I admit to a certain weakness of curiosity. I see you watching—"

"Save it. Thorin cut in. He didn't need to hear this out-loud. From Dwalin. "Or ask the Wizard. But spare me your speculations. We know nothing of this… Thief. I prefer to keep it that way."

"Oh, sure, friend. And I'll buy that when Dáin's pet Boars fly among the Eagles."

Thorin glared.

"I'll be keeping a watch."

"Fine," Thorin muttered. He cocked his head almost like a promise, though he was nowhere closer to a decision on just exactly what he wanted to do about the Thief. And then he leaned in toward Dwalin. "She is no threat. The Wizard is her guide. Trust me," Thorin shook his head for emphasis. "There is nothing more to it."

Dwalin snorted but said no more as they made toward the river to bathe.

A few hours later the rain started, the kind that can keep on for days. Long before Dori saw fit to complain, each member of Thorin's Company had their rain skins on, and the Wizard, he did not seem overly concerned. The Thief, on the other hand, was drenched in a matter of minutes. But she kept on mile after mile without complaint, and asked for nothing, as she took to humming a pleasant melody, soon adding words to it, a strange traveling song, perhaps aiming to distract herself from the cold. Maybe she could distract them all.

Thorin tried not to listen to her, but some of the words in the song were new, and the melody pulled him in, and he found his mind turning over the sounds and pondering the meanings. She sang of brown leaves, grey skies, and walking on a winter's day. Well— the leaves about them were a fair new green, but the sky most certainly was grey. And though they did not walk, and it was nowhere near winter, there was a chill in the wet air. She sang of being safe and warm— Heh. Thorin sat upright on his Pony, somehow smiling inside, not sure why.

"In EL - AE"— What's that?

"Ka Le For N'ya dreamin'"— Kaleforn'ya?
The land she comes from? Her voice was lovely—Thorin shut his eyes wishing he would shut his ears but it was to no avail. But then the next words caught his attention like a tree branch in his hair, their meanings a mystery—Stepping into a church on the way? He wondered if a church were a trap, a beehive or a crevice in the ground, as next thing she sang of was kneeling and pretending to pray—Why pretend? Why not ask, when help is needed? He thought of the Wizard, knowing full well a person could ask and not get the answer they sought. And then she sang of a preacher who liked the cold and knew she would stay—What in Mahal's name was a preacher? He frowned, glancing briefly back at Tharkûn, seeing the Wizard entirely unbothered by the wetness about him, and wondered if a preacher were anything like him—He had, in any case, seen to it she stayed.

Kaleforn'ya—The Thief's Homeland. The name had a pleasing lilt, and Thorin wondered for a moment what it was like. Did it have mountains? Or long open plains? Or rolling hills like the Shire they just left? Did it have many thieves, or was she an exception? "If I didn't tell her I could leave today." Yes, unannounced goodbyes. Thorin understood those, noticing an ache in his heart at the thought. Because sometimes home is the only place a person wants to be, and sometimes it is exactly where a person cannot get...

Thorin's thoughts drifted until he noticed Dwalin glaring at the Thief. Why the glare? Had she said something offensive that Thorin missed? Now she was asking Tharkûn if there were other Wizards. She mentioned the White One herself, further confirming her story, just as Tharkûn mentioned Radagast and the need for the Wizards' watchful eyes, "For always evil will look to find a foothold in this world." Indeed.

Just then Dwalin threw his rain skin over the Thief, muttering about wet kittens.

Ah, she was cold. Thorin's eyes dropped and he looked away, slightly stung, and at the same time confused by his feeling. He should have noticed; he would have, except—

"I think he likes you," Fíli offered toward the Thief.

Thorin's eyes ticked to his Sister's Son in an instant, to signal a warning, but he was stopped by Fíli's smile, open, welcoming, and brighter than the gold in his hair. Fíli answered his gaze, his grin spreading fractionally wider as he nodded his way, signaling 'why not?' Thorin turned, letting it be. What could a conversation hurt?

"What?" The Thief's word sounded like a whip slashing air, and Thorin snuck another glance back, to find her giving Dwalin a bit of the Warrior's own medicine, staring at his back hard enough to put a hole in it. "I'm not sure how glaring at me and ignoring me counts as liking me."

She didn't know Dwalin.

"Well, he didn't knock you off your horse," Kíli explained matter-of-factly, and Thorin had to stifle a chuckle, having watched Dwalin do just that on numerous occasions when the boys were acting up, to keep them on their toes, Dwalin would say, or just to see how they'd land.

"Okay... I think maybe he just felt sorry for me."

Clearly she did not know Dwalin.

He was growing fond, no mistake, or that cloak would still be on him. Indeed, several of them seemed increasingly charmed by her as the hours passed, including Bifur and Bofur, who were closest to her on their Ponies, along with his Sister's Sons. Balin kept his negotiation face on, pleasantly neutral and within earshot, clearly listening, evaluating. Thorin glanced briefly at the Thief, and noticed her biting her lip, chewing the lower edges. He blinked and turned around.
"I'm really not used to rain—not something we normally have to deal with back home in Kal... in the west." Thorin's head rose at her hesitation. Somehow she did not want to name her Homeland.

Kaleforn'ya—

"Ka le for n'ya." Fíli sounded the name aloud. "That's what you were singing before. Is that where you're from? And it never rains there?" he asked, having missed nothing.

"Yes, and yes. Well, mostly yes," she said to all of these. "It's a coastal state."

To the West, he thought. The sun would set upon a vast expanse of water, like liquid metal in a golden light.

"Beaches and lovely sunshine, and temperate weather year round."

Where is this place? Not their West. That was rock and cliff, biting winds and harbor lands.

She was humming again.

"You do that a lot," Fíli observed. He eyed Thorin with a brow raised in mischievous challenge. "OK, N'adad?" he signed the question.

Thorin merely stared, daring the lad to choose for himself.

"Do what a lot?"

"Singing or humming," Kíli answered, taking Thorin's silence to mean quiet assent. So Thorin turned his gaze upon him, naturally, to try and contain this. "Especially when you think no one is paying attention." Just then, Kíli winked at him in response. Thorin frowned slightly, to warn him, and Kíli frowned all the harder, smiling beneath it. Fíli caught the looks between them and jabbed his brother on the shoulder, and they both looked back at the Thief, all smiles and ease.

And she smiled back.

Thorin jerked his head forward. Well, he had not turned entirely, not likely any but Dwalin would have seen him startle. He let out a breath of air, eying the horizon for Wargs or Orcs—why else would his heart race like this?

"I'm a musician. It's what I do. I suppose I see music in everything."

No wonder he thought of song—

She made music. Of course she did.

"Wait—so you're something like a traveling minstrel then?" Kíli asked, his voice brimming with excitement. Thorin knew how those eyes shined now, and he smiled, remembering Kíli's face as they would leave twice yearly for the spring and fall craft fairs and tool trade gatherings. A face full of uncontained joy at what was to come, what Kíli would find. He would wander off to meet the entertainers, the artisan sculptors, the singers, the jugglers, the musicians and the actors, the food and the ale—Until Dís sent Fíli to fetch him. And Fíli, good brother that he was, would take his time returning them both to their 'Amad.

"Well, no. Not exactly."

No travel, just music.
"I mean, when I was younger I was in a college band."

A gathering of a band? Was this some kind of guild? Thorin frowned, confused.

"And we didn't really travel."

Well, he figured that one right—

"Mostly we played local gigs—"

Gigs?

"And did acoustic covers—"

Covers...

"Of pop—"

Pop?

"Songs."

Song. He knew that.

She made music. Of course she did.

"I'm a teacher now. I give private lessons to students that require extra tutoring."

Thorin caught himself studying at the ground behind him and resisted the urge to turn around and ask his own questions.

"Oh?" Bofur asked, "What do you play, lass?"

Thorin's eyes shut in a quiet sigh. Thank Mahal for the curiosity of Dwarves.

"Just about any stringed instrument that doesn't require a bow."

So she could play a harp—he wondered how her music would sound on his upright in the Blue Mountains. And, why was he thinking such nonsense?

"Though I prefer the guitar. Martins are my favorite brand."

Martin? Brand? What did fire have to do with it?

"Their sound is so rich; it gets better with age, even on their travel guitars—I've actually got one with me—"

Just like—

"And the action is great, not too high, not too low, and they always smell so good." She hesitated, and the urge to turn was all the more strong, Thorin had to grit his teeth to stay focused forward.

"Sorry, I just really like music."

She liked it—He found this word choice strange, 'like' was not the strongest word for passion, but he knew she loved; he could hear it in her voice.
"I love a merry jig as much as the next Dwarf, lass." Bofur chimed, echoing Thorin's thoughts. "And these two both play fiddle passably well." Thorin could see the fingers pointed toward his Sister's Sons. "Perhaps you could be so kind as to play for us one of these evenings."

That would be—

Thorin cut the thought off. What in Mahal's name was he thinking? And what was he going to do about her?

"I'd like that," she answered.

_I bet_, he laughed silently. No need to decide this tonight, he thought, angling his chin toward the road ahead.

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Want more? Go read Sona's side of the story, "On the Road to Find Out," by JennyWren28! :-))
Days went by, and Thorin continued to look forward, to leave decisions for later.

His Sister's Sons had latched onto the Thief, and Thorin, try as he might, could not prevent himself from listening to their conversations. The Dog took a liking to Fíli from the first, becoming his second shadow after Kíli. She bounded around them as they rode, woofing, sighing and yawning as though she added her own words to their bantering. A thaw began for the others, and they slowly opened toward her, Bifur, Bombur and Bofur including her with friendly gestures, food and polite questions; the rest hung back waiting, observing, while Thorin kept forward, focused on the Mountain far away, determined not to say a word. He settled into a sour mood by the third day, and Dwalin had a few extra sparring bruises to prove it.

"What are you waiting for?" Dwalin took a swing, nicking his shoulder just after Thorin had landed the hilt on his jaw. They turned to each other, both sweating and panting from the moves. "Why don't you just ask?"

"Ask what, Dwalin?"

"Where she comes from, what's her purpose? And if she's married, for starters."

Thorin nearly choked on a laugh. "You jest while I hold a blade?"

"It's not a joke, and I don't see why not—"

"I already asked." Thorin stilled at the admission and watched Dwalin blink.

"What? When?"

"It— That first day. The conversation was— forced. She found offense and refused to answer me." Thorin sheathed his blade, opting not to add the fact that his question then had been anything but polite. "I'm not about to speak to her, much less ask her that. Again. Besides, I have no time."

"Hah! We move along, day by day, and you say there is no time? Just let your boys do all the talking?"

Thorin glared and punched and shoved all at once, and Dwalin thrust back, laughing the way he does, his teeth showing, threatening to bite. "Well, you could—"

"Look, we did not start off on friendly terms. I know she prefers I keep to myself, as do I."

Dwalin's eyes widened in doubt as one of his meaner frowns creased his features. "Something's changed, Thorin." He stepped back now, pointing at him with his blocking fist, gauntleted finger toward his right eye. "Something about you—"

"Yes," Thorin agreed, cutting the Warrior off. He rolled his left arm, shrugged and pointed East. "I've a Quest, to get us to the Lonely Mountain, where a fire drake awaits us."

"I know—"

"I am resolved to take back our Home."
"Suit yourself," Dwalin huffed, gathering various weapons scattered across the clearing. "Don't think I'm not watching. And I'll make sure your Thief doesn't get lost in the meantime," he called out as he headed back to camp, just before he disappeared through the brush.

My Thief? What utter nonsense.

Thorin tarried. Confused as his breath settled. Somehow, just somehow there had to be a way to clear his head. But the undeniable fact was he seemed to favor this Thief. He had no room for such feelings. And it aggravated, like wood shards under the skin.

Sure enough, later that day, pertinent questions were asked. Fíli began it after the Thief described dancing on waves atop planks of wood—surfing, she called it.

"So, where is your husband? What does he— How is it you travel unattended?"

Blast it, Fíli, why? Thorin tensed in his seat, anticipating her response, wondering if she'd be offended, keyed to hear her answer all the same.

She made no answer. Thorin bit his inner lip to keep from turning around to look.

"Sona?" Fíli spoke again as the gap of silence grew. "I asked you a question, but seem to have lost you."

Thorin felt eyes upon him, but held firm, he would not turn around.

"I'm sorry. What else did you want to know?"

Thorin frowned, confused. Had she been listening?

"He asked what your husband thought about you going off traveling all by yourself with no escort or chaperone," Kíli piped in. Thorin could hear the laughter in his voice.

"What is it with you guys and assuming I'm married?" She asked tersely, low, as though she pressed the words through her teeth. Somehow this subject of husbands was a sensitive one. Perhaps she had no husband, and thought she was too old to get one now? Certainly the world of Men was a cruel and foolish place, if one such as her were considered unworthy due to her age, as if she were some cattle, to be graded, and degraded, treated as a lesser being. If that were so, they did not deserve her. At that he dared glance at her face, one puckered in anger, cheeks slightly flushed, and he wanted—

He let out a breath he'd been holding, closed his eyes and turned back. He wanted to know about her. And topics of husbands were irksome, and she was not too shy to show how much so. Her frown was almost golden, almost—pretty?

No, he didn't think that. But he rather did think—she wasn't married, and he wondered why this knowledge seemed to ease the tension in his shoulders—why should it matter?

And then he smiled, feeling a slight satisfaction as his Sister's Sons were subjected to a bit of her ire, just as he had been before. And then his mind followed back the thought—she wasn't married. Why should it matter?

"Well," Fíli interrupted the growing silence, "to begin with, there's the piercing in your nose." Yes, they had all seen that, but, as Thorin had already told Dwalin—"Dwarrow-dams only wear them to
signify that they are married. Not all married Dwarrow-dams have a nose piercing, but, all that do are wed."

"Oh," the Thief replied. "We have a similar tradition. Married woman can wear the sindoor—"

The what? Thorin's ears pricked up.

"It's a red powder in their hair."

Fascinating— And she had no powder in her hair, further confirming his assumption. She was not married.

"Not all married women do, though, but only married women are supposed to. But, Fíli, I'm not a Dwarf."

No, she was not. Thorin glanced back at the ground passing beneath the Pony's hoofs.

"Yes, exactly so." Fíli continued, his curiosity animating his voice. "You are of the race of Men, and most females—"

"Woman, thank you very much."

Thorin's eyes glanced back, noting the term she did not care to hear.

"I apologize," Fíli was quick to amend. "Most women are married and have a brood of children by the time they reach your age."

"And just what age am I?" The Thief asked cuttingly.

Tharkûn chuckled low, and Thorin couldn't help half smiling.

"Not a day over sixty-four, I'd say," Kíli crooned, and Thorin suppressed a snort. "I know Men don't age the same way Dwarves do, so taking that into consideration," the lad continued on, his excitement greying like snuffed coal.

Silence followed. Thorin glanced back to awkward stares all around.

"You don't know much about humans, do you?"

Humans—? What—

The Wizard began to laugh with exaggerated enthusiasm, and Thorin rolled his eyes. "My dear, Fíli, and to a lesser degree Kíli—when he shows up for lessons—knows more about the race of Men than most Dwarves..."

Humans were of Men, Thorin considered, perhaps much the same as Hobbits, unheard of in most the world...

"As they have been tutored," Tharkûn went on, "about a great many things for most of their lives to prepare them for when one of them will inherit the throne from Thorin one day."

Thorin's jaw set, looking East toward the mountains far in the distance.

"But to further explain for you. Dwarves and Men do not age the same," the Wizard was telling the Thief. "Your lifespan is considerably shorter. Fíli here is eighty-two, while the young master Kíli is only seventy-seven."
Still green. Too green for the dangers ahead— Thorin sighed. He had been young at Azanulbizar. Younger, even. But these were his Sister's Sons, and—

"You're so old!" The Thief objected. Thorin glanced back to find her glaring at Dwalin. "What are you, three hundred?"

The Warrior huffed, fighting a smile. Thorin turned back and relaxed into his own.

"My dear, they are not old," Tharkûn continued. "Fíli and Kíli have not yet reached their majority and are only here because their uncle allowed it."

And Thorin still wondered if he should have—

"More like they kept pestering Thorin until he'd had enough of their nonsense," Dwalin grumbled from behind.

Yes, Thorin let out a quiet laugh. They had been relentless. And he and Dís had fought, shouted and hurled objects for weeks before he set out.

"I cannot stop them, Dís."

"Yes, you can, thick-headed pig. Don't go."

"I am the Heir, N'amad; I have to do this—"

She had eventually relented, after promises from all of them, and stone-sakes for memory, hard promises from each to come back—

"And then mother made him swear to look after us." Kíli piped in.

"Dís. I will bring them home. I will bring us all home."

"As is we were Dwarflings in short pants!"

Ah, Sister's Son. You are indeed young. Thorin's lips curled in a tight smile.

"So," Fíli began again. "How old are you, Sona? And don't think I haven't noticed you didn't answer my question about your husband."

Thorin sighed. Back to that again.

"I'm thirty-two. Definitely an adult by human standards, and I don't need an escort or a chaperone to travel. I'm out on my own quite a bit, actually. And you're right. I was married."

W— was.

"My husband drowned several years ago saving three children from a riptide."

Binumral. The Thief was widowed.

Thorin thought of his Sister as the Company went silent behind him— How she had cried only briefly upon hearing the news of Víli's death, how she busted up her forge and all its contents— How she did not speak for a whole year after— How Thorin had taken on the upbringing of her young ones in her absence— How the little ones had cried, as though they lost both parents at once. Thorin had been older than Fíli and Kíli and when he lost his 'Amad; Arís had died in the Mountain when Smaug came. He remembered the rip of losing her. He remembered feeling the heart of his
'Adad shift, compounding the loss. Grief settled over him, recalling, imagining, unable to comprehend beyond the sadness.

Did the Thief have children? Were they left behind in the world she wished to return to? There was no end for sadness such as this— But for this Thief, one he did not know, one who stole from him before stealing her way into his Company, why was his own heart sinking so low?

"I— apologize." Fíli stammered. "I did not realize. I would not have asked if—"

_Ah, Fíli, you did not know. It is not your fault, just as it was not your fault when your 'Adad died, ambushed by Orcs so many years ago._

"It's okay, Fíli," the Thief said, echoing his thought. "How could you have known? It's not like I run around advertising—"

Adver—?

"—that I'm a widow."

No, she seemed to handle it with coolness, almost as if it were nothing, but then, people of Men likely did not mourn as Dwarves do. Thorin's jaw tightened, still remembering, now imagining, entirely awash with unwanted feeling. He felt her eyes upon him and looked up, meeting her steel gaze. There was something there; he could see it, and yet she hid the injury well.

Enough of this. He stopped, dismounted. "We'll camp here for the night." He turned to his Sister's Son's, who both looked like the earth had shattered. "Fíli, Kíli," he held them close with his eyes, gripping each one by the shoulder and squeezing tightly as he passed. "Look after the Ponies. Make sure you stay with them.

_/\oSo/\oDo/\
Tharkûn did not like where they had stopped, the ruin of an old farmhouse. For the next several minutes he did his level best to pressure Thorin of the need to find the hidden door to Imladris and seek the advice of Elves, and Thorin's sour, sad mood sank into full blown anger.

Thorin noticed the Thief waiting at the edges of the abandoned shed and wondered what she wanted, but promptly shoved the thought aside, fully adamant he would not be persuaded to seek out Elves.

"We could make for the hidden valley."

But who said the Wizard would quit? "But I've told you already I will not go near that place."

"Why not?" Tharkûn hounded. "We could get food, rest, advice."

Just then the Thief moved between what used to be a doorframe, and Thorin saw her smile. Somehow, for reasons he could not define, it only made him angrier. "I do not need their advice."

"We have a map that we cannot read." The Wizard leaned into his staff. "Lord Elrond could help us."

The Thief's chin shot up; she knew Lord Elrond. Thorin settled deeper into his stone face. This was getting hard to manage, keeping calm. Perhaps she could use some history, though she said she knew their 'story' from 'books'.

"Help." Thorin sneered. "A dragon attacks Erebor. What help came from the Elves?" The Wizard moved to cut in, but he was not about to stop. "Orcs plunder Moria, desecrate our sacred halls, the Elves looked on and did nothing." He stepped toward the Wizard, full on in challenge. "You ask me to seek out the very people who betrayed my Grandfather, who betrayed my Father." He lowered his glower and glanced toward the Thief, wiping expression from his face. The look of shock on hers was somehow gratifying. *Your favorites are not as 'kind' as they wish the world to think.*

"You are neither of them!" Clearly angered, Tharkûn used his height to tower over him, not the blustery magical looming spell he wielded for periodic emphasis, but a trick of intimidation the Wizard had clearly learned from Men.

Thorin glanced past him but settled his weight. He would not play that game.

"I did not give you that map and key for you to hold on to the past."

Enough. Thorin threw his full glare back up at the Wizard. "I did not know they were yours to keep."
At that, the Wizard twirled and stomped off, leaving Thorin alone with the Thief, who stood there staring at him with her mouth ajar. He wondered if, in all the 'books' she had read, no one had ever challenged a Wizard. For a fleeting moment it looked as though she considered saying something. Thorin almost hoped she would.

But she darkened under his gaze, and quickly spun on her heels after the Wizard, her long dark braid flinging out behind her, leaving a hint of lavender on the air. "Gandalf, wait," her voice was strained, and Thorin wondered again, fleetingly, what it was she wanted, when she stopped before her Dog and Fíli, and ordered the Dog to stay.

Fíli glanced back at him sheepishly, and shrugged, holding the stick in his hand he'd been using as a toy with the Dog. His Sister's Son's guilty expression was surely brought on by having ignored up to now the Ponies and his Brother, who, equally careless, was content to watch the game of Dog, stick and Dwarf.

Thorin rolled his eyes and admonished them both. "Fíli! Kíli! What did I say about the Ponies?"

"Is Tharkûn coming back?" Fíli asked a pipe smoke later, approaching Thorin with pain in his eyes beneath the welcoming smile. Thorin was sure his Sister's Son's ache was not on behalf of the Wizard.

"Only he knows."

Fíli nodded, undaunted, his sad look unchanged. "The Ponies are secured just past the high grass. Kíli is with them, I am going back, but could you come, please? I would like to speak with you."

"Come Fíli." Thorin put his arm his shoulder and pulled him close as they made way through the grass, stopping just in view of the Ponies and Kíli, who was fletching arrows. Thorin turned to his oldest, tapped him brow to brow. "What is it, then?"

"She, uh." Fíli let out a breath. "I had not even thought—"

"Of course not," he kept his eyes fixed on the lad's.

"It's just—I had hoped—" He clamped his mouth shut and looked down. "Doesn't matter."

Thorin grabbed his arm, squeezed until he looked up again. "Go ahead, say what you think."

"I remember 'Amad when her face looked carved in stone. For weeks, N'adad. Then she would shift and still again, for weeks into months, no matter what I said to her, not even when I broke my arm."

Thorin's throat grew tight. "I know."

"Sona— do you think—"

Thorin waited for him to finish the question, but after a long moment, when he did not, Thorin answered. "I do not know." He shook his head. What could he say? He knew no more of the Thief than his boys who had asked all the questions.

"Should I not have asked?" Fíli's eyes shot straight to his, the concern burrowing deep.

"It is fine, Fíli." Thorin smiled at him, hoping to lighten his heart. "She did not seem to mind your questions too overly much, where I have seen her angry on my account." He nodded. "I think she
likes you."

"I'd like her to like you too."

Thorin frowned. "That is—" he bit down, shrugged, remembering. "—it's not likely, after how poorly we met." And then he nudged him, hoping he wasn't wishing for something impossible. "She's Binumral, Fíli. You know from your 'Amad; Widows find their own way."

Fíli nodded, looking off toward his brother. "That can make it hard for ones who care."

"Yes." Thorin nodded, swallowing, hurting somehow, unsure whom he was thinking of, unsure of everything. "Yes, it can."

"She does not seem broken, not like 'Amad after so many years—" Fíli observed.

Thorin shook his head. He did not know what to make of it. He felt sad, but not only for her, and it made no sense. Why did he grieve for her loss when she strove to pretend there was none? But that wasn't all of it, and he couldn't figure out the rest.

Never mind. Binumrâl... find their own way.

Thráin had broken with the loss of Arís, his heart shattered, his mind weakened, laid open to the sickness as if in welcome, and that evil took hold like a raging Warg, dragging him off to parts unknown—

"Have you changed your mind? Do you want her to stay?"

"I—" What? "I haven't thought about it." He shook his head. "Tharkûn. He thinks about it." He laughed shortly, unable to shake the image of her face from his mind. This was— getting uncomfortable. "I must focus East, on our Quest, Fíli, to the task put before me."

"You—"

"I must." Thorin nodded once, unwilling to argue.

Whatever it was that Fíli wanted from him, he was certain it was something he could not provide. It was not up to him. And in any case, he did not want it.

"OK, N'adad." Fíli warmed, looking back at him, smiling. "Tomorrow is another day."

Thorin slapped his shoulder. "Watch the Ponies with your Brother. I will be nearby." Thorin backed away and circled the perimeter of camp, to stand opposite Dwalin, who now looked extra solemn, while Bombur prepared supper and the others settled into camp. The Warrior nodded in greeting from over the fire, and Thorin returned the gesture, looking toward the mountain, away from the others, wishing he did not hurt, unsure why he did.

Fíli. Thorin smiled, thinking of his Sister's Son, who more than likely missed his promised Ahu'ze, Danê daughter of Zâfir, though he wouldn't admit it. Glóin had warned them it would be so.

Boisterous hollering and loud crashing sent Thorin rushing, blade drawn, toward the harrowing sound of his Sister's Son's battle cries.

"Come! Du bekar!" he shouted to his Company, racing toward where the lads were guarding the Ponies. He made the clearing with Glóin and Dwalin at his side and the others on his heels to find
Fíli, Kíli and the Thief's Dog engaged in combat with three giant Trolls. Suddenly Fíli crashed on top of his Brother, thrown by a Troll, and another Troll reached to grab them when Thorin's blade sliced into his arm, sending him bellowing backwards in pain, the Dog snarling and biting and pressing him back further. Thorin's Company jumped into the mix. They sprang, blades flying, chipping away at the flailing legs and arms of the aggravated Trolls, bringing them to their knees, their faces within easy reach of swords, axes, hammers and the rocks from Ori's sling. The Company had almost brought them down when Kíli, now off to the side and trying to free the penned up Ponies, got caught from behind and lifted above them all, his body splayed between two of the giant Trolls.

Kíli, no.

"Lay down your arms, or we'll rip his off," one of them hollered, his breath stinking of decayed teeth and gums, mixed with the scents of shit and living filth that permeated the Troll camp. Thorin felt his gut roll.

Kíli's eyes were on him, beseeching.

Try as he might to think of escape, there was none.

"No, N'adad!" Kíli protested, seeing Thorin's choice, fighting with all his might to get free.

But Thorin shook his head, heaved a sigh and thrust Deathless into the dirt before him. The others grudgingly following suit, each of them with their eyes riveted to Kíli strung helpless in the air.

"You can't!" His Sister's Son shouted. "They'll kill us all."

Likely, unless the Wizard saw fit to return—

A second later the Trolls were grasping and pulling and tying and shoving them all into sacks that they then tied off at the top. At least the Trolls had left their heads exposed to the air, however putrid it was, but Thorin still felt a blinding suffocation at being so confined. They last caught the Dog, still barking and fighting with all her fervor. Thorin wondered where the Thief was, and hoped, with surprising desperation, that she was with the errant Wizard. One Troll harnessed her Dog to a rope he tied to the fence posts holding the Ponies; his hands came away bleeding from the Dog's relentless teeth. Not about to give up, she began to chew vigorously on the rope that bound her. It did not take her long to free herself. She dug her paws forward in the ground, growled at the Trolls as if she would attack again, but then sprung up and out over the brush in the direction of their abandoned camp.

Thorin wished he could do the same, and bite his way out, but his teeth were no match to the Dog's and nowhere near the ties that bound him. He needed a knife, and all their weapons were in a heap before the fire. Tied, unable to move, feeling lost for having failed them all, Thorin clenched his teeth to keep his body's panic at bay, watching on in utter horror as the Trolls muttered and fussed over an enormous skewer and two heavy cross posts to support it over the fire. Mahal help them, he had led them to this. They were going to be burned alive—

"Don't bother cooking 'em! Let's just sit on 'em and squash 'em into jelly!" one of the Trolls suggested, picking his teeth with a bone from Balin's slaughtered Pony, her remains in a heap by the fire.

Kíli, watching on next to him, began to shake, his fear taking hold. "N'adad, I'm sorry, they came for the Ponies— I thought we could take them—"

"We both did," Fíli added in defense of his Brother, his voice a bit more calm. "But we did not see
"Shhh," he hushed gently. "Be calm. Stay ready. Did they get all your knives, Fíli?"

His Sister's Son sighed. "Aye, all that I can reach, tied as I am."

"They should be sautéed and grilled with a sprinkle of sage." Another Troll said, the one closest, nudging Glóin with his foot.

"Why don't they kill us before they eat us," Kíli asked, squirming as he fought the knots binding him inside his sack.

"This is how they enjoy it, laddie." Dwalin muttered under his breath.

"Oh, that does sound quite nice," said the Troll with the bone.

"Then why did you give up?" Kíli glared at Thorin, anger supplanting his fear.

"Get off, Bombur— can't breath." Bofur groused, pushing up from beneath Bombur.

Thorin, eyes locked on Kíli. "You live. We may all live— yet." He didn't know where his hope came from. The Wizard was never on time.

"Never mind the seasoning, we ain't got all night!" The third Troll came at them, and a hush fell among them. 'Dawn ain't far away, let's get a move on! I don't fancy been turned to stone.' He reached his massive meaty hand toward Bombur when the second Troll whacked him with a cooking ladle and the two Trolls began fighting, one nearly falling on top of Nori and Bifur in the skirmish. They both scooted closer to the rest of them as best they could as they all watched the Trolls lunge at each other over the fire.

Suddenly a light hand gripped Thorin's shoulder— Who's—?

He jerked from his spot on the ground to find the eyes of the Thief upon him; they were round, hard with purpose, and wild beneath the surface.

"Asti," he whispered in Khuzdûl, you.

Surprise and renewed fear swept over him. She— She came back? What was she doing here? She did not hold his gaze; her eyes dropped to the knot around his neck. Her hands came at him, a flash of colored metal in one of them as the other curled around the rope, her knuckles pressed into his throat. He relaxed his neck to slacken the rope, give her better purchase; cool skin greeted firmly as she pulled herself closer. He could see her pulse beneath her skin, beating; he could smell her breath of mint leaf, lavender in her hair, and a hint of sage, sage! mingled with the stench of Trolls— his stomach heaved but he kept it in, breathing fast, keeping on the surface of her scent near him. Her scent. Only hers.

She grabbed the rope as though she could pull her way through it; the flash of colored metal caught his eyes again, coming at him— It was a small blade in her hand. Callused fingers touched him as she levered it beneath the rope, its smooth backside against the skin of his neck, and then she began sawing at the thick knot from the inside out.

Her cool fingers made his heart pick up speed, and all he could do was stare into her face, open, caring, set with single-minded purpose, as she tugged back at forth, hacking through his confinement.
She swallowed, and he could hear her quick intake of air.

And that pulling feeling he'd had since the fogs in the Shire, it rebounded upon him, and he realized: it was her. This Thief. But what in Mahal's name did that mean? All he could do was stare.

But quietness alerted him, his breath stopped to listen; Dwalin and Balin were watching, and the Trolls had turned as one.

"Sona!" Kíli called gently, warned to silence by Fíli's kick to his side, but the Trolls were already aware.

"Oi! Who's that there?" the first Troll asked, lumbering large.

"Can we eat him?" the second one asked, hovering over the first's shoulder.

"Run," he asked. He ordered. He— sank his eyes into hers. You have done too much. Please do as I say.

But she stood firm, and he knew. No, not that—

Rope severed, she dropped the blade inside the sack, into his outstretched hands, bound palm-facing. He caught the knife, warm from her hands, and breathed tight like he could hold her safe, but he wasn't even free. Please.

He felt her breath caress his face, her skin but a half hand-span to his lips. His tongue pressed the back of his teeth.

So close, she paid no mind to his request, but rather smiled a playful sad smile, and she made herself tall, and she answered the beasts, "Her," for she was her own person. And she turned to look at them with power, but weaponless, raising her hands above her head— Submitting? No.

But she stepped away from him, and the open space was a void. He gripped the blade and began sawing through the knot at his wrist.

She stepped past the others who all vehemently urged her to run.

Why was the rope so thick?

She set herself firmly in front of the fire, and her shoulders held a stubborn edge, and he knew. No—

And he was only halfway through the ropes at his hands.

She had placed herself between the trolls and the Dwarves. No.

No. What was she doing?

"What?" the third Troll repeated, and Thorin blinked at the absurdity.

"Her. I'm a woman, not a he."

Thorin swallowed, confused, his mouth dry, but entirely certain for her this mattered.

"What does it matter?" the second Troll demanded, suddenly reaching for her. "Put 'er in a bag and let's eat 'er too."

No. His hands were free and he immediately went after the ropes tying his feet.
"Okay, while I prefer not to be eaten," the Thief began, making absolutely no sense.

"We don’t really care what you’d prefer, Missy," he said as she ducked away from his groping hands.

She lunged toward her backpack, signing for her Dog to stay. But then she asked, "Would you grant me one last request before you kill me?"

What in Mahal’s name? Why?

All the Dwarves grew silent.

"It's the gentlemanly thing to do, after all."

Gentlemanly? She truly was from another place—These were Trolls she bargained with—

She lowered her arms but did not step back.

Thorin continued to saw on the ropes at his feet.

The Trolls huddled and discussed her bargain while all the Dwarves stared at her as if she were an unstable beam in a waterlogged mineshaft. She paid them no mind, but instead dug through her backpack.

Suddenly the Trolls decided. "Alright, we'll give you your last request, so long as it's not to let you or them go.

"Of course not," she dismissed breezily, as though she came to sell the best manure to the farmer with the largest plot of land. "I would never insult your intelligence by asking for that."

The Trolls puffed at the flattery while each and every Dwarf groaned in protest, or dismay, depending. Thorin frowned. For him it was clearly dismay. She glared back at them for silence. His frown deepened. Did she want them to sit quietly while she gives herself over to death?

Why was the blasted rope so thick?

Just then she pulled something out of her sack, and Thorin instantly and rather sadly dismissed the possibility it could be some weapon she was drawing—

"No," she said almost smugly, lifting a stringed instrument from its case in her bag. Her guitar, he remembered; that was her name for it— "What I was going to ask is if you would grant me the honor of playing a song for you?"

A song. She wanted to sing them a song. What was he going to do about her?

With Mahal's blessing he could decide later; for now he was finally free of the ropes. He slipped out of the binding fabric of the sack and clambered across to Fíli, the Thief's blade firm in his grip. They would break free of these Trolls, or die trying.
With Foes Ahead, Behind Us Dread

Chapter Notes

A/N: Happy New Year! & Thank yous: All who have left kudos and favored my story, and to those who are silently reading along!

Yes, Fíli has a One! I've named her Danîe, daughter of Zâfir, as tribute to Daniella Blue.

And Dear Readers! Curious what's going on from Sona's PoV? Check out "On the Road to Find Out" by JennyWren28!

She would play them a song? Why?

Thorin flung himself tight against Fíli, grasped the binding, angled himself for leverage, made space and slipped the blade beneath the rope just as Sona had done to him before—

Sona—

The Thief had done—

Thorin swallowed, sawing on his Sister's Son's binding with the blade the Thief had given him, the one who now stood before three angry Trolls, and he sawed and he sawed, with as much force and speed as he could muster without strangling the lad in his grip, who rushed him on with his fiery eyes, both of them driven by the need to hurry.

"Oh yes, please let's have a song!" one of the Trolls blustered, clapping. "It would be so nice. We ain't had any sort of entertainment for so very long."

Entertainment? Thorin rolled his eyes and dug the blade deeper into the rope, with Fíli frowning and eager, looking on.

"We ain't got time. Sun'll be rising soon." The second Troll, the one with the now cleaned rib bone between his teeth, pointed toward the Mountains. "Just bag her and be done with it. This lot ain't goin' nowhere."

You will see, Troll; you will see very soon who goes where.

"Oh come on, Bert," the first one said again to the one with the bone. "Can't we just have one song?"

This was ridiculous.

The Troll nearest the fire looked back at this whiner— "I suppose just one song won't hurt. We ain't savages after all."

Dwalin and Nori nearly choked on a shared gasp of suppressed laughter, followed by Thorin. No, of course these were no 'savages.' All they wanted was a bit of torture, with Dwarves for Diner as the end reward. Nothing 'savage' about it! Just then Thorin got through the rope and pulled down Fíli's
binding cloth, finding where one of his blades was stashed. Thorin grabbed for it and pressed it gently in his Sister's Son's hands, butting their heads together as he let go and moved on to free Dwalin. Soon Fili was also free and hard at work on Kíli's ropes.

The protesting Troll flung himself to the ground next to the first one. "Just play your jig and be done."

And he could see her from the corner of his eyes, pulling her guitar up ever so slowly, adjusting the strap over her shoulder, over the braid. She let her fingers slide over and sounded the strings with what looked to be a flat scale. And then her hands gently glided to the keys where she began to tune her piece. Thorin almost had Nori free.

"Hurry up!" The third Troll bellowed, and Thorin knew her secret—

"I thought you said you weren't savages." She flung their words back at them with a knowing glare, as though they were capable of compassionate reason. "If this is going to be the last song I ever play, I'm going to do it right."

The Thief did not lack boldness, or courage.

"Shut yer gob and let 'er play, William!" The Troll smacked the other upside his head for emphasis.

"Thank you," the Thief replied, and nearly every one of the Company grumbled why she would thank these stinking foul creatures.

"She plays for these?" Bofur muttered under his breath, "after I asked and got nothing?"

Except Thorin realized she still was not playing. She was stretching the moment, buying time. Time for him and the rest to cut their way free and kill these bastards.

Then she began to play, sliding her flat scale over the strings, and singing about a long long time ago—the Trolls were somehow charmed, clapping to her rhythm, quite oblivious to what Thorin and the others were about. She sang how music used to make her smile, and Thorin could tell by how she settled in that this would be a very long song, at least for the Thief. He tried to focus on the words as he continued to hack his Company free. "Bye by, Miss American—"

*American— he had herd that term before, but—*

"Pie, drove my Chevy—"

*A what?*

"To the levee, but the levee was dry..."

*To the water-line, a dry bed— was the Chevy a horse?*

"Them good ole boy's were drinkin—"

*They drink when their horses cannot?*

And then she lost him, so many strange words strung one after another, he just hacked at the ropes ahead and continued through, sped on by her string of words, each one a bead of sand in a time turner glass, ticking the minutes to the end—

The Trolls had quieted, and Thorin stole a glance, and was shocked to see they were dozing off, first the Troll with the bone, followed by the one near the fire, and lastly by the one who had been most
excited for music. And Thorin could tell by how she slowed the stanzas in her eighth verse, she was nearing the end when she sang, "this will be the day that I die—"

No. Not that. Not this day— He dug deeper into the ropes binding Glóin; they were almost all of them free now, and the Trolls were silent— In spite of her ominous words, this all seemed incredibly easy. By her voice and Mahal's blessings, each of the Trolls had fallen asleep.

Glóin, now free, turned to cut Óin out of his bindings, while Nori and Bofur stole quietly to the remaining Ponies, to free them from their holding pens. Kíli leveled his most gaping smiles at the Thief, and she signed back with her thumb up, 'I—' but never finished— No, wait, she could not know Iglishmek, and her face opened into a wide grin, and Thorin gaped at her, somehow unable to look away as she turned to her pack.

Dwalin muttered, "get the weapons," and seconds later he had Grasper and Keeper in hand, and, spinning Keeper in his right, he set himself like a battle ram toward the nearest Troll— That is when, beyond Thorin's wildest understanding, the Thief stopped everything by hurling herself toward Dwalin with a loud cry, "NO!"

Trolls attacked, one grasping the Thief, cutting off her voice, sure to crush her before their eyes— Before his eyes. "I knew you was trouble from the moment we saw you!" It was the one who hadn't wanted to hear her sing— Thorin took a step toward them. He had been too slow to get his sword, and now— Mahal, no. "I'm going to pop your 'ead off right now!" The Troll began to clench his fist, with her in it, and Thorin's own chest felt the hold of it; he could not breathe. Dwalin was in the air, blades flying, but he would not get there in time—

"The dawn will take you all!" Tharkûn's voice boomed from atop the boulder to the East beyond them. A dark brown flash blew past, and the Dog was on the Troll, clamping her fierce jaws over his fleshy leg as the Wizard slammed the butt of his staff down, splitting the boulder in two.

The Troll hollered in pain, swinging the Thief high above him as he struggled for balance.

Thorin rushed toward them, finally able to move, and caught her just as the Troll let go. She was warm, she was solid, she was breathing, thank Mahal. The boulder crumbled to the ground, releasing the sunlight behind it and turning the Trolls into stone.

"Are you injured?" Thorin asked, checking her up and down as he put her on her feet, gratefully seeing no sign of damage.

She shook her head, regaining herself.

"Good," he sighed out, now examining her face, searching for the reason behind her action before. Why? That— there was no answer for. "Then perhaps you will explain. Mahal save us, but what were you thinking?"

"I couldn't let Dwalin kill Jelly!" She lengthened like an angry cat.

"Who?" Jelly? Did she mean— No, she couldn't possibly. "It does not matter. That was—"

"Jelly?" Dwalin huffed from behind him, interrupting with patience as frayed as Thorin's. "Do you mean to say you actually named the filth?"

"Who cares if I did?" She challenged, crossing her arms, closing herself off. Why? "I couldn't very well just let you kill them. Especially not in their sleep."

She made absolutely no sense. Thorin frowned, trying to understand.
But Dwalin was quite ready to argue—"Aye, you very well could." He shouldered past Thorin, waving Grasper before his puffed out chest for emphasis. "They're savages, lass, and would have continued to wreck havoc and ruin! I was doing the world a service in meting out their punishment."

Thorin couldn't argue with that—

She looked flamed, eyes burning back at the Warrior, to Thorin's utter bafflement. "And what was their crime?" She reached out and—Thorin's jaw dropped: she pressed Grasper down, hand close to the blade. "Being hungry?"

What? We—

"When you're hungry enough you'll do anything for food."

Wait, did she think of herself and the day they met? When Thorin caught her thieving his dinner and his handkerchief? Thieving, because she had been hungry?

But—**WE were dinner!**

How could she defend Trolls? Leave them loose on the world? They kill for sport and a meal as their prize. How do you then answer to those who die at the Trolls' hands, or to their families? After you have left the Trolls alive and free to their devices? That is cruel to the defenseless, cruel to the surprised, who only wish to live their lives.

"They're Trolls," Dwalin groused without hesitation. "That is crime enough. They're a menace."

Âkmînruk zu, Dwalin.

"No." She would not back down, but jabbed her hand forcefully toward the Trolls' remains. Thorin felt sickened. "They were living, breathing beings and therefore had as much right to life as me or you. Who are you to decide—"

**Why did you come back?** "ENOUGH!" Thorin commanded. "You," he grasped Dwalin to get his attention. "Go and make sure everyone's got their weapons back."

Dwalin leaned his head toward him, and Thorin let go.

"And you—" You confusing, conflicted, senseless, bold and outrageously brave Thief. "Next time I tell you to do something, I expect to be obeyed. When I say run, you run."

"Why," she asked. That was all.

Her Dog was back. Thorin gripped his wrist as he recalled her teeth and the mauled leg of the Troll.

"Why?" Thorin repeated. Did she have any sense? He had thought—"Must I explain the obvious? I lead this Company—"

"You've already made it abundantly clear that I am not a member of your Company," she shot back at him, stepping toward him, extending a finger out toward him.

*"I did."

"That you don't want me along—" Two fingers stretched out.

*"—*
"That you want nothing to do with me." Three—

*Not quite true anymore*— The Dog barked at every one of her assertions, blast it. And then her iron chin jutted up, reaching his eye level.

"So why should I listen to you?"

*Because*—

"Besides you should be thanking me."

"Thanking you," he muttered, dazed and reminded— He had intended to, and then— this outrage.

Tharkûn was at his side, a hand on his arm. "She had theNous to play for time."

True, and a bold move that was.

"None of the rest of you thought of that." The Wizard concluded.

Surely the Wizard had never been tied in a sack. Thorin glared up at him. He seemed to find something amusing about the confounded situation as he glanced from Thorin back to the Thief.

And Thorin looked at her, his heart full of conflict, but mostly grateful— She was whole, and they were free and unscathed because of her. He nodded at Tharkûn, who was tugging him aside for more words.

He had questions of his own. "Where did you go to if I may ask?"

"To look ahead," the Wizard said with his face blank.

Leave it to him to remain cryptic. "And what brought you back?"

"Looking behind."

Thorin smiled, nodding down. Confound the Wizard.

"Nasty business," Tharkûn continued, eyes passing over Thorin's form, clearly checking for damage. "Still you're all in one piece."

"All thanks to your Thief," Thorin rolled his head back in her direction, but stopped himself from actually turning.

"Mine, you say?" Tharkûn smiled slightly, his eyes tracking Thorin's gesture to settle upon the Thief.

What was that supposed to mean? Thorin's eyes narrowed, assessing the Wizard.

"Indeed, that was a clever scheme," he continued, ignoring Thorin's agitation at his last remark. "And quite audacious for one who carries no weapons, at least non of a conventional kind."

"She is not without her defenses," Thorin agreed. Her songs, he thought, recalling the feel of her calluses on his neck— His own hand went to the spot, following the trace.

"Trolls," Tharkûn muttered, taking in the breadth of their surroundings, recalling Thorin to the truly pressing question: these Trolls, now set in stone, and the reason for their presence here, a place that was not their usual home—
"They must have come down from the Ettenmoors," Tharkûn added, nodding. An unsatisfied look clouded his expression.

The Troll-fells to the North— "Since when do Mountain Trolls venture this far South?"

"Ooh not for an age," Tharkûn shook his head, ominously frowning. "Not since a Darker Power ruled these lands."

Thorin glared up at him. Darker Power? What in Durin's name did that mean?

"They could not have moved in daylight," Tharkûn mused with a glance at the sky.

No, Thorin nodded, looking about them, up at the hills and back at his Company. Bofur and Fíli and Kíli were hovering by the trees near the Thief, who was quietly chuckling at something. Thorin's mind tripped on that, wondering how she sounded, wondering what made her laugh— He looked back at Bofur and the lads, none of them able to look the Thief in the eye. What was going on? But he didn't have time to dwell. Instead he glanced back at Tharkûn. "There must be a cave nearby."

And with that they returned to his Company, to gather a search, to root out any other potential trouble close to them in addition to these three stone trolls. "Dwalin, Glóin, Nori, come," he called them to him as he headed toward his lads and the Thief and Bofur at the tree line. "Bofur, grab your mattock, come with us. The rest of you," he motioned to the remainder of his Company, doing his best not to glance at the Thief. "Gather your belongings, we leave as soon as we return."

Finding the Troll cave did not take long; they only had to follow the stench. Tharkûn lead the way and they found the entrance within minutes, and promptly lead the way inside.

"What is that stench?" Nori sighed out, as each of them hacked on the foul air.

"It's a Troll Hoard," Tharkûn grumbled, as if everyone should know it. "Be careful what you touch," he added, a warning no one needed, with all the feces and half-eaten carcasses and left-over food things, urine puddles and other bodily fluids plastered all over the walls. The Wizard pressed his way further inside. Thorin followed close behind, torch in his right hand, Deathless in his left, holding his elbow up to shield his nose to the putrid air. Somehow the air improved the farther back they went, and Thorin felt a shallow draft; there was an opening to another end, farther in— He headed for it, passing a huge pile of gold and jewels, glittering gems and valuable coin, scanning over it briefly with his torch as he passed, not breaking his stride.

"Seems a shame just to leave it lying around," Bofur said nonchalantly from behind. "Anyone could take it."

"Indeed," Glóin replied pointedly from farther back "Nori, get a shovel."

Thorin kept on. He glanced back and saw Dwalin roll his eyes at the three of them before settling in to guard the entrance and their backs. Thorin turned and noticed a profusely dusty and cobble-covered weapon's rack filled with rusting blades, and headed there.

He pulled a few corroded rods out of a base rack when he spotted two very unusual heirloom quality blades beneath an inch of dust and grime. He reached for them, pulled them from the rack, appraising them. "These swords weren't made by any Troll."

Tharkûn came to his side, awake with curiosity.
Thorin handed him the longer sword and began examining the unusual grip in the one he still held, the hilt evidently built upon a dragon's tooth. "Nor were they made by any smiths among Men," the Wizard mumbled, pulling the blade slightly from its scabbard to reveal a shining metal, sharp as if honed yesterday, yet bearing the maturity of beloved use from very long ago. "They were forged in Gondolin." The Wizard looked down at him, his eyes filled with wonder. But hearing those words, Thorin wanted none of it. He pulled his observing hand away from the unusual hilt as if it had suddenly sprouted thorns. Gritting his teeth, he moved to return it. He would not keep an Elvish—

"You could not wish for a finer blade," Tharkûn spoke out, full of admonishment as well as certainty.

Thorin stopped his hand. Why waste it? Where's the harm in looking? He flipped the scabbard and tugged, revealing a metal of similar quality to the one Tharkûn held. Alright then, the Wizard was adamant; he would keep it. He shoved it back to its hilt and turned to walk out. He had had enough of the stench of Trolls.

"We're making a long term deposit," Glóin said as he and Bofur and Nori buried a few caskets full of gold and gems in a hole they had dug close to where the gold was piled.

Dwalin only stared at Thorin.

"Let's get out of this foul place," Thorin grumbled past them, stepping firmly toward the entrance. "Come on, let's go. Bofur! Glóin! Nori!"

Once outside, Thorin let the blade fly in a few circles about him.

Dwalin caught up with him. "You'll keep this then, an Elvish heirloom?" He gestured to the blade still in his hands.

Thorin nodded. "The Wizard was adamant. What can it hurt? The blade is sharp and swift; I like the feel of it flying."

"Sharp and fast, that'll compliment your art, Thorin." Dwalin winked, a bitter and toothy smile crossed his features. "In your hands it'll do well enough killing Orcs." But then a shadow crossed his friend's face as he looked back toward where the others waited. "What was she on about back there, Thorin?" he asked under his breath, frowning a chasm between his stern brows. "First she comes and undoes you," he nodded as if this were the most logical choice, "and then she goes and saves Trolls from us, and almost gets herself killed in the process—I don't understand her at all."

"Are we supposed to?" Thorin asked, just as baffled, not really wanting to think about it, not really able to stop, especially now with Dwalin full questions.

Moments later they were all together, and the Wizard came up last, calling to the Thief, holding out a sheathed dagger toward her. She spotted the long blade in his hands and her eyes grew round as river rocks. "Glamdring!" she named it, bursting with excitement.

Glamdring? Thorin knew that name, and to whom it had once belonged—Long lost sword of an ill-fated King—All he could do was stare.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh!"

What's a gosh—?
"That's so cool!"

Thorin frowned slightly; any blade might be cool, but that is hardly a most special feature. He studied her, wondering.

"I'd completely forgotten this is where you would find it!"

Wait— She knew they would find it? What about— He looked down at the blade in his hand—

"Is that what it's called?" Tharkûn remarked with a knowing twinkle in his eyes as he thrust the smaller blade in the Thief's outstretched hand. "Take this, my dear. It will be easier for you to wield."

Her face sank. Thorin frowned, looking at her sidelong. Why was this bad?

Horror rolled over her features, and Thorin took an involuntary step forward. "I can't take this, Gandalf." She shoved the small weapon back at the Wizard.

"The blade is of Elvish make, my dear."

Thorin rolled his eyes. And that should matter because?

"Which means it will glow blue when Orcs or Goblins are nearby."

Thorin's eyes widened. It was one of those?

"I know all that," she shook her head with fervor. She knew it had a warning charm? Holy Mahal—

"It's just that... I mean... I've never used a weapon against someone before."

Oh—

"And I hope you never have to," Tharkûn continued, seemingly oblivious to her concerns, "but if you do, remember this—"

"No," she pushed it back.

Thorin felt a slight smile pull at him. She too could say no to a Wizard.

"You don't understand. I'm a pacifist."

Pacifist— In other words: a peace ambassador? No wonder—

Dwalin heard her and stopped in his steps. "You're a whatsaist?"

The Thief gave him a look as though he had stolen her handkerchief, but that she didn't mind overly much. "Pacifist. I don't believe in using violence because all lives are sacred."

Dwalin stared at her with his mouth nearly hitting his boot.

But Thorin knew the kind, though he had never met one. Perhaps they were more common in her world.

Tharkûn belted out a laugh. "Of course you are, my dear, of course you are." He offered her the sword a third time, and Thorin wondered when he would finally let up, stubborn Meddler, not everyone will do as you wish. "At least take it in the event you need it to cut some Dwarves out of
Troll bonds again."

Thorin rolled his eyes.

This time she took the blade. Thorin's face heated. Had that last argument convinced her? But he did not have time to find out, as just then he heard the sound of smashing brush and wood against dirt coming toward them. What menace this time? He pulled in a deep breath to warn them all, "Something's coming!"
"Stay together!" Tharkûn shouted, aiming his staff in a gathering motion toward the trees. "Hurry, now! Arm yourselves!"

As if they needed to be told.

But he glanced at the Thief; she stood there lost with a foreign object in her hands, and Thorin knew she wouldn't use it even if it meant her life. He caught Dwalin's eye. 'Keep her safe,' Thorin signed to him. 'Between us.'

Dwalin already had her by the arm, pulling her behind him as he nodded his assent. "Stay behind me," he groused at her with command.

She nodded with scared eyes as she grabbed her Dog's harness. "Stay, girl."

The Dog keened her objections as she sat with her back up against the Thief, her head bobbing toward where Fíli stood, his dual swords at the ready.

Just then a bellowing came through the woods. "Thieves! Fire! Murder!" and a sleigh pulled by the biggest Rabbits Thorin had ever seen burst through the brush to slide to a bouncing halt just in front of Tharkûn. The Wizard had his staff outstretched and his new sword in hand, flashing the light of the sun. A scraggly old Man stood atop the fraying sleigh, barely holding on.

"Radagast!" Tharkûn beamed, housing his sword. "It's Radagast the Brown! What on earth are you doing here?"

Instant relief spread through the Company as they all gaped at the new arrival, a strange old Wizard with the snarliest hair Thorin had ever seen, and, wait— was that bird dung caked through it from beneath his hat? Thorin cringed, just looking. Wizards.

"I was looking for you, Gandalf." Radagast blurted, jumping from foot to foot, clearly unable to keep still. "Something's wrong. Something's terribly wrong."

"Yes?" Tharkûn asked.

"You have got to be kidding me!" The Thief burst out, and Thorin looked at her, shocked that she'd interrupt, wondering what she found funny. "I've been saying that for days—" She stopped as their eyes met.

Had she? Then quick as lightening she looked away. Thorin felt a nagging sense that he had not been paying attention...

"Just give me a minute," the Brown Wizard fussed. "Um... Oh! I had a thought and now I've lost it. It was...it was right there, on the tip of my tongue!" And then his face twisted and he stuck out his tongue, curled around— "Oh! It's not a thought at all! It's a silly old...stick insect." Thorin's eyes expanded as Tharkûn leaned in and pulled out a long twig bug.

Enough. Thorin stepped away for some air and space to think, and headed up past the Thief who was trying her best to get closer to the Wizards. Why listen to their nonsense? He was out of
He stood apart, eyes roving over his Company. Fíli and the Dog played with a long stick the lad had found the day before—he had cut it to the length of his dual swords just for this Dog and their game. The Thief whistled and the Dog bolted away from Fíli toward her. She now sat next to Kíli, who appeared to be blocking her view of the Wizards and fully absorbed in peppering her with questions. The Dog sat on her haunches in front of them both, waiting for the Thief to let on what she wanted. He watched the Thief hand Kíli a strip of travel jerky, and then gesture toward the Dog. The lad held it in his hand with his fingers closed, and she was smiling, and it looked like mischief, that smile—and then he understood, his lips slightly moving up. *Ohhh, watch the finger's, Sister's Son, this one has teeth*—Sure enough, Kíli had to snatch his fingers back to safety, and he shot a glare at the Thief. Next thing she was laughing—she had a gravely warmth to her laugh, and Kíli laughed, too. And she held out her hand to show him how to hold the food next time, flat-handed, palm open. Her laugh softened to a smile at Kíli, who bathed in the attention.

Thorin had to look away, and think. Could she tell how much the boy missed home? It looked like she did, but how could she? Kíli hid it well. But Thorin knew. His Sister's Son would often draw out his stone-sake from Dís when he thought no one was looking. He missed the battle games, the fluting, the dancing, the smithing, the parties—But he always found a way to keep his joy, and this Thief appeared to make it easier. Thorin's eyes were back on her, following her hand to her arm up to her shoulders and her neck—

He glanced to the Dog.

His skin felt hot. What was this? He did not need it.

Just—watch the Dog. She was lolling her tongue at the Thief and Kíli as they both beamed over her. But then she froze, risen on all fours, nose pointing into the brush behind the Thief and Kíli, tail pointing opposite. Thorin, alarmed, stepped up, scanning the brush behind them, keeping the trio in his periphery.

A Warg cry split the air—very close.

"Was that a wolf?" The Thief asked. Thorin desperately wished it were.

"No," Bofur answered, mattock in hand. "That was not a wolf."

The growl followed, clearly in lunging distance, and then Thorin saw it, leaping—

He jumped, and reached, and twisted, pitching his ax ahead of himself as he whirled his sword at the throat of the beast and caught the Thief in his free arm, ducking just as the Warg's teeth past over them, the claws of it's front paws slashing the dirt to either side of them. She rolled with him to a stop, like they were in some wild dance, and she could move—! And they came to a halt with him curling her beneath. Elbows in the dirt, he ducked over her, shielding as the animal passed.

For a second he froze, realizing she fit as if she were meant to—*No. Not possible.* Shaking his head away, he pulled his right foot smoothly beneath his shoulder and pushed himself off the ground. "Warg scouts," he warned, scanning the brush for more of them as he offered the Thief a hand up. She took it and came to her feet, seemingly unscathed, yet shaking and green, eyes wide with shock. He looked into them, asking silently, was she whole and well? She seemed to understand, giving him a single shaky nod before he let her go. "Which means an Orc pack is not far behind!"

"Awesome," the Thief muttered.
What did she mean? He watched her stagger off, away from the fallen Wargs. He wished he could follow, but—

Three of the foul beasts lay dead amongst them. Dwalin's Grasper had finished off the Warg that attacked the Thief. Dwalin and Fíli looked it over, assisted by the Dog, up to her neck in Warg's blood. Kili retrieved his arrow from the second. The third had been smashed by Bofur's mattock; Dori crawled out from beneath it, muttering about the vile stench of Warg breath. No one among them appeared to be injured.

Thorin glanced to the Tharkûn to find him glaring at him with blame. His own eyes shot open in surprise. "Who did you tell about this Quest beyond your Kin?"

"No one," Thorin pressed back, incredulous. How could the Wizard think he'd tell strangers?

"Who did you tell?" Tharkûn shouted as if he spoke to some errant child.

"No one! I swear!" Did the Wizard know anything? What Dwarf would do this? He stepped up, glancing at the Thief, stopping: was she losing her breakfast? But Dwalin was with her, assisting her. Thorin's eyes then swung back to the prickly Wizard. It hadn't been her; Thorin was sure of it—He had been the first person she had met.

"She had not met anyone other than us, so it was not Sona," the Wizard said with challenge in his tone and as if he had just read Thorin's mind.

"No, it wasn't the Thief," Thorin repeated for good measure, not sure why he felt the need to say that out loud.

"No?" Tharkûn asked back, still frowning but with a slight smile to it. "So sure? You doubted her before—"

"No." Thorin looked down at one of the Wargs. "Not possible," he said flatly, unwilling to explain further. Focus, Thorin: We have more pressing business. "What in Durin's name is going on here?"

"You are being hunted," The Wizard groused back, emphasizing the word "hunted."

"We have to get out of here—" Thorin looked to them all.

"We can't," Ori cried from up a hill. "We have no Ponies. They bolted."

That too, what next?

"I'll draw them off," Radagast offered.

"How? Mahal save them all.

"These are Gundabad Wargs," Tharkûn argued. "They'll out-run you."

"These are Rhosgobel Rabbits," the Brown Wizard countered. "I'd like to see them try." With that, the giant Rabbits bound through the air, rapidly leaping away, pulling the sleigh with the Brown Wizard behind them.

"Move," Thorin called to everyone, and almost everyone did just that, gathering their possessions in a hurry—The Thief hadn't heard him.

He glanced to Dwalin, who nodded his own concern. 'I'm taking her pack,' he signed, just as he did it, turning and blocking her sure argument with a few choice words: "You need to be able to keep
up."

Indeed. Thorin was surprised at how much he hoped she could. Warg cries sounded from many
directions. He hovered there a second, staring at her until he caught her eyes, and then he once again
asked her to run.

And she ran.

They all ran. And ran. The cries of Wargs and Orcs all about them, at least eighty of them, most
likely closer to one hundred, shifting away in the direction the giant Rabbits had run. But then, the
cries grew sharper again, closer again, and Thorin wondered, running full out, one quick step hard
on the heels of the next as they dodged through brush and rocks and scraggy trees, if the addled
Brown Wizard were circling back—

Just. Keep. Running. And as he did, guiding with his ax and his shoulders and his eyes as he pressed
on, keeping his Company close, heading from rock to rock to keep cover.

*But to where?* They had nowhere to run.

They made it to a large cluster of rocks, where Thorin slowed and the Company gathered together;
he motioned for those behind to stop, but Ori kept going, pressing to race past the rocks. "Ori, no!"
Thorin grasped him by his sweater. "Come back." He hauled the lad behind the shelter of the rock
and they all looked about, all of them panting for breath, the Thief bent double from the last sprint,
but still with them. Thorin suppressed a sigh, trying to gauge where the Orc pack was, Warg howls
and Orc hollering both near and far away—

"All of you! Come on! Come on! Quick!" Tharkûn ordered, and however foolish it seemed, they
were all running again, back out into the open, running somewhere, Thorin had no idea where.

And then, of all things, he heard the Thief start gasping with laughter, muttering, "Gimli... full of...
crap," between intakes of air.

*Gimli—? What?* And then it clicked: Gimli could *run*. Thorin almost smiled through the grimace of
the exercise: Was the lad’s jest of Dwarves as ‘mere sprinters’ somehow in her ‘book’ about them?

Then just as they got to the next rock, up top he saw the hind-side of a Warg and its rider scouring
the area for them. He signed for his Company to get against the stone, catching Kíli's attention,
holding his gaze and signing for him to kill it.

Kíli did not hesitate; he leapt to the open, aimed up and fired, hitting the Warg and felling it and its
rider from the rock to the bottom in a howling mass just before the bunch of them, where Dwalin,
Bifur, Fíli and the Thief's Dog rapidly dove upon them, axes and swords and teeth tearing into them.

Thorin had no hand in the action, as his were otherwise occupied, because as the Warg and Orc
came tumbling down, the Thief had dived her face into his chest and there she stayed, trembling like
a tender reed. He braced his free arm to hold her, stopping short, doing his best not to overly touch,
shutting his eyes only briefly on the strangeness of it, the sweet, tight and absurd strangeness of it. At
the death sounds of the Wag and Orc, she pressed herself all the harder into the fur edging his coat.
He felt horror shuddering through her body at the death cries, and he could not help it; he relaxed his
arm around her waist and pulled her close, hoping she could feel that she was not alone. He would
not leave her here alone—

He felt her breaths slow, in and out, in and out, in and out, as if she counted them, as if she were
smithing— keeping the beats—
He hovered with her, imagining for the briefest of seconds—smithing—

But the cries of others harkened closer, this kill was a beacon to them, and they would bring death.

He smiled at the scent of lavender and sage in her hair, the scent of the Mountain. He would hold her apart; they would have to kill him before he'd let go—

"Move! Run!" Bellowed Tharkûn, spurring them all on once again.

But to where?

There had to be somewhere. Get her to somewhere—

Thorin let go of the Thief's waist to grab hold of her wrist, and then they were running once again away from the rocks.

Dwalin flanked him to the right. He looked deep into the eyes of his friend and right hand. He signed to him, 'keep us all together, keep our backs to each other, the rest between and ahead, every last one of us alive.' And to himself, keep together, one step then another, never give up, never let go—

Dwalin nodded sharply once; he knew, his face alight and grim with agreement, twirling Grasper and Keeper as he ran.

Nori ran to his left, with Kíli two strides in front of him, and Fíli a bit farther out. Balin, Ori and Dori were just beyond them, and out front ran Bombur, Óin, Bifur, Bofur and Glóin— with Tharkûn in front of them all.

"There they are!" Glóin hollered as he pointed back behind them. Thorin knew from the snarls and shrill cries echoing in multitudes off the sloping grasslands around them just who Glóin meant and he did not bother to look, but held tight to her arm and continued to run. Keep together, one step then another, never give up, never let go.

"This way! Quickly!" Tharkûn shouted back, heading them all off to the left.

Where are you leading us?

Thorin could not see where the Wizard was.

Just then the Thief slowed and faltered a step, and Thorin tightened his hold, looking down at her feet as they continued to run, matching their pace, pulling her forward with him, keeping her with him in the pace—one step then another, never give up, never let go.

"There's more coming!" Kíli stood up ahead, facing them, an arrow cocked and then fired into the pack barreling upon them from behind.

"Kíli!" Thorin came to a stop at his side, with the Thief stumbling into his backside; he pulled his other arm around to help her steady herself beside him. He looked deep into the eyes of his Sister's Son, eyes he would keep alive and smiling.

"Shoot them!"

"Gandalf?" The Thief stared off toward some more rocks just beyond them.

Where was the Wizard?

"We're surrounded!" Fíli cried out, now some distance away from them in the open field to their left.
"Where's Gandalf?"

Thorin sought his face out there across the swaying grassland, his eldest Sister's Son out there alone, but no—the Thief's Dog was at his side, teeth ready for any errant Orc or Warg to cross their paths.

"He's abandoned us!" Dwalin groused at his side, swinging Grasper forward, the Thief between them both and closer to the rocks at their back.

Just like the Wizard.

"No!" The Thief pressed from behind. "He's just over—"

"Hold your ground!" Thorin hollered to all of them. They would stand and fight to the last. It was coming. And yet he felt the Thief at his shoulder attempting to push past him—Why? His hand tightened and he forced her behind him. Stay put, please.

"This way, you fools!" Shouted Tharkûn from a next patch of rocks just beyond the ones at their backs where they stood.

Mahal save us. Thorin grabbed the Thief's arm once more, hoping the blasted Wizard had a plan. "Move on! Quickly! All of you!" And again they ran, and he struggled to slow his steps so she could keep pace. Most of the Company ran before him as before, Dwalin pressed right behind, he could feel the heavy thud of the Warrior's steps through the earth beneath them, but—Thorin straining over his shoulder to see if his Sister's Sons were following. No—no. Both were engaged with Orcs and Wargs farther out.

Thorin stopped at the rocks where he'd last seen the Wizard, gently pushing the Thief behind him again, toward what appeared to be a cave entrance, as he scoured the field for the last of them out there, his Sister's Sons.

"Fíli! Kíli! Come now!" Thorin shouted, but they would not heed his call.

"Wait... where's Sasha?" the Thief asked, her voice shaking behind him. Why wasn't the Thief in the tunnel?

Her Dog fought alongside Fíli in the open as he swung his dual swords at Orcs and Wargs, springing as though she had wings, teeth bared. And Kíli shot arrow after arrow, hitting his mark with each one he loosed, but—Mahal, There were too many—"Kíli! Fíli!"

At his angered cry the lads both turned and looked at him for the briefest of seconds before making a dash toward him, much like they used to when he called them home from the sparring fields for chores and lessons, but this—

"SASHA!" the Thief's piercing cry washed over his backside, sending chills clear through to his hands, tightening his grip on the weapons, his right bearing the new sword; his left the ax.

Many seemed to stop at her scream, including the Dog, who looked back at the Thief for direction just as a Warg leapt at them, sliced clean by Fíli's undercut, the Orc above it falling from the last of Kíli's arrows.

Thorin was in the field, each step a claw into the dark—Digging, pulling, heaving himself forward. He had to get—them—back.

Eight steps and he reached Fíli, a Warg and its Orc slain before them by his sword and ax. All in a turn he grasped his Sister's Son, butted his head with his own and shoved him toward the tunnel just
as he let go, scrambling, digging, pulling, heaving, himself forward after Kíli. He would not lose one; he would not. "Kíli!"

The lad ran full out toward him, his sword drawn and swinging, and several Wargs went down before the two came together and Thorin had him by the scruff. "Listen next time," he huffed, and the lad grinned and they ran on together like ball peen hammers on their course, slaying any Orc or Warg that crossed their path.

And then they were down the tunnel. "I shot at least twenty, N'adad!"

"You need more arrows." He winked before looking over the room.

The Thief was on her knees, a puddle of emotion, her tense muscles shaking from released fear, her face awash with tears, crying against the body of her Dog, who squirmed and whined and licked at her face to cheer her. Indeed, the Thief smiled through her tears; he knew—because of the Dog she thought she almost lost was right there in her arms: that fierce flash of love and loyalty, all teeth and strength and power of will—Sasha.

*Well done, Sasha.*

He could see as his eyes passed over the room, they were all here, even as the sound of battle continued above them. Had the Orcs and Wargs set upon themselves in their frustration? No matter. "Is anyone wounded?" He called among them.

Just then a war horn sounded, long and thin. *Elves?* Thorin looked up the tunnel just as an Orc came tumbling down to stop at the bottom, lifeless.

Thorin paused a moment as the Dog—Sasha, bore down upon the Orc to check for herself, snarling with enough menace to wake anyone from a feint. He watched her blink as her muzzle rose up, looking somehow... satisfied.

But there was something else Thorin wanted to know. His eyes narrowed at the arrow protruding from the back of the foul creature. He leaned down and pulled it out, now certain of his suspicion. "Elves," he spat, glancing toward Tharkûn, who had his back turned from him, and flinging the fouled wood against the flagstones.

Flagstones.

This was no ordinary cave. He looked up at the sky. It was no cave, at all, but an overhang of rock set loose by time. But the flagstones: They were set in a pattern that mimicked natural stone lines that rose along the walls, shaped like a bowl with one side cracked open a quarter wide, with a flagstone path leading out of that space. They were at an entrance.

Dwalin wandered down it before coming back. "I cannot see where the pathway leads. Do we follow it or not?"

"We follow it, of course!" Bofur did not wait for Thorin to object, but heaved his mattock over his shoulder and turned Dwalin back around the other way. The way inside—

Outside he could still hear the Orcs and Wargs braying and howling, but inside was no less dangerous, if one foolish enough should come within looking for allies.

"I think that would be wise," Tharkûn mumbled, surely thinking Thorin didn't hear.

Thorin suppressed a snort and motioned for the others to follow on, he waited behind. There was no
better choice beyond this one. He watched the rest of his Company queue in behind Bofur and head into a day lit path toward the sound of water.

Then he turned to the Thief. She had knelt again, and was still shaking as she tugged gently on the ears of the Dog, her other hand holding to the Dog's collar for grounding. "Please don't scare me like that again, girl," she whispered. Thorin looked back toward the daylight on the path, feeling like he trespassed. But he couldn't leave her. He took a deep breath and waited, hoping she would rise and follow along.

"I'm serious."

Thorin had to turn back around at the plea in her voice, to find her head-bumping the Dog. He smiled partly seeing this, one of his favorite ways to share affection to those he loved, shared between the two of them. The Dog seemed to smile back at her.

"I don't know what I'd do without you."

He should not hear this—

"You're all I have left of—"

"Are you coming?" Thorin interrupted gently, hoping she knew he was there.

He knew what she would say, had she finished, as he watched her hands go to her face, her shoulders scrunching as she tried to hide the movement, hide the tears. "Yes. In a moment," she muttered, her hands still subtly rubbing at her face. She would have said her husband, her family, her friends, her world: everything from before, not including herself, which she still had. But then she held her hands out, fingers extended, and he saw how she shook all over, but most visibly in her hands. And he ached for her, because he knew how that felt, at least part of it, the part about life and home being taken away. Her hands were seconds later back on her face as she tried to clean herself up without him seeing.

The Thief—

Sona—

—Didn't want him to know, but— He pulled out the handkerchief from Dís, the one she had taken when they met, and he held it to her, holding his face to the side for her privacy. He felt her gaze travel from the cloth to his wrist, up his arm to his face, and he bowed away in deference to her wish, and he waited.

Soon she took it with thanks and put it to those big wet eyes. Eyes he had only barely glanced at.

He nodded, trying to keep from turning. "We should not linger." His breath caught on the ache in his throat, remembering those eyes, grieved by death and fear.

He gave her a moment.

Soon her breathing quieted and somehow he could feel her turn, so he took some steps down the path and then hesitated, listening.

But then he heard the slip of her shoe against the flagstones, and he made way slowly, following the path to the open river valley, hushed by the sounds of crashing waters nearly everywhere.

"Rivendell," Sona—
The Thief—

—Gushed like the creek rapids cascading near the path.

She immediately knew where they were; that was not so surprising. No. What surprised him was the burn he felt at how gleeful she was to find herself here, of all places. Among the Elves. Of Course: Elves must be the Favored Folk in her 'books.'

Tharkûn, just ahead, turned to face them sidelong and gave a single nod, still avoiding Thorin's eyes. "Indeed, it is the Valley of Imladris." He let his staff encompass the Elven City. "Here lies the last homely house, east of the sea."

Arrogant Elves, to think they are the last—or the first.

At these words, the members of the Company shuffled about each other in varying degrees of discomfort and curiosity, staring from them to the City and back again.

And though Thorin had more than enough of Wizards for one day, he could not hold back, not anymore. He came around full on, facing Tharkûn. "This was your plan all along, to seek refuge with our enemy." He tried to set his stone mask, but he could not bury his irritation. How could he ever have considered the Wizard someone he could trust?

He glanced past Tharkûn to see the Thief suppressing laughter, and he frowned all the more, wondering what she found most funny; his words, this situation or maybe both.

"You have no enemies here, Thorin Oakenshield." The Wizard groused like one delivering judgment, as if he held the station to do such things. But he did not: Thorin knew the Wizard's constraints, set by the Valar for the good of the common folk and as a check to his power—

Dwalin's eyes passed between the two of them, disgust and aversion distorting his mouth.

"The only ill-will to be found in this valley is that which you bring yourself," Tharkûn finished, frustration coating each word with bitter tastes.

_Now wait—_

Balin caught Thorin's eye and signed, 'don't mind him, you stay calm.'

Thorin suppressed a laugh. But he had to speak up; the Wizard had missed the point, as usual. "You think the Elves will give our Quest their blessing? They will try to stop us."

"Of course they will! But we have questions that need to be answered."

Thorin sighed, looking to the flagstones. He could not deny it.

"If we are to be successful," the Wizard went on; his air of superiority clipped his speech. "This will need to be handled with tact." He glared at Thorin with a measuring eye, as one convinced the object of his focus lacked any good traits. "And respect. And no small degree of charm—"

Thorkûn stared back at him, undaunted by the sting of the Wizard's assessment.

"—Which is why you will leave the talking to me."

Thorkûn thought him a fool; perhaps that explained his presence among them.

And with that the Wizard stepped away down the path.
Thorin's eyes tracked him until they stopped on the Thief. He looked on as she picked up her pack and slung it over her shoulder. She all but skipped toward the main gate, her whole body happy to be here.

Thorin, resigned to accept, swallowed hard and followed on.

Chapter End Notes

Thank yous to all who have left kudos and favorited and are quietly reading along.

y
He Named the Nameless Hills and Dells

Chapter Notes

A/N: On my usage of Khuzdûl: I'm using The Dwarrow Scholar's translation tool for the Khuzdûl in this story. Any mistakes in the language are mine. There are two tags I want to mention now, though, just for clarification: In my story, Thorin calls his Sister's Son's a shortened version of 'Sister's Son' in Khuzdûl: 'Inûdoy.' Thorin has long since dropped the 'Sister's' (N'amad) of 'Sister's Son's' (N'amad Inûdoy) and kept 'Son' (Inûdoy) when he calls them in Khuzdûl. He's been doing that since they lost their Father. They noticed, and followed the pattern: From Mother's Brother ('Amad N'adad), they have dropped 'Mother' and kept 'Brother' (N'adad) when they call their Mother's Brother in Khuzdûl.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thorin and Company made their way to the Elven Gates, where Tharkûn waved his staff, turned, and gave the Dwarves one of his more intimidating looks, as if that'd make them behave, and with a nod he turned to address the first Elf to approach, one with dark hair and a pinched expression, clearly not too happy to see Thorin's kind gathered at his steps.

The Thief stood ahead of them, twirling slowly as she looked up at the spiraled towers surrounded by cliffs and rock faces of the narrow valley, nearly all of the natural cliffs decked over with falling waters, living vines, and more towers that seemed to grow out of each other like mushrooms, barely a straight line in sight. The burn in his chest did not diminish as he watched her; clearly happy now for the first time, perhaps, in all the days he had known her since she stole her way among them. Perhaps this was where she was meant to be. Why did it hurt? Why did it matter?

He clenched the hand that had held her as they ran from the Wargs and Orcs that hunted him.

At least she was here in one piece.

And here she would be safe.

That was a comfort.

He wished he could look away, but his eyes seemed trapped by the smile on her face, turning below the spheres and towers as she took in the circular angles of the typically spindly and overly flowered Elven architecture. Tharkûn passed between them and she stopped moving, and suddenly she was staring back at Thorin, her face full of spirit and smiles. But too soon her expression faded, except for the lingering wonder in her eyes. For one long moment she only looked at him, assessing. He wondered what she saw.

He blinked, and swallowed, frozen. She saw him.

But what did that mean? This would not do, Thorin: move. He blinked again and forced his eyes to seek the Wizard. Oh but this was much less pleasant. Tharkûn spoke with the prune-faced Elf who had found them on his doorstep, clearly uncertain and not too happy with his find.
Thorin stepped over to stand beside Dwalin, his warrior, his right hand, his friend. Dwalin glanced fiercely at him, and signed, 'The Elf is not pleased. We're pissed on, between rocks and hard spots. We could leave now but for the Orcs behind us.'

'Aye, He's quite the hospitable Elf, that one,' Thorin signed back, and then he shot a glare at Tharkûn. 'The Wizard planned this part, but for the Orcs behind us.' He looked away, maintaining his guard with a wary eye over his surroundings just as he continued to think of her. Why did he continue to think of her? "His Thief likes Elves," he whispered close to Dwalin's ear, not sure why he spoke at all.

Dwalin's brows shot up as he looked back at her before angling his head toward Thorin. 'His Thief?'

Thorin couldn't help the flash of smile that suddenly tugged at his mouth.

But it was gone the second the Elf horn sounded; the same one they had heard above the hidden pass. And then he heard the horses; he felt the echo of their many hooves hitting the stone beneath his feet, coming nearer. "Iñõi bekâr!" he ordered, gripping his ax, signing to the Company with his left hand, 'tighten the circle,' and to Dwalin, 'Thief to center.' He didn't want to see her overrun by Elves on horseback, even if she did prefer their company to others— "Close ranks!"

The Thief wriggled and pressed against them—against him, oh Mahal—to get back through, muttering, "Whoa, guys, calm down!"

Dwalin growled, repeating "guys" aloud while he pressing her again deeper within the circle; it would have been funny, except for the Elves—

"Calm ourselves ya say?" Bofur quipped under his breath. "They're horsed and bearing down on us, lass, an we'll be ready for 'em."

Indeed the Elves were upon them, circling with their horses, glaring down from the added height of their fast mounts. They circled, hemming the Dwarves closer and closer, waving lances with banners flying, but the Elves did not draw upon them, and slowly the horses came to a canter and then stopped.

Thorin watched the leader—Lord Elrond, if he were not mistaken—greet Tharkûn, with the Wizard responding in the Elven way, a hand to the heart and then open, as if Elves were. Tharkûn called the Elf 'Friend' in Sindarin. And then the Elf was off his horse and embracing the bemused and beaming Wizard.

Thorin's Company let out a communal sigh; relieved it would not come to blows, loosening hold.

The frustrated Thief finally stopped struggling to break through.

And the Wizard and Elf continued their greeting conversation in Sindarin, where all of them listened but only few of his Company understood, one being Thorin, Balin another, and Fíli, and perhaps Kíli if he'd paid attention to lessons. And Thorin couldn't quite curb his irritation at the Wizard, his 'friend,' for such utter thoughtlessness. The conversation moved from greetings to substance when the Elf, hefting an Orc blade for emphasis, described how his party had just come back from slaughtering a pack of Orcs near the Hidden Pass.

The same Orcs that had nearly chased us down.

"Strange for Orcs to come so close to our borders," the Elf continued, surprising Thorin by switching to the common tongue, a language they could all understand. "Something, or someone, has drawn
them near."

*Me, or my head; I am their prize.* Thorin stepped forward to answer for that just as Tharkûn spoke up. "Ah. That may have been us," he said contritely, smiling over himself as if he apologized for some minor social misstep.

"He's laying it on thick," the Thief muttered.

*What? Laying what thick?* Thorin looked her way, his interest sparked by the irritation in her tone, one that spread into her face. Her face.

Not now. No.

His eyes turned and met the Elf's, who looked just as confused. He sought out Dwalin, and signed, 'Keep everyone close.' He stole another glance at her and signed what he felt, 'this one, too.'

Dwalin shot back the dopiest 'of course' smile he could muster as he nudged the Thief back behind himself and center of the others. Thorin gave a slight nod, suppressing the urge to smile back. Then the Company tightened fractionally, though few would notice a change.

Thorin stepped to face the Elf, Lord Elrond, acknowledging welcome.

"Welcome Thorin, son of Thrain." Lord Elrond knew who he was. He spoke with the smooth steely voice of a Ruler of Ages, wielding the power of persuasion in the command of his voice, assured all who could hear him would listen. The Elf stepped forward, to meet Thorin where he had stopped.

Thorin stilled, putting on his stone face. "I do not believe we have met."

"You have your Grandfather's bearing," he said with an evaluating eye.

*And you think I am like him? Be it good or ill?* "I knew Thrór when he ruled under the Mountain."

"Indeed?" Thorin's grip tightened on his ax. *You seek to impress but I already know your age. *"He made no mention of you."

Balin shot Thorin a look, lifting his right brow and signing, 'remember your lessons, laddie, and there'll be ale after, otherwise it might be stitches and splints.'

The Elf rose in his disdain. Switching back to Sindarin, he invited them to supper, speaking as though he were proclaiming harsh judgment over a band of thieves.

Glóin protested, "What is he saying? Does he offer us insult?" each word rising in thunderous blows.

Thorin's face grew hotter, and then the Company joined in, grumbling with Glóin in unnecessary outrage, until Tharkûn finally interrupted to correct them.

"No, Master Glóin; he's offering you food."

Everyone relaxed at once, this sigh of relief much louder than the last.

It was then Thorin noticed the Dog sitting patiently beside the pinch-faced Elf, all relaxed, her tongue lolling as she observed the gathering of Dwarves all chattering amongst each other. Even her Dog is at home here. Of course.
Dwalin stepped next to him. They leaned into each other as Dwalin whispered, "You wanted me to keep everyone close, eh?"

Thorin looked back at him, "Yes, and?"

Dwalin pulled a know-it grin across his face. "You signed, 'this one, too' about our spare Thief."

"Yes, and?"

"What're you going to do about her, Thorin?"

"It is out of my hands." He looked away, not entirely sure what he meant, but seeing the Elf City all around them, he was certain he was right.

"So we stay," Dwalin asked.

Thorin looked back to see his Company waiting his call. He nodded to them all and then signed to Glóin, 'lead on,' and the Dwarves followed Tharkûn up the stairs.

Dwalin, Fíli, Kíli and Thorin waited at the bottom for the Thief to catch up when they all saw she was stuck in conversation with the pinch-faced Elf. She extended her hand and they watched to see why, but the Elf could not bring himself to ask. So her hand lowered, and Thorin was caught by the fleeting glimpse of exposed sadness that washed over her face.

Thorin was about to ask his Sister's Son's to go fetch the Thief and her Dog along, sure they needed rescuing, but before he could open his mouth Fíli and Kíli were bounding off toward them, no doubt to do just that. He couldn't help the slight smile, and Dwalin gave him an eye suggesting he knew what Thorin thought.

"So, not entirely out of your hands?" Dwalin called over his shoulder as he hurried on ahead to fetch the Thief and her Dog.

What? No. He could not entertain it. He frowned slightly as he made his way up the stairs, then turned at the side of the ledge and watched as Dwalin reached the Thief and her Dog, both next to the Elf, who had just offered to escort her up. Dwalin shook his head when he took her pack, Fíli took hold of the dog, while Kíli took her elbow and bowed, offering to escort her up. She went gladly with Kíli, smiling at each of them, one after the other, beaming her amusement, and then she turned to wave off the Elf, and his face was more pinched than before, and Thorin thought he heard her laugh out loud, but no, he most likely only imagined it.

They were climbing the stairs.

Once, as the Thief climbed, she looked up and their eyes locked.

Entirely, Dwalin. Thorin curbed his smile as she drew closer. Completely and utterly entirely.

"Thorin Oakenshield," Lord Elrond called out behind him as he stared over the cliffed expanse of the City.

Thorin turned. Tharkûn stood next to the Elf, eyes expectant. An Elf Maid stood between them, alight in a gown of beaded lavender and pearl, boasting the most expressive grin Thorin had ever seen on an Elf.
"Meet Lady Arwen Undômiel, my daughter," Lord Elrond continued, his arm outstretched toward the Elf Maid. "She wanted to greet you, but she will not be at dinner."

Thorin lowered his head slightly, "Greetings, Lady Arwen."

"Thorin, son of Thráín, son of Thrór," she smiled all the more, if that were possible. He wondered if there was some joke he missed. "You bring such interesting companions."

*What? She thinks Dwarves interesting?* He forced a small smile as he contemplated the meaning beneath her comment.

"That would be Lady Sona of Kaleforn'ya," Tharkûn offered, "a traveler we met along our way."

His brows cocked up as he glanced and Thorin and he grinned. "She's quite special, and a good friend, that one."

Thorin had to stop his jaw from going slack, what in Durin's name—

Thankfully Lord Elrond changed the subject. "Will you sit with us at dinner, Thorin Oakenshield?"

Thorin's brows creased as he counted Lord Elrond's second purposeful reference to his honor name, and it struck him that the Elf invited Oakenshield, a Dwarf who had made his own reputation, not the King in Exile, the Heir. His face relaxed and he breathed out a barely discernible smile, unsure why this eased him. He knew better than to trust Elves, so why did it feel like he wanted to? *Never mind that—he wants to sit with you at dinner.*

"You may bring a companion, if you would like," Lord Elrond added, his tone inviting, his face friendly.

"I may," Thorin stated, unsure how to receive such grace from the Elf. His mind suddenly flashed to the Thief. Sona. And he blinked. *No. What is wrong with me? Balin is the logical choice. It would be good to have his Advisor at the table.*

"Oh, lovely, a companion for dinner!" Lady Arwen said, one brow slightly raised, and he saw mischief. Then she glanced away, down a hall.

Thorin just stared at her, watching the Elf Maid's eyes as she smiled bigger, bringing the moon in her profile.

"Well, I must go; I want to meet Lady Sona before she dines," she said, eyes still lingering down that hall, and then she turned to him. "Later she will come this way as dinner assembles." That smile again, like she knew. *What did she know?* "And from here the dining halls are that path just beyond the wash falls." She looked into his eyes and—winked, her hand lifting lightly to point the way behind them. Her smile, already so big, shined the brighter. *Was that her way of saying he should wash up?* He looked away, at all the many halls, no one place to the other in a straight line, and felt confused. With that she bowed her head in farewell, "Until next time," and headed down a different hall than where she'd been looking before. Thorin returned his gaze to the hall that had interested Lady Arwen— the way to Sona's rooms—

——The Thief's.

He swallowed, wondering why his throat hurt.

___________________________________________________

"Come, Thorin, let's wash our hands of Trolls and Orcs." Thorin followed Balin down the way
Arwen had pointed, that opened up into a wide-circling veranda with an open cliff high above it, from where water fell and crashed to either side, the veranda spared drenching by a second protruding cliff some twenty feet above them. A smaller stream fell from it, over a star structure of suspended glass that separated the water into at least a dozen thin and steady streams... These fell into a curved and spiraled draining basin just below hand level, each stream with space wide enough for an individual to stand between. Beyond the thin streams a third thick sheet fell, with a mist that rose up behind and coated the air in a pleasant scent of salt and lime. He had to admit it felt good to breathe. "Maybe here you can be reminded of the value of cool water."

Thorin said nothing, only quietly removing his bracers and setting them on a nearby ledge as Balin did the same.

His advisor smiled that 'I told you' smile before he pointed his eyes toward the soap pearls on a second ledge near the basin. They each took a pearl and put their hands into the water, cool but not chilling. "He's not so bad, I've heard tell. His society is far friendlier than King Thranduil or his court; Thranduil never offered us food, much less a place to stay when the Dragon came." Balin had the nerve to wink then.

"Do you think I need reminding?"

"That these are not the same Elves that wronged us? Yes." The mettle beneath his Advisor was not concealed by his warm smile. "Don't tell him anything and we should have no problem here."

"Tharkûn will want me to show Lord Elrond the map."

"No, Thorin—"

"Friendly, but not enough to trust, then?" Thorin kept his face neutral. He pulled a dry-cloth from a curved branch that had been shaped to hold many folds, and wiped his hands. Balin followed him, doing the same, both of them hanging their cloth back on the branch. "We cannot read that map. The Wizard says Elrond can."

"But he might—"

"Can't be helped, Balin. We must know."

Just then Lady Arwen approached them from one of the joining halls, carrying an armful of gowns, all colors of the rainbow, most of them jewel tones. She smiled at him, bowing her head in renewed greeting, but with that mischievous edge, as if she knew some secret he kept and found that fact amusing. Her smile increased as she passed, but she did not slow her step. Thorin frowned, breathing deep; these were strange Elves.

"Indeed we must," Balin said, sighing with him as they watched her disappear down a different hall.

"Perhaps you would not mind seeking out the Wizard?" Thorin glanced at him. "I'd like to have this meeting as soon as possible." At that he smiled just a little. "I will wait here."

Balin clasped his arm, winked again, and was gone.

And Thorin wondered at the state of his mind, or his heart, or his—what was it, this pulling? He wanted to leave this place, but the thought of actually leaving made him almost sick. What was worse, he had a sinking suspicion he knew exactly why. He did his best to turn that thought aside, breathing in the soothing air, wondering at the Elves' abilities of sensual manipulation, but welcoming it now, however begrudgingly, considering his mixed up feelings—
"Did you tell her she had to stay here?" Kili appeared at the opposite side of the fountain, glaring at Thorin through the falling water.

"Stay? What do you mean?"

"Sona," Fili interrupted, now next to his brother, his face colored with a rare frown. "She said you told her she's not of the Company, and then she said she's not coming with us when we leave here."

"She did?" Thorin asked, shocked though knew he shouldn't be.

She loved this place the second she laid eyes upon it; he saw that, and he, well––

"She also said we act like we think the Elves will kidnap her," Kili rolled his eyes but his frown remained intact. "Did you, N'adad?"

"Did I what?" Thorin felt lost.

"Bar her inclusion from the Company." Kili stepped up, looking ferocious.

"I did." Thorin replied. "It was the first day." His eyes panned slowly from Kili to Fili. Dwalin had just stepped up behind Fili, wearing a scowl even Mahal would respect. They were all after a piece of him; he wondered how she had phrased what she said; she had only told the truth, but was she bitter? Or had they grown to care so much simply because she was such lovely company? Most likely the latter, and he could not think her unkind. "She came for aid. I did not notice; I would not listen. Tharkûn took her in."

They were all silent, weighing the news. Dwalin gave him a knowing glance as the sound of rushing water underscored all thought.

"That was daft, N'adad, being such an arse the first time you met her." Kili's brows were nearly joined together by the frown between them.

"Yes, Kili." Thorin nearly chuckled at the harsh truth, but at the same time he wished he had never been so—daft. "Mine was a poor grade." Thorin nodded toward his youngest. "I expect you would do better."

Kili's lips tugged up as he fought the loss of his frown.

"Well, she did steal your dinner first," Dwalin reminded them all, his face lightened in turn, as if Thorin's regret somehow made it better.

Fili, still weighed heavy with care, raised his brows, leaned in and asked, "So, she's to stay here, then, when we leave?"

"I did not know we would come here until we arrived." Thorin breathed out, his hands stretched, fingers extended, trying to release the tension. "As for the Thief, she can do as she pleases; travel with the Wizard, stay here—"

"Come with us."

"I cannot ask that," Thorin stared into Fili's eyes, conveying his meaning silently and hoping his Sister's Son understood. "I would not stop her. I thought she would remain with Tharkûn." He looked up, shrugged. Elves. Water spray dusted them with a turn of the breeze, the waters gurgling and hissing beneath the undercurrents of his thought. Elves. She looked on them with awe, as if they were magical, wonderful, beautiful. The heroes in a dark world. Oh, irony. These were the ones she
had favored from her 'books' — *Books that retold their history, their lives, the ones they lived now.* He tried not to let the sting burn. "But this place. She is happy to be here."

"Why can't you ask her?" He would not let go.

Kíli stared on wide-eyed, while Dwalin crossed his arms, settled into his smug face, and waited. But Thorin didn't notice; he was still looking at Fíli. You know why, Sister's Son.

Fíli shook his head as if he heard.


He took this moment to leave, and thank Mahal, none of them followed.

But after a short while Thorin discovered that wasn't the case.

"N'adad," Fíli called from behind some ten minutes later, after he'd gotten lost in the maze of curved paths and winding stairs among vines and rock and waterfalls.

Thorin stopped without turning around or saying a word, wondering when his Sister's Son would let it go.

Fíli caught him. "You left these at the wash falls." He hugged the bracers he had bundled with his sew kit under his left arm. "But first there's something I want to give you." He motioned toward a bench in an alcove of the hall, surrounded by statues of Elven maidens tending the air, arms outstretched in poses reaching nothing. Thorin's brows creased as he wondered if they were supposed to be dancing. He was familiar with stone, and the art of sculpture. The Dwarves would keep the angles and the textures and the veins in the stone, and in the resemblance created retain the nature of stone, in reflection of love toward the honored one's reflection in shape, where Elves tended to wash the nature of the stone away, softening the stone to a smooth cold polish, taking the shape of the person remembered into something far too literal for Dwarves' taste. It was unsettling, what they did with the stone, and it that made the sculptures look—dead.

"Why are you staring at the statues, N'adad?"

Thorin looked back at Fíli as they sat on the bench. "They are ugly."

Fíli snorted. "That's why you shouldn't stare. Now give me your right arm shirtsleeve; you don't need to take it off, I can reach. I'm going to stitch you a quick pocket here." He indicated a spot on Thorin's sleeve just below his wrist.

"What for?" Thorin asked; he knew, but he wanted to hear the lad talk about anything other than what Thorin thought he really came to discuss.

"You'll see." He smiled, not looking up as he whip-stitched a narrow pocket with an overflap to his sleeve. "There." He patted it and then reached down to a lower pocket in his vest and pulled out a small blade. "I want you to keep this in it, blade facing your elbow."

"Ákminruk zu, Inûdoy," Thorin said, moved to stillness, remembering their moment together in fear. Now they smiled together and his heart swelled.

Then Fíli pointed to the blade with his eyes, 'look.'
It was blackened silver, so as not to catch the light, fashioned like a three-cornered comb, with its cornered edges slightly higher than the blade; it would not cut into his arm should it slice through the pocket: if fact, it was impossible for it to cut through the fabric at all, with this shape. In hand, it would easily cut through ropes, and given a close struggle, it could be used to find a juggler. Fíli slipped the small knife inside the new pocket, folding over the flap. "You can open the pocket with your fingers, so," he demonstrated on his own, sifting his fingers down and fishing the blade out with a downward flick. "Works with one hand, and you can draw out the blade without being seen." A wry smile lit his Sister's Son's face. "Kíli has one too, now. Just in case we're sacked again." And he winked. But he did not look away.

Thorin waited.

"Do you know what's happening here?" Fíli asked.

Thorin frowned. That was vague enough for him to choose his own question. So he did. "We are going to speak with Lord Elrond about the runes on that Map. You know this." He had a good notion this is not what Fíli meant. This he did not want to know. He was ill at ease enough as it was.

"Yes, of course," Fíli smiled the face of a diplomat. They were standing and ready to take leave.

Thorin pulled him in close and tapped his forehead with his own gently, looking deep into his Sister's Son's eyes, seeing Dís there, in the shape of them. Then he let go and they both stepped back.

Fíli then flashed a devious grin, a slight nod of his head proceeded his customary bow. "At your service, N'adad, should you need my advice."

Thorin stared at him, his smile stiffening. "Balin will be there."

Fíli pulled his head back and shrugged, coming as close to rolling his eyes as he could while remaining polite. "And he will help with the Map better than I could."

Thorin's face eased. "Yes, he will."

Fíli's brows rose as he leaned in, gripping Thorin's shoulder. "You know where I will be."

"With Kíli and the Dog."

"Sasha." Fíli's face opened into the widest of grins. "Aye." He paused, eyes brightening. "Danîe would love her." And with that he turned on his heals and nearly bounced in his saunter down the hall.

*Was that the way to their quarters?*

Thorin stood watching the blank space for a brief while, thinking nothing.

Instead he sat down again.

Then he reached into his heart pocket and pulled out the blade the Thief had used to free him from the Trolls, his eyes widening over the rainbow wash of the metal, remembering her face as she brought it near his neck. He pressed the lever and opened and closed it several times, twisting it in his hand and looking at its shine. Playing with the lock bar. It was a clever design, the blade resting snugly and sheathed within its handle when closed. Checking the edge, it was sharp, but could be sharper. He pulled out his pouch with his travel stone and trop and quickly swept the edge with the stone and then finished with a polish from his trop. He sat a moment longer, keeping his mind still, flipping the switch that opened the blade, folding it back, flipping again. Except his mind would not
stay still. He needed to return the knife to the Thief. The though made him chuckle. She still had Dis's hanky. Perhaps he could get it back in a trade. Still smiling, he pulled open the new pocket and wedged the blade next to the one Fíli had gifted him.

Now, to find his way back: He opted to follow the way Fíli had gone, being sure to take no turns until he found himself in a familiar hall, the one where he had first met Lady Arwen. He stopped short, standing in that same place, shocked certain she had known he would get lost. But now he had his bearings, and he smiled slightly. He knew exactly where he was: the dinning hall, the wash hall, some halls in between, the hall toward their chambers, yes, that was the way, and just opposite that—the path to Sona's.

The Thief's.

He frowned briefly in thought. Had Lady Arwen actually seen he would get lost? It was as if she left him a message to find later, to mark the way, in addition to the suggestion to wash that he had understood initially.

What else did she see?

He shrugged, resolved to ignore it. Elves and their games…

Chapter End Notes

Thank yous, lovely reviewers! I appreciate each and every one!
His eyes trailed back toward the Thief's rooms as he went the other way and entered the dining hall, stopping in a giant atrium where the guests gathered before being seated at the tables to the sides and one above. Tharkûn and Lord Elrond had just filed in from an adjoining hall in front of him, with Balin right behind. Balin sidled next to him, smiling success. 'We meet after dinner,' he signed as they paused a moment just beyond an arch they had passed beneath. Guests filed in from at least three directions, all the paths organic, like branches on trees. Strains of a gentle harp mingled with flutes and other stringed instruments with Elven melody, rather boring but the sounds were fine; he located the harp, curled and rounded and edged with vines, not like his angular geometric upright in the Blue Mountains, but clearly a fine instrument. He eyed it briefly, rubbing his fingers—wishing he could play. Perhaps later.

His Company was already seated at one of the side tables beneath Lord Elrond's high place, where Thorin was to go. He was about to ask Balin to join him when the Thief stepped into the room and filled his senses with all of her. She stood regally, her back to him, partly exposed from the low cut neckline, strong and full of life, the movement of her skin, her muscles beneath—how would this feel—under soft fabrics, jewel toned—blues and gold—the sent of lavender and sage pulsing in the air about her, alighting on his tongue through his partially opened mouth.

Blues and Gold? Did she choose with purpose? Could he possibly even think— No. Not possible.

She had altered the gown to something he had never seen, striking, with gathers and twists to the silk that now twirled around her body, with extra fabric falling over her left arm in a sweeping fashion, dark blue trimmed in gold, highlighting her movements. And her arms, they were mostly bare now, but for the sweep of long drape. Her skin was golden-toned like her face, and soft, and strong, the touch of that skin, he knew it. Every part of him wanted to confirm it.

Why?

But she looked so lovely, hair free to her waist, loose and curling, Mahal help him. Loose.

He turned to Balin to excuse himself, but his Advisor was already gone. He returned his gaze her way, and he saw her all-so-subtle slight of shoulder as she surveyed the room ahead of them. But just as quickly she squared them and was about to step further along, and there was nothing for it.

"Will you join us." He stated an invitation, keeping his hopes in check.

On his first word she was twirling, eyes wide as she gracefully stopped just in front of him, her dress taking its time to catch up around her. She took a deep breath, and he swallowed just watching her breathe, so soft, so strong. She hadn't expected this. He hadn't expected this.

"Yes, thank you," she said politely, and he wondered if she wanted to. "That would be lovely." He hoped she meant it. And then she gently put her hand in his as he came up along side her and began leading them toward the stairs. Her hand was cool, soft but for the calluses, he remembered them from when she cut the rope—that touch.

He stole a glance at her, smiling as he caught her looking back at a pair of Elves who stared too openly for her comfort.
"I almost did not recognize you," he teased slightly, but this seemed to confuse her.

"Oh," she said, her voice quiet. She looked down at her dress, and her free hand gestured along it. "I am not as tall as Arwen, so I had to modify things a bit to make her dress work, and well..."

His humor was too subtle, Dís would say. He leaned toward her when they were almost at the table. "It suits you," he said, trying another way to bring her ease in this strange place. This worked better; she smiled back at him as they took their seats.

Dinner commenced without incident, with wine and plates of meatless dishes passed in abundance. The Thief seemed to enjoy the selections of vegetables, legumes and fruits mixed with various types of cooked breads, lightly spiced. Thorin took a sip of the wine, a rather good one, and settled into listening to the conversation, until the topic came around to them and their presence in Imladris. Tharkûn deflected the question with one of his own, asking Lord Elrond if he could help place the identity of the swords they had found in the Troll Hoard. Lord Elrond looked to Thorin, and he procured the sheathed blade and passed it over, however reluctantly. To his great surprise, he had grown fond of it in their flight from the Orcs and Wargs.

Lord Elrond pulled the blade from its scabbard, examining it with clear admiration. "This is Orcrist, the Goblin-Cleaver."

Orcrist. Of legend. Thorin had learned of it in Genealogies in his youth. Last known to belong to Turgon, an Elven King who ages past had used this blade to kill Orcs in the many hundreds. And Tharkûn held—

"A famous blade, forged by the High Elves of the West. My kin," the Elf continued, quickly sliding the sword inside the scabbard and passing it back.

Startled slightly, Thorin took it in hand. He looked between the blade and Lord Elrond with mild suspicion, waiting, wondering. Would he give this up, no questions?

"May it serve you well," Lord Elrond said, bowing gently with a serious face. The Elf's jaw tensed at the words, and Thorin remembered more of its previous owner, Turgon. The fallen King of Gondolin had died defending his city, most likely wielding this sword along with the other when he fell. When, for his people, all was lost. Lord Elrond, with his expression so grave and full of assessment, seemed to be thinking similar thoughts. The loss of Turgon's city had been through a close familial betrayal in the end, through Turgon's own Sister's Son, and not due to the failure of any sword— This truth was far worse than any possible superstition. And yet the blade had not served its last king well in the end.

Thorin nodded in response, saying nothing. He would have expected the Elf to reclaim it, and swallowed a bit of his surprise with an open look back at him. Well, as open as he could make it: most likely he only managed his stone face, but that was better than a scowl. And then his gaze wandered back to the table, where he took a sip of the wine and tried to relax.

Now and then through the evening Thorin caught the Thief looking back over her shoulder at the table where his Company sat; she would smile and nearly laugh every time she looked back. It cheered him to know that she liked them, and her smile—he only wanted to look at it, at her. Nothing else. So he mostly looked at his dinner, though he would steal a glance at her every time she turned back, keeping his head still so as not to be noticed.

Since when did he act this way? His eyes were back on his plate, where he saw he had not eaten much. He picked at it, particularly enjoying the mushrooms.
After a while Lord Elrond was speaking again, introducing the sword Tharkûn had acquired from the Troll Hoard. "...this is Glamdring."

Also one of Turgon's swords, Orcrist's mate.

The Thief stiffened next to him, sitting up straight, her face suddenly all the more bright with excitement, just as she had looked after they found the sword in the Troll Hoard, and she had named it— "Glamdring, the Foe-hammer, sword of the King of Gondolin. Made for the Goblin wars of the First..." She grew quiet, turning as she glanced at the faces around the table. Lord Elrond laughed lightly and her cheeks darkened with embarrassment. She stopped turning when her eyes rested on Thorin.

Somehow it pleased him that she knew these facts of history. Even if it was about Elves.

He kept as still as he could, looking nowhere else but in her eyes, unable to hide his elation completely, unsure at all why he was elated in the first place... unwilling to think too much about it.

In spite of the fact that he did not laugh, she looked away, to her own plate, and began eating at a rapid pace. Well. That was one sure way to keep her mouth from speaking.

A wild Cat at her meal. She was not cowed, just... determined. But Thorin could no longer help the tug of his lips. He let the smile settle there and he relaxed, taking another sip of wine.

"How did you come by these?" Lord Elrond was asking Tharkûn about the blades.

"We found them in a Troll Hoard on the Great East Road, shortly before we were ambushed by Orcs."

Thorin nearly snorted. Fine way to keep our path secret, to name the road, Tharkûn.

"And what were you doing on the Great East Road?" Lord Elrond asked as pointedly as his ears. Of course he would ask that now.

Thorin would not answer to this.

He moved to get up when, just then, the Thief's hand jerked. Or had she slightly jumped? Thorin wasn't sure, but her wine glass upturned and he was on his feet and out of range within a multifractured second. The Thief soon stood beside him, both of them behind the table. She looked to his kit with oversized worry in her eyes. "Oh my gosh I'm so sorry, did I get you?"

Get me? With the wine? "No. I am untouched." Somehow that was a lie. He felt touched in more ways lately than he ever had before, always in ways relating to—her. "Are you?" Do I touch you?

Her eyes dropped like stone in water, scanning her gown as they sank, until finally they came to rest at the edge of the draping fabric that wrapped around her, where a four finger span of gold trim was hand stitched along it, just like the trim along her low cut neckline.

Or are you merely touched by wine?

There were spatters of it tarnishing the edges, dulling the gold with dark wading splotches.

"Crap!" she cried out.

Crap? She cried out crap? At Lord Elrond's high table? Thorin pressed a thumb to his lips and chin to keep from laughing aloud. Who would have thought he could be so amused while dining with
Elves? With her as company he could sit with them for hours—

"I don't suppose I can get access to some boiling water, salt, and vinegar?" she asked, listing common methods of wine stain removal, but the stress in her voice knocked the mirth from Thorin's chest, and he stepped closer to her, hands fumbling before he stopped again and waited. She did not seek his aide. She stared with sorry eyes toward the Elf Lord. "I'm afraid I may have stained your daughter's dress."

Thorin frowned slightly, remembering the light-hearted and expressive smile of Lady Arwen Undômíel. Somehow Thorin knew she would not care about the stain. He studied Lord Elrond, waiting.

The Elf smiled in kind and motioned for her to be seated. "Arwen told me she gave you the dress." The Thief opened her mouth to protest, but the Elf would have none of it and held up his hand to stop further discussion. "The is certainly not the first time something has been spilled on it. We will set it to rights later."

Sure they would. Some dry air method aided by powder bonding sands, a thing known at least since the time of Narvi.

The Thief returned to her seat. Thorin watched her as she moved there, her hair cascading loosely down her back, the thick rolls shifting as she settled in, imagining his hands—

He forced his eyes shut and quickly sat back down.

She caught his gaze as he slid into his seat. Was that— admiration in her eyes?

He blinked, wondering what he'd done to deserve it, returning his focus to the table, where the spilled wine was quickly wiped away by two attending Elves, somehow almost invisible in their movements amidst the continued conversations around them.

"Mithrandir tells me you are from the West," Lord Elrond addressed the Thief, "though you have the look of someone from the East."

The Thief grew more flustered as her eyes landed on the Elf. "Er... yes. Well." She glanced over her shoulder at the pinch-faced Elf who had just shooed off the two who had cleaned the table of spilled wine. "Perhaps I can tell you the full story later?" They all stared at her, waiting, some faces fallen at the not-so-subtle dismissal of Lord Elrond's question. "But I'm not an Easterling if that's what you're asking. I'm not really from around here at all."

Lord Elrond's face was neutral at first, covering a great deal of care, if Thorin were not mistaken, though he knew he had little experience reading the nuances of Elven expressions, flat as they usually were. But then a smile turned the corner of the Elf's lips and he nodded slightly toward the Thief. "I did not for a moment think you were an Easterling. Or from Arda."

The Thief paled in her seat as her jaw dropped.

Thorin's eyes narrowed on Lord Elrond, bristling at his manner of 'knowing everything' without anything having ever being said.

"Your manner of dress is quite different, but more than that, so is your bearing."

Thorin resisted the urge to snort as he set his wine glass down. This Elf and his focus on 'bearings.'

Enough. Thorin turned to the Thief. "Your style of dress—" Her eyes were on him, brightening as
she took hold of the escape he provided. "Is it common to your people?"

"Oh, you mean my sari?"

*Sari*— what a lovely word. His brows furrowed, waiting for her to speak more as she looked down at her dress, her sari. In blue and gold. *Why the blue and gold?*

"Yes, and no," she answered, and he had to remind himself what it was he had asked her before. "Where I'm from is actually a melting pot of culture and dress and manners. I'm Indian—"

*Indi?* A people of Kaleforn'ya? He wondered if Kaleforn'ya was anything like Gondor, where cultures of Men met from far corners of the world, corners off most maps he had ever seen outside of the ones stored in the libraries of the Mountain before it was lost to the Dragon.

"And this is common dress for women... well, kind of." She was flustering again, hands running over the folds of the gown. "It's not exactly right, and depending on the formality of the event I would wear a lot more jewelry, maybe some henna—"

*Henna?*

"But yes, this is a decent approximation."

*Decent? Above and beyond that, Thief. You have stolen the evening.*

"Can somebody change the tune?" Nori blurted from the Company table below.

Thorin smiled slightly at Nori's timing, signaling his loss of patience, a loss shared undoubtedly by all the Dwarves now dining in Imladris. Thorin hadn't been paying attention, but now that he listened he had to agree— The music would serve well at inducing sleep among the insomniacs. He looked over in time to see Óin sign to Glóin about funeral dirges as he stuck a napkin in his hearing horn to further dull the sound. Thorin nearly laughed aloud.

"Oy, Sona!" It was Bofur. Thorin's smile grew, knowing what was coming. The Miner was standing at the Company table below, smiling beneath his big bouncing hat. "You promised to play us a song!"

"Yes, well—" The Thief was not excited, and Thorin suspected he knew why, but he could not help watching this play out.

"Yeah!" Kíli sprang up in his seat beside Fíli, nodding briefly toward Thorin with a dopey grin on his face before he looked over at the Thief with a mock frown pasted over his smile. "What about us? You owe us a jig."

"Okay, but I don't think—"

"You'll play for Trolls but not for us?" Dwalin nearly had his war mask on.

Sona's color had returned from before, and then some.

Thorin's jaw tightened over his smile. She thought they were being rude. Maybe his Dwarves just needed to lighten the mood.

"I left my guitar in my room." She said, sitting back in her seat with a look of hopeful satisfaction.

"Surely they have a spare you can borrow," Thorin offered, refusing to let go of the mirth turning his cheeks up.
And then she stared at him, but not like she had before; he knew she wasn't truly angry. He leaned in, ever so slightly, basking in the warm sweetness of her glare.

"Yes, absolutely we do," Lord Elrond intoned dryly. Thorin suppressed his desire to smile openly while he kept his eyes on the Thief.

She had not yet looked away. "No, it's okay, I'm really enjoying the current selection being played..." Then her eyes grew wide and she cringed ever so slightly.

Silence greeted her, as all the Elves had stopped playing and all the Dwarves waited to hear her response.

"There is no requirement for you to play, of course." Lord Elrond added in a lame attempt to put her at ease.

Thorin knew that wouldn't work. His Dwarves grumbled and muttered from the table below while he only continued to look at her, unable to keep his eyes from smiling.

"But if you wouldn't mind, I believe we would all love to hear a song of your people," the Elf added, likely seeing the futility of his efforts.

"Aye! Something from Kaleforn'ya!" Fíli chimed in, his voice like sunshine.

"Oh..." The Thief's mouth rounded. Thorin tried not to look down at it, keeping his eyes on hers, stilled, remembering her breath on his throat as she cut him free from the Troll's ropes. He wanted to hear her sing again where no Trolls breathed the same air. Her unease increased, but Thorin would place a bet against Nori that she would calm again once she had a guitar in her hands.

Something the pinch-faced Elf was about to provide— He approached the Thief from behind with a guitar, and her face lit up when she saw it, a beautiful cherry wood carved with rounding curves favored by the Elves. The headstock of the guitar was particularly ornate and carved into three interlocking Mallorn leaves, with its tuner knobs carved into tiny white Mallorn blossoms. A bemused smile flashed across her face as she accepted it with a shake of her head.

Then she made her way slowly to the stool previously occupied by the Elf playing Harp. Once she sat with the guitar wrapped in her arms, her face cleared and she breathed out, ready. And Thorin smiled. This was her element, as he knew it was. And now he could watch her and listen and be still, unlike before in the Troll's sack with the rainbow knife she gave him in his hands, cutting through ropes. Without looking away from her, he pulled her knife out of the new sleeve pocket Fíli had just sewn in, and cradled it in his palm, rubbing his thumb up and down the side.

She strummed the open chord with her nails in one hand, as she positioned her other hand around the neck. He was captured by those fingers as she began to play, how they deftly found their way unseen to where they should go. He felt his own calluses, and remembered the feeling of strings beneath his fingers, her knife hidden in his palm.

And then she began to sing.

"Why are there so many songs about rainbows?"

Are there? He smiled, having never heard one...

"And what's on the other side?"

The mist? Sky Sun and Star. He looked at her without hiding.
"Rainbows are visions. They're only illusions"

Water shifting light. She performed. It was allowed.

"And rainbows have nothing to hide."

Allowed? Since when did he need permission to look?

"So we've been told and some chose to believe it…"

She is a Widow. He dreamt at his peril. Was he dreaming?

"But I know they're wrong wait and see…"

She sang sweet in her sureness, that jovial tune woven to magic by her voice—

"Someday we'll find it. The Rainbow Connection…"

He could hear it for days and not tire. Mahal, what is this?

She was looking around the room slowly, engaging the Dwarves and Elves watching on. Thorin gazed from her face to her hands, how they caressed over the guitar with a gentle endurance he could see.

"The Lovers, the dreamers, and me…"

What? He was looking back at her face, her lips, realizing he'd stopped hearing the words for a few bars.

"Who said that every wish would be heard and answered?"

Did someone say such a thing? He smiled again.

"When wished on the morning star?"

Ask the Thief. She stole the star.

"Somebody thought of that and someone believed it… And look what it's done so far?"

And here he could look at her freely, if for just a little while, at ease except for the Elves with then in the Hall.

"What's so amazing that keeps us star gazing?"

Who needs stars? She was smiling.

"What do we think we might see?"

Her eyes seemed to know where he was, but not find their way to him.

"Someday we'll find it, that Rainbow Connection…"

How does this poet know?

"The lovers, the dreamers and me…"

How her mouth made an O over 'lover'...
"Have you been half asleep?"

Not lately. He gripped the blade in his closed palm and brought his hand up to his chin.

"Have you heard voices?"

I hear yours. It is like silken-sand—

"I've heard them calling my name…"

Sona. Song. The air of a low-toned flute—

"Are these the sweet sounds that called the young Sailors?"

The tremor I can feel: You slay me with it.

"I think they're one and the same."

I cannot move. And what does this song mean?

"I've heard too many times to ignore it."

Now he knew why he lost track of the lyrics. This song made no sense, and was not nearly as lovely as she—

"There's something that I'm supposed to be."

Yes; not this. He sighed against the fist on his lips.

"Someday we'll find it, the Rainbow connection."

Could someday come for us?

"The Lovers the dreamers and me."

The song was over, the evening winding down. She had stopped singing when she played a last chord and looked at him. At him. She was frozen there and he couldn’t move, and then her eyes flitted briefly to his mouth, then his eyes, then to a wide area behind him. Did she—want his lips? Absurd. What's got into me? And see, she doesn't even look at me now. Her entire face and neck had gone dark with color as her gaze moved all about the room as though looking for purchase. He swallowed the awkwardness, looked away and reached for his wine, brows creasing, unsure what he had done to offend, when just then she started up with a bawdy bar tune, "beer, beer, beer, tidaly, beer..."

And to his left Balin motioned, they were to meet with Lord Elrond now. His glance lingered on her as he rose and left the table, vexed slightly by the tightened feeling in his chest and the sadness he felt at leaving.

A/N: A reader has asked what Sona's Sari looks like. Here is an image JennyWren28 found for an approximate idea:
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Dear Readers, your reviews are a pleasure, so thank you all of you for each and every one!
"We need to leave here before a month's out, to get to the Mountain in time," Balin said with quiet urgency as they made their way from Lord Elrond's library.

However reluctant Thorin felt at the thought—and the fact that he felt any reluctance at leaving an Elven City was entirely too unnerving—he had to agree with Balin. But instead he said nothing and they both kept walking. He took a turn to the left when Balin tapped his arm and nodded. "This way, laddie," and lead them to a high terrace overlooking a vast garden with little creeks and falls and mini islands decked in flowers set haphazardly in meandering tiny lakes, bridges weaving in and out among the slopes. Why this mess? How did they ever find their way? Leaning against a wide benched banister, they both pulled out their tobacco pouches and set to work preparing their pipes.

"The Elf Lord has summoned someone here since we arrived," Thorin muttered under his breath as he packed the bowl down and pulled out his light.

Balin frowned all the harder, already puffing, shrouding his face in a billow of smoke. "Who do you think he summoned, Thorin?"

"I sensed deeper plurality in his choice of 'we' as he spoke with Tharkûn, suggesting a number bigger than the two of them, as he questioned the wisdom of our business..."

"He has no say in our business," Balin said with a crisp settling of his jaw.

Agreed. "Tharkûn mentioned the danger of Dol Guldur; some threat he had heard from Radagast."

"What has this to do with us?"

"Nothing, and yet we should not lose the Wizard's company just because we are unwilling to wait within the time frame allowed." Thorin watched as Balin's eyes rose up to meet his, a smirk clearly beneath them.

"You're not in much of a hurry to get on with it, laddie." When Thorin opened his mouth to object, Balin raised his hand for silence. "You didn't answer my question before. Who do you think Lord Elrond has summoned?"

Thorin smiled, admiring his Advisor's command of the course of their conversation, directed deftly along with the barb onto matters of time management. Thorin opted to ignore the barb and answer the question: "Past the Mountains, there is the Elven Queen to the South; some call her the Elf Witch, of terrible power. And, in addition, there is the woods to the North of her realm. The matter of the Necromancer within them could be of interest to Lord Thranduil." Thorin's lip curled on that name, brow sinking all the more. "Perhaps there are other Elves Lord Elrond deems wise enough to ask; I do not know their names."

Balin snickered, his lips lifting slightly as a spark returned to his eyes.

"Perhaps he means some other of the Istari." Thorin shrugged, expecting interference in any case.

But it did not matter. He would not be stopped.
And yet—*Leaving*. That felt terribly impossible. He refused to think about why as his eyes roved the expansive sprawling maze of paths through the water-filled garden.

"Tharkûn will deflect them, whoever they may be," Balin nodded reassuringly.

Thorin raised a brow. "You should have seen his deflections during dinner—"

"Speaking of dinner," Balin interrupted, his face now entirely widened by smiles, "how was it with Sona for company?"

Thorin clamped his mouth shut and stared at Balin with his stone face firmly set.

After a while Balin simply winked, drew a long puff and looked away over the expanse.

They both stilled at the sight of two individuals slowly walking over the tallest arc bridge, stopping at its center, an Elf-maid: *wait, that is Lady Arwen*. And with her a young Man, barely bearded. She was laughing at something the Man said, and he smiled shyly back at her, bowing his eyes out of sight. Thorin glanced at Balin, feeling like they trespassed. His concern must have showed; the old Advisor simply angled his face back, winking once again as he shook his head. 'We were here first, laddie,' he signed. 'And she's an interesting one, that wee Elf-lass."

"She's not so small, Balin."

"Aye, there's power in her, a hefty measure of it. But she shines like a child on Durin's Day with that one," Balin's voice was strangely teasing as he said those words, aiming his head back at the young man with the Elf-maid. "You won't tell me about dinner," Balin finally said, just as Lady Arwen and her young companion made their way off the bridge and out of sight.

Thorin would not fall for Balin's round-about prying. "Lord Elrond knew the blades we found, and shared their history."

Balin cocked his brow, interest waging a contest against dissatisfaction over his face.

"They belonged to King Turgon, Lord of the fallen city of Gondolin."

Balin pointed his pipe wand at Thorin's chest. "You're going to tell me about the history of some blades we found in the Troll Hoard, when you could be telling me about what really interested you at dinner? I saw you—"

"Stop it, Balin."

His Advisor pursed his lips in silence for a moment before nodding. "You'll need to come to terms soon enough." Then he smiled. "Let me know what those terms are, once you find them."

Thorin paced in the Hall before their rooms, entirely unable to sleep and unwilling to try. He found his steps leading back toward the dinning hall, up the stairs to the high table where they sat. *Had that been just a few hours ago?* Thorin shook his head.

What was he going to do? *Durin's Day*—*They could not tarry long to make it on time*. Why in *Durin's* name was he so conflicted? He remembered her hands on the guitar, nimble fingers weaving over strings with speed and grace, and wondered how they would feel in his hair, braiding—*Just stop*, he nearly hissed aloud, teeth clenched, trying to block thinking. He had thought enough for one day.
His eyes landed on the upright harp set in a glade below, just off the way from the lower tables within a tiny glen of moss and trees, and he went to it, hoping somehow that by playing he could ease his mind. Such actions had worked in the past, for other worries, so perhaps. He took the seat to the back of the harp and pulled the solid upright against his chest over his left shoulder, settling the instrument comfortably in the crook near his neck. He shut his eyes to the pleasant feel of the weight against him, his hands spread over the strings, welcoming the call to music. To distraction. He savored the feel of the wind through his hair, touching the skin of his face and hands as he began to strum the chords of the song he'd been working on these past months, the one about Home, the Dragon and the Misty Mountains stretched out before them. Then he began to hum the tune, before settling into quietly singing the newest lyrics—

"Farewell we call to hearth and home,"

Life was full of partings. His heart felt heavy.

"The wind may blow and rain may fall,"

And most likely will. This was not helping.

"We must away ere break of day,"

No. They had time for one more night. Or one month. No more. His Company needed rest from running—

"Far over the world and Mountain tall."

—And Lord Elrond had good wine.

At a hint of lavender in the air he turned his head slightly.

She was there. "Asti," he hummed below his breath. She'd stumbled upon him playing, startling herself, startling him as she stood there awash in the partial light of the moon. Oh Mahal what she wore! He took a look at her through lidded eyes, this was a dream— but no. She was there, he saw, he heard, he could very nearly feel, stilling the strings with his hands. She was clad in a blue silk shift of the finest weave, with a sheer gold robe flowing over it. Blue and gold. And her feet were bare. He focused with his eyes half shut, staring at the slender toes peeking beneath the soft silk bunched at her feet where she stopped so suddenly the gown chased ahead of her. A smile tugged his cheeks as he noticed her nails, all ten painted red.

He heard her gasp and his eyes widened partly, rising to meet hers.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

An apology for entering the glen? Surely this was open space for all? Her face grew darker with each fraction of a second she stood in silence. "I thought you were an Elf."

What? No. He looked her full on, wondering how she'd suddenly become so confused.

"No, I mean, I know you're not an Elf." He sensed her embarrassment growing upon itself. He watched, uncertain how to respond, how to put her at ease, at the same time trying to tame his smile.

"What I meant was, I didn't realize you played."

But she was getting so exited he wished she would relax, and above all—

"If I'd known it was you…"
"...I would never have..." Her eyes, staring back at him, grew river rock round.

*I wish you would...*

All of a sudden she twirled and hurried back.

"That day you were thieving from me," he hailed low, hoping to stop her, "surely you saw my travel harp." His eyes eased when she wavered, delicately glancing at him over her bare shoulder draped in gold.

She sighed into the air toward him.

"Or were you too focused on my food to notice anything else?" he teased further, hoping she would smile. He bowed his head in welcome, hoping she would return. He watched her chew her lip, knowing she considered it, pulling the flesh of his bottom lip against his teeth, just to feel the hardness.

She looked at him then, from his face to his neck to his shoulder down his side to his hips, to the instrument in his embrace, with a look that he dared not call jealousy or desire—to his—*no. It was the instrument; she loved Elven things.*

Her eyes flashed to his as though she were suddenly embarrassed, just as her color darkened once again, and he wondered maybe she had been looking at his—*Please don't leave.* "Do you play?" He set the harp upright and moved to stand.

"No, no, please don't get up." Now she rushed in protest, nearly tripping on the edges of the robes tangling her feet.

He was up before she caught herself from falling. Exasperation filled her face as her gaze fell to the gold robes opening as she moved, revealing strength and grace in her form escaping the fabric. Soft skin, cleavage, how would it feel, his lips parted to breathe in the cool air. *What in Mahal's name was wrong with him?*

"I don't play." She adjusted the robes loosely about her.

His eyes glanced off her shoulder, to her neck, to her eyes. *Please don't leave.* He stopped before her, stifling the need to reach out and make sure she was steady. "So when you said you played nearly every stringed instrument..."

"This is one of the few I don't." She swallowed hard, looking nearly crimson in embarrassment, and he had no clear idea why. *Surely she did not believe she had to know how to play every kind?* Her eyes skipped from her right to her left and back, as though she searched for lost directions. "Why are you here?" she asked him quickly.

*Why not?* He flashed the question back at her, unsure what she truly wished to know. Rude, he thought, coming from one who was never rude. This surely meant something—she was greatly discomforted. And he glanced down, seeing a silver object nestled in her arms, and then back to her face, wondering what she was about, with no idea how to answer her pointed question.

"I mean... you're still in your travel clothes—"
forward to the heat, and then he was looking at her and wishing she'd—he quashed the thought, suddenly hot enough. So he blinked, looking at how well she freshened up. She had discarded her own travel clothes for—far better. His eyes roamed over the shape of her beneath the silken folds.

"...and so I assume you haven't gone to bed..."

Who can sleep?

"...and you and Elrond..."

Elves.

"...and Gandalf..."

Wizards.

"...and Balin..."

Balin saw us. He saw—

"...all disappeared, and well..."

Well. And now her skin flushed yet again, and she was looking in his eyes with something like a question. But she did not ask it.

"I couldn't sleep." She said.

Thorin smiled on the inside; he was not alone, being restless. "You are not the only one who calms their mind with music." His eyes wandered back down to the closed silver vase she held embraced to her chest, and he wondered what it was. He had seen it before, peeking out of her pack when they settled in and out of camps. She carried it with a gentle force, care not to drop it quite evident, always packing it deep inside her other possessions to keep it safe. He looked at the silver gleam, the intricate black wash etchings; it was well wrought, but enigmatic; did it open? What what inside?

"This is what's left of my husband's ashes," she said, as though she heard his thoughts.

Revulsion pulsed through him. What was she doing with that here? But just as quickly he pressed this inner roiling down.

And she lifted her arms with it carefully upward and to him, offering for him to take it. She would hand him her husband's ashes? He did not understand, but she asked, and he felt the asking as he reached out for what she handed him, baffled, fighting for stillness.

He took it in his hands.

She sighed in relief. Yes, she needed this from him.

But why, exactly? His body hardened some as his eyes followed hers to the silver locked vase bearing her husband's remains. Never mind the remains. It is her custom. Look at the silver work. The silver. It was finely wrought, with tiny elegant hinges and a straight and steady inscription he realized was her husband's name. He let his fingers move over the script.

"David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor," she recited the inscription.

What did the names mean? He looked into her eyes for grounding. Who did they honor? Why did her people burn their Deceased? Why did she carry his ashes? How dare he even think to ask?
"What would you like to know?" She asked unflinchingly.

Could she truly read his mind? No. No no no. Not possible. And he would not ask. Instead he handed back the vase, bowing slightly. "It is well made."

A flash of surprise crossed over her face, but she was eased, he could feel it in her posture. "Thank you." She stepped away to the overlook, and he missed the contact of her gaze instantly. "I don't know what Dwarves do when someone dies…"

We lay them in Stone until the Wakening Day.

"… but I imagine it has something to do with the earth and some sort of burial."

Stone.

He watched her finger trail over David Ho'ard Jones Jun’yor's name.

"That's what David's family wanted."

Her voice was soft but he could feel the pain beneath.

"… but David always told me he liked aspects of my family's Hindu tradition… specifically cremation."

Thorin wondered why but had no inclination to ever ask, pressing thoughts of the aftermath of Dragon's fire from his memory.

But this was hard.

Dwarves wanted a bonding to the stone on passing, as a memory until waking. They felt, if the body were burned, this left nothing for stone to remember, and that they will then be forgotten. We had taken the memory of our burned dead to the Blue Mountains, and within them is the Memory Hall, where the best sculptors we could find made likenesses of those we lost, to aid their way back…

She walked toward the edge of the glade to their left. He followed step for step, where trees opened a way through a tiny wooded nook near a gathering of falls, the crashing water spraying the air about them. He tried to focus on the sound of her voice, and not the subject of her loss… why did he feel loss, too? But the effort was entirely useless. He wished he could offer some comfort, but he could find no words, and he certainly could not give in to his desire to embrace her…

"Ever since then I've been traveling to David's favorite places to leave a bit of him behind…"

This is a strange custom, yet she saw beauty in it, and it brought her some manner of peace, and this soothed him somehow, to be of assistance to her here. He knew she needed company as he watched her describe this custom, her arms circling tight over the vase.

"… the Appalachian Trail, Zion's, Moab, Denali…"

Places of her world. Places they loved…

"…I've never met anybody who loved all aspects of nature more than him."

What did she mean, nature? The wind took her hair and combed through it and several strands flew up in the circling breeze. And she smiled.

Somehow he could forget when she smiled, and he felt a lifting in his heart.
"I was actually going to our favorite hiking spot to leave the last of his ashes."

*Was that when she came here?*

"He's long since moved onto his next life."

*Next life?*

"It is time for me to do the same."

*Do what? Please don't say die...*

And just then she looked at him. And he waited as she wished, nodding once to bring her ease. She was at once timid and shy, but open and clearly grateful.

And she was biting her lip again, and looking away, eyes glancing off the Elven statues posed all around them, looking more alive with her there... "I can't think of a more lovely place to leave a part of him."

*The Lonely Mountain—*

Fingers visibly shaking, she moved to open the vase and almost dropped it before his hands enveloped hers and the vase, holding them all secure, calming her tremors. He'd moved without thinking, and now his hands cradled hers above the vase. *When would he ever use his brain?* But her hands were soft and cool, and still shaking, and he could tell she needed him there, somehow, though he did not understand. He kept his hands over hers as she opened the vase beneath a circling breeze. It caught itself into the vase, lifting parts of the ash out into the air of the Elven City. Thorin did not see the ashes float away on the breeze. Not while he watched her eyes, full of wonder and hope, take in the whole of her surroundings.

Chapter End Notes

This was a big moment for Sona. Wonder what she thought? Find out in JennyWren28's "On the Road to Find Out!"

Thank yous for reviewing, each one is appreciated most kindly!
In Hollow Halls Beneath the Fells

After the wind had taken the ash, Thorin stepped back from the ledge and waited for Sona to turn, watching strands of her hair lifting behind her in the breeze. A moment later she was walking, and he stepped in beside her, matching her stride. Her breathing eased into relaxed humming of a tune he had heard her honing before, as they turned on the path that led to the bath halls. Thorin's mind snapped to Arwen, remembering yet again where they were... Sona took the path toward her room, and he remained walking beside her, unwilling to break her musical contemplation, or the comfort she seemed to gain from it. The tune was lovely, though so utterly foreign to his ears, as were many of the tunes she sang. This one, however, felt closer to her, and he wondered—no. What was he doing, walking toward her rooms?

He tugged at the pocket Fíli had only just sewn for him, extracting the rainbow blade; he had meant to return it, his thumb caressed the spine as they made their way.

The path followed a narrow lake, full of dark from the starlit sky. He knew it turned into a fall some distance ahead; the crashing water underscored the flute in her melody.

"What is this tune you hum?"

"Oh, uh," she startled, looking surprised at his question, and his brows knit together, wondering why. "Just a song I've been working on."

A song. One of your own. "Play it for us one evening soon?" he asked, smiling at her, feeling close because she had shared it, and he wondered—no. What, with these questions? Ease off. "Otherwise I fear for Bofur's jovial heart. He still begrudges your serenade to the Trolls."

She laughed, and the sound cracked over him like a summer thunderstorm. He froze; she'd laughed at his joke, and his heart swelled warm, in spite of the shock. "Someone had to save your skin," she quipped on her next breath, smiling like she'd just tripped Dwalin in a spar match.

Yes, Thief. You stole our lives back. And we thank you for it. He smiled slightly, looking in her eyes.

"And I will play it for the Company," she continued as her step slowed. "Once I finish it, that is." She stopped at a set of white columns gracing the entrance to her rooms, and turned to face him.

They were close, of a level, and at the end of the evening, and he was staring, unwilling to move. But there was nothing for it. "I meant to return this before now," he said, lifting his hand with her knife upon it. Her eyes widened with a spark of joy, and he couldn't stop his desire to add shine to her smile—"I would not have you think me a Thief."

She laughed! "Oh goodness, no. I know how you feel about Thieves!"

Do you? Can you be so sure? What if I don't know?

"Besides, we have been very busy..."

Running, fighting, holding, dining, walking—

"...what with Orcs, and Elves, dinner parties, and midnight meetings..."

Is that what this is? He was warmer, thinking it.
"You've hardly had a chance to give it back."

A chance. What chance? What was this? Then she took the knife, her fingers over his palm, cool against his heat. Then they were gone. "Thank you," she said in the hollow between them.


Now she looked away, chewing her lip—his gaze had been too fierce. What was wrong with him? "It's a good knife, though somewhat crudely made," he said, and then he attempted a joke. "I could do without the Elven lines."

She choked down a laugh, and peeved humor spread over her face.

He could only stare. But that would not do. "The metal is new to me. Quite hard. And the rainbow wash is exquisite."

"It's heat treated titanium…”

Titani—

"One of the strongest metals in existence."

Stronger than mithril? I doubt that. But she smiled and he did not care to correct; he rather only wanted to watch her. She still held the blade aloft in her hand, filling the space between them. Without thinking why, he reached out to touch it once more, when her lips drew into the shape of a hard kiss, and he froze.

"David gave it…”

Binumral. Thorin pulled back. What was he thinking?

"…to me for my…”

He wasn’t thinking… and now she had stopped, her face crumpled in thought, looking toward the stars…

Would she find answer there?

Thorin let coldness sink inside him. He had held onto this blade, this gift…as grounding. No… more than that… And he felt vile for it. He should have known, or guessed…

"…Twenty-second? Twenty-third birthday?"

A mere babe. But she is no mere babe. Such is the span of life for people of Men. He swallowed, feeling lost.

This would not do. He backed off. "Goodnight—"

"How do you…” she interrupted, she always interrupted…”say 'thank you' in Dwarvish?"

Dwarvish? "Pardon?” he asked her, suddenly stopped from leaving.

"That language you guys are always speaking when you don't think I'm paying attention."

How much are you paying attention? And why?
She drew a finger to her ear. "At least, I assume it's Dwarvish. It sounds like the Dwarf word for Moria, Khazad-dûm."

Oh Mahal, how she spoke it, all breath and vibration, it ran through him like molten gold to the casting forms. *When had he ever felt so alive?* But he stopped himself short, rather loosely fixated on the fact that she chewed her lip yet again. He pulled his own against his teeth, to feel the edge. And then she was focused on him, her long lashes partly closed, like an invitation. But, no. *Quit with this.*

"Did I say it right?"

He moved to open his mouth but nothing came. And then a look of worry clouded her face. This would not do. He attempted smiling, and it seemed to work, but he felt like he was hanging on climbing-rope traversing down a snow-filled mountain-side. Then he managed a short nod. And then his mind caught up to the fact that she knew some words in Khuzdûl… and spoke so casually, as though she moved without thought across a sacred shrine. But she did not mean offense. This he knew without doubt…

"Khuzdûl," he finally breathed out, wary of his own voice. "Where did you learn it?"

Her face crinkled in confusion.

"There is no 'Dwarvish'," he smiled at the term, somehow endearing coming from her. "We call it Khuzdûl," he said out loud. *Out loud. Holy Mahal. What was he doing? Did she really want to know? "Our Language… it's sacred."*

And now her face filled with color and she seemed to draw closer without moving, as if she asked for something, but she would not say it. "I don't actually know Khuzdûl. Just a few words from my…” she hesitated, her face twisting like she'd bitten on a sour nut…”readings."

The 'books'. Of course. But *how did our sacred words wind up in a document not written by Dwarves? Even we rarely write them out in script… Balin would be appalled… And everyone glaring at Ori… Did Ori have something to do with this?* Thorin wondered, still staring at her face, a face full of open questions.

And then he decided, and filled the space between her. He would give her what she asked. "Âkmînruk zu."

"What?" She didn't know this phrase. But then she understood and her eyes widened into the grandest of smiles. "Oh! Aack-min-rook-tsu. Thank you!"

Not bad. Thorin nodded, unable to hold back the smile clamoring for release. *Balin would have my beard, or what I keep of it. Except he can't.* Thorin smirked to himself. Such are the small benefits of being Heir. But he tarried too long— "I shall try again to take my leave." He backed away once more. "Goodnight, Thief."

"Oh, wait, no." But she would not let him leave. "Hang on just one moment." She turned to her door, the gossamer silk swirling about her, the hint of lavender assailing him yet again. "Let me just get you your hanky or else you really will think I'm a Thief."

"But you are." A small chuckle escaped him. *You are my Thief, with all you have stolen…*

But then the door was open and her Dog was on the threshold, growling and twice as large as usual, teeth bared, with her hair standing on end, and Thorin's reality returned. What was he thinking this whole night? The Thief was no more his than the moon or stars, all equally beyond his reach.
"Sasha, no! Bad!" The Thief was there in a second, restraining her Dog, who clearly had forgotten about as much as Thorin had of their first encounter, which was—absolutely nothing. "Thorin is a friend."

What? Friend? When did that happen? The Dog calmed instantly, as though Óin had given her one of his relaxation tonics, and now the Thief dragged her back into the recesses of her room, leaving him alone in the hall, partially stunned. Did the Thief actually like him, beyond being polite?

"Better not come in!" she called out to him.

And that he laughed out loud, nearly coughing on his surprise, quashing thoughts of the intimacy sure to be found there, the bed, the sheets, her gracious form in flowing silks and lavender gliding through the room as she spoke freely—"I wouldn't dare dream it."

"Stay," he heard her order the Dog. And then she was back at the door with his hanky in hand, flushed and breathing hard, pulling the door shut behind her. He couldn't help glance down her throat at the darkening of her skin, and lower, at the rise and fall of her chest. Eyes up, Thorin, and just as fast he was looking back in her golden browns. Friend.

Her breath was a smile. "She's usually not that bad."

The Dog? You must be kidding— Thorin's hand went to the wrist who had met Sasha's teeth, and he grimaced.

"Sasha was David's, or rather, he was hers." There was a haunting in the darkness around her eyes, and he saw she was tired, leaning still, her breathing slowing, he could see her heartbeat through the pulse of her neck, and the scent of lavender touched him once more. He wished he could ease her burden, but that in turn seemed to cause a restlessness in his own heart. He knew what she wanted: she wanted home. He had no way to get her there, and if he could, if he knew… "She sometimes minds me," the Thief continued on about her Dog. "But only if she feels like it. And she's super protective of me because she knows I was important to David."

Ah, the key to the puzzle. Sasha is a worthy friend to keep you safe.

She leaned deeper into the wood, pulled by her exhaustion, canting her head up, eyes twinkling in reflection of the stars. "She's way too smart for her own good."

Is smart so bad? "She appears to get on with Fíli well enough."

"Yeah, I've never seen her take a shine—"

—take a shine?

"—to anyone else before. Which reminds me." She pressed herself away from the wall and he caught his breath as she took a step toward him. "Why do Fíli and Kíli, and Dwalin for that matter, all think I'm still traveling with you?"

So it was true.

"Have you not told the Company that I'm not going any further?"

No. It felt like falling, but his feet held firm. He blinked, and shrugged down on his speeding heart to slow it by force of will, adjusting into his stone mask as best he could after having been so open. Why had he been so open? What was he thinking?
Oh right. He hadn't been thinking.

And yet she still stood here before him, waiting for an answer. "So you will not," he said, for time to think, bowing his head toward her in silent acceptance, keeping his eyes on hers for the simple fact that he could not look away.

"Well, no, of course not." Of course. He had been foolish to think— And yet she looked so confused, tired and lost. "Why would you think that? And besides, I thought you didn't even want me along…"

Mahal save him from his past foolishness. But this was unexpected, as he had not thought to visit Elves on the course of his Quest, but Tharkûn had seen to it. Tharkûn. "Gandalf took you as a traveling companion," Thorin attempted a futile explanation, unsure why it mattered so much that she knew it. "He still journeys with us." He shrugged, hoping he could let silence fill the gaps. But that would not do. No matter how hard, he could not stop explaining. "I thought it would follow."

His gaze sank, and he noticed the flagstones reflected the light of the stars; there were little bits of diamond shards embedded along the paths to light the ways as darkness deepened toward dawn.

"Er, no. I'm staying." The words were hard to hear, and yet he heard a softness in them, something like a whisper of regret.

I know you wish for home.

"Elrond is going to help me get back to my…where I came from."

Is he?

She did that face again, the stone kiss, and a worried crease formed between her brows.

He took a moment to gather his thoughts and brace his confounded emotions, clasping his hands behind him as if he could stuff all feeling there. "I see." He resolved to give counsel as far as she allowed. "And what if Elves lack the ability to send you home?"

"I…oh," she stammered. Evidently the thought hadn't occurred to her; those 'books' must indeed hold the Elves in highest regard. "I don't know."

She was chewing on her lip again; he clamped his tongue still and looked away. "I guess… I guess I really could become a… what did Kîli call me? A traveling minstrel?"

Oh that was a practical thought. "Aye," he agreed, relaxing a bit, releasing his hold and pulling a hand over his mouth. "Your skills would open doors in any hall, and you would have pupils lined up past the gates."

He stole a glance at her and saw wide hollowed eyes staring past him, he knew the look; desolation of never seeing home again. He had seen it far too often, and he grieved for her. But there was something else he saw there beyond her sadness. A spark of adventure had perhaps touched her soul, and she was not altogether unhappy here, especially now, in this place she found beautiful, fostered among Elves, an idyllic people capable of all manner of wishes.

For some.

And then her eyes widened again with something else, and he leaned forward as if to catch her from falling, silly as that seemed. "I guess… I guess I can visit all the places of Middle Earth that David would have wanted to see and leave a bit of him there."
Aye. Surely. And this would mean travel. "If this is your course, Thief, you will need to visit Erebor once it is reclaimed." Tonight had been a dream. A good one, but no less unreal. It was his Quest that would fuel him forward. He let his spirit settle into this, relaxing his arm to his side. "For you will find no grander halls in all of Middle-earth." He stopped, as if on a ridge where there were two ways down. He would not leave her without a full welcome. "And David," he whispered her deceased husband's name as he slipped farther into the hall, feeling the syllables pass his throat, striving to be reverent, "He is welcome. He should be there, too."

Why did her eyes seem to grow bigger as he made distance between them? And when did the breeze go cold? He bowed quickly, it was time, and with a swift turn he was down the path and away.
To Seek the Pale Enchanted Gold

"Did you see her," Dwalin asked when Thorin was back.

"Aye," Thorin muttered, eying his friend warily from the side. He was tired of talking.

"She was smiling quite favorably on you," Dwalin looked away across the bridged glen just off their rooms, two falls edging either side of it, trees rimming the land between the falls.

Thorin frowned back at him, disbelieving. Surely she did not look at him so?

"And you were smiling more than I've ever seen in one sitting. Even Lord Elrond saw it." Dwalin nodded, his eyes shining beyond their normal 'know-it-all' luster. "You need not deny it.

Thorin stared at him, unmoving, but not angry. His frown slowly dissolved.

"You need not say anything, as well you know." Dwalin clasped Thorin's shoulder and brought his head up against his brow in a friendly head-butt. "Just as much or little as you wish, I can take it."

Dwalin let go.

Oh he was sorely tempted to give a litany of complaints. But he was not yet ready to say anything out loud, especially something he'd been refusing to articulate up to now, even to himself. He shook his head slightly and nodded toward his room. "I am tired, travel worn, and there's a bath in there waiting, I saw it before; do you know? They've given us rooms with running water, complete with faucets and drains, elaborate fixtures, the plumbing on a level with the Lonely Mountain's best, Dwalin." Thorin smiled, thinking of it. "A long, deep-seated bath. Mahal willing there's hot water, and I can let my mind relax."

Dwalin snorted, shaking his head with another meaning. "Mahal willing, more than just your mind."

The bath was already drawn, and hot, steam rising the way Thorin liked it. He wondered how the Elves knew, and felt a smidge of ease toward them, swallowing his surprise as he moved toward it, a long tub of porcelain, in black, with gold flowing lines whirling over the edges as a vine might. The room was lit with sundry candles and a torch above the tub. Seemed not all Elves were without compassion or hospitality. Someone had readied the water with soothing herbs, sage and rosemary. There were towels and soaps laid out on a ledge of the tub, and a vase filled with lavender near the bed. Thorin fetched his comb and his oils, set them next to the soaps. He then stripped as quickly as he could and settled into the heat of the bath, taking it in and sinking down until the water was up to his chin, nudging the bristles of his beard with the motion of his settling. And then he lay still, still as could be, for as long as it took, and the water stayed hot beyond the normal span, the tub seemed to somehow hold that heat. After a while, the heat managed to sooth the edge in his blood, and he undid his braids and washed his hair, combed it slowly out, spreading it through the water, then combing in his oils of cardamom and pine.

It felt like, somehow, for the good of this water, or whatever it was the Elves had put in it, he would be able to rest tonight.

Fíli met him just outside his chambers the next morning, looking as fresh as Thorin felt, that is until he noticed Fíli's face was full of the same question he had the evening before. This time Thorin didn't
wait for it. "I did not ask, I will not ask, because I cannot ask, and you very well know why."

"Morning, N’adad. Did you enjoy dinner?" Fíli had one brow raised and a smirk to match it.

"Aye."

"From where I sat, so did Sona."

Thorin made no reply to that. Instead he opted to further answer Fíli’s first question from the night before. "I spoke with her later. She said, without my asking, that she does not wish to join us, no matter what the Wizard does, or where he goes. She believes the Elves will see her home."

Fíli’s smile dropped, but his eyes stayed on him.

He almost turned to leave but Thorin caught his arm, further holding his gaze. "I cannot change what is; you know this as well. I can only move forward."

"You think you can," Fíli said fast, and apparently without thought.

"Is that a smart remark, or a question, Inûdooy?"

"I did not come to argue, N’adad." Fíli moved closer, jaw relaxed, spine firm. "And you will answer only if you wish it. When do you think we will leave here, then?"

"Not just yet," Thorin said, gentling his grip on the lad’s arm. "We all can use the rest. There is some time, some weeks we can—"

"You would stay so long among Elves?" He leaned further in, brows raised high.

"I would." Thorin’s face felt hot and he worked hard to hold still. "These are not so bad. Tharkûn wanted to speak with Lord Elrond over matters of our Quest, the journey there," he continued, "but also something concerning the old ruins of Dol Guldur. We will spend some time here."

Fíli only stared back, but Thorin felt the smile beneath it. After a moment the lad found his voice again. "I came to tell you Balin looks for you. He has some news to share." Fíli angled his head down the left path before them. "This way."

Balin stepped up when Thorin and Fíli crossed the bridge into the Falls Veranda, adjacent Lord Elrond’s Library, surrounded by cascades of water from three sides, and a fall on the forth, beneath the bridge. Nori and Dwalin were with him. Nori had his arms crossed. He stood to the side looking distracted though Thorin better than to believe he was… "I know who he is. Nori found out." Balin nodded, looking past Dwalin at Nori, who was watching down the hall as if to see if they were followed.

Dwalin, between the two of them, nudged Nori’s attention back to Thorin.

But Thorin paid them no mind, glared hard at Balin. "Who who is?"

"Ach," Balin shrugged at Thorin’s impatience. "The one we saw with Lady Arwen. His name is Aragorn, son of Arathorn, known as Estel to the Elves. He is the last remaining Heir to the Throne of Gondor." Balin’s eyes were wide, his brows to the skies. "It hasn't been said yet to Lord Elrond," now Balin winked, of all things. "But the two have been sweet on each other for a short while now."

At this Nori glanced from Dwalin to Balin, eyes wide and frowning at the same time. "Why's that
information necessary to Thorin's business?" the Spy asked, brow arched at the possible impropriety of it.

"It offers insight, Nori, to things Thorin has interest in."

Now Thorin frowned. What in Mahal's name did that mean? "What things?" he asked. "I do not care what these two—"

"It's the idea that's important, laddie. Don't forget it."

"What idea?" Thorin was utterly confused, but none of the three would answer. Insight? Was that it? Then why not explain? "Go have breakfast," he waved them off. I'll think a moment." Thorin was sure it would take longer than a moment to think this through, and that was only if he wanted to, and right now he had no intention...

They all stared on, averse to move.

"Go, go," he shushed them all out. "I will be along."

Balin and Nori and Dwalin each bowed and made their way, all wearing looks of mischief that sank clear down to their boots.

Thorin glanced to Fíli, who stood there, arms crossed, watching the three leave with one huge smile plastered over his face. "Do you know what they meant?"

Fíli took a moment to measure him, his face relaxing into a question. "I'll wait on the answer until I know you want it."

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Days passed to weeks and restlessness was settling in. Nights he slept better than most places. His dreams were haunted by paths he would follow, a door he would pass, not knowing why, which was frightening by itself, except not here, and he was always lost, but always found the spot that Lady Arwen had marked out to him, and these dreams were much like his nightmares of the past, not that they were steeped in cries and battles and gore, but that they were so vivid, he could smell the honeysuckles blooming; he sometimes woke with the suspicion he had actually walked the halls. Each time he was relieved to find himself in bed, awake from rest and hungry for breakfast.

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In the mornings he would spar with Dwalin.

But not this morning. Dwalin had not showed, and Thorin instead moved through the forms. It was just as well, being alone to clear his mind. And that's what he did most days... He did his best not to think about the Thief and what was to come.

On this morning he saw the Thief leave the breakfast area just as he was turning the bend, in one of her fitted tunic suits, gold fabric sheathing her, and a blue wrap draped over her shoulders and hair—gold and blue—streaming down behind her like a gentle fall of water. He stopped a moment, watching until she was out of sight.

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Middays he would meet with his Sister's Sons, for the simple joy of watching Fíli and the Dog, Sasha, playing with the stick Fíli had whittled to the shape of his sword. Sasha was very good with
it, bringing it back to him invariably without tiring. Rarely a day passed when Kíli didn't make some cheeky remark about the Thief's apparent preference for blues and golds, he'd wink and wag his eyebrows at Thorin, stressing this was something they had not been aware of prior to Imladris. Thorin would shrug and scoff, sometimes even laugh, which made Kíli's face beam wide with joy, and then Thorin would tell him the Thief could wear what she wanted and it held no meaning, but something tugged inside when he said it, and he really wasn't sure.

Today felt different. Today when Kíli mentioned the colors, Thorin got quiet and Kíli stopped, abruptly changing the subject. "She thinks I like Elves, N'adad." Kíli frowned, shaking his head as if to say 'how could 'that' be? When everyone among them knew Kíli's curiosity toward Elves seemed heightened well beyond the average Dwarven norm to the point of annoyance. "She's always on me about my manners," he muttered with a sigh.

"Well," Thorin latched onto the opportunity to change the subject and work on Kíli's manners at the same time, "A certain amount of grace among our allies can be useful during negotiations."

"Who's negotiating?" Kíli asked, frowning all the harder.

Later on, Thorin walked, as was his usual habit. He'd been restless, with the impending need to move, and all he could do was walk, and he preferred to do it alone.

Afternoons he would meet with Balin overlooking the falls, where neither would say much beyond the movements of the Wizard, who was still bidding them wait.

On this afternoon Balin had more news. It seemed Nori had discovered the White Wizard had arrived earlier in the day. His white robes had been seen billowing up the high stairs toward Lord Elrond's Council Table.

Thorin took the news quietly, drawing a hand through his beard and frowning. The last thing he needed was another meddlesome Wizard in his business.

They needed to set out. Thorin had known this, and yet he delayed.

Each day evening would arrive, it never failed, and Thorin's Company was still in this Elven City. And then Thorin would think of how lovely it had been the night before, dining with the Thief, and he would opt to wait for her, escort her to dinner yet again if she were willing. What was one more night? And not a night passed where she had not said yes.

Sometimes it would be at the harp, and the Thief would be passing with her guitar from having played in the gardens. She would pause, linger, and talk of music, so easy in his company, almost as though she really liked it there, with him there. That confused him, so he did his best to ignore it, instead bringing up the subject of dinner.

Or sometimes it would be where he found her that first night. And when he saw her, he would ask her, hand extended, and she would take it. He felt shock every time.

On this evening, she did not pass through the gardens, so that's where he found himself, standing at the spot before the dining hall and waiting for her, feeling somewhat heavy, knowing the Company must leave, most likely before the week was out… maybe sooner. What would the White Wizard
demands?

Thorin was fairly sure he did not want to find out.

He waited. Time passed. The people assembled. But the Thief did not show. He took his place alone, Lord Elrond and Tharkûn showing up shortly after, the last to arrive. Thorin kept looking toward where they came in, wondering why, if he were here, the White Wizard did not join them. He felt suddenly chilled, and wondered if something had happened to the Thief, hoping she was well. But what could have kept her? The dinner rang hollow, tasteless and dull, the colors paled from the many nights before, and the music toned flat, almost unbearable. He did his best to keep his head down and eat fast, wishing to leave as soon as politeness allowed.

And that is what he did. He left the table early, complaining of a headache he had acquired during the meal, and moved quickly. He wanted space behind a closed door, away from any and all people.

"N'adad."

Thorin stopped, shutting his eyes so hard he felt the blood pulse beneath them.

"I am sorry. It's my fault."

What cold possibly be Fíli's fault? But the worry in the lad's voice made his skin crawl. Thorin held his breath, turning slowly, full of wariness as well as concern and questions, with no idea of what Fíli spoke.

"I just asked Sona a question, at breakfast. Sounds quite lame, now that I think of it, but I remarked upon her choice of colors she's worn since she has been here in Imladris, the blues and the golds." Fíli stared at him eyes wide and sorry. "N'adad. I thought for sure she knew how well you two have been complementing each other since you have been here together…"

Thorin could not get his mouth closed from staring at his Sister's Son. Though he found the Thief lovely and he enjoyed her company, they were not together… no.

"Seems the choice of dress color had been decided for her after that first evening," Fíli continued, "with Lady Arwen bringing the clothes for her leisure." His face fell to the floor, worry and sorrow creasing his brow. "I fear she has stayed in her rooms after this discovery, for embarrassment, perhaps, of what you might think of her, or her motives…" Fíli stumbled his words, his mind wrestling with the possibilities.

Thorin felt a sinking in his gut. What did she actually think? She hadn't come to dinner— clearly because of him, because of what he might think, assumptions he might make, just as Fíli said. Thorin had made no assumptions, but he knew now, with this awful sinking feeling, that he had hoped, and these hopes were now evaporated, like water cast to steam from the Dragon's fire. What had he been thinking? That she meant something by it? That she was sending some cryptic message by wearing colors matching his preferences? Blues and golds, shades that became her so well? Well, now he knew she did not choose them. What foolhardy thought, to carry this faintest of hopes that this could be so. And it irked him, the depth of his grief, realizing this, and the uselessness of this unvoiced hope. How could he let himself dream this way, even if ever so quietly?

Nothing of use. That was the sum of it. And now, what now?

The Thief's mortification for that fact surely matched his own. She would assume he believed she was showing her favor—for him. Nothing could be farther from truth. How utterly too much. But neither of them had caused this. He tried to sort his thoughts through the pain swelling in his head.
What in Mahal's name had the Lady Arwen been thinking? *How could she play such games?*

"I had no idea," Fíli added softly, still wrapped in his worry. "I would never have——"

Thorin reached out and grasped his Sister's Son's arm, a calming grip. "Do not fret this, Fíli. It is not your fault." Thorin looked into Fíli's eyes, they were shining, the lad was clearly painfully moved, and the sinking in Thorin's stomach shifted to acid. "We've been the butt of an Elven joke." What more could he say? There was nothing for it but forward, and with that he let his Sister's Son go, turned on his heel and headed for the peace of his room as fast as his feet would take him.

He found the decanter of Cognac and his pipe and settled into the cushioned recliner by the fire, wishing to escape thoughts that hounded him, wishing he had seen her tonight, wishing his heart didn't feel like an anvil.

Someone knocked at his door, but he did not go to it. Instead he sank further into the cushioned chair, resolving to feel the pain this once, to accept the awkwardness of his futile hopes, hopes he had hidden so well from himself, fool Dwarf, now dashed.

The smoke trailed about him, the taste of Cognac a small balm, and the fire hypnotized, keeping the melancholy at bay, to a point. He had to find a way to tell her, to ease her embarrassment.

Because he knew she was mortified. She *had skipped dinner to avoid him*. He trailed a hand through his hair, agonizing over that thought.

He found himself chewing his lip like she did and forced himself to stop. It wasn't helping. He stared into the flame, the embers carving the wood into coal black shapes like Dragon scales.

Lady Arwen had done this with purpose. Of course she had, sneaky Elf. He had not thought her capable of malice. But was it malice? Or something else? Confound these accursed Elves. He could not understand them. Her purpose was writ all over the deed, but her motives remained unclear.

That, and it seemed the Lady had a faulty knowledge regarding Dwarves and the use of color; she seemed to hold the Elven or Man held assumptions, that certain colors were heraldic... but this was beside the point, was it not?

They all, including his Dwarves, had seen the connection. No one had seen fit to make comment, as it seemed the Thief merely did as she wished, as was her right— at least that was how Thorin thought, how any Dwarf would think— but Elves and Men were no Dwarves and did not think as such.

Lady Arwen had toyed with them. All of them. But *why*? He had almost come to think of her as friend… *Fool Dwarf.*

He fought the bitterness down that welled inside him. *Elves.* Why in Mahal's name to they do *anything?* Or sometimes *nothing?* But he knew well, he did not need to be angry at Elves. He merely needed to lower his expectations; even when they seemed to have it, their sense of compassion was… *strange.* And to think, what thoughts crossed the mind of the Thief as a result of this orchestration by the Lady? The Elf played just as well with her feelings, throwing them together this way without a word of warning. Clearly the Thief would feel badly if she thought for a second Thorin would draw the wrong conclusion and assume by her color choices that she favored him.

What level of discomfort this revelation must have caused the Thief, to have kept her from dinner…

How was he to fix this?
Right now he did not want to move, because the motion caused his head to hurt.

Instead he shut his mind to everything, and stared into the story the fire told, dancing over the wood, consuming it slowly. Soon he was spent and shut his eyes from the red glow.

—He was in her doorstep. What nerve to be in her doorstep! But he did not care. He needed to explain. And, well, her door was open. And there she stood, in blue and gold, brushing out her hair with long flowing strokes as any knots were long since combed out. She looked at herself, and he could tell she didn't see what he saw; she didn't see she was spellbinding, or that she stole the air along with everything else. No, she was bored and thinking of other things, other places, other people. Home, maybe even. But that he didn't want to think about. He only wanted to look at her, having momentarily forgotten why he came.

And just then she looked through the mirror, directly at him. She dropped her hairbrush, swirling round like a wave over rocks, stopping to face him with a force of estimation he did not expect, almost as though she were hungry to see him. It was good, then, that he came so quickly, barely dressed—barely dressed? What was he doing wandering about in nothing but his shirt and his breeches? And how had he gotten here unseen, and better yet, with no memory of having moved from his chair by the fire? Never mind, she's looking at you, and she likes what she sees. And she'd dropped her hairbrush, he recalled, as he noticed her eyes lingering over the flesh he had exposed on his collarbone. He couldn't stop himself. He went for her—

—hairbrush, kneeling just there, right next to her bare feet, the red of her painted toes shining off the light, the color glossed and vibrant, pulling out the gold in her skin. He reached for the brush, and swept his fingers over the sole of her instep, gently, how he wanted to kiss the tender sides of that gracefully curved foot... He heard her breath go sharp, and he looked up at her, caught her eye in his own and held fast, don't you do it, do not look away—

He kept his eyes nailed to hers as he rose slowly, not backing off even a hairbreadth from her presence. He wanted more within it, and he knew by her eyes that she wanted him there. So he stayed as close as he was.

And remembered why he came. "You were not at supper." He leaned closer, toward her ear, not touching, but only after he spoke. He took a breath, settling in the scent of lavender about her.

And then his body followed forward as he wrapped himself around her. "I wasn't hungh..." she began to reply, her breath stopping at his movement, while he dropped the brush on the table behind them, the clunk of it causing her to jump ever so slightly against him, closer still. Solid, so near his heart, hers beating, faster. He would envelop her, except, no, cannot. He stayed put, as close as she'd have him, and they were touching now. Soft and firm at once, he wanted to bury his face in the hair by her neck, and kiss her there to hear her sigh again. "You were missed," he whispered in her ear instead, looking longingly at the span of skin beneath it.

"You...?" she asked, swallowing, as if she couldn't imagine it.

"Hmmm." Can you not see it? He nodded slightly, as close as he could get to her cheek without touching.

And then his eyes dropped down to the nightdress she wore, blue with gold trim, the gold trim lying gently over her skin, clear and perfect, he wanted to touch her—

—so his fingers went to the gold trim, and he pressed along it, to her collarbone beneath, along the
ridge, feeling her foundation to the bone, so close to where her heart beat—

He wanted kiss her, but all he could do was breathe. And then he remembered what he’d come to say, how he desperately needed her to know it. "Blue suits you. As does the gold. No one, by deed or word, can change the truth."

And then he couldn’t help bridge the gap further, tracing his nose along her cheek toward her lips until he was—

__________________________________________

Back in the chair, less soft than it had felt before. His pipe was still lit; the fire still burning, yet he felt a chill in the air, knowing very well it was her absence. What in Mahal’s name was that? He had never dreamed such a vivid dream in his all his life, including the worst of his most realistic post battle nightmares. This felt achingly real, clear down to … the scent of lavender? He could still smell it. But then his eye caught the vase near his bed, and he shook his head.

And he climbed quickly out of the chair, now fully awake, and thank Mahal his headache was gone. He needed to walk, to cool. And then he had to find her, to tell her this was no reason to fret. They should pay no mind to an Elf that would play with them. He could not leave it like this, not after all these days, not with goodbye just around the corner. Maybe he could share with her something of how Dwarves consider color. And he was in the hall before he could think anymore.
Thorin kept his steps quick, never slowing his resolve, at first with no direction in mind. He needed walking, and he needed it now. He headed to the garden paths, and once there noticed Fíli with Kíli in one of the wider spaces, passing the wooden throw sword for the Dog to fetch. Sasha sprang and retrieved with barks and jumps, sometimes bowling the lad over, to lick him and hug him between the bouts of practice. Thorin kept far enough out to pass them unnoticed, leaving them at leisure and undisturbed in the games.

He headed farther into the gardens, mindful to remember the way back, when at the turn of a bend he came face to face with and old man in white. But not just any old man: without doubt this was the White Wizard. His intense scrutiny fell upon Thorin from just before and above him, as the Wizard stood on a balcony to the side of Thorin's path.

Thorin kept walking, stone mask in place, his eyes on the Wizard, who stared back without saying a word or raising an arm in greeting. Thorin saw no reason to prove himself more polite than the brooding Wizard glaring down at him with his raking eyes. Thorin kept walking, feeling a coldness in the way of the Wizard, a measuring assessment mixed with dismissal, unlike anything he felt around Tharkûn or the addled Radagast. This was a being he wanted nothing to do with. Moving his eyes away first, Thorin walked until he was past, not about to be kept from his way.

From there his thoughts wandered back to the mischievous Lady Arwen and the game she had played with color. As he looked about him, still clear of his way back and sure he would not get lost, he was reminded of the manner Lady Arwen had used to keep him from getting lost. His thoughts softened a little; she was far brighter than the white in the Wizard's robes. She had always seemed so... well? Helpful would have been the word until tonight. She had displayed a hint of friendly mischief, even while having the air of someone all-too-knowing. But was there malice? He hadn't seen that coming, not from her, and it was no wonder, as it didn't fit, no matter that he was not too overly fond of Elves, and no matter that she'd opted to play this game. It all made absolutely no sense.

And then he turned the corner, and a whiff of honeysuckle tickled his senses, and there under the gazebo stood the Lady Arwen Undômiel, staring back at the Man she had been with before as if he'd just given her the Moon. And Thorin remembered, that was the exiled Heir to the Throne of Gondor standing before her. Bending in, kissing her.

Aye, Nori had seen it correctly; these two shared a bond. Thorin stopped; all he could do was stare—An Immortal, of one of the highest family of Elves left in Middle-earth, here sharing promises with the future King of Men? The Man, 'Aragorn son of Arathorn', Balin had called him, appeared young, having seen not more than thirty years, with a scruffy beard and the dusty worn leathers of a Ranger of the North. Lady Arwen wore a breezy pale Elven gown that blew and flowed about the Man where they were standing.

Thorin wondered if this union were in the Thief's 'books' as he stared at their lingering kiss.

And then she broke away, singing a bar of keening lyric, haunting and yet edged with an abundance of hope, best expressed by the smile in her words, and he caught a few of those words floating back on the breeze, "a promise lives within you now, a promise..." She stopped and pulled the young prince forward into another kiss, her hand on his heart. Thorin smiled then, wondering how long it
would take before Lord Elrond caught wind of it, and how the Elf Lord as Doting Father would react to news such as this…

And that’s when she saw him. The Man called Aragorn did not, as his back faced Thorin, and Thorin was far in the shadows on a third trail passing beneath them. The Lady looked into Thorin's eyes, in spite of the distance.

*Why did you toy with us?*

She seemed to see too much of Thorin's current unease, as her smile faded slowly from her face, before she shook her head, and a gentle aura seemed to flow from her, as though she would argue with him silently, toward a kindly understanding. She nodded her head toward Aragorn, smiling back at Thorin, knowing, yet full of warmth, as though she would tell the Dwarf a secret, and then she was in his head—

—*In his head? How did she get there*—?

But it did not feel foul; it was a kind word: 'I am like you, cherishing one who is not my own kind.'

Thorin's eyes widened just as his heart eased. He knew then with certainty she had meant no ill-will, however poorly thought her plan had been. She had wanted to help them. He nodded back, a subtle acquiescence, and then turned on the path toward Sona's rooms, sure of his way.

His stride picked up, and he had to almost laugh; that was, if he were not mistaken, the first truly touching encounter he had ever had with an Elf.

Everything was verging on lovely, except Sona hadn't come to dinner.

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The first thing he heard was her voice calling the Dog. And the he rounded the next bend and saw her leaning across another veranda, calling louder and longer this time, "Saaaaashaaaaa!

He almost didn't recognize her. She had changed, gone the gold and blue. Tonight she wore a burning red robe dipped in orange and pink on the sleeves and in the sash, her form aflame in new colors, with the wind blowing the airy fabric like a spark on the breeze.

"She is with Fíli," he said, swallowing hard.

She nearly jumped as she turned and a small sigh escaped her, and she looked at him with the biggest eyes, surprise and shock and recognition and… embarrassment…? all vied at once for her expression.

He took a step back, sorry he had startled her.

And her look of embarrassment seemed to take hold and shift into something like—suspicion, but no, that wasn’t it. Thorin couldn't quite place it, but she surely felt awkward, looking as if she’d just got caught stealing some of Bombur's lemon cookies, likely still worried about expectations of colors prompted by Lady Arwen and her games.

Her eyes took him in as though she were hungry, and he wondered, had she gotten some dinner later? And her eyes strayed over his person, taking, from what he could tell, a detailed inventory of what he wore, from his shirt to his belt to below it, where she lingered and the color in her face increased, as if she were imagining—
No. Not possible.

Her head bobbed back up, her eyes meeting his with a question nagging the edges of them. He recalled their closeness in the dream, her body pressed to his, and he could barely think to address the question he thought was intended.

So he tried to answer an easy one. "He continues teaching her to fetch with practice swords," he said, surprised he could muster any measure of his voice. But he needed to find it, and quick. "She's quite intelligent. For a dog."

She gave him a look of disbelief, and Thorin felt confused. Surely she knew her Dog was smart, but maybe she hadn't expected him to say it.

He stepped closer, clasping his hands before glancing at her. Stop delaying, and get to it already. "You were not at supper." Every word felt like boots pulling from a muddy path, and he was desperate to get to the end of it.

She laughed, a hesitant giggle, and he stopped, spellbound, just to listen. And then she caught his eyes. "I wasn't hungry."

That— was almost what she'd said in the dream. Thorin frowned a fraction before he laughed himself, struck by the echo of it, but this was so unlike how he'd imagined.

Just then they heard a growl, both sets of eyes widening at once, and Thorin's gaze fell to the binding of Sona's sash, where beneath it her stomach complained for lack of dinner. He gave her a questioning look but he already knew that she had gone without. He felt the sharpness of grief: this was his fault, because of assumptions she expected he may have thought—blue and gold—assumptions he had indeed made, however subconsciously, and he was sorry.

"The fire shades tonight?" he asked, nodding toward her robes, trying to rekindle a smile somewhere within himself to ease the ache. Come on, get to it. "Do you know, Dwarves love color? More than any other culture in Arda, we tend it outwardly," he began to explain.

And as each word came her eyes grew bigger and bigger, and he scrambled faster to clear this matter, to curb the anxiety he saw growing, for surely she needed to know it made no difference what shades she wore, aside from her own sentiment— Not among Dwarves. All shades are free for any Dwarrow to wear. We crave color, every shade. Royalty holds no claim to any one or set, unlike many races of Men or Elves— She had to know she was fully free to choose.

"Some Dwarrow wear multiple colors combined; others have favored shades chosen by ourselves or by our parents, for the love of how we set together, hair, skin, eyes, gemstones..." He looked from her dress to her.

And stopped cold, stilled, his heart racing against her upset features, her displeasure coming off in waves as her eyes sought every angle of escape along the paths around them. She couldn't hear this. She wouldn't—Didn't need these words. It wasn't working. She did not want to know. What was he thinking?

She wanted to run.

From him.

Because he never knew the right thing to say. It was best to say nothing.

His gaze dropped to her hands, and he wished himself still as one of these gray Elven statues,
wishing for a fraction of their hardness. *What was he thinking?* Had he entirely lost his mind in this City of Elves and Crashing Water? Her hands were gripping one over the other, her fingers twisting the long golden ring she wore on her small finger. His eyes settled upon it, focusing on it, wishing to let her go. He knew. It was well past time for leaving, but still he resisted.

After a while his heart slowed, and he realized she had not left. She still stood there, he had no idea why. He kept his eye on the ring, waiting for her to move off, it would happen any second, and then he could catch his breath and make his way. Fool Dwarf.

He needed to pack.

Yet still she stood there, and his eyes rested in the worn gold of her ring, and he thought nothing, as it was better than anything else. Then she stopped turning it. He was sure she would go when she lifted her arm to him, brining the ring closer for him to see. "My Dad gave it to me for my birthday."

Her 'Adad— He had good taste, he thought, watching her thumb stretch over the underside of it, imagining how that would feel over— *Stop. This is no use.*

"It used to fit on my index finger back then."

He focused again on the ring, and her voice, slowing and calming.

"But took up nearly all the space up to my first knuckle. My mother thought he was nuts for giving it to me…"

—*Her 'Amad’s jesting banter calmed her even from afar—*

"What does an eight-year-old need with a ring like that?"

*She knew: to hold until now, to recall her words, because her Nathith would need her now, while she was lost.*

"But he said he had to get it for me as soon as he saw it…"

—Your 'Adad loves you still. Neither knows what has befallen, if you are well, or—

"…that I was meant to have it."

—lost, like my own 'Adad. I wish I knew—

"I love it."

His eyes stayed fixed on the ring, as grounding. That is a precious metal, to be in your possession, cherished so.

"Always made me feel fancy and gown up as a little girl."

*Asti. Their pride beyond measure.*

"And now it reminds me that my Dad loves me. And my Mom."

*How could they not?* He stepped back to the rail, to look at her whole, a flame in the garden to waken his blood. *Even he—*

"Because if she didn't really want me to have it my Dad never would have bought…"
Fire take you, Son of Durin! He could not forget the Dragon. This was folly and almost goodbye; why did he think these things, and when would it stop?

She had stopped. She stared at him staring at her, and the color crept up her neck, slower than before, but clear as sparkling water at midday. What had he done, he wondered? Could she read his thoughts? Feel for what he craved?

"I'm sorry…"

Sorry? No—

"I'm rambling…"

Your voice. Don't stop.

"I must be boring you." No. "I'm … sorry."

"Bored?" Impossible. "No, Thief." Go easy, say little. "I rather enjoy your tales."

"Oh." She blinked in surprise, leaving Thorin to wonder why. And did she not know what she did to him, just by blinking?

Unwilling to call it a night, he mustered nerve to venture a question, a safe one. "May I examine the ring?" He could barely find his voice. What was he still doing here?

After the briefest consideration, a shy smile appeared at the edge of her lips, and she set her fingers around the ring and twisted back and forth until she had it off. There she held it a moment, looking at it oddly, almost as though she would ask a question. Instead she placed it in his hesitant hand as he'd waited, unsure whether his request had crossed some line.

The gold was soft; a fine pure grade. He could feel her warmth in it, still lingering. There was a script, or runes, he let his fingers pass over them. "What runes are these?" he asked, his curiosity won over.

"It's a script for a language my mother's side of the family speaks, called Hindi."

—Hindi, from Hindu tradition... It was angular, strong and lovely all at once.

"And their meaning?" He was betting on Song, quite sure she'd never spent a day of her life without it—

"Gold."

What? He looked at her, caught by his surprise. Was she joking? She smiled—O Mahal that smile; but there was no jest in it. "Your father gifted you a gold ring—engraved with the word gold upon it?"

Her eyes agreed as she almost burst from laughing, somehow holding it in as her eyes dropped to his lips—she looked almost dreamy there, as if... No.

Stop the nonsense. There was something more to this. He studied her, returning her ring, coming to a second guess as he let it go. "How do you say gold in Hindi?"

He didn't think it possible, but her face beamed all the more. "Sona."

Sona—
"The Hindi word for gold is Sona."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This is the Hindi Script on Sona's ring: ■■■■
"Of course it is." He laughed. How warm. How utterly priceless. He looked into her eyes, wishing he could hold her there. "Of course your name means gold."

She looked away, as if her eyes betrayed her, but from what? And then she began to fidget, working the hand with the ring into her robe pocket, as if she would hide it. Why hide it, after sharing? *Have I done something wrong?*

But he would not ask that. He only waited, postponing what he knew was next.

"Oh!" she cried, pulling his hanky out of the pocket her hand had tried hiding in. "I meant to give this to you before, and well…” She scowled at it. "I'm sorry… I should have taken better care of it."

Careful not to touch her hand, he quickly accepted the handkerchief, still warm from contact to her body. He imagined it pressed against the hidden folds of her pocket, so near—*It was time to go.* "It is fine. It has seen far worse, believe me."

"Even so…” she mumbled a word he could not make out.

He looked to her, touched by her voice, a foreign lilt to it. "Pardon?"

"Thun'yuh Vod," she repeated, or at least that's what he thought she said. Her foot traced the landing; he saw it in his periphery, the delicate arch curved in his direction, and he recalled the feel of her skin… *no, what he imagined—that was a dream.*

"Thun'yuh Vod," he said after her, slowly, exaggerating the sounds.

Âkmînruk zu. *Thank you.* She now taught him to say this in Hindi…

"Perfect!" Her eyes were fixed on his lips.

*On my lips? Do you know I want to kiss yours? Mahal! Rid me this tiresome wishful thinking!* He sucked in air, convincing himself she was just watching him speak.

"I suspect you have a gift for languages."

"A gift? *You think this after my blunder tonight? No…* "I have no gift." He failed every time he tried to speak with her… It is best when he said nothing… or asked about … what he hoped were safe topics.

"Who did the embroidery on your handkerchief?"

*Did she really want to know?* A spark of thrill warmed him. Could not hurt to tell: "Fili and Kili's mother. She packs it with provisions whenever I travel, to carry a part of her with me, as she says…” He laughed, folding it slowly, seeing his Sister's face, remembering her smile when he unwrapped it the first time, how proud she was of the stitching; so meticulous, and embroidery was not her favored craft. She'd laughed later, telling how she had formidable instruction from Dori on the various stitches, with the warning she best do well so as not to shame her teacher. "She embroidered it long ago, a Durin's Day gift."

"What's Durin's—"

"Of course I was going to tell you." It was Tharkûn. His voice cut in from below them a short
distance away, stopping their conversation like a cold front seeping into the fragile warmth of an early spring; what had she wanted to know?

"I was waiting for this very chance." The Wizard walked with Lord Elrond on a lower crossing of the gardens. "And really, I think you could trust that I know what I am doing."

"Do you?" Lord Elrond asked, or rather demanded. "That Dragon has slept for sixty years."

Thorin glared at the Elf. And you speak now because Smaug sleeps? Elves paid no mind when he blew fire through the lives of Men and Dwarves, laying waste, leaving us homeless, wandering...

Better to look at the Thief. From the side Thorin saw her smile about the Dragon? But then her eyes went big and her mouth opened, the one he wanted to kiss—

Stop it! Just then his heart took a jolt, seeing the fear bloom in her eyes. But he wondered, hadn't she read about Smaug in her 'books'? If then, why this sudden surprise? Was this something she'd forgotten?

"What will happen if your plan should fail?" Lord Elrond continued, speaking as though he knew for certain they would. "If you wake that Beast…" His warning could be felt as the slightest vibration filling the air of the valley. Was he throwing his voice? What were these powers of Elves?

"But if we succeed," Tharkûn argued, un-swayed by any warning. "If the Dwarves take back the mountain, our defenses in the East will be strengthened!"

Aye, because Tharkûn feared something beyond the measure of their Quest, something relating to the matter of Dol Guldur, and the Necromancer. Thorin recalled the rumors Nori and Dwalin had brought back from recent travels through Rohan, in addition to words from travelers on the borders of Fangorn… There was a magician casting dark spells in the south of the Greenwood, now Mirkwood…

"It is a dangerous move, Gandalf."

The Thief followed them with her eyes as they moved down the path, to the point of leaning her body well over the ledge, toward the ones she thought could save her. He saw hope in her strong posture, in the longing sureness of her gaze toward them. And they couldn't even agree, these two she thought so wise and powerful. A twinge of sadness curled through him, that she no longer asked him for help, not once since that second night they met, where he had knocked her over.

"It is also dangerous to do nothing or the cut the throne of Erebor."

My Kingdom. 'Adadê. The Home of our People.

"It is Thorin's birthright. What is it you fear?" The Wizard almost pleaded the question, clearly frustrated by his momentary lack of power.

Thorin's heart raced now, because, blast the mineshaft, this had wandered into the personal, and he didn't know where this conversation could lead, but it couldn't be good with Lord Elrond there, naysaying everything...

His gaze strayed back to the Thief as she nodded adamantly in agreement to Tharkûn, staring with bright eyes at the Wizard. Thorin felt and inexplicable elation he was certain was founded on sand.

"Have you forgotten?" Lord Elrond nearly spat the barb. "A strain of madness runs deep in that family."
Thorin couldn't breathe, he stood transfixed, somehow stunned Lord Elrond would mention that. But then again, why would he not? But then her face... her face: disapproval skid over her features in the direction of the Elf. She made no move to look Thorin's way, and in this moment he was glad for it.

"His Grandfather lost his mind; his Father succumbed to the same sickness."

Just like an Elf. Thráin is lost, and you—you would speak of him poorly, for all to hear. And I had begun to think—"Can you swear Thorin Oakenshield—"

Why does he use my Honor name, when clearly he ascribes it no meaning? There was nothing solid from which to blunt the blow...no weapon he could smash against.

"...will not also fall?"

—will not also fall.

Will. Not. Also. Fall.

I will fall.

I am no better than Thrór, far less; Thrór was great, and strong, and wise, and Thrór built kingdoms... And Thráin, he had ruled with dignity and strength, until...

"Gandalf, these decisions do not rest with us alone." And now the Elf was beseeching in his tone.

Thorin recalled the White One he'd seen before, and wondered where he waited, vaguely reminded of the Wizard's cold stare boring into his numb heart. Surely he had an opinion.

And where was his 'Adad, and how could he have abandoned his search? Tharkûn. He had felt hope in the Wizard's persuasive words back at Bree. But is all in vain, forecast to fail... because even if he should succeed, eventually he would go mad with this sickness, and all would be lost in the end.

Sona—

Gold.

—The Thief had heard all that. All true... what was the use of his feeling?

"It is not up to you or me to redraw the map of Middle-earth..." Lord Elrond continued as they moved on.

Looking from her, he let his gaze fall to the back of the Elf Lord disappearing from sight behind the trailing bushes. Leave it to Elves to think so; Elves leave everything to chance. Elves do nothing in the face of evil.

Time to leave. He had already backed off from the ledge. The part of him that could feel only ached and burned, but this was enough. Departure was long overdue.

The Thief's face still followed where the others had gone. He dared not think what she thought; it was a waste—

And then she shifted, leaning back from the ledge, and he thought she might turn.

That he could not face, so he willed his feet to move, eyes unsure of the way with an added haze about them vying for release. What did it matter, beyond his foolish dreams? She did not care for him overly, beyond cordial affection, and here he was— why wouldn't his feet move? He found his nerve
and began to quietly exit.

"My mother's bi-polar."

Bi-polar? What? He stopped, still leaning toward his path away.

"So's my sister."

Sister is…? What had she said? She looked out over the gardens, not at him, but he could see her head tilted, listening for his step as though she hoped to catch something. What could she possibly want with him? But she spoke of her family. There must be a reason she brought them up now? Perhaps something to do with what she just heard—but that, no, he didn't want to think of it. Through the ache in his heart, he wanted to hear what she would say of her family.

She grasped the banister. Was she looking for grounding? He took a step back toward her, moved, unsure.

"It's a type of mental disorder."

Mental—

"Often hereditary. But not always."

He could see her spine tense, and he recognized the reluctance buried within her words. What was she trying to say? His Grandfather. His Father. Himself. It stilled him though the ache felt worse, because he knew this, and he could never speak it aloud.

"I grew up wondering if I would be too."

Her shoulder turned up and he—

"Sometimes I still wonder."

Ah Thief—

—Sona, nothing could mar your shine. The breeze caught her hair and lifted strands in the air about her, lavender and warmth, a gold flame in the night.

"And the thing is, having a mental disorder doesn't make people bad or weak… they're just ill."

And this is different how? He wondered this now, with Lord Elrond's words still sounding echoes in his mind, fully aware the world held them weak for their failing.

"And, in many cases, like with my Mom and Sister, they can take a medication for it."

Medication…? He wished she would explain it, even if he didn't understand, feeling comfort in the sounding of her voice near him, filling the air with her calm.

He took the space beside her, full of hesitation in his gut. What was he still doing here?

"If you break a leg, wouldn't you put a cast on it?"

A cast? Óin would see it set and secured in splints while it healed…

"Mental illness is no different."
Madness. There is no bone to set, nothing to secure… how then?

And… he wondered… was this her way to let him know he was not alone?

"Do I hope I'll escape their fate?"

Escape fate? Who can escape fate?

He couldn't help it; he looked at her sidelong. Surely she would escape.

"Well, yeah. Of course I do. I'm only human."

Asti— Her lip, she chewed it again, all worked up with worry…

And then she was looking at him sidelong and all he wanted was to sink in that gaze. She was open, there were glints of recognition mingled with hope, understanding, determination... Thorin breathed out, marginally relaxed, unsure why.

"I refuse to let the fear of what may happen… what could happen… control me, my decisions, or stop me from making plans for the future."

Of course you do. But why tell me this? I cannot ask it—

You wish to excuse how I feel? By your sweet grace? If only. This is horrid, this fear— He mustered his voice from the depths of his aching, longing to touch her in a sacred space. "Thun'yuh'vod."

She moved closer, filling the gap.

And Thorin was moved by her care, her acceptance, and this seemingly unflinching good judgment of him, how had he deserved it?

And for a while it was as if they hung there, waiting for the next breath. No one said anything. But then… Her hand… Oh Mahal, she brought it flush to his. She was touching him of her own volition, and it felt like a key note chiming clear to his soul.

He froze there. His mind actually could not think, staring at their touching skin.

And next thing he knew, she wound her small finger, the one with the gold ring, 'Sona', over his own. All he could do was gape now at those hands, Sona's and his, linked by small fingers, feeling the heat there, feeling it spread. What did she mean by this?

They stood and he waited, and no answer came, so he sank into the feeling, accepting it, resting in it, Mahal willing he would never forget it.

"Lady Sona, there is someone who would speak with you."

The Thief and Thorin shifted toward each other, Thorin's ire lit by someone having snuck upon him unawares. Her hand was gone. With a heart full of racing, Thorin quietly removed his own from the banister. He set his stone face and turned toward the intruder, the pinch-faced Lindir shuffling uncomfortably before them. Why now? There was nothing so cold as an unwanted Elf.

The Thief remained startled, looking as though they had been caught swimming naked in the fountains. Thorin would have laughed if it had not hurt so much, the simple loss of her finger touching his. His thumb traced the memory of it.

"I'm sorry, who did you say wanted to speak with me?"
The Elf never said... as per usual. *Elves.*

*This one looked guilty, as well he was...* He awkwardly shuffled and stood, all twitching, and Thorin was through.

"Is it Lord Elrond?" Sona asked, frustration clipping her words. "Because he's been avoiding me for days, and I really need to talk to him about my, uh, travel issue."

*Will they help you? Can they?* Again that pang moved Thorin—*I would, if only*— but it was useless.

*I wish you well, Gold Song.* The night was over. *May you find your way home.*

Thorin was down the path, decided. There was no more time to waste among Elves.

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A/N: The Hindi script on Sona's ring: ■ ■ ■ ■
"We need to go tonight—within the hour. Is everyone packed?" Thorin flung his bag near the doorways of the common room where he found Balin.

"Aye. We have not heard back from Tharkûn…" His Friend drew his head up and motioned to the sofa chair across from his recliner in front of the fire.

"We do not wait for the Wizard."

Balin's eyebrows flew to his hairline as he pulled his pipe from his lips, and he seemed to puff with questions Thorin had no time to let him ask. "You changed your mind, then, laddie?"

"He's said he will follow," Thorin went on, ignoring the question. "Not that we need his leave."

"But what moves you to rush?" He offered his pouch. Balin's tobacco was a fine leaf, though Thorin did not reach for his own pipe.

"Tell me the laws of our People on the matter of Binumrâl." Thorin knew them just as well as Balin, but this had to be stated.

Balin looked as though he were about to pass horrendous gas. But then he shook his head and shrugged before leaning back and creasing his brow, considering. "A marriage binding two can only be unbound when both of the union grant permission," Balin glanced at him sidelong, pausing. Thorin could feel the gaze but he did not return it. He waited for more answer.

"Now that's a rare thing indeed, you and I both know," he went on, hesitation edging his words, "as most wed their Ones and would never consider breaking bond. But there are those exceptions, happening occasionally in certain family lines at risk of extinction, where unions must be established among those who are not Ones in order to secure survival." Balin stopped, staring beyond him, and Thorin knew he thought of his Grandparents. Then a flash of smile overtook him. "Dwarflings," Balin chuckled, sparing a quick glance at Thorin before resettling into his advisor's mask. "These unions could only be dissolved when both agreed, and only then could one of them ever consider future marriage, even should they meet their One."

Balin stopped at the threshold of the matter. Thorin knew his Friend would consider it finished unless Thorin pressed, perhaps only to spread his discomfort more equally between the two of them. Thorin felt his Advisor's gaze once more, boring like a water drill, waiting in his own stubborn way.

It would have been amusing under less personal concerns. Thorin ignored Balin's expression and demanded more bluntly, "And when one of a wedded union should die, leaving Binumrâl, Balin. Say what our laws require then."

Balin fidgeted with reloading his pipe as he frowned harder over the answer, slightly miffed at having been so put to task. Then he sighed, and smiled wanly. "No calling. No courting. The union cannot be dissolved, because there is one missing to grant permission. Yet sometimes, when one of a bond should die, the living could meet their One. Binumrâl, with power to grant permission, will find
their own way. The way to remarriage is seldom chosen; only those in the union can grant both permission from themselves and from their wedded one beyond the veil to Itendûm, to call the marriage passed, so that, in the rarest of rare cases, Binumrâl may remarry. That is all I recall."

Thorin did not hesitate. "That is why I must leave."

"Sorry, Thorin, I do not follow." Balin stared at him, stubborn in his refusal to think between unspoken facts. "And the Elves have been kind enough."

Thorin thought of Lord Elrond's words to Tharkûn concerning his family curse, concerning himself. Could he be trusted not to fall, not to fail his people?

No.

Even he did not know. "The Elves let us stay because they do not want us on this Quest, Balin. They do not want me near that Mountain."

"But why?"

Thorin shot him a look. "You know well why." Everyone knew.

Thorin took the sofa spot across from Balin's, resting his elbows on his knees. He thought of Sona's words. Bi-polar? He shook his head, no idea what that was. But she was not appalled by his family's curse, she did not stiffen or flinch away in judgment, but rather told him of her own mother's illness, and her sister's. A woman from a far off world: she knew his feeling, telling him she had her own, very near the same. She touched his soul, and then... him, and it was hot. He drew his hand to his face, to lean into it, recalling her gold-ringed finger over his, delicately encircled in beautifully crafted Sona in the gold. He pressed his little finger hard against his lips, so hard he could feel the teeth. Surprised, he pulled his hand away into a fist. He knew he should move, but could not even breathe, just like that moment she touched him. What in Mahal's name? For a woman of Men?

Whatever this was, he did not want it.

"What of Sona?" Balin asked, and Thorin had to wonder if Balin were learning mind-reading skills from the Elves.

"What?" Thorin responded, stone mask firmly set.

Balin stared a moment before replying. "Will she come with Tharkûn?"

Thorin shook his head and shrugged, hoping just this once for an easy answer.

"You want her to come?" His Advisor asked, his face full of welcome curiosity, with knowledge and expectation bubbling up. Clearly he refused to connect the matter to Thorin's concern for Dwarven Laws...

"It may be better if she not."

"Why?"

Was Balin being purposefully dense?

"Aside from the aforementioned, Balin," Thorin directed one of his more pointed glares his Advisor's way. He thought of all the other reasons he no longer wished to hang onto, and started to list them. "She's a Thief." She stole my... no; I have not yet given it. "She argues everything—"
"I don't consider those faults, Thorin," Balin interrupted him smugly. "We needed a Burglar, we could employ a Thief, and you've never needed someone to constantly agree with you in any circumstance, or have you changed since we've spent time with Elves?"

Thorin glared briefly at Balin before continuing his futile point— "She argues for the rights of savage Trolls to eat us. Is this useful, and if so, how, Balin?"

Balin cocked his head toward him. "She saved us from said Trolls, truth be told, ladde."

"She cannot defend herself! Not even when the largest Warg imaginable leaps onto her!"

"That's where you come in." And with that Balin's smile took over his whole face. "What's your argument now?"

"Have you heard nothing?" Thorin shot back, entirely frustrated.

Balin shrugged, accepting Thorin's ire as his smile went sad.

And Thorin regretted, feeling himself shake deep within. How could he explain it? "I— She— There is a pull," Thorin could barely hear his breath come out at the words. "I don't know these feelings. I do not welcome them. It is not like others before— no mere attraction, however affectionate and altogether welcome. No, but this…" Thorin inhaled, as if he could grip it. "…this is beyond all that. And I have no time but for this Quest, nothing to offer but service to my people, to the Lonely Mountain."

Balin's eyes only seemed to grow wider. "Is she yours? Mabujba— Have you chosen?"

"How do you even ask that, Balin? She is of Men."

Balin merely shrugged, his knowing smirk growing all the more visible as the seconds passed. "But you haven't answered, ladde. Have you chosen?"

"I—don't know." He could tell from looking at Balin just what it was he wished, but Thorin doubted any of it possible, and he wondered at the mind of his Advisor, where it had wandered off to? "But no, I have made no decision."

Balin's eyes relaxed fractionally.

"And so, as yet… will it be forever?" Thorin wondered out loud, turning his eyes toward the fire. "This pull."

"I do not know this pull, Thorin; I have never felt it." Balin's blinked a few times, smiled and shrugged. "Can't say I miss anything, eh?"

"There is a gap in the knowledge. Books have never answered these questions, and for this blasted subject I never felt the need to pay attention." Thorin stared at his wisest Friend intently, as if his eyes could burn the smile off his face. "Is she the One whether I choose her or not? Or, if I choose her not, now or ever, is that then Nê mabujba, or may I one day meet another and feel pulled again, or is there only one where this can happen to a Dwarf, and thus why the bond is called One? And thus the choice is this One or be alone always?" Why was he saying all this? To Balin? He clasped his hands over his forearms and squeezed, as if to close himself.

Balin only watched him, his face gone almost serious. He had no answer.

"She is Binumral. She finds her own way after her husband's passing."
"May not be the same with people of Men." Balin nodded, eyes still unsure.

"And there's that! People of Men. They are not restricted to One. So, Mahal strike it! Why this? Why do I feel it? Isn't that where it matters? How can I choose this One? And with Binumrâl I can do nothing until—" Thorin raked a hand through his hair, fully stopped at the notion. "She is not a Dwarf, Balin. I feel lost, and not in the way I am used to."

"If you regain your Kingdom, Thorin, you can clarify your own thoughts on this matter, and make your way. No one will question you. It is private, after all. The line is secured with your Sister's Sons."

"I can clarify nothing until she grants twofold permission, her own and Binumrâl." Thorin stared at the flagstones before the fireplace, watching the lights reflecting off the metal of his boot-caps. "Besides, she does not know these things. And even should she, what makes you think she would ever have me?" Thorin asked the question with his own clear answer— This was not possible.

"It is not for me to say," Balin said quickly. "But she might." And there his eyes sparked the smile back on his face. "And if she does, well then. It is up to you."

"There would surely be objections." This was his least concern, beyond reach.

"At least one in your Council would not. I could persuade the others, or at least most of them."

"Enough." Thorin pressed his hands over his temples and rubbed deep. "We leave within the hour, and I am sure that will settle it."

Balin watched him rise, his face losing its ease. "Thorin."

"Gather the others."

"As you will." Balin stared down at his pipe and frowned, and Thorin wondered if it was from the order or the fact that the pipe leaf was not yet consumed. After packing his smoke satchel, he shuffled out to assemble the Company.

Thorin sank deeper into the cushioned sofa and began to fill his pipe.

"I overheard you talking about Ones," Fíli said, stepping up to the mantle pipe in hand, pulling out his pouch, smiling happy.

"And the rest of it," Thorin muttered, swallowing his embarrassment.

"What rest?" Fíli asked, brows bent in a frown like a cloud over a sun filled day.


Lord Elrond's words echoed; the sickness was in their blood, and it hurt just to look at Fíli, thinking one day he may fall to it also. Thorin ran his thumb over his small finger, the one Sona had touched, and kept his eyes on his Sister's Son, determined not to answer. Perhaps, if he held strong and managed to escape it, then the stain of madness marring the family line could be washed clean and Fíli kept safe. But though Thorin wished with all his heart to be true, he did not know if he would fall the way of his fathers before him.

Fíli stared at him a brief moment before he realized Thorin wasn't about to answer, and then his
frown cleared. "Never mind what Elves think, or some dusty laws. What about Ones, N'adad? You asked Balin, but Balin doesn't know about them."

Thorin suppressed a smile. Perhaps Fíli was missing Danîe. He glanced to the pipe he was smoking, suddenly warming to Fíli's offer: the opportunity to learn stood right before him in the form of his eldest Sister's Son. "Inûdoy, I have these… feelings. *And a dream. No need to mention that. He has no idea.*

Fíli waited, staring, smirking, no help at all. And the silence lengthened. Finally his Sister's Son took a breath and leaned in, eyes sparking. "Tell me, what feelings?"

"Did you—" Thorin stopped, not quite sure how to phrase the question. "There is a pull, like a magnet— I was talking to Balin, but he—"

"Yes," Fíli nodded, cutting him off with understanding.

"Have you always felt it? Or did it just come one day?"

"She's yours, isn't she?" Fíli asked, one eye cocked, his face gentle.

"I was asking about the pull," Thorin angled his head away, glaring slightly, not about to name any names, obvious or otherwise.

"Yes," Fíli nodded, looking serious but at the same time smiling more. "I'd say always, but I didn't define it until I met Danîe, and it was not right away that I drew the connection between the two."

Thorin nodded, looking away, following the flagstones down the hall past where he could see. "I have not—"

"Not everyone notices before they meet, N'adad. Bombur—"

"She— She is not from Middle-earth, Fíli."

Fíli nodded slowly, his eyes gazing slowly over the room as he withdrew in thought. And then suddenly those eyes were back on Thorin's. "That explains much. When did she tell you?"

Thorin looked away, embarrassed yet again. "She didn't. She told the Wizard back when I… declined her aid after we first met. I overheard it, and engaged in their conversation. It was not helpful."

Fíli bit his lower lip, creased in more thought. "But she is well over that, N'adad, surely you can see it."

"No. I don't see it," the bitterness took hold of his voice and he forced himself to ease up. "I see a wondrous shining person who would be kind to anyone she's met, including one clumsy short-tempered Dwarf."

At that Fíli snorted. "She's seeing through your rough exterior."

Thorin laughed, not a happy laugh, but it was release.

"So, tell me what happened, when you first felt the change," Fíli continued, always drawn back to the heart of the matter.

"She passed a barrier somehow that leads to her world, where there is a place she calls Home. Kaleforn'ya."
Fíli nodded. "She sang about it."

"Aye." Thorin recalled the song of Kaleforn'ya Dreaming, and his lips turned slightly up. "I felt it in a bank of fog as I was lost on the outskirts of the Shire, near two weeks before we met at Bag End. When she passed, that is when it started, this pull."

"Juzrazur. Pull, N'adad. That is its name."

Of course, he had known it… He hadn't wanted to name it… for that would be admitting it.

"Ones share it."

Thorin's head whipped back toward Fíli. "Share?" He felt his heart sink. *She doesn't*. His head shook, marginally slower than his insides. *She can't."

"Many things are shared."

His eyes startled back into his Sister's Son's. "Among Dwarves," he stated, unable to keep the question from his voice, unable to hide the horror blooming in his gut, that he was miscast; that he would never be able to share something he never knew he missed, but now would rather not live without.

"And who said only?" Fíli asked, his jaw pointed in challenge. This one never missed a beat.

"How often shall I repeat in one night that she is not a Dwarf?" Thorin shook his head, his attempt at suppressing his irritation only marginally successful.

"These things are not entirely unknown, N'adad. I have read some books." His Sister's Son smirked.

"She has a Home she wants to go back to," Thorin reminded, bowing his head in all seriousness, his eyes wide and open as if that could gentle the beating of his heart. He did not want her to go, and here he was, leaving—

*And what of that dream?*

Fíli's head sank slightly, but the light in his eyes remained, smiling like only the young could do. "So she says now."

Juzrazur'ē, his Juzrazur; his Pull. He had always thought he would have no One, because he had never felt what some with Ones said they were born knowing. To suddenly feel Juzrazar, and know it was for nothing? *How, Mahal? How could this be?*

"Do you refuse? You haven't—?" Fíli asked, the fire reflected back at him from his Durin's eyes.

*Could he? Could he not?* None of it made sense. "We are leaving." Thorin stared at Fíli as his body stiffened ever so slightly. "Once Balin has gathered the others."

Fíli's hand shot out and caught his arm. "You deny your One?"

"No, Inûdoy, I do not think so. But, I do have a choice. I can choose no."

"Nê Mabujba." Fíli shifted in discomfort, his glanced down at the tiles and furrowed his brows. "So it says in books we have been taught, though it is rarely done."

"Aye, and so then I can…" Thorin stuttered on his thought. "Perhaps I could choose later."
"Do you mean for Sona?" Now Fíli looked worried, the alternative weighing in his shoulders and his eyes.

Thorin put his hand over his Sister's Son's. "I move on, and leave choosing to take care of itself. A Mountain with a Dragon wait for me." Thorin looked away and removed his hand, unwilling to see the emotion Fíli strove so hard to hide.

"You say that every time, N'adad." Fíli stepped back from the mantle. "There is room in this life for you beyond your duty, room for you to live within it as yourself. Just you as a Dwarf. Why else would Mahal gift you Juzrazur?"

Why else?

Thorin suppressed the bitter laugh he felt. He looked up, but Fíli was already headed down the flagstones toward their quarters, likely to rouse Kíli and gather their packs.

Moments later Nori stepped quietly into the hall. "There is news, Thorin."

Thorin nodded, assuming it concerned his decision to move out. "Are you packed?"

Nori assented once as he glanced back toward the door, and Thorin wasn't sure if it was to check his bag there, or to see if anyone listened. "There's a Council going on."

"What?"

Nori nodded again, still watching the door. "You should be there."

"I wasn't invited." Thorin felt the bitterness from before as the words slipped past. But he was not surprised. Nori turned to him with a scowl to match his inner rancor. "What do you know, Nori? Who is at the Council?"

"Only the most important folk of Middle-earth. Aside from the ones we know, Tharkûn and Lord Elrond, there is the Elf Witch and the White Wizard, and some incredibly tall Blonde Elf with searing eyes."

"Thranduil?" Thorin asked, the acid rising.

"No, no, bollocks no, far more beautiful and yellow-gold ancient than the Woodland Rat King, this one is. Glorfindel they called him."

"This is no jest?" Thorin asked, incredulous; the one who'd slain a Balrog and lived to tell it?

Nori shook his head, feigning innocent eyes. "They cannot be making decisions about us when you aren't there to speak our mind."

But Thorin signed no. "I know better than to expect they will not try."

Just then Dwalin bound into the room. "What's this about, Thorin?" he groused, glancing at Nori with a silent nod of greeting. "Why are we leaving in the middle of the night?"

"Our host has gathered a Council, it is taking place now, Nori just informed me." Thorin paced slowly in front of the fire. "As you can see, I am not at it, even when it is most likely we are one topic they intend to address, among others."
Dwalin stared at Nori, who stood on the edges of the firelight staring back at the Warrior. "How do you always learn these things?"

Nori shrugged, smiling like a brawler who knows which way the fists will fly.

Raising a brow in quiet admiration, Dwalin turned back to Thorin. "So this is why you would leave now?"

"I would leave before this Council forces a decision upon us I had no part in making."

Just then the rest of the Company filed into the room, each with their packs on their shoulders. The most of them looked tired from waking. Kili glowered and scowled blades of burning ire straight his way, hair tussled more than usual as though he mussed it on purpose when he rose. Fili stood right beside him, a knowing look resting there. None of the others appeared remotely pleased, their expressions ranging from glares to blank stares. Clearly they blamed him, each and every one. *For what, in Durin's name?*

"So we are ready," Thorin started—

"We are not all here," Dwalin groused, interrupting.

The Company fell to silence waiting on Thorin's word.

"Dwalin, I count thirteen," Thorin muttered, suddenly tired beyond measure.

"We can't leave the Whatsafist behind." Dwalin's frowning ability nearly surpassed his own, Thorin was sure of it.

"Pacifist," Thorin repeated before he could think, hearing the lack of her voice rejoining. *How could he leave?* "One not signed to the Company."

"What does that matter?" Dwalin asked through his teeth.

Thorin shot him a glare. "What are we to do with the Thief, Dwalin? She needs help to get home. We do not even have our own." Thorin's eyes gentled fractionally, so he dug in deeper. "We cannot help her, now can we?"

"Well what if—"

But Thorin cut Dwalin off with a raised hand. "Likewise, though she may wish it, she cannot help us on our way. By coming she would draw danger to herself. I cannot have it. I will not."

"She's never drawn the danger." Dwalin's eyes stared holes clear through him. "We found the Trolls on our own, remember? And in that instance she helped fine, putting the bastard Trolls to sleep." Dwalin bit his mouth shut, coughing, surely cutting off the rest of it, that she then proceeded to wake the Trolls to save them from Dwalin's axes… "And besides all that, Tharkûn said we could use a Burglar," he reasoned, repeating Balin's thoughts, sounding as though his Brother schooled him on what to say. "That's almost like a Thief once we get the door open."

"She does not want to come," Thorin said quietly.

"Tell me you asked her."

Thorin's head jerked up as he glared at his friend. "You dare ask me that?"

"If you know she will not come you must have asked." Dwalin's angered smirk was growing, just as
a warning spark shined from his eyes. And then he signed, 'You're breaking rules, asking.'

"I didn't ask, blast it!"

"Then you cannot know what she wants!"

"Shut it, Dwalin." Thorin stepped up, glaring equally fierce. And with that he shoved past, grabbed his pack just as Fíli grabbed his arm, stopping him briefly with the saddest look, though his lips were smiling, and Thorin couldn't figure out what that meant. It was a kettle of trouble and joy, his Sister's Son's face, as though he knew something no one else did and found it powerful and blessed. But no, he wasn't alone. Glóin stood behind him with a similar face, and beyond his cousin's shoulder stood Bombur. Bombur? They all looked at him that way…

"You can't run." Fíli said simply.

They all had Ones…

Well. Thorin did not. He had not chosen. He would not. Now now.

Maybe not ever. Thorin bowed his head toward the door. "I will leave. We all leave. Now." And he walked out, hoping he was heading the way toward the hidden pass, hoping they followed, not sure of either, too tired to look. But then he saw Fíli's boots step in beside him, keeping his pace just a bit to the back of him. "I'm here, N'adad. All will be well." It was the voice he used with Kíli when Kíli was scared. Thorin's gut turned, hearing it. Was he scared? He shook his head and kept moving.

"Take the path to the left up ahead," Fíli whispered, his voice sure, though grief lacing the edges. "It leads to the steps…"

The Company neared the final bridge when, turning the corner, Thorin spotted Lady Arwen on the arch opposite, joined to the path they crossed over. She stood with another Elf, extraordinarily tall, golden blonde and ancient in his shining aura, but Thorin could pay him no mind, not with the harrowing look coming at him from the Lady Arwen, as though she measured his strength and found it lacking. But then she blinked, and a level of grace eased the hardness Thorin felt within her. 'Go then,'—She was in his head—'see if you can outrun her.'

Outrun her? What makes you think she would—

At that she smiled and turned away to say something to the tall blonde Elf at her side, who turned laughing, a piercing look, but the smile true and friendly, and overly full of mischief.

Elves.

Thorin kept on.

And they headed out of Imladris the way they'd come in weeks before, with the sounds of the crashing falls heard from near and far surrounded them like an ushering to the exit; the falling sprays a constant beat through the Elven City, a vibration Thorin felt to his bones. He wondered if he would miss it. The the water grew louder as they passed up the valley the paths. This time there were no Orcs giving chase, not yet anyway. But it was all the same to Thorin; he was still running, though his steps were all the heavier for the one he left behind.
A/N #1: Thank you everyone for the comments and kudos! I appreciate them greatly! Glad to have you along!

A/N #2: Time to announce a brief intermission: I will be off posting for the next four weeks, with real life requirements calling for a break. I hope you all come find me when I'm back first Thursday/Friday in April! Until then, you can follow Sona's story, where many long-anticipated things are finally beginning to happen over in Jenny-Wren28's “On the Road to Find Out.”

A/N #3: I'm in the mood for a game! (The game takes place over at Ff dot net, because there I can PM replies…) Curious about the conversation between Arwen and the Blonde Elf? Let me know in your review (must be at Ff dot net, because of the PM feature) and I'll provide it in a PM.
"Slower than chilled lava up a snow frosted mountain slope, that's our pace, Thorin." Dwalin muttered as they made their way through the hidden passage.

"It wasn't that slow," Thorin grumbled beneath his breath. Well. It wasn't all that fast, either. The way was longer than he remembered, each step so far compared to when they'd come in. The sound of the water had long faded. He did not miss it so much as Sona. He stopped at the entrance, staring at the spot where she had cried, after the Wargs and Orcs, with Sasha at her knees, safe and sound. He almost smiled, sadly, fingering for the hanky now tucked back in his pocket. It felt like ages past.

And this was after having tarried a half hour in the hills above the steps and before the passage, after Bofur had rather jokingly asked why they weren't waiting for Tharkûn, and somehow eased by Bofur's jovial tone, Thorin had come to realize, indeed, maybe leaving so quickly, not to mention unannounced, had been a rather hasty choice.

The time passed on by nearly an hour before Thorin saw the uselessness of it. They were off, and Tharkûn was nowhere to be seen, and they were wasting time—

"Thorin?" Dwalin glared at him with the question he knew he wasn't about to answer.

Thorin looked out into the blue sky above them, met with sounds of bird calls and the wind touching his cheeks, not the howls or cries or Elven horns or hooves of horses galloping, nor the near taste of death, as it had been before, except they had been saved by this entrance…

Someone, Elves most likely, had cleared the fallen Orcs, leaving no trace. He thanked whomever silently, breathing deep the fresh air. It didn't matter that he did not welcome it; at least it didn't smell of death.

He turned to Dwalin with his war mask firmly set, and then he addressed them all: "Be on your guard; we're about to step over the Edge of the Wild."

His insides welled with pent up feeling. There was no room for waiting, and what was he waiting for? Tharkûn would come on his own.

Thorin dared not think how he would feel once that happened, when the Wizard would show, and the Thief would not.

He gave way for his Advisor. "Balin, you know these paths, lead on."

Just as he spoke he heard a sound coming up the path behind them, like faint falling water, nearing them, though they were well past the falls.

Someone approached; they all heard and instinctively drew their weapons just as Thorin made the silent command, each Dwarf arming up double with swords and axes.

Just then the Dog—The Thief's Dog—darted past the corner and under Fili's blades to lick the underside of his Sister's Son's checks. Fili began to giggle at the onslaught of Sasha's tongue upon him.
Behind her came Sona—

Asti!

—nearly running into the clash of weapons his Dwarves held against her, all of them immediately relaxing once they knew it was her.

She looked at those closest to her, the reception of blades in the hands of her friends from before, her face a mixture of shock and joy.

Joy? She was happy...

Thorin froze, watching her watch the others as they looked to him for direction. He breathed in, swelling in his own happiness, taking in a hint of lavender and sage on the breeze. She was here. This relief, it was deep, and suddenly he felt he could move again, but he didn't know what to do, and there they all looked to him for guidance. He wanted to laugh at the irony, but held still instead.

'Now what, Thorin?' Dwalin signed, a smug look on his face.

'Who knows?'

And better yet... What was she doing here?

All of the Dwarves were staring between the two of them, and then she noticed, eyes widening in understanding when she looked at him, and this felt like a hammer to his heart. She was there.

But this felt strange, because why was she nervous? She was chewing her lip, looking at him, growing worried. He pulled his own lip in, and then stopped. Quit, Thorin. He couldn't move, and her eyes only seemed to grow larger.

She came ... she followed! Why did she follow?

Who cares…. She came!

But now what? The Company waited for his word, but not a single one minded the delay, he was sure of it, all of them quite happy at the turn of events. They knew his mouth would catch up with their circumstances soon enough...

No, far worse— She waited, growing more agitated by his dumbfounded silence by each fractional second he delayed. What was he to say? How could he ask her to join them, without asking her to join them? And yet he had to say something.

"Lose someone, Thief?" He partly smiled, glancing back toward Imladris. Aye, that hit the mark. "Wizard's late, but knows the way."

"Wizard's late, but knows the way."

Thorin turned and followed Balin up the path, smiling broader—that was a good word— hoping his attempt at humor would ease her discomfort.

But why?

"Well in that case," Dwalin muttered from behind. "We can go faster than the snail's pace he was keeping us at."

Thorin heard Nori snigger along with his Sister's Sons, but did not look for the reaction. He couldn't trust his face not to show too much.
Thorin kept a hard pace that morning. It helped him think. Or so he hoped.

Was this what Arwen meant when she spoke of a race? And just what exactly did that mean?

Why had she followed?

She had said she wouldn't, and the memory was a cold blade.

Yet here she was. Why?

Had the Elves told her they could not help? Then why was she not with Tharkûn? Surely they had not thrown her out: he took a glance back as she was teaching Bofur a new song, one of her more silly ones, he could tell by all the laughter about them... with Dori in misery, nearly stuffing his ears for silence... No, no. Elves had not thrown her out. She was too happy.

Then what?

She could have waited for Tharkûn.

The Wizard was likely just a day behind them, if that.

Instead she came ahead. Alone. He shuddered to think of her alone out here where the Orcs chased them before, not knowing—

Who would let her out of Imladris without an escort? That was reminiscent of the vilest deeds of Elves... He did not believe these ones capable.

So she left unannounced.

Why?

And Arwen knew she was coming! Arwen...

Arwen knew he couldn't out run her...

She most likely knew he hadn't left the safety of their lands before now...

She had not been wrong.

Blast the Elf.

But—no harm was done.

No. Now he heard her soft vibrating flute of voice singing funny lyrics to Bofur who took the harmony notes and flew with them, the interplay of voices sending the others into fits of laughter, all except for Dori, who muttered and whined for an end to it all as the song circled round and round for a good long while.

Thorin couldn't help but smile, but he kept it forward, down the path they headed, clouds banking on the Misty Mountains to the East, happy he could move, happy she came, by Durin so happy, but why? So confused beyond measure, so determined to keep to himself...

Finally, far later than it should have been, Thorin called for lunch.

He sat on a log off to the side from all of them as they assembled and searched their gear for the nearest bite to eat. He didn't feel hungry, so he pulled out his sharpening satchel instead, and drew
Orcrist just to look at the metal, hoping it would ground him.

What in Mahal's name was he to do? What could he even say to her, now that she was here, after all that?

And why was she here?

That question never stopped.

He hoped perhaps she would say something of her own volition, out of the blue somehow, explaining everything. But that was about as far fetched as wishing the Dragon had vanished.

So, he resorted to what he'd gotten used to in Imladris. He took to a task and waited. Maybe an answer would come with time.

He watched sidelong as he drew his sharpening stone lightly across Orcrist's edge, honing, admiring, holding the vibration.

Dwalin had taken a seat next to the Thief. He then began to give her a thorough once over, checking every thing he might have thought could be amiss, finding nothing. And so he was left with a proud smile of satisfaction, until his eyes settled gloomily on her new Elven cloak. Thorin recognized the upset in his Friend's eyes.

"What happened to the one I gave you?"

Thorin shook his head without moving, already bracing with the knowledge she wouldn't understand the question Dwalin asked, the one not contained in his spoken words.

"Oh!" the Thief exclaimed, stuffing food in her mouth and proceeding to say things no one could understand. But, in the process of all that, she pulled Dwalin's cloak out; it had been folded within her pack, surrounding David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor's vase of ash; Dwalin's face fell, seeing the cloak, but the Thief didn't notice, and clearly she meant no harm or had no aim to injure by returning it. He caught his Friend's eye, 'ease up, she saw it as a loan, not a gift.'

Dwalin nodded, signing assent, but his eyes were still heavy.

The Thief took a second look at the gloom looming large upon Dwalin's cheeks, and partly smiled, partly smirked, "Oh come on, don't be like that. I'd feel forever guilty if I had a cloak and you didn't. Besides," and then she bumped Dwalin on the shoulder as one quite dear to her. Thorin's heart warmed at the obvious show of friendship. "I don't need another one of you guys to start calling me thief."

Thorin would have choked if he'd been drinking.

Dwalin's eyes expanded threefold and he took the coat, no questions.

And suddenly Dwalin smiled, far bigger than his usual, sending a flash of it with a wink Thorin's way. But it did not take the Warrior long to frown over it, that smug one.

Everyone kept busy eating, stealing glances at the Thief when they thought she wouldn't see, wearing happy faces with questioning expressions. Their curiosity mirrored his own, but surely paled...

"I suppose those are the Misty Mountains?" she asked over the sounds of lunch. That voice. And he thought he could leave…
Dwalin grunted "yes."

Thorin settled into the motion of sharpening his blade Orcrist, ready to be traveling on.

"Dwalin?" she asked a moment later, still eating.

"Hmm?" The Warrior was also still eating.

"If it's not taboo—"

Taboo? That is a funny word. He had no idea what it meant...

"— to talk about, what's the Dwarf stance..."

_Dwarf stance?_ Thorin grinned. Whatever it was, she charmed him.

"...on widows and widowers?"

Hard swallow, and Thorin's eyes shot to her face, in profile, lovely profile. She would ask _Dwalin_ that? And Oh Mahal she was licking _honey_ off her fingers.

_He loved honey._

Thorin ripped his gaze off that sight to settle on his Company, many of whom looked at her with their mouths to their boots. All stared between her and Dwalin, each one almost bodily veering away, with Nori looking particularly horrified, perhaps moved by thoughts of his 'Amad. Kíli looked like he wanted to punch the Warrior, which would have been foolish if that were the case, but Thorin knew better: Kíli often appeared on the verge of violence when he was particularly discomforted, like now. Fact was, none of them wanted to stand where Dwalin stood.

_Or answer what Dwalin must. Binumrál._

Dwalin looked to him quickly for answers, his color rising.

'Do your best,' Thorin signed. He had no suggestions and could not intervene.

"Because you all seem to have no qualms about talking to me about just about everything..."

_I wish I could talk to you..."

'I've no idea what to say, Thorin.' Frustration and panic wrestled over Dwalin's face.

'Try starting with One. Explain it.'

'You've got to be joking...'

'I cannot do it.' Thorin held his gaze. 'You know as well as I; it leads to the answer to her question on Binumrál.'

Dwalin gestured toward him ever so slightly. 'Do you want me to tell her you—?'

'No.'

Dwalin faced her.

"...but one mention of David..."
"...or anything he gave me, and you all clam up and treat me like I've got some horrible disease..."

No.

"...or something or... or, no that's now quite right. What I mean is..."

She stared at Dwalin staring at her with his mouth still open.

"That." She grew urgent under the surface, fidgeting some. "What you're doing right now." She waved at him as if the poor panicked Warrior couldn't see her. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. What is the deal? Would you please tell me so that I can at least stop causing awkwardness and stuff? Because if I don't know your beliefs..."

Beliefs, does she mean customs?

"...how can I respect them?"

Dwalin looked back at Thorin like his eyes could bore holes, clawing for guidance, or maybe for permission, and Thorin signed, 'Speak freely, she asked you.'

And then this time Dwalin looked back at the Thief with war mask intact and ready, just as she whipped her head around to see where the Warrior had looked before. Thorin already had his eyes on the blade and the stone, enveloped by the shearing motion of the task at hand. But when she turned again to face the formidable Warrior, Thorin looked up again, just to watch her hair, all mussed and needing attention, slide over her shoulder and back again.

What he wouldn't give to weave his hands through it, to untangle it, to feel her lean into him, enjoying his hands upon her, enjoying him.

Thorin shut his eyes, dismayed by his own thoughts. They were only growing stronger, and there was nothing he could do.

"What you have to understand, lass," Dwalin began, "...is Dwarves only ever have a One."
"What…" Sona bit into her lip as if to stop herself. Thorin pulled in his own, watching her intently from his periphery as he sharpened, out with the stone on the edge, then off, out with the stone, then off, out with the stone…

"What I mean to say is, that's not a concept or term I'm familiar with."

She turned to better face Dwalin, settling back on the log with her legs twisted at an angle away from Thorin, toward his nervous Friend tasked with explaining One to Sona. His One, if he would so choose. How could that ever come to pass?

Oh the irony. He did not envy Dwalin.

All the Company had gone silent to listen. No one looked at the Thief directly, though nearly everyone stared at Dwalin, all of them with various fading levels of anxiety which had eased toward amusement once they all got used to the idea. Glóin and Bombur grew more mirthful as the moments ticked on. Fíli, on the other hand, looked from Dwalin to Thorin, his face slackened to mask his residual concern over the topics at hand.

Sona's face was harder to see now that she'd moved, but when she listened she turned, and he could see her profile.

"Would it be okay for you to explain it to me?"

Her gentle directness eased the features of the Dwarf subject to Questions.

"Is it all right for me to know?"

And her sincere care worked loose a tinge of worry in Thorin's own heart. Their cultures were so different; how would she feel when she knew more? She had not wanted him to tell her much, when it came to something as ordinary as a person's daily color choice. But One? This was something people of Men judged without knowing. Still, he felt like he laid bare on a nail bed, waiting to discover her reaction. What would she think? Would she even say what she thought? Would she assume Dwarves lack deep emotional attachments unless they are blessed, or cursed as Thorin now thought, with Juzrazur? In these ways rumors of Dwarves having stone hearts settled deep into the beliefs of other peoples of the world...

She lifted her hands, full of music in their movement, and the bangles sounded yet again, like falling water, or like the echoes of the falls in Imladris, reminding Thorin of when she touched him. He glanced at the underside of the small finger that had graced that touch, sliding out with the stone over Orcrist.

Why had she done that? And now she was here. Why?

This question had no end.

"Though I totally understand if it's not. I promise I won't be offended.

Silence followed like an uproar. Thorin glanced back to Dwalin, who caught his eye immediately.
"Lass, I don't know if I'm the Dwarf to…"

'What do you want me to say here, Thorin?'

'Tell her, go easy.'

'You owe me,' Dwalin's face was caught in a snarl, both panicked and annoyed at once. But he was willing and able, and assented with a near invisible nod. "Well it's like this... you, you're of the race of Men."

She listened, nodding curtly, her movements clipped.

"So, you... when you wed someone, if they then... die... you can find someone else you like just as well and marry them, yes?" Dwalin spoke fast, tripping along the way, as though he were trying to swallow a healing drought from Óin, one of the ones that didn't taste so good.

"Uh, kind of?" she asked that. Thorin wasn't sure how it was a question.

In the meantime, she moved, and her long hair, mussed, loose and wild from the day's trek, spilled over her back. She pulled her hands through it, stopped and bothered by the snarls. He wished he could——

"When my Dadaji married my Dadiji..."

_Dadaji, Dadiji_: Not her Parents, she must mean her Grandparents in her ancestral language.

"...she was his second wife."

_Second wife..._ so strange. What would it be like to love twice? He had trouble enough with the concept of once. One. However incredibly irksome, he had a Quest to see through.

She gripped her hair over her shoulder and began combing it absently with her fingers, sometimes ripping through, and Thorin cringed, wishing she'd stop. He had a hard time focusing on the stone while she had her hands in her hair... "His first wife died of cancer..."

_Cancer?_ His hand slowed the sharpening strokes.

"...when I was only two, and he met and married my Dadiji a few years later. She's the only Grandmother I've ever known and I love—"

— _love_ — How she said it.

"— her dearly."

Her fingers — _embedded in her hair_ — worked the knots, just as he tried to understand.

"And I know my Dadaji loves her very much, but to say he felt the same for her that he felt for his first wife would be completely inaccurate."

Dwalin had that look again, like she'd woken a second troupe of Trolls.

Her fingers caught and she glared at her bundle of hair. Thorin's hands truly itched, reaching for his comb, stopping himself. _Why_ was she doing that, _ripping her hair so?_

"Now that's not to say he loved one more or less than the other."
The Dwarves were all looking at each other, lost in one form or another. Thorin smiled to himself; in between their discomfort, they studied her as though she came from a different world. Aye, she did. And some of them knew it. He glanced at Fíli, who just happened to be looking his way, smiling like the gleam of yellow flowers on a sun-kissed field. And then there was Balin, who had been eying his brother through the whole encounter, just waiting for him to slip up on some secret—Thorin suspected Balin also knew. And then there was Dwalin, the Dwarf now subject to Questions, always known to be paying attention even when he didn't look it.

"Just that each relationship was completely different and you can't really compare them at all."

Glóin nodded in agreement, squinting and frowning at the same time, as if to say, isn't it obvious?

"That wouldn't be fair for starters—because how can someone compare to a memory?"

A Memory? Past beings are not gone to mere thought... he did not understand.

Her shoulder tipped up. Thorin forced his eyes back at the blade, wishing they would stop with the looking.

And he thought about it, wondering. For people of Men it could be no big event; and yet... this did not explain all of it. And then he saw his hand had gone completely still, and he began to move again.

"And, well, I could go on, but I'd rather hear about this concept of Ones."

Ones. Thorin squirmed, then pressed his back hard against the tree, telling himself just listen. He again he stole glances, all too aware of the choice before him. Juzrazur'è.

"Er... Well..." Of all the lost Dwarves, Dwalin looked the most lost, but this was not taking into consideration the turmoil rolling through Thorin's heart now.

"It is not like that for Dwarves. Most of us never wed. Or, rather, you could say we are wedded to our work. We are very passionate about our craft, and that is often everything for us."

Wedded—to our work. Thorin rarely thought of weddings, and now—Now he didn't want to think of them at all.

Balin suppressed a cough to get his Brother's attention, looking at him sternly as though he just left the Mountain with his breeches undone. Nori stared over Balin's shoulder with a smirk decorating his features, having seen the brunt of Balin's glare, and perhaps he was amused by Dwalin's word choice—wedded—Thorin was not sure, while Ori looked confused between the lot of them, every Dwarf vying to hear Dwalin make a mess of it.

"Apart from existing family and close friends, of course."

"Of course," the Thief nodded with him, leaning toward him, her hair moving across her back, waiting—like a Dwarfling on Durin's Day—to hear what he'd say next.

"And then..." And then Dwalin choked on it, sighing and straining his stern face.

'Must I do this?' He signed, on the off-chance Thorin would relent.

Thorin just stared at him, widening his eyes.

"Look, why don't Glóin or Bombur tell you?" The Warrior asked the Thief while he glared at each
of them with a dare toward his axes. They only smiled on, content to watch him sink. "They actually have Ones!" Dwalin hadn't mentioned all of them, only the Ones who were wed, as it was not for him to tell tales.

Fíli's grin spread over the meadows, so wide. It was for Danîe.

Thorin tried to snuff the smile curling up inside himself, the one for Sona, only barely managing to keep it from his face. He had a choice he had not yet made, and there wasn't room for joy in the present situation, no matter how much he wanted to let loose and feel it. *Why was she here—?*

That question—

Again Dwalin caught his eye, signing, 'Why don't you tell her?'

*Why* would he ask that? Durin's Beard, he knew the answer!

'Aye, I know, I know.' Dwalin's hand clipped out the words in tiny jagged moves. 'You're not telling her anything. Mahal's Furnace, Thorin, I know she's Binumral.'

Thorin went back to his blade, the steel reflecting blue sky and sun, and he kept with the sharpening stone, up the edge, then off, up the edge, then off…

Dwalin huffed his frustration. "All I know is what I was forced to learn in a book when I was naught but a Dwarfling."

The topic had bored them both, and neither had listened to their tutor. And from what Thorin recalled, his experience did not match up to the teachings, not yet. Maybe not ever.

The Warrior tossed the rest of his meal to Sasha, the conversation clearly having ruined his usually robust appetite. Fíli laughed aloud when the Dog sprang for the leftovers.

"Yer doin' fine!" Glóin nearly preened in his futile attempt to shake the grin from his usually-collected gruff exterior.

"Yes, please tell us all about it, Dwalin!" Bombur called from the other side.

The Thief fought off her own smile, Fíli and Kíli saw it too, and both purposely faced Thorin, making it all the more difficult for him to keep his composure.

At that point, Glóin stole a glance his way; his Treasurer's face now unreadable but for the feelings expressed in his eyes, hints of humor over a load of worry and warning.

A motion from Dwalin brought his attention back. 'Is it like the books?'

Thorin nodded once, 'vaguely so.'

Dwalin rolled his eyes. 'I'm ill equipped here.'

Thorin made no answer.

And then Sona took a drink from the adjustable hollow stick fixed on her water flask, lips around the clear material—she had called it 'plastic.’ Looking at her mouth he stalled midway with his stone on the blade.

Dwalin was about to toss up his hands.
Fíli and Kíli grinned ear to ear.

"I hate the lot of you," Dwalin muttered, resigned he was to be the spokesperson, no matter how ill supplied in knowledge he happened to be.

Thorin felt pained for his Friend, and frustrated he could not take up the slack as they always did for each other. But this—

The others around the Warrior shared their delight with smirks and twinkling eyes, though not in any malicious way: they enjoyed seeing the Warrior out of his comfort zone in friendly circumstances.

Again, Thorin clamped down on his urge to smile, for seeing Dwalin so was indeed comical. And Thorin couldn't stop the thought—was this something more than friendly circumstance?

Why had she come?

"Very well." Dwalin braced himself, looking hard at the Thief. "I don't have a One."

Or you don't know it yet, Thorin thought darkly, his brief levity gone, remembering the fogs, his own sudden onset and Fíli's words on Juzrazur. Not all Ones feel Juzrazur before they meet; the books on the subject lack entirely too much detail to be truly useful. "Mahal's gifts," Thorin muttered beneath his breath, pulling his eyes away, taking up his stone again.

"I don't understand how it works…"

I don't either, blast it. This thing driven by feelings, everywhere, but singular, all contained in One. And again he was glancing at Sona, who was clearly trying to keep the grin from swelling her cheeks, rather unsuccessfully at best. He had a hard time looking away from that grin—

"…But what the books say is that you feel a pull to someone and then you can choose."

"You choose?" Her face crinkled as she thought about this. "Like... there are a few possible Ones and then you pick one?"

Thorin smiled. It all did sound confusing, considering the words used to describe the concepts in Common Speech.

Dwalin looked at her as though she had suddenly sprouted a full beard.

"No... there is only one." Though he appeared angry, his voice was uncharacteristically gentle. "That's why it's a ONE."

The Thief's crumpled expression made it clear she did not follow.

Dwalin could see it, too, and his brow darkened with increased frustration, though Thorin knew it was directed at himself, and not due to at any lapse in the Thief's understanding. Dwalin blew out air. "I don't know how it happens, but you feel a pull, and then if you choose, that person becomes your One, and there is never another. That is it. Do you understand?"

"I guess?" Her question was hardly an answer. She drank again—Her lips on the— Thorin blinked and pressed his eyes shut. She does not drink for you.

And then her face cleared in understanding, and it was one of shock and denial and—was she repulsed?

Again, Thorin stopped his stone on the blade, watching.
"Oh... Ohhhhh..."

She looked anything but happy. Why so upset so suddenly?

"I think I get it? At least a little." She sat back again, and Thorin could see her better as she put her head in her hands and considered what she'd learned, fighting to keep her face even. "So, you think I've lost my One..."

Binumrâl.

"...and because of that I'm doomed to a life of loneliness and feeling empty?"

What? Now Thorin frowned, glancing over at Bombur and Glóin, who appeared as baffled as he was—This was not it. He knew it was not—no. He had heard, with Ones it was more like amputation. The beginning of Life Apart. Love apart. Binumrâl. He looked at his right arm, fleetingly recalling Azog, cramming his eyes shut at the image of the severed limb. He shook his head, certain he would never feel the way he felt before Juzrazur'ë.

And why was this topic making her angry?

Was their way so abhorrent? Or was there something she did not understand?

And who was going to correct whatever it was she did not understand?

He tightened his jaw shut, gripping the blade.

He had an idea, in his vivid imaginings, of just how losing One might feel in an instant. You must then find your own way after, facing life with half of you dead to it, that half being more than half of your whole. One. Amputated. Without. Dís. And to live it for centuries after—this was—the downside of gifts from the Immortals.

Dwalin gave her his rounding assent, nodding in a circle as he glared and signed to Thorin, 'Close enough. I've no idea what I speak of.'

Thorin returned a silent nod, 'Aye. Âkminrûk zu.'

He was shocked by the fear that coursed through him over One, by how much he now knew from the inside. No book could contain this Knowledge. It would thrill, frighten, and stir possible envy, so: what did the Writers ask? Would the Knowledge help the knowing? Thorin knew it did not. Nothing prepared them.

It just came.

So, perhaps most wisely, the Writers of Knowledge had kept it brief in the Books.

He took in her reaction to what little they could tell, and this did not ease his heart, for though he saw her struggle in thought with her mind toward curious understanding, the hint of horror beneath it made him pause.

And now she was talking... sharing her experience. "Well... yes, I was very sad when David died."

Binumral. She might have sounded nonchalant, except he knew better. He knew how the injured carried their wounds, and she carried hers. He'd seen it. Held it.

Held it. She had wanted him to.
What did it mean? Why was she here?

Ash on the breeze, in the falls.

"Sometimes I do get caught up in melancholy moments when I think about who I've lost..."

David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor.

"...who the world's lost. Because David was wonderful."

She loved him deeply, though they were not Ones. People of Men don't have Ones... And he wondered as she spoke now, was she melancholic now? She was upset, defending, and then he understood: somehow they had all offended her with their way of being, their culture, for what else could it be? He shut his eyes and swallowed hard, trying to wrap his mind around what and why.

Thorin felt a pang for his friend Dwalin; this was an outright awkward conversation. But then it began to sink in, and then he felt a deeper pang— so lost.

How was he to navigate this? With three of them to answer, one silenced by death, himself by law? And the third unknowing, and was she even able as a person of Men? Only Sona could speak for two, for herself and David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor. Thorin could say nothing— she had to initiate, and would she think it necessary, even supposing she were interested?

A soft whisper eased through his mind: maybe, just maybe, that's why she came, because she was interested...

Thorin brushed that thought aside. People of Men did not have these laws. She would not think of his need for permission.

So, hammers to anvils for answers, Mahal, why was he Pulled to Sona? Why Jusrazur'ē with One who could never have One?

Or could she?

He dared not hope. Yet he did hope. He danced on ice that would crack beneath him.

"But..." An anger note hit her voice, a quiet kind, white heat, and he could see the steel set in her jaw. "I think I have a very different belief system."

Belief? It just is... Thorin stared at her, confused as he'd ever been.

And what does she mean, system?

"As a Hindu, I believe in the rebirth and reincarnation of souls..."

The what? Rebirth, reincarnation? Did she speak of their bodies re-forged in Itdendûm? Or did she mean from the womb, as babes? And if so, how? For a moment he imagined Mahal's Halls filled with naught but Dwarflings and he wondered where they'd come from, with no means of conception or birthing, not among the Dwarflings...

"... Souls are immortal and imperishable..."

Aye.

"... and... I could go into a lot more detail..."
He leaned up from the tree, craving the telling.

"...but maybe that's best saved for another conversation."

She didn't want to share with them—he felt it. Dismissed.

She was livid; Thorin had no idea why, and fought to curb any curiosity for questions he might have. They had done something wrong, and he was baffled and feeling ill for it. What was he to do with all this?

She straightened her spine with resolve. "But the important thing to know is that because of that, death, to me, is not the end of all, but a natural process in existence."

Souls, the essence of being, go on into someone else…? But then…?

Now that was different—a different belief system—she called it. Thorin's mind stumbled and grappled. He was losing the battle against questions… too many intimate questions… Things he could never ask, no matter how hard the wishing would riddle him. Just as it already did, like her hair, falling heavy down her back.

"It still hurts, yeah."

Aye. And he could hear her pain; see it, even. The old ache. And it feels like heartbreak, his Sister would say. Only it keeps beating, even partly dead, and it altogether hurts. He knew it didn't work the same with people of Men as with Dwarves, but in Sona's case this loss was a shattering of equal proportions, the kind no one wanted to measure through feeling.

"I miss David..." and then she sighed. And in her eyes he saw how happy she had been—

—**Birashagimi**—

And still she smiled now, reaching, alive, and in no way content with waiting—Gold Song.

"...and a part of me will always love him..."

True heart. Even when you're thieving.

"...but he has moved onto his next life."

**David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor.**

Did she mean past the veil, into the Halls of Waiting? Wouldn't she join him there? Maybe they do not—? All the peoples of Middle-earth knew the fate of Men past death was a mystery, their spirits leaving the world to parts unknown, the Gift, it was called… He wondered, reminded that he could not ask.

"It's well past time for me to live the rest of mine."

**You still live... who has said you have stopped?** Thorin frowned, confused.

And then something shifted in his thoughts: was she saying she could love again?

**Asti— you would do this again?**

And, as if to show them she would do just that, this very instant, as in right now, she stood up, swatting her behind with her hands to shake the tree bark off...
Her hands, that backside, how he wanted—oh... *how was he to live this way?*

His eyes fell back to the blade and the stone, and sharpening.

"So along those lines, I refuse to be identified by the fact that I'm a widow." Now she was clearly upset, her words forced, her arms stiff at her side, a self protective motion as she rummaged through her bag looking for something.

Thorin wished there was a way he could help, but... his mind was blank.

Why had she come after them? The Elves were her choice after his blunder at the beginning— Or was it something more like *this is where she wanted to be, with his Company of Dwarves, with him?* No. Not possible. *But here she was.*

Could it be?

She told them things they struggled to understand; she could see they did, and so she patiently explained and explained, all while it strained her.

He wished he understood her strain, so he could ease it.

Were they supposed to ignore her loss in the world she came from? That would be a strange custom, and Thorin shook his head, confused. And then it clicked. Did she mean pity? *No, we can't have that...* He needed a way to tell her.

She wasn't done explaining. "That's an aspect of who I am, yes. But it doesn't define me or control my happiness. I've dated plenty since David's passing."

Dated?

_Courted?_ Surely not. He could sense, nothing serious since David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor. Did it mean she had been with people? He thought so. He had been with people, pleasant times from before. He couldn't imagine much liking it now, considering she would most likely never have anything to do with him, and all that was left was this want... *Blast Juzrazur.*

She threw her pack on her shoulder.

*Where are you going?*

"Just haven't met the right one.

*One? What do you mean?* People of Men don't have Ones, he needed to get ahold of himself. _One. Asti. I must choose... How do I? You don't even know._

"Maybe I never will."

_Mahal help me._

He was resigned, for nothing could change what was; he was to miss what he would never have.

"But I can promise you, I'm certainly not spending the rest of my life feeling lonely and sorry for myself," and she was heading down the trail.

Sad, lonely and sorry, still utterly angry, Sona's breath caught as she took the path, and there was nothing he could do. It grieved him to realize it was more than people's pity that hurt her so.
"Pack up, all of you."

Thorin and Company quickly caught up to the fast-paced Thief. Fíli gave Thorin a sad half-smile, one that did not reach his eyes, as he passed on back to the rear guard.

The day stretched out long and awkwardly. Thorin chose to set camp on a high knoll near an overlook surrounded by rocks and trees for cover. Sona had been gone to the overlook nearly an hour ago, far longer than her usual time, and Thorin sought out his Friend, still wearing a deep scowl from the day's unwelcome lesson on Dwarven Custom.

"Can't wait anymore, Dwalin."

"Then we won't. I'll go get her." His Warrior moved off, but Thorin was before him, blocking the way.

"I need to know she is well." Thorin paced slightly next to Dwalin, who glared into the woods behind them.

"I usually get her, Thorin; She was talking to me, she's going to think I'm offended or some such bollocks, if I'm not there to get her."

"She's upset about something; I want to know what."

"You cannot ask."

"I know, but I can listen, if I were there, and maybe…"

"Durin's Longest Beard, Thorin. Hear yourself speak."

Thorin stared at him, refusing to rise to it. Keeping his calm easier than he would have expected, he simply asked the question, "And what is it I should hear?"

"The longing there." Dwalin's eyes dug in. "We need to help you."

"No." He would not argue.

"Let me get her," Dwalin made to move past just as Thorin shot his arm out, putting an open palm on Dwalin's chest, catching Dwalin's eyes in a grip of wills he would not lose.

"I'm going," he said softly with his own war mask firmly set.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all who have commented, bookmarked and left kudos! And all of you silently reading along!
Thorin found Sona sitting in a small clearing of trees near the overlook facing the Mountains, ripping her hair out with that awful brush, muttering words under her breath.

All at once she heaved her brush against a tree, obviously still angry. Had she held this in all afternoon? Because of Dwalin’s words? Or what, was there something else? Why had she come after them?

He hesitated just beyond the tree line, all his questions stalled upon finding her so.

Then she sank her face into her hands and cried out behind them, shaking all the more.

"A comb may serve you better?" he asked, as she jumped up and turned to face him, eyes wide to be so torn from her thoughts.

*Whose comb?* He looked down to see he clutched his own in his hand. What? When? His hand had pulled it out without his thinking… He looked back in her eyes.

They were red from crying.

No… *Why* did she weep? Could he aid her, and help make it stop?

A hint of lavender teased the air about her as her chest rose and fell with the panic of his sudden company.

And he recalled he startled her by offering the aid of a comb...

*I only have my comb.* He looked down at it and then back at her, tear tracks staining her smooth face... lovely no beard and all... She hurt, and he felt helpless. He was certain the conversation from their midday meal still weighed upon her. *I'll let her use my comb…* Dís would be appalled and her sass would be unending… *It can't hurt to let her use my comb…* Dwalin would never let him hear the end of it. *Let him say what he will.* Thorin held it out toward her trying hard not to stare. Somehow they had offended her, in their manners, from their ways. He wished he knew just how, so he wouldn't repeat the blunder...

"Akmînruk zu," she said.

His throat tightened as he heard her speak the Khuzdûl.

How it sounded. Like to brush his soul: *her voice over those words—low, flute on air.*

And he recalled her Hindi equivalent, *Thun'yu Vod*, how she taught him to say it their last evening in Imladris, just last night! and he recalled the comfort she offered after hearing Lord Elrond’s disparaging words. Those words— *of madness*—she heard all of them and still accepted him, still offered him company—*her small finger over his*—And friendship. He wished to do the same for her, but he couldn't move, nor could he get himself to open his mouth. Aside from that, he had no idea what to say.

She reached for the comb and he gave it up, keeping his fingers tucked, being careful not to touch
He tried to think of something, anything; he should have thought of that before he hurried out to get her. Maybe it would have been better to let Dwalin come for her.

As he mustered his nerve she turned back 'round and sat, pulling her hair forward to work it with his comb. His comb. *In her hair... Quit that and say something, Thorin.*

And then she sighed. He had the fiercest urge to quash the distance between them and hold her. Never before had he felt such Pull behind desire for contact. Juzrazur grew stronger. He was unsure he'd ever get used to this... For the briefest moment he shut his eyes and imagined the weight of her there, the darkness in her feelings eased away.

*Stop.* It was useless, considering the circumstances, and he opened his eyes roughly as he stifled the thoughts. She was distraught, and needing the ear of a friend. He could be that friend. And he would if she'd let him.

Stone face set, he sought and located the brush she'd thrown against a tree. He moved toward it. *Motion is good, yes,* and maybe he could even do something like, *talk to her*— "You have been gone a long while."

She stopped the comb. And then she barely shrugged, signaling his dismissal.

Ahh, he was not about to give in to *that.* She'd have to say it first, and then they'd see about it, now that she was *here... Why was she here?* Maybe all in all, she enjoyed their company, at least when they didn't upset her... Likewise he enjoyed hers, and that was enough. One could call it a boon. He only wished he knew a way to help her feel better, very aware whatever he said could too easily worsen her discomfort, especially considering he wasn't sure of the cause.

"So tell me," she spoke to him! "Are Elves always this annoying?"

*Elves? Why does she ask about Elves now?* That put a smirk on his face, and he stepped a bit firmer toward the brush. But what she said!

*Never mind that*—*Just answer.* "No." He went for her brush. Once he had it, he wandered back toward her, taking seat in the grass far enough away as not to intrude. "Though I do not know what they have done, I can assure you they are generally more so."

She let loose a dry laugh and his lips turned up more at the sound. "I believe it."

He stole a sidelong glance at her; she'd just detangled the ends of her hair...

"Wizards aren't much better for that matter," she added.

Thorin huffed a laugh as he went for his tobacco pouch, feeling strangely relaxed by her remarks, because they somehow understood each other on this topic.

It surprised him to feel such a level of relief that it wasn't him or his Company that had caused her distress, but rather *Elves and Wizards.* He was almost happy for it, except she was upset.

"It's just so incredibly frustrating, you know?"

He filled the bowl of his pipe, lit it with his mini flint hammer and settled into smoking, hoping the activity would keep him steady over this new ground of topics. Maybe among them she would tell him why she came.
"You'd think the supposed greatest and wisest minds of Middle-earth…"

Greatest? Wisest? Who? Those we left behind in the Elven City? Surely you jest. He looked at her, gratified to see sarcasm there. She'd gotten the comb several hand widths up her hair length, to mid chest level, the scent of lavender washed over him and all he could do was breathe deep...

"…would listen…"

Elves? Listen? No… they never listen. They sometimes look like they are, but… this was charm. There'd been a time he thought they listened, but that was before, long ago, when he was still very young.

"…when someone tried to tell them about a great danger that threatens pretty much, oh I don't know, EVERYONE."

What danger? His back flexed straight. What threat to everyone? He froze all motion to hear her next words.

"But no, it is not for the mortal human to tell them of what is to come."

Our mortal lives mean nothing to Elves… But wait… You wanted to tell them what is to come? Surprise clawed at him from the inside. Whatever it was, Lord Elrond did not want to know. Thorin was likewise reluctant to learn, but the Thief desperately needed to share it, and he was determined to give her his ear.

"UGH…” She sighed loudly, frustrated at Elves, to Thorin's surprise.

He had thought she favored the Elves more than it seemed she did now, a pleasant discovery in spite of the circumstances.

"Lord Elrond dismissed your concerns?" He blew out smoke before feeling her eyes upon him, but when he went to look she was grousing at her hair again.

"No. No he did not. He would have had to actually meet with me in order for that to happen."

Lord Elrond had offered no council. Thorin set his jaw. Leave it to Elves to disregard the cares of others. Of Sona. Of his Company. Of his People. These things were only expected. But this threat was to everyone, she had said, whatever that meant. Would not a 'wise one' want to know? Lord Elrond's choice would leave all things to chance, when something could be done to thwart a coming evil.

"It was the Lady Galadriel of Lothlórien."

The Elf Witch of Terrible Power… Thorin anticipated Lord Elrond would summon her, and Nori had confirmed it before they left. She came out of concern for the Necromancer in the South of the Woodland Realm… Thorin had not expected her to take an interest the doings of a handful of Dwarves and a lost woman of Men traveling with them, other than to perhaps stop them from their purpose… Except Sona was lost from another world… that may have peaked the Ancient One's interest. Something new in an old, old world… She was one of the oldest Elves remaining in Middle-earth, known as a Friend to Dwarves once, back in the days Khazâd-dum's halls were lit with life and filled with golden lanterns…

Thorin's eyes fixed on the progression of Sona's hands, with his comb—his comb—in her hair, upward winding, combing out the snarls, her hair a luxurious mass of shining tresses his fingers wholly ached to touch. Still these cravings, she is not here to covet; you are here to listen.
"And she, above all people, I thought would want to listen to my warning."

_How much do you know of this Elf? Likely far more than I..._

"But no, all she had to say was a super cryptic and unhelpful 'you may go home once you've found who you are looking for.'"

Thorin stopped. _Who was Sona looking for?_ He stumbled in thought a good long moment. _Who? Surely not—_No. Just because _he_— no.

He looked sidelong at her, refusing to let his mind go where it wished. Impossible. Might just as well trust the promise of an Elf.

Her eyes fell downcast. Thorin wondered if she knew who she was to find. Had that person also passed from her world to Middle-earth? Or was it someone from here? If then, who? Blocking his wish to answer that himself, he let the question float as he focused on her saddened face. Had this person made her unhappy? Or was she grieved because this person was lost?

But this was nonsense. Why spend thought on the advice of Elves? Their words could mean _anything_. And nothing.

"And like... what does that even mean?"

Ahh. Thorin's mouth partly opened on the stem of his pipe. So no, the Thief did not know who the Elf Witch had in mind. Elves. And Thorin had no idea, yet still he wished, _confound it Mahal._

She ripped on her hair again... and he cringed, breathing tight—_go easy._ To keep himself from intervening, he gripping his pipe and puffed once more, forcing his hands still.

"I find this person I'm meant to be looking for..."

Who might that be? Why did he wonder when he dared not speculate?

"...she didn't even bother to tell me who it was, by the way..."

Aye, that she did not. Elves.

"...though I think I have a good idea—

_Who_, then?

"...and then what? She sends me back to Sokhal?"

_Sokhal...?_ Thorin tried not to think about 'sendings' as he wondered where Sokhal was in relation to Kaleforn'ya, and how far that was from Middle-earth...

"Do I just say, 'here I am! Found him!'"

_Him?_ What made her think this person would be male?

"'Now send me back'?"

_Indeed. Then what?_ He turned at the panic welling in her voice and faced her head on, ready and eager to listen. He took a draw from his pipe as he held her in his eyes, wishing there was some way he could be of service.
"It's just, here I am trying to help them save all Middle-earth—"

Save all Middle-earth? You mentioned grave danger, yet I thought you—

"…from a fate worse than complete destruction…"

—wanted to go home. What fate is this?

"…and just…” He held on, not about to let go of her eyes. She cried out with her jaw clenched and compassion filled him all the more. She was so angry, clutching the comb like she wished it held a hammer. *His* comb—!

"I'm not even supposed to be here!"

*I am glad you are, even if only for a while."

"Bilbo is!"

Thorin frowned, considering.

"*He* is supposed to be on this Quest."

And yet he was not.

"*He* is supposed to meet Gollum."

*Gollum? Who in Mahal's name is Gollum?*

"*He* is supposed to find the Ring…"

—the Ring…?

"And he's not here…"

*I am here."

"… and now I guess I have to do it…"

*What…? Wait…*

"…and I don't even know where to start or where this all happened…"

Thorin pressed into the ground beneath him. Let's just start with now.

"…and I'm going to ruin everything…”

*No no no no… not possible."

"And everyone in all of Arda is going to die or be enslaved and tortured and it's just going to be absolutely awful…”

The Ring… *Mahal help us… not that one… 'Adadē.*

"…and it's all going to be my fault, and…”

No, Thief, not your fault… not possible.
Her tears were freely flowing now. Thorin retrieved his handkerchief and reached it toward her—*One small thing...*

She took it to her eyes, shaking as she breathed—*Let me dry your tears.*

He hoped she would never offer it back. Oh, how he wanted to *hold* her. But she avoided his eyes, not wanting him to notice her upset. He hoped this didn't mean she wished him gone, and he quashed his longings. A friend would not assault a friend with unwanted touching, and he knew she did not like it much, having rarely seen her touch any of the others in the Company, so he went stone still, except for one thought. *What ailed her?*

"What ring?" Mahal should call on his brethren for aide, if it be the one.

She stopped like she'd scraped against something scalding hot.

It could not be, that such a terrible doom stood before them now, and yet…

No. Thorin did not want to believe it.

Suddenly surprise and fear wrestled over her face; she surely thought she'd said too much.

And Thorin recalled Tharkûn's questions about his 'Adad from long ago, before they had met and Thráin had passed on the map and key. Tharkûn had asked whether Thráin had his ring of power that day he'd gone missing in battle. Indeed, he had. After meeting his 'Adad, Tharkûn never brought it up again.

The Thief bit her lip, and Thorin gnawed on his own from the inside. Still she said nothing. He watched her think, all those emotions clamoring for purchase. She wavered and shook, and he knew she considered what she could tell him safely.

So he waited.

And then a dark cloud crossed over her features, and she slightly, ever so slightly recoiled… *from him?* And he realized she wondered if she dared trust him. He was a muddle of pent up feeling, wishing he were worthy, but… he hadn't earned it. He had turned her away when first she asked. She had never asked again. His eyes shut briefly, for bracing, convinced quite soundly she would determine she could not trust him. But yet still she said nothing. And so he looked again.

A flash of anger took hold of her.

He settled into his stone mask, hiding as well as he could.

And then she looked at her hands. One held his comb. The other, his handkerchief. Her face cleared like a new day and she smiled. And his heart swelled realizing she looked to these—*his personal belongings*—for care and comfort, for grounding. Warm and open she looked at them, and then at him, but not into his eyes: to his person, as a friend. Perhaps trust would follow. And he could not help take note: *His comb, Mahal's forge; strands of her hair were left through the teeth.*

*Jewels—*

"It all began with the forging of the Great Rings."

*No.*

*No, no.*
And as she began to speak, it seemed the wind and the trees grew silent.

"Three were given to the Elves; immortal—" She cut her words off, and he thought she saw her
swallow, glancing quickly at him before moving on. "Seven, to the Dwarf Lords..."

'Adad, where are you?

"...great miners and craftsmen of the mountain halls."

She trusted him; she trusted enough to confide this great evil. Elation and dread filled him twofold.

"And nine, nine rings were gifted to the race of Men."

'Imrad uzbâd—the Wraith Kings. Long buried, but...

"...who above all else desire power. For within these rings was bound the strength and the will to
govern over each race..."

The Dwarves had scoffed at this... Rings of power held no sway; they were mere pretty things.
Dragons consumed four of those gifted. Two Sauron reclaimed before the end of the First Age,
angered he could not sway the will of the Dwarves.

"But they were all of them deceived."

The Line of Durin had been the last of the Seven Houses to hold a ring of power, a useless,
powerless, overly audacious bauble that's only hailing was to bring evil upon the bearers...

'Adad'ē. Taken for your ring?

For what larger purpose? Kâmin zashar.

But she said the Ring.

One ring.

One...

"Kâmin zashar," Thorin growled out as he set his pipe aside. We cannot let this come to pass. He
was on his feet, and standing before her in a swift move.

She did not meet his gaze, but kept hers steady on his boots. "For another Ring was made. In the
land of Mordor, in the fires of Mount Doom, the Dark Lord Sauron forged in secret, a master Ring,
to control all others."

They should meet this head on; why would she not look at me?

"And into this Ring he poured all his cruelty, his malice and his will to dominate all life."

Kâmin zashar... and the world with it.

Moments passed, silent, while all the night waited.

Finally—finally—she looked at him and set words to the vacant wind, as if Middle-earth herself
would shush and listen, "One Ring to rule them all."
It cannot be. And even so he knew this was true.

"One Ring to find them." She barely could whisper the words. "One Ring to bring them all..." She stalled, unable to finish.

So Thorin took what was left and finished for her, "...and in the darkness bind them," staring into her beautiful, terror-struck, golden brown eyes.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Need to let you know, I'll be out of town next week... I'm off for a short adventure away, taking Thorin on a trip to the Shire... (Spotty internet there, plus, Thorin's going to be otherwise occupied ;-) ) I will be back May 5th or 6th.

Again, as always, thank you for the kudos and comments!

y
"You are certain," Thorin asked. Of course she was certain.

And she confirmed it silently, strongly, shaking as she was.

*Kâmín zashar.* Far worse than any Dragon's threat. Far more important than reclaiming a Homeland. "That Ring was lost to the ages." He put his fist to his mouth and began to pace slowly, too full of shock to think beyond *this cannot be true*...

"It was found." She curled in upon herself as a chill passed through her, and, gauging her upset amid this grave concern, his urge to embrace her only swelled. But he couldn't touch her. It was agony as well as unwelcome; it was not done.

Fear, despair, helplessness, misery, self blame—all these expressions swept over her face, one by one, each one more distinct and grief-laden than the last.

And then she gasped before an onset of even more tears.

This was untenable. He could not hold the distance.

And what should stop him? Ones, Binumrâl and Dwarven Laws?

Utter nonsense in light of this revelation…

None of it mattered.

The key they needed to rest upon was elsewhere, and right before them all the same. What of friends?

Night birds murmured once more from the trees. Thorin took a quick scan of their periphery, detecting no movement in the darkness. They were alone, safe from surprise of any imminent attack with the Company camped close below, but this threat she spoke of was more grievous than any single kingdom's loss, and for this her anxiety was great.

*Friends comfort friends.* He crouched toward her and put his hand on her shoulder, as he had oftentimes done with his Sister and her Son's over the long years, even after they were all grown. He kept as much distance between himself and Sona's person as the length of his arm allowed, to be sure she would not confuse his intent.

She calmed beneath his hand, and his heart pounded for the joy of it, through the weight of his first mistake— She had not told him of the danger before now. He could not blame her, knowing very well why she hadn't. Those first days, when she was overflowing with the need for help, ready to share it with a willing and able ear, he had been hard, uncaring and utterly void of welcome.

All she'd been left with was Tharkûn, and where was the Wizard now?

*Why was she here? Why had she followed?* She had made friends among them… Bifur, Dwalin, and the others. He'd seen the bonds strengthen through these months together. That might be all the
reason she required.

*Know I am with you, listening…*

He would offer his friendship, so that she might accept his aid, but first…

Thief, let me say this. Let me say it to the end…

"That you did not tell me sooner is my failing."

Her face was a mess of worry, blotched red and thick with tears, as she looked into his eyes.

He held steady. "On our first meeting I was deaf to your concerns, blind to your need to share them, and numb to your request for help. In these ways I taught you not to trust me. For this I am sorry."

Clearly shocked, she made no move to stop him, in spite of the fact he could tell she wanted to—*Her face looked like she’d left her guitar at camp and a pack of trolls were upon them*—Still, she only listened with her mouth partly open. As he spoke he felt her collect herself, and her strength regained. She needed this; she needed *him*, and so his words lifted his own spirit as well, no matter the dire concerns behind them.

Durin's stars, she listened!

*Please keep on… allow me…*

"I ask that you believe me now: I hear, I see. You are not alone. This burden is not only yours to bear." He stopped, amazed she had let him speak to the end.

With this he rose to his feet and offered her a hand up. Her cool fingers settled into his palm as she stood with him, and it was almost as if they were back in Imladris—that touch.

He held on, adding a promise. "The Ring must be found. By Mahal, I will help you."

But with those words she shifted. He moved to let go, stung by her turn, knowing why; but he could not release his hold. Her hand hovered cool in his. *Her hand.*

"And then what?" she asked, her voice laced once more with fright. And something else—*distrust.*

With a flash he understood; she thought he wanted it for himself.

He swallowed hard.

"That is for you to decide." And there he released her, one step back, head down.

Her hands followed his as they retreated, just a fraction before closing into a light fist, a small motion one would barely perceive, except for him…*his Thief, to take his space so subtly. What did it mean?*

*Did she want to trust him?*

It felt like quashing his heart, to stifle his hopes as he must.

He knew the rest too well. There was no possible way she could trust him, not with this. Not with what she knew of him, of risk—*the madness*—Not to mention the oft-claimed greed of Dwarves… *But she had told him so much up to now… why then?* It all made no sense.

Perhaps she had slipped, and never meant to tell. This thought ached him deeply.
But then why did she lean toward him still?

Her positioning calmed him on the inside; he did not want to think about why.

She kept her eyes fixed upon his, and here he could not let go. He held still and felt the air about them, the only thing that moved.

"It has to be destroyed," she said.

Now her gaze strayed away and he felt hollow with loss, but at the same time the sense of distrust evaporated from her like warm breath on a chilled morn.

He stayed put, refusing to give in to any of his heart's ridiculous palpitations.

And she retreated into her own thoughts. Thorin was sure this involved remembering, and as her brows creased in frustration, he imagined she sorted through all she knew from the 'books'… Gaps in the knowledge, he could almost see her count them.

Well. She would not take account alone.

"First we need to find it," he said.

We. Yes, we. You will not do this alone, Thief.

He began to walk steps, moving was good… very good for thinking. "Do you recall the Ring's location? Where we might start our search? Who might have it? Anything?" He came before her and looked into her eyes.

She returned his gaze, stunned—ever-so-partly smiling. She welcomed his thoughts!

"You mentioned Gollum?" He asked further, considering the unsavory name. What a name is Gollum? He could put no origin to it. "Would this… Gollum know where it is?"

She breathed out as if she were fevered, her eyes shut. Could she not stand his gaze?

He turned, to spare her. He thought hard; maybe he looked harsh… Dís always said he looked a mighty terror when deep in worrisome plans. So instead he faced the Mountains to their East, where he could glower at will.

And then she began to speak, her voice like a low-tuned windpipe sounding just above a whisper. "History became legend. Legend became myth. And for two and a half thousand years, the Ring passed out of all knowledge. Until, when chance came, the Ring ensnared a new bearer."

Thorin settled into his war stance, studying the Mountains they would pass. Who was the new bearer, after Isuldur lost it with his life in the river?

"The Ring came to the creature Gollum…"

—Gollum—horrid name—how would one come to such as this—?

"…who took it deep into the tunnels under the Misty Mountains…"

Into Khazad dum? Thorin's back tightened. Well then. He breathed deep. The air was fresh. The Mountains stood before them…

"… and there it consumed him."
He thought on that a moment. All sounds of life held still as though all Middle-earth waited. *The Ring consumed him.* Of course. *No Dwarf,* this lost being, Gollum. *Of course he was consumed.* But there they are, the Misty Mountains. *We are upon it. All we have to do is reach out, and—*

*What are we waiting for?*

"We begin our search now. I will wake the others."

Sona grasped his arm, reached forward, touching firmly, holding. He was stunned, to see her there, to feel her. He could abide this, but… *What was the use of it? Could he not stay the feelings?*

"No, wait!" she said with an urgency that rooted his feet to her purpose. She stared back at his person. He could feel the strength of it as he gaped at her hand, still holding him. *She was touching him!*

But she quickly released as though she were caught stealing.

*No no no…* but there was no retrieving it… *She meant nothing by it.*

*Take heed, skip the nonsense.* "The Misty Mountains stand before us." Thorin pointed open-palmed at the Mountains before them. "*Why wait?*

"We can't tell the others… you have to promise me you won't."

Does she know how his Company works? "*Why not? We will find it much faster with all of us searching.*" Did she doubt the others? *Surely not.* "You can trust them. You know this, yes?"

"Of course I do!" Yet she shook her head. "It's not that. I just… I don't want to expose them—or you for that matter—to this." She put her back to him, arms crossed closed.

*Why turn away? You cannot be rid of me now. You have already shared this peril…* He held his hand tight, the one that had touched her shoulder before.

"*The Ring is evil…*

*Aye, beyond measure.*

"It has destroyed everyone who has ever come into contact with it," she added as if she begged him, but for the words…

*I cannot let it destroy you…*

"I can't do that to any of you."

*Do? It is not for you to do; it is for me to help.*

"Promise me you won't tell them. Please."

*How?* She wanted him to keep secrets from his Company—*she had no idea.* But he wanted to bring her peace of mind. "*I must tell them something. But I will not name the Ring.*" He waited to hear if she would object. When she nodded briefly he added the important part. "*And I will not let you go alone. No. And you do not realize my Company goes where I lead…* but he did not need to tell her that…

Still something about the plan displeased her. "*But what about Erebor?*"
His Homeland...! This almost stole his breath, her voice upon it. And then she chewed her lip and he, Mahal's Anvil, he wanted to kiss her.

"You can't just set everything aside... the hopes and dreams of your People..."

My People... you care for them so deeply.

"...their very future, just to help me with some crazy Quest for what is the singular most evil object in all of creation."

Kâmin zashar. There would be nothing left for the living but pain. No space for simple joys. No time to know you better.

"You're likely to get yourself killed, and then where will your people be?"

He saw her swallow and shake. What? Surely not for him.

His People would be fine... Dís was strong, she would manage, and Dáin would fill the void until Fíli came to ready. Fíli would lead them well, when need required... "This... singular harness for evil"— Kâmin zashar— "It is why I must go with you." He denied any other choice. "It is the greater danger. It must be checked, or no home will be safe from fire, not even the wandering kind."

He smiled sadly into her big open eyes; they seemed to reach for him, as if for safety's sake.

"But... but there is still time," she said.

Is there? How can she know, with all that has changed from her 'books'?

She came to him with her hand outstretched, and he stared at it, wistful, but shoved down imagining the feel of it on him. Just as quickly she dropped it, taking a step to the side.

Had she wanted to touch him again? Would his mind never stop twisting over her every move?

"Fifty years at least, if not sixty," she counted, drumming her lips with her fingers, driving him still.

Stop with that...

He turned over her words. That was some time. But he wasn't convinced—did she not say it was found— on his Quest? But the grocer Master Baggins never came. What if they do not find it now?

What will become by waiting?

"Why not retake Erebor first?" she suggested.

But what if...

"Rebuild your strength and reunite the Dwarves, Gandalf said Erebor would be important strategically, and I think he means..." she stalled... thinking... frowning, concentrating, groaning in frustration.

Thorin left her be, long moments spent in thought. But after a time she seemed lost. "The Wizard?" he asked, prompting her back to him. "You think he means... what?"

She blinked as if woken from a sad dream half forgotten. "Uh... just that Erebor is going to be very important."

Things clicked. Thorin knew well the strategic importance of the Lonely Mountain, that it was key to keeping large opposing forces at bay, should a large scale war break out, something he imagined
quite probable with this—piece—being found.

So perhaps there was time to come back and get it later. Perhaps saving the Mountain would be best for all. "Perhaps." But she left something out, something painful.

And he doubted. "But there is risk to leave this to chance, for it to be found by others. Those Mountains are full of Orcs."

She was adamant against this even as he spoke. "Gollum... he—" Again she bit her lip, and he pulled on his own until it hurt, watching her took to the Mountains. "It... won't be found until we look for it."

However uneasy, he accepted her word. "Very well," he told her. She had not said everything. "We restore Erebor first." He stared into her eyes and saw relief within them. "And then we find it."

She nodded down but did not look back. And he wondered. What was he missing?

Deep into some dark worrisome corridors of thinking, she had strayed again.

"Thus agreed," he interrupted her musings once more, bracing for his next request, sure now he had leave after this trust they shared as friends. "I must formally ask: Will you join my Company?"

Her eyes held his, complete, open and delightfully surprised. "Are you sure?"

What a question; it brought a smile to his face and eased his heart. "I would not have otherwise offered."

Then she reached her hand to him, like the time she had done with the pinch-faced Elf at the start of their stay in Imladris. What was it she expected with this gesture? She was about to sag the way she had for the Elf when Thorin put his hand out the same way she held hers, hand facing hers, and waited. She grasped it and firmly clasped on, pulling up and down like she would pump water from a well.

The feel of her hand, that he would not dwell upon, no matter how smooth yet artfully callused, strong and confident it was. He found pleasure in the firmness of her hold. She took him as a friend, he could not ask for more.

Yet still she gave the smile on her face.

And her words. "I accept."

They shared a silent walk back to camp, as she had neither comment or questions, and he was not about to add his own, out of deference it may prove unwelcome—He could tell she was tired of words and in great need of sleep.

And so he used the quiet to think. How had it come from him running from her to inviting her to join them? What was he thinking?

Mahal's Hammer to cares—He liked her and wanted her among them.

And she accepted!

And, in spite of the danger they ran toward, seemingly no matter which way they chose, he could not
remember a time he felt this happy.

The camp already took their rest, but for Dwalin and Balin seated close at the fire, quietly signing between themselves so as not to wake the others.

Dwalin rose at the sight of the fear-strained Thief. After she signaled for him to stay put, he retreated back to his seat, signing to Thorin, 'What happened?'

'Not now.' Thorin replied. He wished to continue thinking in peace.

'What'd you do to upset her like that?'

'What makes you think it was me?' Thorin signed, irritation clipping his moves.

Dwalin snorted, shifting closer to the fire.

Sona retired to her bedroll, only to return a moment later, before Thorin had taken a seat. 'Thorin.'

He shivered at her voice on his name. And he stood tall.

She held out her hands. 'Âkmînruk zu.' That smile, her breath on the Khuzdûl, his comb in her hand… the hanky in her other…

Dwalin and Balin watching…

"And if you don't mind, I'm going to hang onto your hanky for a bit… I'd like to wash it before I give it back. Unless you don't mind my bogeys smeared all over it…"

Bogeys… that fine word Kíli had adopted back at Imladris…

Thorin laughed, retrieving just the comb from her open hands. 'As you wish, Thief.'

And then she returned to her bed roll, a huge smile taken over her face.

Had he brought on that smile? How?

And Dwalin stared at Thorin, waiting to hear more.

As did Balin beside him. 'The Khuzdûl from her mouth, it shocks me, Thorin.'

Dwalin signed over his brother, 'who cares about that!' waving off the language pondering, 'the Comb? You loaned her your comb?'

'Aye.'

'Did you tell her she was your One while you were at it?'

'No, Dwalin.'

'Might as well have!'

This was beyond exhausting. 'There were more important things.'

'Care to share those more important things?' Dwalin quipped with his hands.

'What' Balin motioned to add something—
But Thorin overruled them both. 'Not now, no details.'

He could see the Thief in his memory back at the overlook, how she clutched his comb in one hand and his hanky in the other as she explained this great peril, fearful for all the world. These things of his had offered her support, grounding. And he refused to regret the results of his actions.

He did, however, regret he could not confer with Balin.

'You know, laddie, you get more and more reclusive as we go,' Balin quipped, frowning and smiling at the same time that way he did.

'Enough. Let me sleep on it tonight.'

'Aye, but don't think I'll forget,' Dwalin shot the words with hot hands.

'No.' Thorin wouldn't dream of it.

Their hands stilled and the crickets chirped and Thorin let his mind wander aimless and clear in the night until after a while he signed again. 'I asked the Thief to join the Company tonight.'

Dwalin's face went from aggravated to wondrous in one quick blink.

'You asked her?'

'Aye.'

'And so that makes you think it's fair to loan your comb?' Dwalin's lips were curled at the question.

Thorin kept his stone mask set as best he could. 'That was after.'

'After what?'

'… I asked her to join after I loaned the comb.'

Dwalin heaved an exasperated sigh. 'Your Sister would have your hide, being so forward.'

Thorin did not doubt it, but he only shook his head. Who knows. *That* time was far away, closer to never than anywhere he ever reckoned…

He looked to Balin. 'You will muster a contract. She can see to it in the morning.'

Balin nodded, smiling for more. Both Dwarves looked at him as though they expected more.

He was not about to give it. 'That is all. I need my mind on our Quest.'

'Aye, our Quest,' Balin signed. They both nodded with him, any argument saved for later. 'That should help.'

It should, Thorin thought.

*But first… there was the bigger matter.* Impossible to think he would leave the Thief alone to a danger such as this. He was sure that was her undisclosed plan… so he made his own, to guard and keep her safe on the perilous path ahead, one they would travel together, baring death.
'Teaching her Khuzdûl. Did you leave your brain behind, laddie?' Balin signed, moving closer to the light of the fire with his flat plate and the contract parchment spread out, quill on top, ink pot to his side, and a splitting grin plastered across his face. 'Never mind it. I'll have a look and jot down the particulars, it'll just take a moment.'

Thorin didn't answer but retired to his bedroll, watching Balin work, happy and focused at once, outlined and warm in the firelight. Thorin looked from Balin to the comb still in his hand. About its teeth some strands of her hair remained entwined. He gathered them carefully, wound them into the tiniest braid, and packed them inside and innermost pocket near his heart. One day he would bind them in crystal, should evil be vanquished and impossible dreams come to pass.

Next morning after breakfast, Thorin and Dwalin headed to the overlook alone, weapons at the ready for their daily movements. Dwalin laughed a bit under his breath, turning a malevolent grin Thorin's way, and modulating his voice as high and light as he could, "Thorin!" The oaf batted his eyes in flirtatious exaggeration. "Your comb! And if you don't mind…"

Thorin smacked him across the back of his head, making Dwalin laugh harder. Both were fairly sore after sparring.

Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: We're back! We had a lovely time in the Shire, entertained by none other than the Master of Bag End himself. Tea was at Four, Bilbo left the door unlocked, and we didn't even need to knock... ;-)"

A/N #2: Again, as always, thank you for the comments, kudos and bookmarks!
"So you asked her onto the Company," Fíli stated the question, stepping in smoothly to Thorin’s right side, timing his gait to match Thorin’s as he headed back to the overlook for a smoke.

"Aye." None of them could leave him alone. Thorin smiled, still feeling the blows that had accompanied Dwalin's impertinent Thief imitations. He glanced at his Sister's Son, the Thief's Dog bounding at his side. "You're ready?"

Fíli nodded. "Does that mean you've chosen, N'adad?" Ever to the point.

"No." Thorin kept it simple, stopping there. His eyes gentled on Fíli, whose face passed toward sadness, but not quite. "It means we go together to the overlook while the others wake and Bombur prepares breakfast."

That brought Fíli's smile back. "I wanted to ask about Sona."

Sasha barked and Thorin almost laughed. "Balin will give her the contract once she wakes."

Fíli rolled his eyes just the way Dís did when exasperation began testing patience. "That is not what I meant, N'adad."

Thorin grinned again, still feeling the happiness from the night before—She would join the Company! She would join the Company! But to what end? "Come, Fíli. Talk can wait 'til our pipes are lit."

Fíli snorted. "With you we might wait much longer."

But soon they were seated, enjoying the view and the morning air while smoking some of the Shire's best leaf, the Dog lounging at Fíli's feet with her tongue lolling.

"She confided in me, accepted my trust," Thorin began. Had she truly?

Fíli's eyes rooted upon him, as if studying intricate vein patterns in stone.

"I believed she wanted to find her way home," Thorin tried to explain, feeling lost yet again. "And she does, but—"

At that Fíli shook his head slightly, the tip of a laugh exposing his dimples.

"This is serious, Fíli."

His Sister's Son actually laughed. "It's been serious since she found us; you've just been slow to catch on."

"Not that!" Thorin's face burned. "That's..." Thorin wondered what it was... "Private." He settled on a word he hoped would end the topic now.

There were more important things.
Fíli's face went blank of humor, but remained intent, relentless, unyielding.

"As I said, she seeks her home," Thorin continued, unwavering under the heavy stare, a fine Durin trait, useful for Kings. "But before that, she…" How was he to explain this? "She wants to help us escape a great danger."

"What danger?"

He said he would not speak of it by name, a promise he would keep. "Details do not matter."

Fíli grasped his arm. "That has never been your way—"

"She has my promise."

"She asked you not to tell us, then."

Thorin answered with a nod.

"Why?" Fíli argued, and Thorin already knew his train of thought: "Counseling our thoughts together, we may be better equipped to head off danger…" Fíli's words were a reflection of his lessons.

How oft had Thorin said the same himself?

"I thought to tell her this." Thorin shook his head, recalling. "Started to, in fact. It was no use. She was adamant, and so I resolved to help thus handicapped. The details do not matter; we will see it done."

"Aye," Fíli let go of his arm. "You're so deep you can't see." His eyes remained firm, and a crease of worry took over his brow.

*It is long past that, Sister's Son…* "She believes she is to blame because the Hobbit did not join—"

"Rubbish."

"Aye," Thorin agreed. "There are deeds she feels only she must do. She will give these tasks to no other. By sparing details, she believes she saves others from her burden."

"More rubbish heaped upon it," Fíli huffed his complaint, his eyes bright with ire, though open and yet warm.

"I could not let her do this thing alone."

"No."

"I believe she thinks she will do it alone."

"But she's accepted onto the Company," Fíli objected, frowning in earnest.

"Aye," it was clear his Sister's Son understood, just as Thorin expected. Long moments passed. Thorin suspected Fíli waited for him to say something further, but he was at a loss.

"Fire Drakes Blast our Halls, N’adad! Can you tell me nothing?"

Thorin jerked up, slightly shocked, and stared intently into Fíli's angry eyes.
"Where did you learn the curse, Inûdoy?" Thorin had a good notion of the answer.

Fíli's eyes widened at the question as he registered again to whom he spoke, but he did not hesitate. "Annals of Dwarven Curse Forms, the Fire Drake Scroll." There he stopped, likely hoping for release from Thorin's lock on his eyes. Instead, Thorin waited for the rest of the answer. Finally Fíli gave it, "…from 'Amad's library."

"Does she know you borrowed it?"

"Are you going to tell her?"

"Aye, when you say this in my presence again. I saw a Fire Drake in our Halls. These are no mere words."

Fíli nodded. "Pardon," he said, again no hesitation. But his face did hold a question. "Why does 'Amad have the scroll?"

She did not only have it… she wrote it. "To remember."

She had not put her name to it, for freedom's sake.

They were quiet again. And after a time Fíli's eyes gentled and his face eased, but the worry remained.

Thorin owed some explanation, so he resolved to try one. He grasped Fíli's shoulder and brought their foreheads together, content to have him close. "Sona warns of a grave danger to all free folk of Middle-earth. Kâmin zashar…"If she should not act, the world will fall to evil and ruin."

He felt his Sister's Son tense like spun wire. "You say she believes she must do this alone. It's painful to think— She can't alone, she's a Pacifist, N'adad."

"Whatsafist," Thorin intoned calmly in Dwalin's absence. "Of course she can't. But she sought my aid for all our good, and I will help her come what may."

"And so that is when you asked her onto the Company."

"Aye."

"With all these thoughts in mind."

"Aye."

Fíli stared hard, and Thorin knew he wanted to go back to the private matter, he could see the struggle play out beneath the surface of his Sister's Son's open face. Finally he could hold it no longer: "What about—"

"Mabujbē. It can wait. It will wait. I will make it wait."

Fíli's mouth hung open, but it was not long before he winked. "You know, Danîe said that for ten years."

"See then?" Thorin smirked back. "I have time."

"Life happens on a Quest, or off it. You know as well as I."

Thorin half glared at his smart-witted Heir, feeling a swell of pride. "Aye, it does."
"Then we agree." The lad's growing enthusiasm was a spreading fever, and Thorin kept their foreheads yet together, each drawing strength from their passions, drawing understanding from the bonds of beloved kinship.

"So, though she thinks she is alone, she is not," Thorin said, concluding his explanation.

But Fíli was not finished. "Does that mean she knows the whole Company is with her?"

"No."

Fíli's lifted his head up to look more directly at him.

"I think it best she discovers that on her own."

"So you did not tell her when she accepted onto the Company?" Fíli asked, as if he were asking a Dwarfling if he knew his way home.

"She will see it. The words are in the contract."

Fíli nodded, his face easing.

"That is when she will truly accept," Thorin pressed in once more. "And whether or not she does, that is when she should know."

His Sister's Son's concern was not entirely appeased. "What if she doesn't realize?"

Somehow Thorin was not worried. "She will, whether she can voice it or not."

"She will think you tricked her, N'adad."

"No—" What? This shocked him. "I have not. How, when it is written?"

Fíli just stared.

"There's no trickery, no secret how this Company moves, Inûdo. She has been with us; she remains to see more of it."

"That does not mean she will understand this detail."

"Perhaps she will not chide me strongly when she achieves her goal and remains alive. We will be there to help her on both counts. She's been searching for help since she came through the fogs, and I will give her that." Thorin was sure of his answer. "And as to her perceptions of our Companies operations, pay mind; she is very observant."

Fíli nodded, and then he added. "There is but one choice." Thorin was sure Fíli spoke with more than one meaning, but he stuck to the one in the open. "You cannot let her go alone. None of us can. So, she'll see what she's done, trusting herself to the Company of Thorin Oakenshield."

Thorin couldn't help thinking she already knew, whether she would admit it or not.

By now Fíli was set in his smiles, undaunted once again. "Any thought to the other? You said you have not chosen…"

Back to that. "I said it was private."

"So you say, N'adad." At that Fíli flashed him an impertinent grin, "…as far as Roäc can fly."
They returned to camp just as Bombur placed the Thief's tea on a rock beside her, the steam from it rising just over her face. She liked a blend of cardamom and spice with green leaf. Thorin smiled; these were herbs he also favored. Bombur had spent time in the kitchens of Imladris; this blend was one thing he made certain to learn, having noticed how well Sona savored it.

Thorin glanced by to see her sleeping form shift. She breathed in the morning air and her eyes shot open as though someone spoke her name, and then she sat up to follow Bombur's movement as he headed back to the fire.

She glanced to the bronze tankard and then frowned, eyes sparked with wonder. "Bombur, did you…?"

Bombur merely nodded, his focus returned to stirring the almond dusted oatmeal several of the Dwarves preferred, Bombur most especially, this time garnished with honey and berries he'd found on their trail, and periodically turning the potato fry with egg and sausage, a hearty preference of several others— Thorin smiled, pleased that Bombur chose this morning to make some favorite meals among them, using his fine culinary talents to see it done.

"But how…?" she asked.

Bombur shrugged. "I know what food makes everyone happy."

*Indeed, our Cook knows; he brought supplies for your favorites knowing you would come.* Thorin's smile only increased, though he made sure to shield it from her view. He glanced over at Nori, who was watching on with a bemused expression along with several others, Dwalin, Bifur and Bofur included. There must have been some wagers.

"Dori likes a good smoked salmon," Bombur began with particulars.

*And various teas, like you, Thief.*

"Glóin loves biscuits with chocolate bits."

*Don't forget the salted pork…*

"Kíli will eat anything I put in front of him."

*And then some.* Thorin nearly snorted, hiding behind a fist with his face averted.

"…and my honey glazed scones always put a smile on Thorin's face."

Ah, honey. *Durin's Beard, Bombur, you didn't need to tell her that!*

He stole a glance to mark her reaction, to find her blushing. He could not look away… She shoved her hair aside—

—*How he wished to run his fingers through that hair*—

—and reached for the tankard and took it to her lips.

*Her lips…* He should not stare.

"It's perfect. Âkmînruk zu, Bombur."

*Asti—*
And Bombur jerked up, surprised by her usage, but just as quickly he expanded with smiles, beaming and shaking his head, keeping his eyes on the oatmeal over the fire. "Yamal, a pleasure, my Lady," teaching her a new word of Khuzdûl.

Meanwhile, as the Thief reached for her wash kit, Balin took a seat beside her, armed with contract, ink and quill. "Good morning, Lady Sona. I trust you slept well."

"I did, thank you." She stretched, her body motion-craved after sleep; she moved languidly, while her hands, delicate but strong, flexed above her head… "But please, it's just Sona."

Sona—

—Thief—you take it all.

"As you wish, Sona."

—Gold Song.

"Here's your contract, lass."

Join with us!

"Please look it over, and if everything is to your liking, sign it and return it to me, and all will be in order."

Aye, Mahal, may it be…

She smiled back at Balin when she took it.

The contract fell open on her lap, part of the parchment sprawling to the ground. At once stunned and shocked by the expansive length of it, she choked on her tea.

Thorin's breath caught on a laugh, and he was surprised by his own feelings, as he was used to such irritating reactions among People of Men, but it endeared him, somehow, coming from her…

How shall I live this way?

And then she sighed.

It will be hard.

He glanced her way now and then as she turned through the parchment, reading every side. It was not long before she was finished and looking for Balin, who sat on a log enjoying the potato fry.

"Balin?"

His Advisor froze in action, fork suspended, food abandoned before him. Thorin had to suppress yet another laugh.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I can talk to you later—I didn't mean to interrupt your breakfast."

But you already have, and he wants to know your thoughts—

—I want to know your thoughts.
Still she tried to escape back to where she left her bag, but Bombur was already there with her oatmeal, one he had garnished with cinnamon and cardamom in addition to the almond, honey and berries for the rest of them… This seemed to knock her off from her prior course: she turned and sat next to Balin on the log.

"Now's as good a time as any, Sona." Balin brought his last bite to completion and set his plate aside to take her contract in hand.

Thorin sat on the other side of Balin, desperate to know what she would say.

But she said nothing, staring intently into her oatmeal, tasty as it was. It was if she were reluctant to look any one of them in the eye, especially him.

Thorin felt his chest tighten, a slight trepidation bringing on the edge.

"Let's take a look here…" His Advisor unfolded the parchment.

The Thief continued enjoying her oatmeal, once popping her head up to give Bombur a sign of her pleasure, with her smile in addition.

*It will be hard beyond measure.*

Bombur looked his way, his eyes full of reward from his gift.

'Well done,' Thorin signed, and Bombur smiled all the more.

But soon Balin was at the bottom of the contract, and frowning. "You…" His Advisor clearly did not want to say the rest, so he spoke fast as if to spit it out. "…didn't sign it."

Thorin's eyes flashed to Balin and then back to Sona.


The camp had gone utterly silent, the only sound being Sona's spoon on her bowl.

*Why had he not expected this?*

"Yeah, about that… there are just some things I want clarified first." She continued to eat, and Thorin realized she was doing this for grounding. Why was she discomforted, *was it something they could fix?*

"Such as?" Balin directed the matter in that general direction, and Thorin set his stone mask, breathing even and slow.

"Well, for starters… There's the subject of what exactly my role in this Company is going to be."

Thorin glared at Balin, confused and tense. 'Surely you noted these details in the contract?'

"I thought it was very clear," Balin quipped, to both of them, aloud, and Thorin almost laughed: their thoughts were matched.

"Okay, well maybe their clarity isn't exactly the issue, that said…"

Everyone stared at her, most of them confused, wondering just what exactly she meant, not sure they would ever find out.
In addition, every single one of them eagerly awaited what she would say next.

She chose to read the contract: "The Lady Sona Anand Jones, who, acting as this Company's minstrel in waiting, resident pacifist, vegetarian facilitator, erstwhile diplomat, and sometime thief, shall, upon completion of said duties…" She let the words fade out, and then she made a kiss to the air, an expression she had sometimes when hard at thought.

Thorin quietly sighed and turned his head from the vision. He was not supposed to think of kissing.

"I'm supposed to do all those things?" she asked, intruding on his thought with the same word.

Supposed… expected. What were their parameters?

The contract, Thorin; it's about the contract, and her list of duties…

"It is my understanding that you already do," his Advisor calmly pointed out.

'Âkmînruk zu, Balin.' Thorin signed to the side.

All the Dwarves nodded, agreeing, smiling.

"Uhhh…" She stumbled over her own thoughts.

"Is there anything else about the contract we need to clarify?" Balin asked, nudging her to the next objection.

"Well…" She stopped. Clearly she was embarrassed to say it. Something more troubled her. What could it be?

Thorin waited. Time was forever.

But then she carried on.

"Here, where it mentions funeral arrangements," she bit upon the spoon in her mouth, and Thorin wanted to feel it… Now.

Focus, Thorin. She's concerned about burial rites…

"I just wanted to make sure that if I do, you know…" Die. She spoke of her death for the Company. No. If at all, it will be the other way. I am for your protection. That is why we do this…

I will not let you die…

"You know what, never mind. It's fine. It doesn't matter." Sadness and defeat coated her voice, yet she looked for the quill, and she would sign anyway.

This roused him.

No, not this way.

Whatever your concern, it matters.

He remembered their time in Imladris, when she spoke of burial customs of the lands where she came from. He recalled their moment with David's ashes: David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor, when she shared a part of her husbands remains to the winds.
The rites are so… he shut his eyes on the horror rolling through him—

Stop. She'd shared this with him. And thus he accepted, steeling himself.

"Balin," Thorin stopped them both. "Please make an addendum for the proper Hindu death rites and cremation to be observed."

Sona stared at him, mouth ajar, as if he'd just given her the costliest jewel plucked swiftly out of an unbuttoned pocket, all free for the giving…

The Dwarves stared on with mixed expressions of confusion, surprise and satisfaction. Kíli leaned in and signed to his brother his Brother, 'What's she mean— cremation?'

* Bodies fired unto ash… *

Fíli discretely replied on the matter.

A sour look tinged with horror passed over Kíli, and then he shook his head. Fíli signed a quiet assurance, his smile bright like the morning sun, calming his brother slightly.

Kíli looked back at Sona. Though she did not see him, he stared her way with an irked expression and Thorin wondered if he'd say something reckless.

"Aye, that's easy enough." Balin glanced at Thorin, signing, 'Is it?'

'Aye.'

Balin took the quill and made the necessary addendums, asking "anything else, Sona?"

"Um yes." She took another bite of her oatmeal.

Thorin could tell she wished this part finished.

"While we're on that subject, I just wanted to make sure if anything happens to me that Sasha is taken care of."

* Should the Dog have the life-length of Roäc, spanning beyond a hundred years, I would keep her safe past my days, and Fíli will shower her with love a whole life long. *

* But it will not come to that. *

"Don't worry, Lady Sona," Kíli could no longer contain his silence, but his words were gentle. "Nothing will happen to you."

Sona smiled with sad knowing eyes, ones who had lived through loss. "I know, Kíli, and that makes me feel about a million times more comfortable about doing this." She put down her empty bowl, biting her lip…

He pulled his own in, stopping when he noticed the pain he caused his lip.

He could not keep doing that…

"I just… it's just that… well, you never know what's going to happen."

Thorin slightly nodded, so barely none would see. He knew well death's tricks.
"The thing is… anyone of us could die at any time."

Aye.

"You never know."

Thorin felt a shiver down his spine, and he knew she spoke of her past, just as he remembered his. Even in battle, where death is expected, some times it isn't. *Frerin. Whipping his dual swords at the forefront of the battle charge, opposite Thorin, behind their 'Adad at the tip of the vanguard… His smile hard and bright and young before the gates opened wide…* 

"You could kiss someone goodbye…"

*David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor, had you kissed him goodbye?*

He saw it in her face.

Aye, *one last kiss.*

Dís said she tasted love and waiting; she cherished it long after, her most costly lost treasure.

*Anrân Birashagimi'ē—*

—That one should feel such loss for aches too personal to contemplate.

"…and tell them to have fun at the beach," she said, so sad, her voice near stopped by grief.

*Aye, you said this to him, the very words…*

"and then…"

*Birashagimi'ē.* Her words grew weak and stopped, and her breathing labored as she clenched her eyes, feeling it over again.

Just then the Dog whined from her place next to Sona, lying her head on the Thief's legs, to warm her with touch and share some of their sorrow, as beings do.

He wished he could touch her, soothe her, *but for this—!* He clenched his jaw, as if he could put a lid to feelings— within this context, *she spoke of her lost husband—!* Such thoughts were unfitting, unwelcome, and he'd best subdue them for the sake them both. A weariness gripped his heart.

"Sasha's my… well she's family to me."

*Of course she is.* The Dog is all she had left from home, aside from possessions.

Possessions do not fill a heart, not like family, *or…*

*I would offer you mine, if only.*

Nonsense, *stop. Stick to the contract.* Thorin looked back at it and let his mind wander to open spaces.

"And I know maybe that's silly to all of you… but…"

Silly? What's silly? Thorin looked back up, to see his Sister's Son shaking his head, having lost the thread of conversation.
Sona finished her thought. "I have to know she'll be looked after."

"Don't worry, Whatsafist—" Dwalin was quick to put in the answer shared by all.

"—Pacifist—" Sona corrected, putting a smile on a few faces, easing the tension among them all.

"We'll look after your Beastie," Dwalin promised.

Indeed, they would keep the Thief and her Dog safe until he saw her home.

With that Sona signed on to the Company of Thorin Oakenshield.

Chapter End Notes

A/N #1 Thank you Jenny-wren28 for taking this road with me, for being my Beta, for asking me to be your Beta, and for all the joy we've shared on these stories...

A/N #2: Thank you all for the comments, bookmarks and kudos! And thank you to all who are silently reading along!

A/N #4: Many of you have come to Biriz Akmâth from Jenny-wren28's On The Road to Find Out, but for those who have found this tale first, it's time for another nudge, to let all my readers know this is but half of a whole. If you haven't yet visited OTRTFO, which is this tale told from Sona's PoV, you are missing out!
"Tell me," Dwalin stepped alongside him. "What changed your mind?"

"Pardon?" Thorin asked, taken out of his thoughts of Sona. *She joined the Company!*

The Warrior glanced back at the Thief, clearly frustrated after she had refused to give up her pack to him a second time that morning. They continued the trail East, with Dwalin speaking out of earshot of the others. "Back in Imladris you said you wouldn't ask her."

"I said I didn't." Of course he hadn't.

"And now you did." Dwalin spoke like he questioned a Dwarfling. Seems he and Fili expected this manner of questioning would have some effect... They mistook.

"I did."

Dwalin gave his best 'are you kidding me' glare and waited for Thorin's explanation. It did not come, so he pressed again. "What's different?"

"She came..."

"You didn't expect that, eh?" Dwalin had bet on the Thief.

Thorin shot a glare toward his Friend for silence. "It is not what you think. She needs us."

"In what capacity?" Dwalin's eyes were wide like Bombur's favorite plates.

"To keep to our Quest but follow her should she leave it."

Dwalin's jaw went slack as he understood, if only partly.

"And where's she headed?" Dwalin stared hard, his mind following a path he clearly didn't like. "She's with us now," he stretched the last word ominously, then pressed passed... "Unless—" And then he glared at Thorin, prickled by his thought trail. "Wait— Balin's often said he thinks Whatsumaist's lost and looking to find her way back—"

Thorin nodded, no need to deny it.

"You mean to follow her home, Thorin?" He asked, leveling his question with a disapproving glare. "I've no idea how this will go, but we've no business there, wherever it is she hails from, should she choose to return to it. Seems more like we should hope she chooses to stay."

Thorin stared at him dumbfounded, completely shocked his Friend had thought this far out. But he had it wrong. "Not home," Thorin clarified, now more certain Dwalin had a fair idea just how far away she 'hailed' from.

"She believes she must do something first, something dangerous," Thorin explained. "She believes she must do it alone, for the good of all."

"Tell me," Dwalin stepped alongside him. "What changed your mind?"

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"She believes she must do something first, something dangerous," Thorin explained. "She believes she must do it alone, for the good of all."
"Bollocks." A scowl settled deep in Dwalin's face. "Can't be."

"So I asked."

Dwalin nodded. "So when are you going to tell me what, Thorin? What sort of Wild Wargs trail her? Must be something stupendous—"

"I'm not telling."

Now Dwalin's glare grew fierce.

"I promised her my silence."

"Oh that's just lovely." Dwalin huffed out air and clamped his arms shut over himself.

"It's the right course."

"Since when? And that is no answer. It's better we are more informed," Dwalin nodded his head hard for emphasis.

Thorin sighed, and decided to say what he could. "Nothing trials her. It is something she knows… something to come. Foreknowledge."

Dwalin waited, inviting Thorin to say more.

"I cannot tell you except for generalities, for the promise I made."

"To keep it secret."

"Aye."

"Well, say on, what you can, then," the Warrior groused, rolling his eyes and sighing impatiently.

"There is a danger far greater than a Dragon that threatens all the free people of Middle-earth..."

Thorin filled him in much the way he had with Fíli.

They walked a half hour in silence, until out of the blue Dwalin asked, "If you're ever up to talk, I'd like to hear your thoughts on One, beyond what's known from books." Though he spoke almost carelessly, Dwalin looked afraid.

Unlike how he took the vague but weighty news of Sona's warning fears. Kâmin zashar.

Thorin blinked, shocked at the fact of the question posed, not to mention the change of focus or the unusual choice of topic coming from his Warrior Friend. "What do you know of it, aside from what you told our Thief?"

"Your Thief." Dwalin corrected, not even looking at him. "I've an inkling I've got it too; as does Nori."

Dwalin described it as though it were some disease. Thorin felt his chest tighten. Maybe it was. "Got what, exactly." He'd have him spell it out...

"Juzrazur—"

"You've talked to Nori about it," Thorin said. It was not a question; they were close and he did not wonder why.
"Aye, in our last trip through Dunland, he said he wasn't sure if he noticed something's changed. And then this happened to you after we met in the Shire." Dwalin smirked. His hands gestured toward Thorin as though he were some no good castaway. "We've been watching, comparing. And something's missing, well, and Nori said almost the same. It's come out of nowhere. Or maybe we just never noticed. We start to think we'll get wham-smacked from behind, just like it happened to you."

Thorin stared for a moment, fully aware Juzrazur'ē had not been there before the fogs. Perhaps this was more common that he first believed. "I can't say it won't."

Dwalin gritted his teeth. "We're both rather hoping it won't." Then he stared hard back at Thorin. "You're none too happy for it," he huffed, looking away, not asking for answer. "Nori'd rather have a lot of lasses one after another than just one, and otherwise he'd rather keep things the way they are… ranging with me when we're not on a Quest. I've a similar mind, except for all the lasses."

Dwalin shrugged.

Thorin knew it well. They were good friends, Dwarves at arms not inclined to want to live isolated. "You always said you felt nothing—"

"Don't hit so low, Oh King in Exile; so did you, before." No sarcasm shaded his eyes, in spite of the words. "For a good long while I've felt more than before."

Then Thorin frowned in thought, wondering if there was something specific. "What exactly do you speak of, Dwalin?"

"You can be so coy; don't expect less of others." Dwalin glared straight back at him, and though they were moving, they were now nearly nose to nose. "I'm not telling," he repeated, using the same inflection Thorin had a while before. "At least nothing more about me."

"You don't know who." Thorin knew it was true.

Dwalin's eyes were fire. He threw his hands up. "It's all so… jumbled and rushed, I've a gnawing sense of restlessness."

Thorin looked at him, nodded, remembering… so ominously familiar, his Friend felt Juzrazur, had no idea toward where, and didn't want to talk about it. And yet he had so many questions.

One fear Thorin could eliminate immediately. "Just because it's sudden does not mean there's Binumrål."

"Of course not," Dwalin rolled his eyes at the thought. "But why so sudden? Maybe they're falling out of somewhere like where Whatsafist came from… Kaleforn'ya."

Thorin looked at him, now frowning. "And where do you think that is?"

"Not from here…" He waved his arms, indicating everywhere. His body moved with tense agitation, and then suddenly went still except for the pace they kept. "Maybe they're lost…" A worry-filled expression expanding his face. "Never mind that." Dwalin brushed it off.

Then he pointed a finger into Thorin's chest. "I'm meaning to talk to you, about what you're doing. Crush through the thorny hedge and find a way… Some of us would like to see it work."

What in Durin's name? Thorin frowned. He had never seen it not work, not until it happened to himself. And there was no way around the laws, surely Dwalin knew that.
Thorin looked to the ground ahead of him and kept walking, his mind like a roller drum turning the pieces.

Dwalin thumped him on the shoulder to get his attention back. "Chose for her."

"What?"

"You can't leave her anyway."

"No."

"May as well." Dwalin's face was close enough to hit. "And stop glowering on about it, it's a gift."

"When have I—"

Dwalin pointed to his face just as Thorin smacked the finger away. "Just now, right there." And then he laughed, a frustrated, exasperated and wearied expression full of smug attitude. "You're mulish, like Dáin's favorite Boar."

"No, Dwalin." Thorin went to the heart of it. "The Thief does not return the sentiment." He hoped this may change—dare he even think it? "I would not bind myself to her if she did not wish it…"

"You already have…She's of the Company now."

"Aye. But…"

"And so here we are."

"Aye."

"You think it's any different?" Dwalin stepped in time with him for another many silent paces, waiting for an answer that never came. "Warn us when there's things ahead we need to know."

Aye.

"Ãkmînruk zu, Dwalin."

Some time later Balin and Glóin took Dwalin's place, one on either side of him.

Balin had been with Sona most of the day, but now he came with Glóin; seemed both of them wanted a word, yet neither said anything while they walked a league, until finally Glóin looked aside and caught Thorin's eye. "I'm concerned you've boxed yourself in, Thorin." He spoke matter-of-factly, as if over some prospect for profit. Yet Thorin knew his Treasurer spoke of Sona as a member of the Company. "You can't very well get yourself out of things easily now."

"Nothing's changed." It was the truth. Thorin stared at the path ahead.

His companions nodded silently. Then Glóin bounced up, eyes twinkling. "But now you're willing to talk about it?"

"No."

They both looked to the ground, deflated.
But Thorin accepted something he hadn't wanted to say before, and somehow he didn't mind sharing it: "I need to be where she is."

"So have you chosen?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I should not bind myself to her without her knowledge."

They took that in silence, but not for very long, just a few steps on the dusty road they traveled.

"So you bind yourself to her anyway," Balin said pointedly, eyes fixed on Thorin's, his eyebrows high on his forehead, aimed in his usual jovial challenging way, "by having her join the Company."

"Only so far as in that contract you drew up, Balin, and no farther, and she read it. There was no other choice." Or if there was, he couldn't think of it…

Balin looked at him with doubtful eyes, but spared him any questions.

"Keep a mind on what yer doin' Thorin," Glóin warned. The worry had not left his Treasurer's eyes. Would there come a time they all let him think in peace?

Perhaps if he resigned himself…

The three of them hiked onward a couple more leagues without another word, as if his friends knew his need for company was greater than his irritated silence would suggest. In this his heart felt eased and some distance later he told them so. "Âkmînruk zu, Glóin, Balin."

Eventually he walked once again alone, up ahead of the rest. The Thief was not far behind, and, if he felt like it—and he did—he could hear her now and then when she spoke up during Balin's preliminary lesson on Dwarven Laws in Contracts.

Thorin knew, as much as Balin explained things, even more did he use this chance to get to know the Thief, his curiosity guiding him toward answers in observing her during his lesson. And Thorin knew his Advisor beamed over how well she paid attention, and that she even seemed to like it, something that shocked Thorin almost to laughter. But he kept that in with his face held forward. He felt comfortably watched by those behind, and certain someone would catch his mirth should he turn.

"Hmmm? I'm sorry, Balin, what was that?" Sona asked, something had distracted her. Thorin knew it would not take much to distract her from Balin's passion, no matter the interest she'd shared in it for a good long while now.

"I was just saying that most Dwarf common law roots can be traced back to our days in Moria," Balin quite graciously repeated.

"Khazad-dûm," Sona interrupted.

Thorin about forgot how to breathe, hearing her lips on the Khuzdûl, correcting Balin, of all people.

"Aye, Sona, so it is." Balin's answer came delayed, and he knew his Advisor was thinking after his
initial shock. Thorin was sure to hear questions later; Balin would ask, how can you teach our language, our secrets, when you will not choose her?

*I did not teach her that—I will not be blamed!*

Still there'd see a glint in his Advisor's eye over the laxness of Thorin's use of Khuzdûl—Even with her a member of the Company. *And she was!*

"I have oft thought," Balin carried on, "that perhaps after we retake the Lonely Mountain, we could turn our attention to one of our first homes, and restore it."

Aye, he had spoken of this in their times on the road, whenever they would travel, from town to town, settlement to settlement, until the Blue Mountains, and even then he would repeat it now and then. Thorin knew the ache in the old Warrior's heart, though he shared it for only one place, the Lonely Mountain.

"Óin and I have talked of it, and Ori, too, with an interest in the old libraries."

"No," she huffed low, her objection unyielding.

Thorin couldn't help turning to look at her.

She stared at Balin, stiff as cool hammered iron.

"Pardon?" Balin asked.

Thorin wanted to know, too.

*What did she know?*

"I…" She stopped, unwilling to say. But then she tried again. "I just don't think…"

Was it the Ring? Or had some other memory awakened to her?

"It's just not a good idea, okay?"

*Why, Thief?*

"You have no way of knowing what's there now."

*You could tell us…* 

"For all you know it's still overrun by goblins."

*Indeed we believe it is…*

"Or worse," she muttered.

*Why* was she speaking softer? Thorin strained, wanting to catch every word. *Whatever it was*, it was big. *Bigger than a Fire Drake? Smaller than a Ring*? At this point Thorin knew she wanted to say more, but she held quiet.

Thorin's jaw ached, wishing she would speak.

Balin, confused and curious, looked up at Thorin. 'What's this about? Has she told you?'

'No.'
Balin looked back at the Thief, but now she was looking at Thorin, her face full of horror.

'What is it?' he signed, but of course she did not understand.

Still she shook her head 'no,' her lips drawn tight in a grimace, her eyes filled with grief as though she'd just seen a close friend die only moments before.

With a nod he gave her his silent word. He would find out what she feared about Moria, and he would do what he could to prevent it from happening.

He could almost feel her gratitude, for reasons he did not understand.

You trust me, Thief. I feel it.

Âkmînruk zu. I'll strive to see it is well earned.

He walked past Bombur when they stopped to set camp, thanking him again for the attention to the Thief's breakfast that morning. Bombur took that in with pride and joy and then asked if he could have Kíli's assistance prepping the meal for this evening.

Thorin turned to go find his Sister's Son.

And then he would seek out the Thief—

"I'm glad you asked her on," Bombur hailed low, not taking his eyes off the water beginning to boil as Thorin made his way off.

"Yamal," Thorin smiled though no one could see it. "Âkmînruk zu, Bombur."

He had not expected to find them together, but a beautiful sight it was; somehow his Sister's Son had not managed to annoy the Thief too badly. He stayed back in the woods to see how it would continue. They both smiled and chatted as she strummed her guitar, until she asked if she could play him a song.

It was as if she offered him the moon! Kíli nearly jumped to his feet, but remained seated. "Would you really?"

Durin's Day come early…!

"Of course! Anything you'd like."

Oh, that's dangerous…

"Though… it would probably be best if you just picked a genre since it's very unlikely we know any of the same songs."

Thorin laughed. Good save.

His Sister's Son looked over his shoulder to check his periphery, but he did not turn back the other way, so he missed a view ofThorin, just off his blind side. Thorin frowned; he'd have to talk with
him about that—Fíli may not always have your back…

"Could you…" Kíli hesitated shyly.

Ohhhh…. He's embarrassed… Thorin's eyes go a bit wide.

"Could you maybe play something about…” Kíli couldn't finish his sentence and his face flushed fiercely.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't quite hear that last bit, Kíli."

Oh, how she teases! Kíli didn't say that last bit, as well she knows.

Kíli had to mumble twice before the Thief heard him nearly spit the word "love".

Oh my poor Sister's Son. Thorin's cheeks hurt from smiling.

"Oh!" A smile turned her lips up, so that Thorin felt the pain all the harder. "Well that's easy. I know a lot of songs about love. I guess it just depends on what kind of love you mean. Brotherly? Friendship?"

Surely she knows already, but gains pleasure in discomforting him so pleasantly. Our Thief—my Thief—has a mischievous streak her very own… Thorin remained smiling.

"Romantic?"

At that his Sister's Son blushed crimson. He offered one nod at the word, now so embarrassed he could not even look at her.

"Why, my little Prince—"

She called him that?

"Who knew such a fierce warrior was also a hopeless romantic?"

Oh Thief. Now he'll sulk all night. The lad was nearly on his feet. "I'm leaving now. Please pretend this never happened."

She held in her laughter as she grasped his arm and tugged him back down.

Thorin went still at this unusual display, for he'd noticed the Thief was none too fond of touching others, and more than that, Kíli had complied without complaint.

These two had grown close indeed and it warmed his heart.

"I think it's wonderful," she smiled so wide, looking at the lad's scowl as if it were a cache of precious diamonds. She strummed her guitar. "And I believe I have just the song for you. Though, be warned, this sounds better on a piano."

Piano?

Kíli's face crinkled in confusion, but he shrugged to let her know he'd listen.

And then she began to sing…

"What would I do without your smart mouth?"
Oh, Thief, but yours is smart…

"Drawing me in, and you kicking me out…”

He watched the upturn of her lips. *It's you, Asti, who kicks so hard.*

"You've got my head spinning, no kidding, I can't pin you down.”

Mahal…

Thorin looked away, to his Sister's Son settling contentedly in the grass as she sang…

"What's going on in that beautiful mind?"

*Beautiful? Mind?* Thorin shrugged. *But she was—I wish you would ask.*

"I'm on your magical mystery ride."

*I'm rather on yours. Does this mean you're lost?*

*Where is home, Thief?*

"And I'm so dizzy…"

*Ohhhh—*

"…don't know what hit me…”

*Asti. How do you sing what I feel…?*

"…but I'll be alright…”

*Wish I could be so sure…*

"My head's under water, but I'm breathing fine…”

*So overtaken.* Thorin barely breathed, shocked by how she described his present state. *So alive…*

"You're crazy…”

*No— not you. Never.*

".. and I'm out of my mind…”

*Out of reach. And yet you make me wish—*

*How well you cloud my way.*

"'Cause all of me Loves all of you…”

*One. You sing of Ones— Could you know how it feels?*

"Love your curves and all your edges, all your perfect imperfections…”

Stop. Thorin forced his eyes away. Kíli's had fallen shut, a dreamy smile tempered the crease in his brow— the song hit a chord for him, easing his heart's call. Dís had always said Juzrazur had a strong grip on the lad, from the day he was born. Thorin wondered who held the other end, smiling
"Give your all to me, I'll give my all to you…"

I cannot, unless—He didn't want to think it—I must wait.

"You're my end and my beginning…"

Beyond measure, most expansive… Will you share it, or have I been miscast?

Ze'binishki.

"Even when I lose I'm winning…"

How? A sweet spot for those who lose their way? I lose it often… Should I even hope?

The Thief's eyes were on her audience, Kíli, her aura saturated with a contentment wafting off her in near imperceptible waves—I can almost feel your joy.

"'Cause I give you all of me…"

I only dare dream…

"And you give me all of you, oh, oh…"

One. Oh to choose you… Asti…

"How many times do I have to tell you, even when you're crying you're beautiful too…"

He sees her again, a mess of tears on the flagstones before Imladris—Oh but you are, 'bogeys' and all…

"The world is beating you down…"

No, we will beat it upright. You have the Company—You have me.

She looked utterly happy, staring down at his Sister's Son, clearly seeing the peace she brought him through her voice…

"You're my downfall, you're my muse…"

How can one not find peace there?

"I'm around through every mood…"

I could listen, if you wished it, for hours on end had we time…

"My worst distraction…"

My best cause…

My rhythm and blues."

Blues?

"I can't stop singing, it's ringing, in my head for you."
He felt stretched toward her, watching, wishing. And something changed, a sadness flashed over her features and she shook her head slightly, asking herself a question, her brows slightly frowned in thought.

"Cause I give you all of me..." There she brightened once more, as if she remembered a name she'd forgotten, and the person who owned it was pleasing. "And you give me all of you..." A satisfied smile took over her features—a Cat who had found her Mouse—

He felt the sharpness of a sudden intake of air. Singing brought her such joy.

—Never stop, Thief—

Sona—

—Gold Song.

But then then it was ended, and after a moment Thorin stirred just as Kíli roused himself with a sigh, to Sona's clear delight.

Still he could not stretch the moment, calling from where he stood, nearly breathless. "Kíli."

Kíli and Sona both froze and at once turned to see him. Her mouth was ajar, her eyes wide, and yet—was that—excitement? Covered by a question after?

"Bombur's looking for you."

Kíli smiled, bowed to the Thief, huffed "thank you, my lady" and then rushed off back to camp.

This made Sona laugh aloud, and Thorin could only stare, taking the air in deeply to settle his stance.

Think, Thorin, rather than bumble about here wordless: what can you say on the matter? "That was kindhearted." She has the kindest heart..."He's a gentle spirit..." He imagined she detected that. "Not everyone sees through his mischief..."...landing him in trouble numerous times...and without friends on too many occasions.

Her spirit was equally gentle, if also sharp as the finest-honed blade.

She's staring at his lips...? Or do I imagine that?

Thorin came to where she sat, pondering how to broach what needed to be asked.

As he neared it seemed she took flight, removing her guitar in a flash, standing and breathing just a little too fast. Her hands moved absently over the neck of her instrument as color darkened her face.

He had wanted to come closer, and now thought, perhaps too late, he should have better kept more distance.

"It's kind of my thing." She lifted her shoulder and took a breath, perhaps to calm herself. "I guess I'm a little like Bombur in that way. He always knows what to cook for someone..."

"And you always know what to play," he rejoined, fairly sure it would put her at ease.

She smiled, nodding.

He wondered, humming beneath his breath. What song would she choose for him? "I'd be curious," he said before he could stop himself. No. No no no. He could not ask. He should remember what
he came for, and forget personal dreams. "I need to hear what you know of Moria; as much as you are willing to share."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Greetings, Readers! Hope you're enjoying the story... Poor Thorin's stuck in a slow burn while his Company watches and worries...

I'm off on another adventure over Memorial Day Weekend and I'm not sure I'll be able to post before I leave... We shall see. If not I will be back in two weeks.

y
"Of course," Sona said tightly, her smile pleasant but guarded as she placed her guitar against the oak tree behind them.

Did she rather not speak with him? Or was it the subject of Moria that set her on edge?

"I kinda expected this conversation to happen," she said, her voice hushed low like the time before. Clearly she dreaded the topic—a grave thing, a thing she rather not contemplate, much less discuss. Yet she was driven by need.

He pulled a hand over his beard. and it was for his People, for Balin, she spoke a warning. Aye, it was a thing he must know.

He stood awkwardly a moment, wondering what he should say.

"Mind if we go for a walk?" she offered, now standing at his side.

Relief spread through him. She only needed a moment. Perhaps he could lighten the mood, buy her time, ease her cares… "I should've thought you had enough of walking today?"

That made her smile, and he relaxed a bit on the inside. Then she gave him a knowing look and pointed at her ear. "Little pitchers have big ears."

Ahhh, she did not wish to be heard. But they could not go far.

"Well," she came to the point, "what do you want to know?"

Nothing, thank you. But that would be a waste of knowledge, your knowledge, and we need to know all we can—

"All that needs knowing." He smiled, trying to ease her cares with his expression. Somehow he knew it calmed her. Plus, by asking her to tell him everything, he would have time to listen, to hear her, watch her as she talked. He chose to walk the periphery, just out of sight of camp, far enough out where no one could see them or hear them, but close enough where a shout would be heard and the Company could be there with axes in an instant… He kept her to the inside, enjoying her company, no matter the grave concerns they must discuss, maybe even all the more for it… Where did that feeling come from? "Though we could begin with Moria."

She nodded. "Okay. Moria… There's a Balrog," she remarked abruptly with no hesitation.

Thorin halted. He heard that right? "The Balrog—"

She caught his gaze over her shoulder, surprise clouding her features.

Thorin recalled the sketches of a flightless winged-demon of fire and smoke with legions of Orcs under its command. Dwarves delving deep had aroused it in Durin's time, and it vanquished the First Father and laid waste to Khazad-dum. Still feared by the few who travel through the dark ways of the Mountains, it hadn't been seen in over an age…

"You knew about it?" She frowned, confused.
Thorin barely nodded. "Durin's Bane..." That's what they called it. "...is re-awoken."

"And the mines are completely overrun by Goblins," she looked ahead of the path he chose as he kept close to her, making the bends as they walked. "Soooo back to what I told Balin... it's just not a good idea to go there."

"Indeed," Thorin agreed, studying her face, creased with a look of worry. "There's more you're not telling me."

She partly shrugged her shoulder staring West. How she moves. "If you do not wish it, you do not have to tell—"

"It's Balin himself."

Balin...?

Sona looked entirely crestfallen, eyes grieved, head bowed, shoulders slackened like she carried dead weight. "He leads an expedition of Dwarves to retake Khazad-dûm."

What? No. Why would he leave the Mountain to do that? Do we fail re-claiming the Mountain...?

"And they are successful."

They... who? Balin and...?

"At least at first. But then the Goblins and the Balrog show up, and well... Gimli—"

Gimli?

"... and the fellowship he's traveling with find Balin's tomb later."

Nooooo. No. no...

"After. The entire city is a tomb for that matter."

He cannot do this—"Balin..." Thorin groused, looking back toward camp, imagining his Advisor, his oldest Friend, gone off with too many Dwarrow to die in barren halls... And Glóin... Stone silent ponderings set a fire in Thorin's heart, Glóin's lad was like one of his own, and a memory passed his mind, three Dwarflings fallen asleep at play, one gold, one brown, one red haired, all wrestled together and wound to the point of dreams... And she had said Gimli—

"How—with Durin's Bane—does Gimli...?"

"No," she stopped him from more horrid thoughts, staring into his eyes like she could read his soul. "Gimli and the fellowship escape..."

His face eased, utterly relieved, though questions remained. The Fellowship... who comprised it?

"...though at great cost to one of their number."

One of them dies... who then?

He did not ask. He would not... but waited into silence... wondering...

Who? She acted as if she knew them personally, not from her 'books', and there were battle deaths in their future—though not Gimli, the cost she spoke of— And yet, how deeply she mourned one she'd
never met. Or had she? Thorin let his mind wander over that, and left her to think in quiet as her face remained melancholy. His eyes wandered to her hands that clenched her braid with fierceness, like she would claim the moment's victory and press worry from her mind through the strength of her hands. He wished he could be the grounding anchor she sought. Watching her fists tighten over her hair, he kept quiet, asking nothing. Clearly the subject troubled her, and he would let her rest from it.

"Don't you wonder about your Quest?" she asked, breaking the silence, surprising him. "If it's successful?"

"For the Lonely Mountain?" Aye, fearfully he had wondered, but he would never allow himself to ask. "There are dangers I should know of, to be better prepared against them." This was the logical truth, though the thought of actual knowledge somehow made his insides roll with dread. "You know what these are—"

"Well… funny you should say that."

Why was it funny? Was this not a serious topic? His head jerked up and his eyes held her face, her lovely face, and all he could do was smile slightly as she dropped her braid. She was chuckling, too, and staring at his mouth… almost like she wanted to taste it. Nonsense, utter nonsense, and how could he think such things now?

"It's just that, I don't really remember much about it."

You don't— remember. Then why do you ask what I would know? He considered a moment. She had not asked that— she asked if he wondered about success. Do they make it?

Did she know the answer to that?

"I read the book when I was just a kid." Her smile faded as she let her frustration loose with a low pitched sigh, and he knew she wasn't happy for her lack of memory. "Most of what I know has to do with you know what." She pointed to her gold band, Gold. Sona. But her face, eyes pointed with dread, spoke of another ring… One they would not name.

Thorin nodded. Kâmin zashar. Of course. Far outweighing a small Quest to regain a People's treasured Homeland…

"And for that matter," she continued, looking away at the greenery along their narrow path. "I've no idea how much I do know is even accurate any more since Bilbo never showed up."

"How so?" Thorin asked, catching her eyes again in his, eager to know her thoughts, confident that they'd gotten by so far… "The Halfling was to find this…artifact. What else was he to do?"

She held a palm out to touch the high grasses swaying lightly in the wood-cloaked breeze. His lips curled as he wistfully envied the tufts of foliage brushing beneath her hand.

"Well, for starters he saved you from the Trolls."

"So did you," he winked, but she wasn't looking.

"You're welcome."

Her words only made him smile more. And she swallowed on her laughter, pulling her hands up in mock surrender. "Honestly, he's important."

Thorin just stared at her.
"He saves you from all kinds of stuff."

"Such as?"

"Giant spiders, for starters."

Spiders. Thorin set his stone mask. He hated Spiders. But this posed no problem, truly. "That is simple; you tell us where they are, and we avoid them."

She frowned and curled her nose, breathing aloud yet again. "That's the problem… I don't know where they are."

Ah, well then. "I see." He took to pacing, hands clasped behind him. However unpleasant, Spiders were a problem for another day. He began leading her back toward their camp.

Something else gnawed at him. This was the second time she said she hadn't remembered something of their Quest. He wondered, who wrote the 'books' she'd read? How was a story so pale, when it contained Trolls and Wargs and Orcs and Giant Spiders and Dragons? And Dwarves. Had the writer portrayed Dwarves as boring?

He laughed inwardly and held no bitterness. These 'books' no doubt came from the Elves and Men who wrote them, and his Thief was undoubtedly most focused on the fate of the… the artifact. A wider World stretched beyond their scope of deeds, successful or not. "Do you know of other perils that stand before us?"

"Let's see, you already know about Orcs and Wargs," she used her fingers to count. "… and... you know what."

The artifact.

"Done with trolls," she continued. "I just told you about the spiders…"

And then she bit her lip while she pondered and his teeth pulled at the flesh of his own absently, fortified by the fingers of his free hand pressing hard at the indent between his lip and chin… He nearly forgot the topic, such an unpleasant one in comparison to the view of her face— Pay mind, Thorin, of what she speaks.

"I don't have to warn you about the Dragon."

Thorin laughed outright, and Sona's head whipped up, mirth lighting her eyes.

"And then we're going to meet some really dooshee Elves."

Dooshee…? What? Is that Hindi?

He looked at her doubtfully— We've already met Elves…

"I'm serious! Their King puts you in jail and everything and Bilbo breaks you out using old wine barrels and it's all very clever."

The Elven King, Thranduil. No Friend of Dwarves. Thorin frowned, thinking. "We travel through Mirkwood along the Forest Path, but I do not intend to step one foot North of that path."

He'd wanted to avoid Thranduil's realm when he'd plotted their course, but it was a danger he'd been willing to risk, with the Forest Path being a lot safer than the old Dwarf Road to the South, cutting very near Dul Guldur where the Necromancer had been setting up a stronghold attracting the vilest
Thorin knew King Thranduil was an Elf without honor, but he'd expected no trouble for merely crossing through on the Forest Path… surely the King would not jail them for trespass…? But it was good warning. They would keep their guard up.

He glanced briefly at Sona, who blew a stray strand of hair off her face before she asked, "Is Mirkwood where the dooshee Elves live?"

That expression again, did it describe Elves? "Dooshee?" he repeated, hoping he said it right, catching her laughing behind her hands as he muddled over possible meanings. "From how you say it, I gather this is not a good trait?"

"Nope. It's not." She looked like she just heard one of Bofur's more explicit jokes… "It's short for dooshbag—"

Dooshbag?

"And don't ask me what that means, because we are not having that conversation."

*Then why do you use the words, Thief?* He wondered, smile-frowning at her with his mouth good and shut, but only for a moment before he returned to the topic at hand. "Then aye, that is where the dooshee Elves live…" he repeated her words, feeling daft about the expression but enjoying the smile it evoked from Sona. "North of the Forest Path."

"So we just avoid them," she said, suddenly frowning like she mislaid her pipe, although she didn't smoke…

He was going to ask but then she was just as quickly beaming once again, and then she cried out "Ohhhh!" and scrambled past him to the side of the small path where a thatch of lavender bloomed along the edge.

Thorin stepped with her toward them. She bent into the tall sprouting shrubbery and breathed deeply to better catch their scent, and all he could do was stare. A feeling of bemusement settled over him. Lavender, the Purple Flower of the Lonely Mountain. And she liked the scent. He knew she liked the scent—She wore it… *why wouldn't she like it?* But he'd never seen her near the blooms themselves…

Nungu Azsâlul'abbad Zabal—

All at once she snatched a handful and thrust the bunch toward him.

Wha—

"Here you go." She shook the bundle, impatient for him to take it.

Why? What was this? *What's she doing?*

*A game? No, she couldn't— she wasn't able. It was not her way.*

*Thank Mahal.*

But she wanted to give him *courting flowers?* She had *no idea*— He stared at them, slightly frightened, to be honest, if he were to measure fear by how hard his heart beat against chest, fully armored yet unprepared for this assault.
"Don't tell me you've never seen lavender before," she admonished as she took a step toward him.

Uhhh. No. I have. It's Lavender. Nungu Azsâlu'abbad Zabal. Swaths of the bloom purpled the Mountain each year in summer… But Thorin could not move, nor could he open his mouth to explain. How had they gone from 'dooshee' Elves to Sona gifting him court ing flowers?

"You should put some under your head tonight when you go to sleep."

What's she saying? She continued to hold the flowers at him, looking slightly irritated; he knew she wanted him to take them, but—

What had she said?

"You hardly sleep, and when you do it's light or fitful—"

What? What's that got to do with anything, and wait— you watch me sleep?

"Don't think I haven't noticed…"

You did. And now you give me flowers. Why? For no reason other than to help me sleep? Could that be it? As before, he still couldn't open his mouth.

"It'll help you."

It will remind me of you.

"The smell is very calming…"

And Home.

Lavender. Purple Flower of the Mountain. I know. He stared at them. Do I take them? Surely she doesn't mean… She might not understand why I wouldn't.

Gold Song— he thought of her, too, now, when enveloped by that scent— the essence of Mountain and Sage— that scent in her hair.

His heart battered on. She would help him sleep? He was sure these blooms would bring no rest tonight. She set her jaw, about to force the issue, when he could finally move and lifted his hand to receive them. I will take your flowers… though you do not wish to court me.

His pinky grazed her hand before she let go, her skin cool to his touch.

There is no way you ever would.

It was bold, that touch. He blinked at his audacity, biting down regret.

It was not his place. She was his Friend, missing others, her family, her home.

David Ho'ard Jones Jun'yor, whose ash he helped her spread to the wind—

A custom of her People…

"I really hope it works—" she said, finishing with a sigh.

What works? He wondered, having lost the thread, still not quite able to move.

And then someone coughed. Thorin jumped and turned, irritated to be caught off guard so… to find
Bofur standing before them in the direction of camp. The Miner whistled and fidgeted and smugly kept his eyes to the trees, for privacy, for clearly he could see the flowers. Thorin held them tighter in his hand, feeling warmer. "Yes, Bofur?"

Bofur could not hide his pleasure. "So sorry to interrupt—"

"Tellin' tales, Bofur," Thorin groused under his breath, frustrated and slightly off balance, knowing the flowers were a token of friendship, yet certain Bofur would assume deeper meanings. It felt like glass beads in his boot, because the Miner was wrong.

"—But dinner is ready." Bofur waved Sona's guitar, smiling wide, bobbing his head down and winking all at once. "And Lady Sona, as the Minstrel in Waiting, I believe you owe us some songs."

She laughed, oh how she laughed, and the sound was like a twinkling down his spine as he could smell the lavender he was crushing in his hands. "Indeed, I believe I do, Master Bofur," she said, making way. And here Thorin felt the distance, staring at her in wonder; she came from a world away, so far far away.

Why flowers?

*It isn't what you ever dare hope, Thorin. Just because Bofur might assume; or any one else, even—Just. Calm. Now. And Thorin set his stone mask.*

She moved off but stopped at the quiet behind her, where Thorin still waited, his arms pulled back, his free hand linked to the wrist of the one clenching the blooms, the scent deepening around him. She turned to see if he was coming.

He tried to smile, knowing he failed at it. his feet gripped the ground through his boots for hold where he felt he had none.

He couldn't.

Not yet.

"I'll be along." *Later. Much later. "You have given me much to ponder."*

She smiled back at him, the biggest, boldest smile, as if she knew what she'd done… *but that was impossible.* She looked so—*happy.* Well. *She will now play music— and music makes her happy.*

And she and Bofur were back on the path to camp.

Thorin lingered, his hand pulling forth the sprigs of lavender.

Reason settled the beating of his heart.

She did not know their customs.

She did not wish to court.

Nor did she wish to torture him.

She only wished to ease his sleep.

Catching the ache in his throat with a hard swallow, he tucked them into the long pocket of his coat, to pack into his bedroll later that night.
'What kept you so late out there, Thorin?' Dwalin signed before they nodded off. Nori had the watch. 'I thought I'd have to hunt you down and have the Whatsafist—'

—Pacifist—

'...force your dinner in you...'

—She brought him dinner that first night—

—He would forsake this needless aching.

Thorin glared over at his Friend, reminded too sharply of his current struggle.

'Nonsense.' Thorin signed, each move sending a waft of her lavender into the air around him. *Nungu Azsâlul'abbad Zabal*... No one had seen him tuck the flowers away, but surely Dwalin could smell the blooms. 'You're not my 'Amad.'

Dwalin snorted. 'Course not. Just your Friend.'

Thorin nodded, grateful, saying nothing for a time, until finally he thought of something. 'She doesn't know our ways.'

'She can learn 'em.'

Thorin chuckled quietly, but stopped himself. *Does she want to?* He could not hope too keenly. *What would she think if he did learn?* Surely it would cause her pain, just like the colors in Imladris...

They looked easy on each other now, and Dwalin was thoughtful, with no teasing in his eyes. 'She was off while you were gone, kept looking back toward the woods.'

Thorin's eyes narrowed. 'What should that mean?'

'Nothing.' Dwalin shrugged, keeping his face neutral. 'She only truly settled into song once you were back.'

Thorin let that rest in his mind a bit.

*Sona—

—Gold Song—

*You care for me.*

Then Thorin smiled at Dwalin, whose confident eyes reflected the warm firelight back at him. 'Âkmînruk zu, Bâha-amê.'

'Lomil ghelekh, Buhel.'
Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: Well now. I was going to delay this a week because of my upcoming adventure on the weekend, but I heard it through the grapevine (from Jenny-wren28) that Maybe a Pilot is really looking forward to this chapter from Thorin's PoV, to see what he thinks of the lavender from Sona the first time... AND... since in OTRTFO we just had the other lavender scene, well, it's fitting this goes up now. I'm giving it a mini-dedication: the post date is for you, Maybe a Pilot!

A/N #2: I'm currently in the draft stage of Chapter 25... There will be 27 chapters in Part One, so we're getting close! I may need a two week break in here somewhere, but we shall see how the muse cooperates. I won't sacrifice quality for speed.

A/N #3: Thanks to all of you sticking with me, and all of your comments, bookmarks and kudos. I appreciate them!
Next evening the Thief called him over with a nod to her small finger, the one she had touched him with, the one with her gold ring, Sona—

—Gold Song.

She'd remembered something from the 'books.' Something about a Man or a Bear who turned into a Bear or a Man. A Skinchanger. Though Thorin had heard of their kind, he had never met one.

"Was he friend or foe?"

She shrugged that way she did, one shoulder up while she shook her head, a chagrined smirk on her face. "Again, I don't remember." And then she scrunched her nose some, like she just bit into a sour root. "Except I don't think he liked Dwarves much."

Thorin nearly smiled, most others didn't like Dwarves much, some with reason, others off rumors and reputation. But she was different, and he delighted in the fact she'd come to him once again, even if the details of her concerns remained spotty or vague. And at that he let the smile surface, his lips slightly turning up, just as he let himself enjoy her company, no matter what was said.

Time passed. Days on weeks. They'd wake, breakfast, spar, move, set camp. Wake, breakfast, spar, move, set camp… Day by day making ground upon the Misty Mountains.

Habits formed to include the Thief in the function of the Company.

Bifur would join her in the mornings, with her singular moves she called Yoga. The Toy-maker followed her moves in silence, and it helped calm him, and the two grew close without need of words. It cheered Thorin, catching glimpses now and then of one of the two effortlessly making the other feel welcomed.

Once on the road and hiking, Balin would take her aside and teach her more of their ways, history and origin, and some Khuzdûl to Thorin's pleasant surprise. It was as though his Advisor thought she would hold some prominent appointment, and needed to hold her own… Thorin wouldn't let his mind go to what that appointment might be. Best leave that dream unspoken. And Sona listened to Balin with great attention, avid interest even, and it appeared she felt the honor of what Balin chose to do, how he spent his time, and it was Balin who told her, "'Tis not our gold or the things we make into art that would be sold, and thus we have shared with the world; 'Tis our Society and Culture, our People, or True Names, our Way of Life, and our Language that we deem precious."

Thorin could not have said it better.

One day Balin made her laugh unexpectedly, some word about Dwarven sense of direction in the dark, specifically when they found themselves underground.
"Really." She said, low, disbelieving.

Thorin felt eyes on his back and refused to turn, sure Balin attempted to jest with him. *Thorin had never been lost in the Mountain… and his Advisor knew it well—*

But then she burst out laughing, and Thorin had to turn, to see her laugh so hard her cheeks turned dark red, and Balin couldn't help but stare. Then he glanced at Thorin, and winked.

*The old Cod.*

Finally, his Advisor chuckled slightly, and muttered, "Well, you know lass, there's something else many peoples find strange about our folk, and it's that our Dwarrow-dams, just like the Dwarrows, usually have beards."

This news delighted her and she beamed, her eyes glistening with excitement.

That was when Fili piped in, "Seems ridiculous to me, that most people of Men find the hair of women … distasteful whenever it's found anywhere but on the top of their heads…"

Thorin listened, bemused by Fili's diplomatic semantics.

"Unfortunately, yes," she assured them all. "Apparently body hair is thought of as masculine…"

*Aye, strange people of Men.*

"…so therefore cannot be feminine."

*Rubbish and hogwash.* A murmur ran through the Company, all of similar sentiment.

"And don't even get me started on how over the past eighty years or so the razor companies…"

Razor Companies? Was this a kind of guild in the world she came from?

"…have used that to basically shame women into thinking they can't have any body hair…"

*What? How shame, and why only women?* There were many men among the people of Men who did away with their body hair. Thorin thought, perplexed, men of Men liked control, and perhaps it was their preference; but why did the women take part?

"…in order to sell more of their product…"

*Aye, surely a guild… a powerful and greedy one, ill managed, irrational…*

She looked peeved, her lips turned down, when suddenly she brightened. "But I haven't shaved for months at this point…"

*Shaving… the thought sent a sick shudder through him.* *Months,* she said. He frowned. Only *months.* How about *never?* He could practically feel the others cringe. But then another feeling settled in… and a grin stole upon his face. It was lovely to hear her say she didn't like to shave, that it was not *her* preference, because—

He stopped. He wasn't supposed to think this way, to give such feeling room to grow, or his mind an image where thoughts would lead— *her hair…*

"… and it's awesome!"

*May you never need to shave again.*

And then something else occurred to him: she'd been in Middle-earth for months now… He'd been battling this Pull—*Juzrazur*—for months now. It was not getting easier.

Thorin felt eyes upon him, and turned to see glances from Fíli and Kíli, Dwalin and Bofur, and Glóin and Bombur… The others were eyeing each other or the Thief, nearly all of them shaking their heads.

She looked over them all, assessing her, and she smirked. "By your standards, I must be quite unattractive…"

*No. no. You…*

Silence filled the space among them, several of them wide-eyed: the Company gawked at her like she'd fully lost her mind… Fíli stole another glance Thorin's way, followed quickly by Kíli… He set his stone face, averse to showing any reaction.

"I don't even have the beginnings of sideburns like my cousin, Tali does." Her hand was over her cheeks, showing where. *He could trace the spot with his fingers… But no. He could not.*

Everyone laughed, and Bofur nodded, the first to recover. "Oh, aye, lass, I'm certain most Dwarves would find you pretty enough without a beard," and then he winked, exaggerating the motion with his usual flair, not without glancing at Thorin on the way, his eyes twinkling under his boisterous hat.

Thorin glowered at the Miner, but, lucky for them both, the innuendo had escaped the Thief.

As time passed, The Thief's Dog spent more time with Fíli, even more so than with the Thief. Early on his oldest Sister's Son began training her to fight with him during his sparing practices. She was agile and a worthy partner. Thorin found the exercise fascinating, and often watched on when not participating.

Kíli once muttered his frustrations, something about advantages and fairness, as Dwalin oversaw their training. Dwalin gave Kíli an unlooked-for shoving to the backside, and the lad tripped up, landing on his back in the dirt between Fíli and the Dog. Fíli tapped her collar so she heeled.

"Learn early, lad," Dwalin scolded. "Nothin's fair in battle."

Soon after Kíli went off sulking, looking for Sona. Thorin suspected he'd ask her for a song. He chuckled, knowing well this would become a habit of his youngest Sister's Son, to seek her out prior to dinner.

As time passed, Thorin wondered at Tharkûn's absence… *It had been some weeks since they left the Elven City*… But he did not mention this, nor did anyone else. Thus they kept worry silent as they made more ground day by day.

Each evening, with their area surveyed, the Company would gather and dine near the fire, with their eyes divided to watch for intrusions from any viable paths of approach. During dinner, the shadow of dusk would fall upon them, then the ordinary shadow of dark before dawn, varied by stars and moon, and night clouds, and known too well by Dwarves spending time in the open… They could see far in it, and so they knew when it was safe to sing… Those times, at dinner and after, the Thief, as Minstrel in Waiting, would play for them, or tell stories, and soon it was each Company member had their own favorites they would request, and many would join along in the songs, pulling out their
pipes and hand drums.

One of Dwalin's favorites was from her softer, lyrical ballads, a Bob Dylan song, she'd called it, after singing it on one of their first nights and moving the Warrior deeply behind his stone mask.

"Hey! Mister Tambourine Man, play a song for me, I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to…"

Oh, Dwalin was gone, leaning toward her, taking in every word…

"Hey! Mister Tambourine Man, play a song for me, in the jingle jangle morning I'll come following you."

Dwalin caught his eye, and his grin was large, and Thorin saw the spark, and his heart swelled at the loyalty reflected there.

She sang of lost kingdoms vanished in sand…

Aye, that's how it was…

A flux of feeling reflected from the Warrior's eyes. Sona leaned close to him as the song wove on, smiling affectionately as he took in the highs and lows, melancholy with a hint of hope… he hung on the words for that hope.

She sang of streets too dead for dreaming…

'Then we shall wake it,' he signed fast and hard, his fierce desire formed into a fist over the fire.

She sang of stripping, or weakening, and yet the will to never give in.

'Aye, never.' And surely his fist tightened, though it was hard to tell through the knuckle duster over it. And Thorin felt the steadfast grip of his Friend's bond over the fire.

But it was the passion she woke…

'I will not heed naysayers.' Dwalin's gaze was on Thorin, his jaw set to bar any argument. 'Be there a blade in my foot, I step anyway…' His hand went to his heart, his fingers opening to point at Thorin. 'Fight when need calls. Wander on…'

Sona's eyes reflecting firelight, her voice melodic and full of sunlight in the darkness…

*The world is wide… Full of night shadows*— Thorin scoured the periphery, *as did Dwalin and the others, just as they had through the evening, guarding the shadow of dark before dawn.*

Just then she sang of disappearing, and ruins, and fogs — *The fogs*— Thorin trembled, his eyes panning over their surroundings, stunned by the deep fear suddenly sprung. He imagined her passing into those fogs — *away*— Through frozen leaves and haunted trees…

And though Dwalin scanned with the rest of them, his ears hung on every word Sona sang. She smiled at him and he smiled back, and then, in spite of fears, it felt to Thorin like everything fit, like every danger could be overcome.

These two had become friends; it was a lovely sight to see.

Watching the curve of her cheek as Sona finished, Thorin was shocked once again, and it eased the pain of fear from before, because he could see her. She was at home there, singing among them. *So*
"Enough with the dirges!" Óin spoke up in the following silence, his trumpet to his ear, waiting.

"Yeah, give us something loud and bang worthy!" Glóin agreed, grinning wide.

And a sly smile came over the Thief, and she set to make her guitar cry about a Highway to Hell, which they all thought sounded like the perfect party feast song after a well won victory… though they had no idea what Hell meant.

And, as if to make sure no remnant of melancholy remained among the Company, she sang one boisterous bar song they all loved instantly, "Raise Your Glass…"

They learned it quick, with laughter and cheer even if the ale was low to non-existent…

"So raise your glass if you are wrong, in all the right ways!"

So beloved was the song, that one or another of the Company would ask for it each night through the weeks that followed…

"All my underdogs! We will never be, never be…"

And joined her on the chorus…

"...Anything but loud…!"

To give the song whomp.

"… and nitty gritty dirty little freaks…!"

Together they belonged. Few understood. He looked at Sona—

"...won't you come on and come on and raise your glass, just come on and come on and raise your glass…"

—Gold Song had a knack for cheering souls.

She also had a knack to get peeved if she felt that tasks were denied her irrationally, such as when Thorin designated the night watches, and he never called on her…

"Why am I never on watch?"

Thorin stared at her with his mouth ajar— It had never occurred to him that he should even consider putting her on the watch— Why wouldn't she already know that? What's bothering her?

"Is it because I'm a woman?"

Ohhhh no…

"I'm capable of doing my share here, folks, so… what's the deal?"

Thorin stalled, his eyes expanded nearly to his hairline, his surprise compounded…

"Wasn't sure before, lass," Balin stepped up, "you've gender concerns?"

"Should I?" she asked, not gracing the Advisor with a glance, keeping her gaze focused squarely on Thorin.
He breathed in, measuring words. "That's not why—"

She stared at him, waiting, eyes sparked.

He stared back with equal force, unsure what it was she needed to understand— "The watch has nothing to do with being male or female, Thief." He tried to make his words gentle, feeling an upset rising within him, along with a dose of confusion and embarrassment at having missed this potential mine hole…

"Then what?" Her jaw was set and risen. "Because every single one of you has been on watch since I joined this Company… all but me."

"You're a Whatsafist," Dwalin butted in.

Âkmînruk zu, Bâha-amē.

"Pacifist," Sona corrected, the glare in her eyes easing.

"All the same," Dwalin nodded on. "We can't have you on watch when you might need to do violence to protect us all. It's against your calling, as you said yourself."

"I could wake you—"

Dwalin smirked, shaking his head 'no.' "Would you want to, if it meant we'd kill the problem at hand, even if they'd be Trolls?"

They stared at each other over a strong measure of silence.

And then her posture eased. "I guess not," she sighed, her eyes relieved yet still bearing disappointment.

Every evening after dinner, she would motion a signal and Thorin would take them just out of camp, where they would walk the periphery, and guided by her thoughts they would talk. Thorin always let her choose the subjects, not wishing to burden their moments with anything unwanted or unwelcome. In this way she grew more comfortable with him, and in turn he grew more at ease with her, sharing only so much as she was willing to hear. This worked well enough, he could readily admit. And, against what he'd first feared impossible odds, they were becoming friends. The only problem was he couldn't shut down his desires, nor the Pull of Juzrazur, so an ache took residence in his spirit, one he did his utmost to ignore.

After that she went to bed as soon as politeness allowed, and woke up each morning ready to go, cheerful, with nary complaint.

Invariably, sometime the next day Dwalin would be at his side. "What's with these night walks of yours, with the Whatsafist?"

—Pacifist—

Thorin would stifle the urge to say it wasn't his business, and try to share something. "We talk about… concerns she has."

"Concerns?" Dwalin's eyebrows reached skyward, probing. "You mean that big thing? Surely it's gone beyond that…"

"Well no, not only that…" That topic's barely touched upon, now… "…she's asks me questions…"
“Why—? ” And so I’ve told her of Erebor. Of… life back then.”

"Of Erebor?" Dwalin stifled a laugh. "And you, keeping yourself from feeling. How's that working?"

Thorin shoved him, but he couldn't help it: after a moment he answered, "not so well, but well enough."

And sometimes in the early mornings, before breakfast, Fíli would join him for a smoke. "You walk with her every night, N'adad."

Thorin nodded, sagely, looking out toward the mountains. "Observant, Inûdoy."

"Have you chosen yet?"

"Of course not. Quit asking."

Fíli laughed, not about to change tactics.

"So then, what do you talk about?"

Thorin couldn't help the smile edging his lips. "We just talk about… things she wants to talk about."

Fíli's eyes widened expectantly. "Such as?"

Thorin kept his mouth shut.

This had no effect. Fíli went on, "If it's not about choosing, it can't be too 'private' for you to say…"

Thorin glared over his grin. "Aye, she's told me of her family."

"Ahhhh," Fíli nodded, his eyes warm and full of dancing. "And you told her of yours?"

"Some," Thorin answered, and they both went silent, quietly smoking as they surveyed the Mountains ahead. They were closer now… close to the steps…

Balin would find him up front on the hike, prompted by the same curiosity. "You're gone each night a long time with our newest Company member. Care to share your thoughts, laddie?"

"No."

Balin just nodded, smiling, before he was off to find Glóin.

This did not stop Thorin from thinking of all that they shared…

She shared many things of the world from where she hailed. Her parents came of two distinct cultures, bonded by a strong love. She explained her 'Adad naturally had fairer skin than she did, though it was deeply tanned from hours of time spent on the sea, while her 'Amad had a darker complexion—gifting Sona her lovely brown skin that always looked sunkissed—

—Birız’ul—

—And that he was Christian while she was Hindi: this had to do with Faith, Sona explained, something Thorin found hard to follow. But it meant there were disagreements. Many people did not favor the union. At times they soaked in waves of cultural misunderstanding, but still they thrived; her 'Adad, a 'surfer' she called him, "appreciated waves…so much in fact, he rode upon them."
Thorin could not help a chuckle.

And he found it thought provoking: Dwarves were many colors, some light, some red and some brown and some dark, with hair of every different kind of shade... They were all Dwarves. They all looked to Mahal their Maker, and the ONE who allowed them, not with Faith, but with Knowing.

How did people of Men from her world live without feeling lost?

Sona seemed to do fine.

She glanced up, smiling, "They are happy, in spite of the odds."

Odds.

Thorin wondered if there was a meaning beneath that, but she looked away after she spoke. And then he thought, odds—Her parents also had the 'Bi-polar' concerns— Sona missed them, and he shushed his contemplations, reminding himself as he did too regularly, she wanted a friend, an ear for her cares...

And he would be her friend.

She spoke of her sister, Priya, and her Sister's Daughter and Son, and she asked of his siblings—

—Of Frerin. And Dís. So he told her, holding to facts, suppressing feeling.

She did not ask for that.

Or well, maybe she did. Maybe it was he who did not wish to be exposed. He had his reasons, and for the time being he preferred to keep them from his mind, being confused by the intimacy of her questions, cautious with offering unwanted conversation, never quite knowing when he might step into something unpleasant. In all honesty, he would have preferred not talking. But with her questions, well. More than fearing he shared too much, he feared losing their talks. He had not chosen for her—he could not—but he reveled in their walks. He craved her company— he craved her— Yet their closeness grew as Friends. He could almost believe it was enough.

So he told of times before the Dragon came, when his Family was together, dwelling under the Lonely Mountain, as his Sigil'adad, King Thrór, grew more and more distant. But they were together, and those were times where he'd felt whole.

He told of when his 'Adad had first taken him and Frerin to visit the Ravens just before Dís was born...

He told of when Thrór came to their rooms at Dís's birth; the King almost left right away, but on the way out Thorin asked him to stay. He hadn't known it, but that was the last time his Sigil'adad would visit their private chambers... He left with a smile Thorin would never forget. Full of love, lost in longing and promise, not the eyes Thorin came to know later.

Skirting too close to unwelcome feeling, Thorin changed the topic.

He told of spending time in his father's forge, hiding under the long side of his biggest anvil, calmed by the beats...

He told of going through the guild markets with his 'Amad Arís, how she'd hold Dís in one arm and Frerin in the other, and they would visit the textile halls to meet the weavers... She took them to the best in the business, Zafîr's 'Adad, and Thorin's eyes basked in the color, depth & detail in the
tapestries…

He told of the time Frerin pulled a water lever, snuffing the coals to a half dozen of the main Forges; Thorin took the blame, losing the use of his Forge for a week and deprived of wood for his chamber hearth. His N’adad opened the back way to his chambers, warm and lit, sorry as could be, and Thorin slept in his wide-cushioned reading chair those nights, coddled and beloved.

He told of the lights hung on feast days… *let no one say 'Urdêk, the Mountain Hall, was dark*… Such were the days before the Dragon came.

He told of getting lost in the woods when he snuck out with Dwalin and Frerin to 'camp' the first time.

*Frerin.* Thorin thought of him strongly after sharing so much. He missed his brother every day, though he did not say it.

"You lost him," she stated, drawing closer with concern, somehow sensing his grief.

Thorin knew who she meant. "At the Gates of Moria, in the first assault…" that was all he could say, though he felt the rest: *I did not see him fall, we separated in the melee, he had followed 'Adad— I found his broken body after, alone, 'Adad nowhere to be found.*

After many weeks of evening walks, Thorin dared a question he'd harbored since they'd spoken that last night in the Elven City.

"What is bi-polar?" Glancing at her sidelong as they made their way, he noticed the question surprised her but did not offend. "How did it—" he stumbled for the words, uncertain. "May I ask—"

She nodded, urging him on; she had already told him things of this illness, of her Sister and Mother, on that night in Imladris; of counselling and medication, and patient understanding…

"—what has it done to them?"

And then she explained, when things were good, they were very good. There was nothing that couldn't be done. When they were bad, they were so bad, it could be impossible to get out of bed—*sometimes, in the extreme, they stopped caring if they lived, thinking it would be easier if they died, easier for themselves, easier for the ones who loved them*— Thorin swallowed on that, absorbing her meaning, *violent wide mood swings, sheer Mountains and Valleys, no place in between to take hold, no grounding, nowhere, no way to live…*

This was unlike the madness in the Durin line, which turned a mind on gold greed, sacrificing the bearer's true heart and with it all his cares… And yet it was close enough that she understood more than anyone he'd ever met. And, surprised at the fact, he did not feel embarrassed or shamed that she knew of what plagued his line, but rather comforted…

The next day she was picking and weaving daises as he explained the Durin family tree.

And that was when she lodged a more personal question. "So… with both your father and grandfather gone…"

*Asti…*

'*Adad-ê…*
"…that means you're the King?"

This was raw. "Aye," he groused, keeping his chin up, stone face set. No use arguing. "But a King uncrowned and with no Kingdom." He'd leave it at that, and snuck a glance at her, to find her with a thoughtful expression, brows creased, hands still at work with her daisy weaving. She meant no hurt. "So not really a King at all," he added, hoping that would finish it.

She looked toward camp, plucking another flower. "There are twelve Dwarves back there to whom you are a King and always will be."

Twelve stubbornly loyal Dwarves. Do you know how many I asked? These are the few who said 'Aye.' Yet Thorin couldn't subdue the smile forming at the edge of his lip.

She caught him smiling, and quickly smiled in return, causing him to blush.

Mahal's Hammers, he didn't want to blush.

"They will follow you anywhere and do anything you ask of them…"

Not quite, Asti. There are limits... things I would never ask.

But she went on. "You can't command that type of loyalty just because of who you are descended from."

All must follow willing, or not at all…

"That comes from love and respect for you."

I've lived to take the fore, to fulfill what I was born to be, to do… That, they respect. It is I who am honored by their trust…

But you?

She smiled partly; he hung on the upturn of those lips—

You hold me in high esteem, Thief… or? Do you like me?

As if to answer she nodded. "And I happen to know one human who thinks you're pretty great King material as well."

Wha–! He could not look at her but laughed inside, and he knew traces of his humor escaped as he felt the heat rise to his face.

He reminded himself, she referred to Kingship. Only that. Still, this did not stop the heat.

But she changed the topic again. "So you left the Lonely Mountain and led your people…?"

Oh aye. He breathed out. Back to history.

She truly wished to know. "We eventually settled in the Blue Mountains near the Shire." A time of hard adjustments… "Though we wandered for a long while. I found work where I could. I had to provide for my people."

"And that's what makes you a King," she quipped in response, jarring him out of his easy pace to look at her again, as she continued to pick and weave the daises. "Not a Kingdom or a crown."
Was she trying to make him blush?

*Of course not.* But he kept his eyes low just in case.

"So what kind of work did you do?" she asked, still interested in his personal details. Why, Thief?

*At least this one was easy,* or so he thought. He looked at the flowers she'd been weaving, wondering again, fleetingly, *why?* And then he looked to his hands, one firmly gripping the walking ax he kept on his open side opposite Sona. It was a fine work not of his own making, but a renowned ax maker of the Firebeards — "Smithing mostly. Though anything to do with metal." From weapons to tools, swords and axes, to levers and pulley-joints, to geared clock bits, rivets, bolts, nuts and nails: he had made every kind of thing of use from metal.

She asked what some of these things were, and he went on for some time, listing the things he thought would be most interesting, feeling fully at a loss with the number of pure war blades on his roster, never mind that they were skillfully made; she was a Pacifist.

And she wanted to know how it was done; every kind of detail. So he explained as best he could without examples.

Somehow it escaped his attention that she'd managed to get him talking about himself through his interest in the craft he loved… *You're good with people, Thief. Very good with people.*

"It's art," she said when he went quiet.

What's art? Thorin looked at her.

"What you do with metal and fire and hammers and physical strength." She was still picking daises; her weave was thick with them now. "It's art, and in many ways sounds like a natural extension of making music…"

*Indeed, there is rhythm… and meter… with the high pitched ringing sounds of metal being shaped — becoming — melody of the work.*

Thorin thought of Dwalin's favored song… *Tambourine Man…*

Aye, he had thought up lyrics as he'd worked over the years, many of which had made their way to song. She did not know they would sing and chant while smithing—

Now she scrunched her nose up. "Never mind. Forget I said that." She thought what she said was nonsense… "I'm rambling. That was weird." *Far be it!*

And he couldn't help laughing. "No, I understand what you meant… it is like making music in many ways." He stole a glance at her. "Not many make that connection." *Usually only those who made music and worked a beating trade—*

"Artists," she shrugged her shoulder that way she did, just as her skin darkened shyly. If he weren't certain otherwise, he would almost think she flirted… "What are you gonna do?"

—*What indeed, Gold Song?*

"Maybe…" She bit her lip again, and he chewed the inside of his own in response, his teeth pulling the flesh in, feeling the pressure on his lips…

*Oh Mahal. Stop with this…*
"Maybe after Erebor… but before the artifact… you could show me your work space?" She spoke hurried, as if she expected refusal.

*My Forge?* Thorin looked at her, brows bent on the question.

"And what it is you do?"

*Smithing?*

"I promise I won't touch anything and I'll stay out of the way. I'll be quiet as a mouse and you won't even know I'm there…" 

*That's hardly possible, Thief.*

She spoke hurried, as if she expected refusal.

*As if he could refuse…*

Her hands gentled and stopped over the weave of flowers within them.

"I would be honored," he answered, not sure when time or practicality would allow for such lessons, but looking forward to the days none the less.

She sighed, pleased with that answer, fiddling once more with the daisy weave in her hands, tying off the ends. She had made a ring of them, and she seemed utterly happy with it.

His smile grew along with hers, until they both were beaming at each other like two Dwarflings who just found the hidden sweets…

Then, as she grinned from ear to ear, she leaned over and dropped the ring of flowers on his head. "A King without a crown no more."

What—?

She didn't wait to see his gaping expression—*Will there ever be a time when my heart doesn't go to my throat*—? But turned and nearly danced off toward camp, leaving him stunned and alone once more, after gifting him with flowers yet again. *She has no idea.*

She had only meant to cheer him, surely. He knew she liked to see him laugh. He found he could not be angry or hurt, *even if he wanted.* He pulled the flowers from his head—*Nor could he wear them*— and found himself smiling softly down at the work her hands had wrought over the past hour…*for him.*

Curse a dull blade, *this was folly! What in Durin's Name was he to do?*

He wished he had his Forge, to work on metal now, to hammer something hard that would endure.
Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: Well now, this chapter takes care of some required exposition! Hopefully I've kept your attention. Action happens next chapter... and the pace kicks UP.

A/N#2: This past Memorial Day Weekend, May 2016, marks a year anniversary I'd like to call out: That was the weekend I got a text from Jenny-wren28, expressing her desire to write a story with Thorin, and asking me to be her Beta. Look how far we've come! Who could have know it would be so fulfilling? Thank you Jenny-wren28 for choosing to take this road with me.

For those who have not found it yet: Jenny-wren28's story is the other half of this one, told from Sona's PoV: On The Road to Find Out.

A/N#3: Your comments are a delight, thank you, those who do, for leaving them! And thanks to all the added bookmarks and kudos and those silently reading along!
Thorin left the flower crown on a stone, his heart aching, yet full.

It couldn't be helped that he felt such things, where she did not. And she did not know their ways.

Gazing at the crown by the light of the moon, the daisy petals looked like river pearls… and he wondered what it'd be like to be truly crowned. It was not something he wished, or even ever imagined. As far as he knew, though all others denied it, he was not King. Not yet—

'Adad'ê, where are you?

He returned much later, Dwalin still at watch. 'Thought I'd have to come get you after waking Bofur.'

Thorin shrugged, stretching out over his bedroll. 'So I'm here now.'

'What kept you?'

'Flowers.' Thorin didn't elaborate.

Dwalin's eyes went wide, Thorin could see from clear over the fire. 'Flowers?'

'Aye.' Thorin contemplated. And decided. 'Don't ask. I was thinking of Thráin.'

Dwalin nodded, leaving his head low in sorrowful remembering. 'I think on 'em often, our parents, yours and mine.' Dwalin glanced up, a fire back in his eyes. 'But you're thinking something else, right?'

Thorin didn't answer.

'You're ours and we're with you, barring his unexpected return.'

That was as close as Dwalin would come to saying hope as you will; until then you remain our King.

His mind wandered back to Sona. He thought he'd have trouble falling asleep, for though he was weary, his soul raced, while his heart wanted to run wild as well, even knowing it was no use. He was only there to be her Friend. His heart must feel it, to recognize and accept. There was room for nothing else. But he kept thinking, how much she wanted to know of him… even so far as all manner of details of his craft. She wanted to see his Forge!

—He woke there, already busy preparing his workspace, setting out his hammers and chasing tools. He tied his hair back with a leather strip, leaving his warrior braids free. Coals heated for the tempering of gold, his choice of metal for hammering today, and while he waited he pulled a gold sheet square, five fingers wide and an eighth inch thick: he would make a bead for hair.

But he startled, looking up—

—At walls vaulted and high, with an opening like a diamond at the peak, to take out the smoke, the large graceful bellows suspended with a nose over the coals to keep the temperature steady, the table-
sized anvil with 'Durin'ul' inscribed at its base, all four corners with space for a name, three of them inscribed, Thorin's had been the most recent addition, many many years ago—

This was not his Forge, where he'd worked metal decade after decade, set in the Blue Mountains, much less grand in it's design but with equal function.

—This was his 'Adad's, the one they had once shared in the Mountain an impossible long time past. Yet here he was, in the Forge he had learned upon, set deep and high within the steep peaks of Erebor—

—Sona was in the doorway! *How did she get here?*

And then he remembered; *she had asked; she has come for a visit*—

There she stood, leaning against the wide-angled door frame dressed in a cobalt sheath of a top and leggings, all tight to her body clear down to her knees, showing every curve—*he longed to touch*—to just below her knees where the fabric draped over her calves, stopping just above her feet—*Those feet* were bared open in orange sandals, her toe nails painted flame red, and the curve of her arch—*her soft skin*—Oh Mahal—*She wore a gold chain around one ankle! And there were gold rings on several of her toes.* He swallowed, looking up at her. She reminded him of a hot blue flame. Then he smiled—*She does love fire shades*—Her arms were bare, her fingers threaded together, the skin of her shoulder touching the rock of the Mountain.

—*And so I will show you.*

"Come," he beckoned her over with a nod of his head; his braids swayed over his chest, still covered with a linen shirt, though his sleeves were rolled to the elbows and his collar unlaced. The shirt usually came off last, once he finished and the metals cooled.

*But not today*—

He put a leather apron on, and handed her one as well, turning her gently to tie the cords behind. Her skin was cool beneath the taut fabric, her hair bundled up high in one of her stretching ties. His eyes traced the sinews of her neck, over her shoulder, partly bare, without blemish, down her back where he tied the knot. So close, his knuckles in the sway of her waist—he lingered before letting go. *No flame shall touch you…*

He brought her round the large oak work bench where a vice secured a wood block with a wedge and a hole in it, the space where his saw blade could dance. He'd been holding the gold sheet steady over the wedge and sawing the shape of the bead's outer edge with a horse shoe tension saw.

He bade her sit on a stool before it.

She smiled up nervously as she sat, and he smiled back with a bow of his head, hoping she'd feel more at ease. He stood in the space behind, pocketing her between his body and the work bench.

"Put your fingers here." Drawing himself around her, he carefully set the fingers of her right hand over the sheet of gold, very near where he knew his saw would pass, to keep the gold steady over the block of wood in the vice. "Keep them still." And he began to saw, his hand resting over hers to make sure she minded, and to keep the sheet firm.

As he drew the blade near her fingers, back and forth, back and forth, to pass along the edge of their tips, creating a tiny, smooth cut, her eyes drew wide, so wide, and then she smiled. "It's hot!"

"But only while I move," He continued flexing the blade back and forth, almost with a waltz beat,
his lips turned up at her continuing astonishment. *You do this to me. All over. Everywhere.*

She turned her head, and he was caught in her gaze, in those soft gold eyes, so close, he could feel her breath on his cheek—He gripped her hand more steadily. "Careful, a sudden move may cause the blade to snap."

She blinked, skin flushing, her lashes fluttered as she closed her eyes to swallow. He followed the line of her throat with his eyes, wishing he could trace it with his fingers—*with his lips.*

"Can you feel it?" *I am warm all around you.* He shifted her closer into his left shoulder, breathing in the scent of her hair, lavender, Mountain's Flower—*Nungu Aızâl'abbd Zabal*—as he continued playing the blade, but not kissing or touching her face.

*She had not asked for that…*

"Am I the blade?" Her lips quirked into that famous crooked smile she wore when she teased.

"You are action I move with." He bent closer to her head, his bundled hair caressing her face on the side. Her smile remained, yet warmed and grew larger.

Next he had her grip the cut sheet in a long prong over the coals, now ready to soften the metal… When it reached the right shade, and it was soft for working, his hand guided hers off, and they brought it together to the anvil, where she held, and he hammered, and the rhythm shook through their bodies together, ears ringing to the sound of the beats.

First he put the runes in, adding dimension along the edges, flipping, embossing. Then they turned the length to angles, wrapping it into a six-sided bead.

"It's for hair?" she asked.

He nodded from behind her, careful to keep their hips apart.

"Who's it for?"

He pulled his head slightly back, angling his face to see hers better. Her beautiful gold brown eyes, soft and open, and so close. "I haven't chosen."

She smiled, those eyes widened with a slight surprise. Or was that disbelief?

"Truly. I haven't." He grinned, and that made her grin all the more, and she gave up the chase, looking into the bead, her gold-flecked hair twinkling in the light of the coals.

And then she leaned into him, and he knew she felt his heat—

—Waking him from the deepest sleep. Since when did he sleep so soundly out in the open? And… *Mahal…* what WAS that? He looked around the camp until he found her…

She was awake, stretching over her bedroll—*her arms flexed long over her head.* Then she turned quickly—*she did not look his way*—and began rummaging through her pack, to pull out her wash bag—*Sona was headed to bathe*—and a second later she rose, facing the river.

He'd *dreamed* of her again. *It felt so real—*

He still felt it. Quite evidently. And so he remained in his bedroll, keeping his dream to himself.
He shut his eyes, opened them, waiting for the images to fade, as happens with dreams... but not this time. Just like in Imladris, the details stayed with him as if they’d truly happened, while he willed his body to calm, a challenge given these... circumstances.

This was impossible.

He watched her leaving, her form backlit by the rising sun, so agile and so lovely shaped, he stared after her—wanting— as she scampered down toward the water.

_Yamal, Gold Song. I hope the lesson pleased._ It felt good to have been so close, and part of him couldn't help it—He wished it _had_ been real.

Once she was gone, he spotted Dwalin leaned against a nearby tree sharpening Grasper, chatting with Nori at his side, who was tuned to some detailing work on a small picking tool in his hands. The Warrior glanced up and smirked slightly when he caught sight of Thorin, but signed nothing. _There was no way he could know._ Still Thorin felt a flush of embarrassment go through him. Dwalin had let him sleep through sparring. 'Why didn't you wake me?'

'Not often do I see you rest soundly, Buhel.' Then Dwalin pointed at the Mountains. 'We are on the steps.'

He looked away to the fire, as yet unable to rise without exposing too much. Bombur and Glóin conversed head to head as Bombur filled the bowls and Glóin added the seasons on top. Glóin finished some quiet remark, pointing at the kettle, before glancing back at Thorin with his eyes raised, assessing, confirming, _as if he knew._ Just as sure he looked away, nodding at something Bombur said.

_Not possible._

Breakfast was ready, and Bombur sent Kíli off to let the Thief know.

Thus began a grueling day of climbing.

When the Thief glanced his way, _every time, though there were not many times this strenuous day,_ she turned two shades darker— But he excused this — _exertion of the climb... nothing more_— And besides, he noticed she turned the same shade when she'd look at Fíli or Kíli.

He felt confused by all of it and kept forward, except that he had to look back along the trail to see that those behind followed.

He could not shake the feeling, _the beats in his blood, the weight of the hammer, her soft skin beneath his hand._— It stayed with him as the day wore on, and he could not tell if he smelled lavender from the blooms in his bed roll, or as a residual memory of the dream. _No one smells when they dream. Nothing like he'd ever known or imagined... what was that?_ 

_And why a hair bead?_

Never mind. He could only imagine how embarrassed she would be if it indeed _had_ been, due to some strange magic, a shared moment between them in sleep...

_Not possible._

By afternoon they made it high past the steps of the Mountains, starting single file up the slopes of
the pass they took, when it started to rain and winds picked up. The path became more treacherous, more slick with each step they took, and Thorin saw the Thief lose her footing more than once, with Dwalin catching her falls; the Warrior caught his eye, and in the gale wind blocking out audible voices, his Friend signed, 'I've got her.'

The way was slow, the path up the pass narrow. They hiked up one after another, with Dori at the fore. Glóin and Bifur made the way ahead of Thorin. His Sister's Son's were behind him, with Kíli closest and Fíli just beyond, followed by Sona and Dwalin, Balin, then Nori and Ori, Glóin and Bofur, with Óin and Bombur at the rear.

Pick, staff and ax: all of the Dwarves used what tools they had to ascend the pass. No room for conversation, the way was too hazardous for much beyond concentration of foot placement, hand placement, staff placement. Soon they would need ropes to angle up the steeper slated sections.

Thunder cracked above them.

The rumbling shook the ground; Bifur jumped slightly, shaking his boar spear at the mean gray sky.

Dwalin yelled, "Look out!"

Thorin swung to see him shoving the Thief to the rock face of the Mountain. His eyes followed his Warrior's fearful glare to see a massive boulder hurling toward the Mountain above them. It hit, the ground shook, the shattered bits bouncing and striking over and about them.

Thorin whirled his head back toward Dwalin, who was using his body to keep many of the stones from hitting Sona. She crouched with Sasha pulled between her legs, both protected by Dwalin's bulk pocketing them safely against the wall of rock.

Then Thorin pitched back, facing where the rock had come from, toward the opposite side of the pass. Astonishment stole the air from his chest: a humungous hulk of Mountain, alive and grotesque in the shape of a person, hurled stones larger than full grown Oaks.

More thunder cracked and the ground shook with nauseating force; it was moving beneath them.

"This is no thunderstorm!" Balin hollered, seeing—more than one of these vast beings. "It's a thunder battle! Look!"

He pointed at another, where the whole of Thorin's Company made up a size far smaller than the span of its hand.

Sona stood up, talking to her Dog before she noticed the Giants— horror stopped her mouth and paled her face.

"Storm Giants!" Bofur yelled. "The legends are true!"

Thorin's eyes whipped back toward the Monsters, fearing they could hear.

Indeed, a head turned, a tree-sized stone in it's mountainous hand— It let it loose and the stone came hurling their way.

"Take cover, you fool!" he hollered at Bofur and any one else who could hear, at the same time signing for everyone, 'Cover, now!' his eyes scanning them all, all as yet unharmed—

—to stop on Dwalin, then Sona.
The Dog still plastered her legs, unwilling to move off, and barking; she yelled but Thorin heard nothing through the storm. He blinked once, eyes back at Dwalin, waiting a fraction of a second.

'I've got her, Buhel.'

The boulder struck, pouring more rock upon them.

"Hold On!" Nori shouted with curdling intensity rarely heard from the Spy.

The Mountain they stood upon broke apart.

Fíli hollered, "No, Kíli!" reaching out for his Sister's Son's hand—a gaping chasm opened between them and he could not reach.

Shaking, moving, breaking, shifting: all did their best to cling and not fly. Thorin forced his head up, scrambling for purchase, to see they stood upon the knee caps of one of the Giants.

Its knees had split apart—

—and the deep moving gap split Thorin's Company, opening a chasm of air and void between Fíli and Kíli, who shouted frantically one for the other over the tumultuous divide; Thorin's throat caught, fearing Fíli would jump after, but the ledge he was on suddenly dipped and moved far too far away.

Thorin stumbled back, grasping at the wall, keeping hold with his ax wedged in a groove of the rock, as others did the same with hooks, mattocks and pickaxes. Sona had no such tools—Dwalin grasped her wrist and took a leap across the divide. The Thief, clutched in his hand, sprung with him, just as the ground beneath them disappeared.

Thorin tasted bile, clinging helpless on the huge rolling wall as all of his Company struggled to keep purchase. But then just as quickly the Mountain face came round, the Giant's knees slammed back one against the other, and once more and the earth stopped and went still.

They were together on the ledge again.

A collective sigh went up among them.

"It's all right girl," the Thief crooned gently to her Dog. "We're safe—"

What soothing, to hear her voice—

Another blast sounded—they all looked on one last enormous bolder headed toward the mountain just above Sona, her Dog and Fíli.

Sona shoved Fíli and Sasha out of the way—

"NOOOOOO!" Thorin hurled the word, scorched painfully raw yet powerless from the root of his being, demanding, begging, anything but—No, Mahal NOOOO—as the boulder struck and shattered, and he was frozen, watching, unable to move, his chest held fast in an invisible vice, a saw blade on his heart—Sona—

She fell to the ground. A mass of tiny rocks smashed over her; she almost disappeared beneath the rubble on the ledge, but Thorin could see her there—

The vice loosened ever so slightly. Was—was she well? Could he breathe again?

And the world was suddenly quiet.
Balin looked about, his eyes taking account, lastly landing on Thorin, his manner calm, "We're alright! We're alive!"

But just as he spoke the ground broke away on the ledge where Sona lay beneath debris.

Thorin could not breathe for fear.

"Where's the Whatsafist?" Dwalin boomed.

Too beside himself with worry, Thorin found no voice, no matter how his mind screamed, just get to her— must get to her!

"Here!" her voice came from below.

Dwalin and Bofur peeked over the ledge, and both hollered in panic. Thorin was running, stumbling, tripping and keeping his feet, until he, too, could see over. She caught on a smaller ledge and it was breaking beneath her—

Sasha whined and bayed, pacing the edge, showing just how Thorin felt as he struggled to remain calm, he must get to her! He released his ax; it clattered on the ledge as he dropped to his knees, evaluating, spotting the best way down to her. He dug his fingers in the rock at the edge, and he could feel the breath of the Dog, warm and pleading, brush over his face. I will get her. He scrambled over the edge and lowered himself down. Hoping beyond hope he could reach her in time, he tried desperately not to disturb any rocks from all the loose ones around them and held his fingers in a grip lock. I must get her.

He looked from the Dog to Sona, who stood plastered to the side of the sheer cliff, the purchase crumbling away beneath her feet.

"Thief! Do not move!"

She laughed! From that spot! How?

He frowned on, angling closer to her—

"No chance of that, Grump-Muffin."

Grump-Muffin— He frowned more, lacking all sense of humor. There was no grip beyond where he'd fixed his hand. And she was getting scratched up along the edges where her skin caught the rock— she bled.

He moved in any case, he reached all the quicker, farther—as far as he could stretch—

"Rope!" Bofur called, and Bifur hauled out picks and ropes and … "Here, here! Now, lads!" Thorin heard the calls from above as he eyed the ledge she stood upon.

They had no time.

The balls of her feet barely fit there, less than half a foot width wide. How she managed to keep balance— with her pack on, no less— would have amazed him, if he hadn't been scared beyond all reason. Scared of losing her. È'ze. He couldn't lose her. È'ze, just hang on… hang on… I will get you… I must.

She looked up to see him staring down at her, her cheeks scuffed from the rock, fear spread all through her features and sunk deep in her eyes; she saw her own doom, yet she smiled, seemingly
happy to see him, the one she called Grump Muffin—

He jammed his fingers further into the rock, to lower himself beyond the limits of the length of his arms… he couldn't reach her… she would have to help…

And she did… Her arm came up, her hand grasping toward his, scraping on the cliff face, scraping her arm, and he … had her, he had her! He felt the tips of his fingers brush hers, cool callused tips against his flesh… Aye, he did! Just a bit more, just…

The rocks gave, the chasm opened—

And Sona fell away.

/\oSo/T\oDo/\

Chapter End Notes

Did I say buckle up? The angst train is rolling now. Sorry, not sorry.

Thanks everyone for your comments, kudos and bookmarks!

y
"NOOOOO!"

Sona was gone from sight before Thorin screamed — no end to the cry ripping from his chest — "E'ze—! Nooooo! NOOOOO!"

No one could——

No. no. His mind refused, but he knew it——

—she could not yet live, not after——

But he would not stay, he would not, and his fingers released and he flexed to jump after when sharp fingers dug in below his armpits, thumbs grasped deep into his shoulders, and he was heaved and hauled and wrestled back upon the ledge. By Dwalin.

Thorin slammed his fist into his face, achieving release.

Dwalinreeled back and Thorin, free for a second, took a leap to the edge only to be grasped once again, his right eye meeting the brunt of Dwalin's determined palm, hard as granite, the power of the punch hurling him back against the ledge wall.

"Try that again, you'll get the knuckle dusters," Dwalin growled in his face.

Thorin grunted and shoved to get past, but Dwalin grasped him tighter and now Dori held on his left shoulder, and Nori and Bofur and Fíli stood between him and that ledge. "LET GO," he demanded, seething.

They only held tighter.

She's down there, fallen to her death——

"MOVE!" A furnace ignited within——

It was no good. They glared, Bofur turned away, motioning to Bifur about ropes——

Ropes? No. No time.

He could not stand here; what were they doing——?

He pressed against Dwalin, glaring deep in his grief-filled, glacial blue eyes. Ė'ze. Mabajbūna'ulê. It had come to pass — "She is fallen," he wept the words. Surely his friend——

"So you'll dive off a cliff?" Dwalin countered, not letting up.

Thorin blinked. The crashing and beating of his heart drowned the sounds around him.

"I must GET TO HER NOW!" Thorin roared finally, though it was mere fractions of a second later.
Thorin's voice bounced off the far off ledges of the Mountains in echoes returning back at him from too many angles… *Could he not understand*—? *"She's down there!"

All of his Company formed around him to bar him from the ledge.

They could not keep him, he writhed against Dwalin and Dori's grips, his insides twisted at the thought of her below, *unmoving*—

*Lose*—*no hold*. He sank in Dori's unshakeable grip. He couldn't be still, though Dori was too strong, too strong by far; he panted, struggling against them all, *"Mahal, please,"* he begged them now, his sight blurred through tears. *"Release and get out of my way."

"No." Dwalin held firm, one hand on his shoulder while the other reached behind his head where he gripped and pulled their foreheads together.

Ś'ze. Biriz Akmāth'amē—

Thorin squeezed his lids shut while Dwalin kept their heads pressed together, fleeing Dwalin's pain-struck face.

---*His ONE. Mahajbūn'alē. He had chosen and lost her in the same breath*---

"We all love her," Dwalin spoke softly, his gentle tone a battering ram to Thorin's heart. *"We all care for our wh——"*

---*He could not say it*---

"—our wee lass." Dwalin tripped and stuttered past the unsaid word and pressed his brow into Thorin's, a sure embrace in the depths of *loss*. *"We'll do all we can to get her back."

Thorin opened his eyes to his friend, bearing all.

"Now, let me *now.*" Thorin breathed out, pleading deeply. *"She's gone…"* Panic took place of anger. And despair, hard, determined, crushing, held him fast it its resolute grip. Tears cut a path from his soul, down his face. *"I will get to her, I must get to her—"

---*Hold her goodbye*---

"Not like that—" Dwalin muttered beneath his breath, his voice cracked.

"I can't," Thorin muttered—*I can't stay here, Bāha-amē*—closed in by the panic. *"You can't hold me forever."

"No, just for while," Dwalin shook him, his motion tinged with affection though his hold never lessened. *"Dori a bit longer. So, ease your struggling; you cannot go that way, an' well you know it."* Dwalin's eyes were rimmed red. The one Thorin hit had gone dark, both were ringed with the Warrior's falling tears. *"Bofur, Nori, lads, are you ready by now?"

"Aye, almost," Bofur called from the ledge, with Nori muttering something inaudible.

Thorin heard hammers striking stakes from somewhere behind Dori and Dwalin.

"We'll be climbing down, Thorin," Bofur called. His voice would be a saving rope, *but there was none*. "We're setting the lines. It'll be quick once the stakes are secure."

No time. It is gone. *She is—no more*—
"The rock's fragile," Bofur said, "blasted flaking shale—"

—Treachorous stone—It broke beneath her—

Thorin stretched his neck to see Bofur and Nori arranging lines with what limited rope they had while Bifur and Bombur hammered in stakes for lowering, Bifur muttering and shaken in frustration at the crumbling stone they worked with, both he and Bombur hunched close to the wall, seeking a solid root.

He could not wait for this. So he struggled in vain.

Dwalin stuck to reason where Thorin could not.

And Fíli joined his keepers now, taking hold of Thorin's right arm to still his thrashing.

Thorin clenched his jaw shut while his eyes burned red. *What had he done? What could he do? He could not wait. How could he get to her that way?*

*And he could not leave her, surely they did not expect—*

"Do you feel her?" Fíli whispered in his ear, gripping harder to gain his attention, and Thorin startled to see his Sister's Son so near, blurring into his vision, his caring eyes looking over him, grave and wise for one so young.

*Juzrazur'ē…*

*Was it gone? A dread spread further through him he hadn't thought possible; he went limp in the grips of the three Dwarrow holding him, expecting to feel nothing.*

*And yet—* beneath the beat of his heart he felt the low steady hum of her Pull.

His hope rebounded and he looked back at Fíli, eyes wide. *Dare he believe?*

Fíli drew back, nodding. *Aye. She did—Juzrazur'ē: Gold Song held the other end— She lives—!*

And yet, *how—?*

*She fell from sight, so far—*

*How far—?*

*And Pull did not tell him how she fared—*

He grasped Fíli's arm, tightening, this new question now clawing for purchase.

*She could be hurt, she could be knocked out, she could be taken, she could be— no... No... He still felt her—*

—Panic resumed—*He would be loosed to join her—*

But the Dwarrow grips had not wavered.

*She could be dying—*

—alone.
Fíli's eyes flashed, knowing what he asked, worry riding high on the surface. 'I know. We will search.' Fíli dug his fingers deep into his arm in an effort to keep him still. "We will find her together. And Sasha's already gone ahead to look for her."

"LOOK OUT!" Ori cried. "It's movin'!" He pointed beyond Fíli who stood closest to the wall beside Thorin. A shuffling behind them and a blast of air, and Thorin knew a door had opened behind him. Dwalin, Dori and Fíli yanked simultaneously, and he was off the wall and pressed to another wall adjacent to an open door frame.

Ori fired a rock from his sling, and the missile landed square in an emerging Goblin's brow: it fell dead at Thorin's feet, twin knives falling from it's hands, while a hiss issued from the depths beyond, and a second Goblin showed its black face, rotted teeth baring, yellow streaked eyes full of killing lust. Kíli fired an arrow past Thorin into it, and it tumbled out, writhing but not yet dead.

"Dwarves, hah, the ones he seeks, yeach." This one was scantly armed, its pocked flesh oozing open sores. "Pale's bounty. Pitiful unfair to die here, but mine will get 'yach."


It smiled, inner-blood escaping its lips. "And that will make a rich few Goblins. My Brood's lookin' for 'yach tonight. Pay a mind." It coughed. "You will 'nach live past dawn."

At least that was clear—

Thorin resisted the urge to kick, and then the horrid thing died. Thorin flexed and dropped weight to see who among his grappers had relaxed.

None, and Dwalin shook him soundly against the rock to emphasize the fact.

Ori reached over and took a written leather from the dead Goblin's hand, looking over the words.

Thorin continued thrashing against his Dwarrow's hold.

"Can you read it?" Balin asked, with Ori leaning over the leather.

"Aye." Ori read it, over and over, Thorin could tell by where his eyes went, frowning, flustered and nearly huffing each time his eyes traveled over the dark runes. He glanced at Thorin and back at the leather again.

Thorin had no patience. "I do not care!" he shoved once more against Dori, head straining toward the cliff.

Balin glanced from the leather to Thorin. "No, Thorin, you should hear this…"

Kíli glanced at him and stared back into the tunnel, bow at the ready. More would come.

More— "I must get down, get to her, before—"

"Have an ear while Bifur and Bombur set the stakes for climbing, laddie." Did Balin think to distract him?

Impossible.

But go on then— Thorin peered back into the depths of the open door, he did not care to hear. There was nothing beyond for a long way in, the path straight and deep, with many openings joining in from side to side, alleys beyond count—
"They search for you." Now Ori said.

**Of course they did.** Reckless, to stay so close to the Goblin Dwellings— They had not signed on to this—

"They're offering quite a sum for your... Um... Head... Lord Thorin. Just your head."

Thorin imagined this deed the Goblins craved, the taking of his head: just as Sigil'adad's before the eyes of his people at war, Dwarrow and Dwarrow-dams losing their lives along with their morale, a lost King, never to recover— and here stood his Company.

And Sona—lost, hurt— running out of time— or worse—

Thorin would not look away from the gaping maze beyond the entry— had they dragged her in here? *If, how would he ever find her? Even though he could feel ways through stone— This stone felt... seeped in darkness.*

Dwalin and Dori's grip tightened; they sensed his ready spring. Dori looked over toward where Bofur and Nori secured ropes, while Dwalin, after a glance at Thorin, glared steadily inside. "She's not *in* here."

"And you know this *how*? You only wish it." Thorin shoved; it was no use.

"There will be more," Ori said as if in promise.

Had not the Goblin said the same? **Of course there would.**

"Then we will kill them," Kili groused, his draw hand holding an arrow.

Thorin pushed against the fingers of his captors. *Helpless, he felt her still— but how?*

"Aye," Ori added, no hesitation. He would keep wary and defend. And for a second he caught Thorin's eyes. Paling at the raw defeat that met his gaze, he looked down. "Pardon."

—*Perhaps the ledge was not so high—*

Thorin hadn't been able to see before, through the foggy air, the rain and the foliage growing off the the rock face—

"Bofur? Nori?" Dwalin interrupted, digging his thumbs firmer over Thorin's shoulder and collarbone. "You ready yet?" The Warrior glared back at Thorin, as if he felt him awaiting his moment. *Because he did.*

"Just about."

"Aye."

Thorin growled—*this useless holding*—and Dori frowned at him, shaking his head no, strengthening his hold, already impossible to break.

Fili attempted to catch his gaze, burning like the sun so close to his face, his fingers digging deeper, but Thorin would not return it.

"Listen now, all of you," he called. Those at the ledge perked their ears, though they did not stop their tasks. He raised his voice over the hammers. "I do not care to cause your death and ruin for a cause you did not sign onto: I do not hold you to your vows, should any of you wish to leave."
Then he glared once at his Sister's Son, then Dori, to settle it on Dwalin. "Let me go so I may get on with it."

They all stared, mouths slack. Fíli, Dori and Dwalin made no motion to release. And then all of them shook their heads, as one.

"Utter bollocks, Thorin," Dwalin made a glance toward the ledge. "Let's get off here first, have a look below."

"You see what comes," Thorin hissed, cocking his head and aiming back inside. She cannot be in here, alone... "I will not leave until I find her."

"We won't leave you, either of you," Kíli spat back, arms crossed, his words echoed twelve more times by each one of his Company. "Where do you think we'd all go, N'adad? Should some Eagles come carry us off?"

The lad had a point. Thorin could only grimace in response.

Fíli laughed, his breath catching in Thorin's face, reminding him of living—

He had to find her living—

And others followed, there was laughing, but Thorin could not remember why.

And then Bofur looked up. "Two lines set, we can go now, two by two, aye. Bifur's sure the stakes are well set. Shall we then, lads, Thorin? And we'll have a look below?"

Thorin nodded, fast, pressing, please yes.

Dwalin shook him until he looked in his eyes. "You go down the ropes. Tell me now."

"The ropes," Thorin growled back, knowing he'd be tied and carried otherwise.

He pulled his nose to Thorin's, glaring at him through his now blackening eye. "No rash moves, Buhel."

"We go down," Thorin nodded; he felt his own eye swelling. "On the ropes."

"Aye."

They never made it to the ropes.

A whooping and hollering issued from the gaping passage and Kíli and Ori were firing shot after shot into it, where suddenly countless Goblins spewed out, just as another swarm climbed over the edge of the ledge—

—where Sona had fallen—

—Ē'ze!

Goblins came up and out in equal measure.

Thorin felt sickened, his gut coiled.

And only then did Fíli, Dori and Dwalin release him, letting go their hands as all went for their weapons, and Thorin veered with speed, drawing Orcrist. Bifur hailed as he pitched him his ax in
addition; Thorin slashed and hacked through Goblins, one after another, only seeing Sona's face, drowning out the blood, the stench, but only how she'd looked, how she smelled, so close at the Forge—

—that dreams could be real—

But Goblins were. And death, and loss.

No—He still felt her.

Orcrist swinging, Thorin kept on. His way to Sona barred, he let his anger loose on the obstacles set between them, these light-forsaken Goblins. In an instant all the Dwarrow were swinging and blocking and slaughtering a multitude of Goblins from every direction; no one could get to the ropes Bofur, Nori, Bifur and Bombur had set. All were forced to fight their way along the ledge, away from where she fell, away from the door, toward the open surface, heading downhill along the path of the ledge.

Anger pressed him on, this filth would keep him from her!

No. no. Not this night.

He swung and he sliced and he hurled into them—

Sona, how should I find you?

—And Goblins died, unable to stop or even slow his blows, one racing after the other into his sword and ax.

No. They would not keep him. He cut through Goblins with sure placed fury, unleashed and roaring, his mind set on her.

He fought ahead of Bofur, who hewed Goblins with his mattock, anger coloring his face beneath the long hat. Nori was on his other side, raining blows upon them with his cutlass and his mace, as Bomber twirled his axes behind, slaughtering one upon another; they took out dozens with trifold fury moving them.

Bifur pitched the filth with his boar spear held long, felling many with single sweeps, down—

—the way she had fallen—

Gold Song

—loose off the face of the cliff.

He still felt her.

Farther down they fought, all of them as close as their weapons allowed, while Glóin cleared their rear path, swinging his walking ax, slicing through the ropes before they were pushed down the path. So much for ropes.

Dwalin stayed ahead of Thorin, hewing with Grasper and Cleaver, Fíli and Kíli fought ahead of them.

The Dog had gone to find Sona—Mahal, may Sasha find my Thief.

His Sister's Son's swords bit a forward path, with Ori, Balin and Óin behind them, helping clear the
They fought and they fought, moving from where they'd lost Sona.

She still lived—

Down. Away. After a while the ground tapered and widened into a heavy slope, and they were slide-fighting their way down as yet more Goblins attacked.

Thus accosted, the Company fought on, bit by bit down the side of the mountain, killing Goblin after Goblin. Sometime midway the rain had slowed and stopped, and darkness took the night, without star or moon, and they faced Goblin attacks on every side.

No doubt, now they had lost their way.

And Kíli asked in a lull of attacks, "is this a residence pocket within the Mountains? Do they come from their windows out of the ground and rock?"

Most likely—

—a nest of wasps—

"Ay, Kíli," Fíli assured, his voice forced to an ease he did not show in his face. "We surf over the topside of Goblin Town."

—Surf—

—Sona's 'Adad surfs. Thorin sliced through two more. I will find her.

Bofur laughed with them while more Goblins surged on from ahead and besides.

Dwalin parried off a few attacks from Thorin's flank, and Thorin saved him from a half dozen in turn.

On and on it went until the stream of Goblins ebbed and now they searched, discovering indeed they'd lost their way back.

Surely they moved in circles, through no fault of their own in the dark night, though light began to paint the horizon to the West, and stars appeared where clouds opened in the sky.

Sona was nowhere to be found.

He turned in bitter frustration toward Dwalin, the question screaming from every blood-soaked pore: how would they get back?

Dwalin shook his head.

They no longer knew where they were or exactly where Sona fell.

How long has it been?

He still felt her. But where was she—?

Dwalin avoided Thorin's eyes, for the grief he saw reflected there. But eventually he ambled toward Thorin as they searched, seeking peace, and Thorin saw a different pain reflected there. The pain of purpose lost, a grievous failure—
"No, Dwalin. No blame," Thorin aimed his eyes between his friend and the paths they searched. Yet panic kicked up as the fight against Goblins dwindled.

Every turn and tree was like the next. So lost.

Running out of time.

Dwalin shook his head, tromping on, biting his jaw down in a vain attempt to keep his stone mask set. Finally, he said, "You know, she talked to her Dog as the Stone Giants waged battle."

Thorin cocked a brow, though it hurt to move so, eying the Warrior. "She often talks to her Dog."

Dwalin rolled his eyes and carried on. "She said she didn't remember that battle happening in the 'book' at all."

Thorin held his gaze as best he could, saying nothing.

"We're in some 'book'? Is that what Kaleforn'ya is?"

"Our fates are not set by what is in her 'books'." Thorin turned to meet a stray flying Goblin with the edge of his blade.

Dwalin took a moment to absorb that as a few more Goblins rushed at them and died for their trouble.

"Then she did not know of this danger—" Dwalin muttered as he pulled Grasper from a Goblin's chest. His face was twisted, though not from the effort of battle.

"No," Thorin let out a groan, stretching long to catch the next Goblin that flung itself upon them.

The search was strenuous and slow for all these bloody interruptions.

And then there was quiet as the Company trudged on.

"Juzrazur, that Pull you once told me of…you still feel it, Thorin?" Dwalin asked below his breath, out of hearing of the others.

"Aye," Thorin looked to his hands, dark with Goblin blood.

"We will find her."

There is no other way. "Aye."

The Moon-fearing Goblins made weak and easy opponents, and the Company killed countless without sustaining more than scratches before dawn began to part the night.

In due time, each hour feeling like the loss of a year, they made their way to what might be the bottom of the cliff where Sona fell. But then any doubt was dismissed: Bofur discovered his ropes tangled among the fallen Goblins that littered the clearing next to the cliff wall; these had fallen from above by Bifur's spear, pulling the unsecured lines with them.

But Sona was not there.

That means she must have moved, or— No. He could not think it—
While the last of the Goblins grew cold behind them, the Company stopped to check their surroundings.

A shallow pool from a falls formed close to the cliff. A creek ran off from the high ground, and there were woods all around, slopping beyond the pool. The rain passed some hours ago. There were no tracks or trace beyond the bodies and the footprints of too many Goblins, but the earlier rain may have covered traces of Sona.

The Company cleaned their hands and faces of blood and drank from the pool as everyone gathered at the cliff-side.

Balin beckoned Ori and joined Thorin at the water. "You still have the leather note from the Goblin's hand, laddie?"

Ori nodded, patting a satchel pocket before pulling out the foul leather.

"Read it."

"It's not necessary, Balin." Thorin objected, wanting simply to continue, even knowing he knew not where to start.

"Everyone's washing up, Thorin." Indeed, they all were, and several of the Company drank their fill, as no doubt they all should. "We'll have a listen while we regroup and take some water." After motioning for the others to do just that, Balin turned to Ori. "Read the leather, laddie."

_His Advisor would know specifics this time_, the ones that Tharkûn never named aloud to anyone but Thorin—_Who is it that hunts his King?_

"Aye," Ori nodded. "Well then." He cleared his throat, directing his attention to the words—_on leather_—_what kind Thorin would not contemplate_—"'Unto the Goblin King; we seek the—'" Ori narrowed his eyes and would have bored holes in the leather if eyes could cut... "—Dwarf Scum, Thorin Oakenshield. We would like all of him, alive, unspoiled, with his Brood Shoots. But his head will do for less.'

"Then," Ori looked up, his fingers glancing over further words, "it promises payment."

Balin waited for Ori to finish.

Thorin studied the ground for traces of Sona.

_Traces that did not exist._

_Where are you—Gold Song?_

And Ori read on. "'Reward: 250 gold Gondorian dung coin:'" Ori scrunched his nose. "'50 pics of the next favored kills, for hearts and skull trophies, unless it be the Oakenshields's itself. The Oakenshield's Brood Shoots may be included in this request, but not before we've had our fill of game with them.'" Ori blanched, peering at his friends, and then back at Thorin.

Fili and Kili glanced at each other, at first confused, their frowns darkening as understanding dawned.

The Company all gathered round to listen, their faces cut, creased, full of horror and wrath.

"How does it end?" Balin asked, his voice ragged. "Who so hunts our King?" Balin's eyes were full,
glistening with grief, flashing hot while anger flushed his face. "Thorin? Fíli and Kíli? Who, Ori?"

Thorin knew his Advisor would be disappointed—

Ori signed 'no', stopped by the gruesome words.

So Thorin stepped in for Ori: "If just a head…" Thorin recited, continuing to search the ground for any kind of clue— "then only Oakenshield's will get you 150 in same gold Gondorian dung coin…"

_Thief, how could there be no trace?_

_Curse the Rain, take the Goblins—_

"… Bring us naught of another's remains with news of Oakenshield's escape, lest you wish to die from our frustrations.' It's signed 'Bolg, on order of my Brood Sire, on His command.'"

Ori's wide, shock-filled eyes went from Thorin to the leather and back, seeing Thorin's words entirely matched what was writ there.

"Bolg? Thorin!" Balin asked, or rather demanded. "Brood Sire? His? What? Who is that? And how—? Thorin!"

"One thing is sure," Thorin muttered, "it's just like the other," the leather Tharkûn had shared, before— The grisly details of the orders never shed actual light on precisely who hunted him, besides this name Bolg, and these vague—titles.

"You knew these specifics." Ori's eyes were wide in shock as well as fright, a look mirrored by the rest of the Company.

_Specifics?_ Thorin did not see it that way.

"The other." Balin repeated, nodding slowly as his understanding caught up. "What other?"

Thorin pointed at the leather Ori held. "Tharkûn had one of these at our chance meeting in Bree."

Dwalin shoved past his his Brother. "Mahal's Hottest Furnace, Thorin! You knew these details, and didn't deem 'em worth telling me?" His Friend's eyes flashed bright and angry.

"Useless Orc waste, for what purpose?" Thorin glared back at his Friend. He could only think of Sona— _why did they care about this leather and its empty content?_ "It changes nothing. It's neither time nor place for such talk—"

"We should've known we were hunted, N'adad," Fíli had stepped up, Kíli close at his side. Kíli nodded and frowned, a fire woken in him, while Fíli studied Thorin, his big eyes full and holding grave concern. Both lads remained paled.

"Perhaps, and then it would've taken root in your minds…" Thorin admitted, shaken, suddenly aware just how rooted it had become in his own mind. _Without thought, he'd remembered every word, though he'd only heard them spoken once._ He now watched it settle in theirs— "…only pleasing those who hunt us…" —_His Sister's Sons—This was too much._

_Dragon fire upon it—!_

_No remedy—_
—Sona’s losing time. He went back to searching the area, for anything.

But his Company now drew closer to him, eying him, some outright seething, others indignant, all of their faces creased in pain and horror at what they’d just heard—

"Thorin!" Balin’s voice lifted sharp, admonishing. "This is your life they speak so foul of, and your Sister’s Sons."

"Would this have stopped you from coming on this Quest for our Homeland?" Thorin asked them all, his voice low, his soul aching— Sona.

Balin nearly choked on the question. "No, laddie, it's just, you knew these, this—?"

"I don't care—"

"We care," Ori said.

Then Fíli squared his jaw, eyes hard. "And we would have come anyway."

"Aye," Kíli joined, canting his head for emphasis.

"As you did," Ori added quietly.

Thorin swallowed. Indeed.

Ori, their youngest but no less strong, proved as sharp as Balin as he sought to encourage them all. Thorin nodded to him and then glared at the corpses about the cliff. "Aye." Who cares what Orcs want?

I need to find Sona. But how, with no sign of which way she — went?

He knew they all worried, though it was useless ’til he found her. His eyes were on the ground again; he would scour every finger span of it.

Thus grieved and moved, he continued to explain to Ori, to all of them, how truly little this gruesome knowledge was. "Even so, I did not know they’d be here. And these are not those, whoever they are. These just want the bounty."

Thorin didn’t care. He longed for his One—and worry buried him live—

What if she died before he reached her?

And Sona— What of her?

Alone.

Ē’ze, Biriz Akmâth’ulê.

Long silence passed until Nori shuffled up to stand beside Dwalin. "Did you all hear her say, 'Are you shitting me'?

Dwalin laughed, nodding, and Thorin groused inwardly. What had she said? When was that? Ohhh.

In spite of Thorin's countenance Nori did not back off. He just stopped. "Never mind." He looked away, but not for hiding. More to show determination. Nori would think as he wished. "I'll ask her when we find her if she's got any more like that."
And Thorin knew thusly did his Spy express hope.

And Thorin still felt her.

"I'm sure she does," Thorin nodded once. Âkmînruk zu, Nori."

He turned and Tharkûn stood among them, just emerged from the nearest woods

Chapter End Notes

A/N#1: Angst fans? This one's for you. I hope I'm doing it justice. And now we know how Thorin and Dwalin got those black eyes! I've a couple more heavily concentrated angst chapters coming hot on the heels of this one... and then I'll be at the end of Part One.

A/N#2: Thank you, everyone who takes the time to drop comments. They make my days! And thank you for all the kudos, and those of you silently reading along!

y
Tharkûn was back!

No matter. He'd never been much help.

"Well met, my Friend," the Wizard said, smiling his usually assessing greeting at Thorin. That smile wilted into a frown at what he saw returned.

"There you are," Thorin's step gained; he was not about to stop.

It was past time to *move*, and downhill seemed a good choice…

So the Wizard joined his side and kept pace.

"This is not the way, Thorin."

"It is the way I am going." *Downhill—*as good a way as any.*

"Have you gotten lost?" That roll in his tone, as if he *condescended.*

"No." Thorin was amazed he managed not to shout.

"Well you're in a needless hurry going the wrong way, and there's *not* plenty of time to get where you're going, Master Dwarf, not to mention *Goblins—*"

"We've lost a Member of the Company. I do not stop the search."

It was *then* Tharkûn turned and counted. And once he reached the end of their numbers, his eyes got very big, and Thorin thought he saw fear in them. "Where's Lady Sona?"

—*Lady Sona?*

Thorin did not answer, even as his heart tightened over the same *agonizing question—*

Ê'ze, where are you?

*And since when* had Gandalf addressed her so?

"She's of the Company, now?"

Tharkûn had *listened.* Thorin was mildly surprised. He motioned to the others. "Fan out, start looking!"

"Thorin, stop. All of you, Be STILL." The Wizard seemed to grow in stature at the pitch of his words.

The Dwarves stopped, though they would not cower.
Thorin felt a fire burning deep within, so angry. "You care for the personal lives of your pawns?"

Tharkûn's expression diminished; was that grief? He aimed the bottom of his staff at a log as his eyes pointed at Thorin. "Sit down. Now."

"I wo—"

"Yes you will." Tharkûn rose his voice above him. "It's time you all ate a bite from your rations, for your strength to hold, so I suggest you do it while I … measure some things, and perhaps I find some bearings on your…" His heavily browed eyes worked over Thorin's face. "… missing Company Member." And without waiting the Wizard turned to do his work.

Thorin sat.

The others followed suit, all watching the outskirts for more Goblins, though it appeared dawn had arrived complete and the woods felt clear.

Thorin glanced at his boots, quite surprised he'd complied. But perhaps Tharkûn had a sense of Juzrazur. Could he sense the bond? Thorin stared at him, frowning.

All the while the Company waited on Thorin, unsure of this course, for direction. 'Do as he says, eat. Who knows how long his work will take.'

But Thorin could not eat.

'You're a fine example,' Dwalin signed, pointing out the absence of food in Thorin's vicinity.

Thorin ignored him in favor of watching the Wizard.

Could he actually help?

Tharkûn turned about, his gray robes billowing as he moved. He looked up the mountain, swaying the staff high, slowly. Then he faced the opposite way from them, parallel to the slope of the mountain, swaying his staff once more, and here he stood for many minutes, while the others finished their meals. Then Tharkûn faced downward, repeating the motion. Then quick as blinking he stood before Thorin, all the taller now, as Thorin saw him from the log he sat upon.

*Blast the Wizard.*

But then the he knelt— Tharkûn was kneeling before him, head bowed slightly, and Thorin was utterly confused. *What was this kneeling? He needed to find his One, they wasted time.* And Thorin glared up at Tharkûn, his heart still burning coals.

"I'm sorry I am late… I was delayed." Then he looked in Thorin's eyes, and Thorin saw his yearning, and it felt healing. *How can this be, she is not here?* There in Tharkûn's eyes a vast desire shined, exceeding the number of stars, revealing an overflowing will to make it well.

The Wizard's arms were outstretched, the staff almost level to Thorin's shoulders, and then the Wizard shut his eyes, and the woods went still, and they listened. In silence. For many long minutes.

Thorin felt his anger draining, and a weakness settling on. It was out of his control. The realization stabbed a deep root of welling sadness that he knew could hold no bounds.

Then the Wizard stood.

"She's… not far. And she's…" He turned toward the downhill side of the mountain, pointing the tip
of his staff. "She's that way."

"We can fan out in a thinner band and we will find her," Tharkûn added, pointing.

—*the way Thorin had been headed*—

Happenstance. Merely the ground's pull if someone were to roll. *Had she—? and then what?*

Thorin moved to rise.

"Come, no." Tharkûn gestured he remain seated. "Eat a bite of rations, Thorin. You need your strength, just like the others."

*Happenstance and one observant Wizard*: how he had noticed Thorin hadn't eaten *with his eyes were shut and his back turned*, Thorin had no idea.

But he did as he was told, wondering why he suddenly felt such calm.

*He still felt her… he'd been feeling her all along… this could be a good sign*…

So he tried not to think any second could be the last.

*She was alone, in need of being found.*

The search commenced and they made their way further down the mountain with no trackable clue to her path beyond Tharkûn waving them on—

—*Downhill, the way he had gone, without thinking*… Could he find her if he were able to keep his spirit quiet? *Feel* the way to her? And he tried, but there was nothing beyond the Pull, no directional sense to Juzrazur, none that he could trace. *If only.*

Could it be, *she sought him too*? He dared not hope too greatly, but *hope*— he needed it.

And no doubt she struggled to find her way back to the Company—

Soon Tharkûn took to walking at Thorin's side.

Thorin had no use for talking, and kept his eyes on the search, until lateness bore the heat through the layers of his kit, clear to his skin beneath, and she was still unfound.

He needed distraction as his eyes kept working the grounds, and so finally he sought one. "Why your delay? We thought you would join us weeks ago."

Tharkûn startled at the sudden question, perking up beneath his long hat. "I was detained, counseling over a matter of grave danger."

*Kâmîn zashar*. Thorin did not say it. "Did you reach any conclusions at the Council? Find a solution?"

"*The Council— A solution?*" The Wizard sputtered as his head snapped Thorin's way, his enigmatic face full of surprise and curiosity and perhaps a tad of shock. "Nori told you of it, then? *The Council.*"

Thorin only stared. *Confound the Wizard, he knew as well as his own name.*
"I thought I saw him spy us out when Saruman took the head of the table—"

"Your better?"

"He's the Head of my Order, if you must know." Tharkûn nodded, looking down their path.

Thorin had seen the White One, the Wizard who carried a void filled with arrogance. "He's missing something," Thorin mused out loud.

"Is he now? What might that be?" The Wizard asked, eyes narrowed.

"Seems you're the one should know what, Tharkûn; he's your kind."

"You've no idea of what you speak," Tharkûn tusked and looked about for something to strike besides Thorin. Finding only bushes and brambles, he turned again upon him, full of a prickly glare. And then he began assessing, as if he could read Thorin's face like some runes off an ancient parchment. "But you know something. You know of things to come."

Stone mask set, Thorin gave him nothing.

"Of course you do, she told you." The Wizard frowned, concentrating in thought.

*She told me what she could remember.* Thorin kept his jaws clamped shut.

"She wasn't supposed to tell you—"

Thorin's brow cocked—*did she permit you to 'allow' her—*? *And why not tell me? Are you won over by Lord Elrond's words on my Family's behalf—*? and again he felt the swelling from Dwalin's blow.

Tharkûn placated with his hand beyond his staff, "*or anyone, anything—*"

First things first: "Did you tell her that?" Thorin glared at him.

"Of course, for safety's sake."

"And you *forbade* her?"

"Yes, in so many words."

Fool of a Wizard. "I'll wager you left a few choice ones unsaid, to spare yourself her anger." *Where was she?*

Tharkûn looked back at him, puzzled.

"Never mind. How did she accept your requirements?"

"Not so well."

"No, I dare say *not." The Wizard had never *truly* listened, by Durin, and Thorin *knew it.* "She needed your ear and you gave her your shoulder—"

"I should not *know—*"

"You could help, *knowing*. You're a *Wizard*, by Eru who allowed us, you could *plan—*"

Now a shadow came over the Wizard's face, one of dread beyond measuring. "I could make it far far
worse, you should realize, with the ones I care for meeting the brunt of it ALL." Tharkûn's eyes both widened and creased simultaneously with his attitude of knowing everything.

"Aren't we meeting it now? Mithrandir?"

"You're working yourself up again," the Wizard groused.

"You listen only when you choose. You've been known to be wrong—" And then Thorin leaned away, frowning all the more. "You cast some spell on me before."

Now Tharkûn looked truly peeved. "Always suspicious, Master Dwarf! Of course not; it was just a slight calming charm and a look at the grander scheme of things…"

Thorin could only stare, his mouth partly opened, how dare you? Sure as night was coming no one matched the impertinence of a Wizard.

Night was coming.

It was past late afternoon and they still had not found her, nor any trace of her passing. His doubts resurfaced with a swelling, the ache in his soul resounding: He had not found her.

He did not trust himself to guide them. "Are you sure of the direction, Tharkûn?" A desperate edge caught the air on his question, and it came softer than he'd expected. The Wizard seemed to know—what if he were wrong—?

He never had time to answer— a dark horn sounded as the light dimmed, chilling them all. Thorin's chest tightened for fear: It was no pitiful Goblin Horn, but a loud harrowing deep one, like the claw of wind's fiercest charge. Orcs.

Did they have her? Any calm he felt remaining was stolen on that sound.

"Orcs!" Ori yelled from his search point fanned out from Fíli toward the South. "I heard an Orc Horn!"

As had they all— Could Sona hear it? Or— he dared not think it— but he could not stop the thought— Perhaps she was already found— No. no no no.

"Aye," Fíli hailed low, looking out that way, "Out, away to the South."

Thorin's heart eased ever-so-much. Aye, that way— not the direction we'd been heading, and yet… He slowed and looked about.

His Company, all within call distance of each other, now gathered in tighter at that sound. All day, none had seen even the smallest trace of Sona, nothing.

And now they heard the Orcs—

"We must do something." Ori huffed as they gathered 'round, all eyes locked on him.

—The Orcs come for him.

This is not what they follow you for, Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór—to fight and die trying to save your head because you will not flee, for Sona's sake. And even if they would, it did not matter; he would never ask. But one thing was certain. "I will not leave this mountain until I find her." This was as it would be.
"Thorin," Balin tried to use his calmest voice, his Diplomacy Mask intact. "No one is suggesting we leave. We are merely—"

Thorin heard water, water falling. No wait—was that—!? 

"Sasha? Sasha!" Fíli questioned, then hollered with glee just as the Dog bounded past Thorin, barking and yowling her greetings—

The bangles—! He angled forward, passing his ax to Bifur to free his hands, then nearly running—

And there—

"Asti—!" She was there—! Standing! Walking! Alive and whole!

They found each other!

But oh, what had she been through?

Her skin was cut about her face and arms, her tunic torn, flesh likewise scraped beneath, her body caked in dirt, she had bruises; she swelled from far too many blows, not just ones from indifferent rock that met her while she fell; these kind were aimed for maiming, she'd been beaten after the fall. Had she met Goblins as well, and managed to get free? And yet she lived! Fíli had reminded him of this, above on the Mountain side, that if he felt her, then she lived.

Her eyes drank him in— was he not seeing this?

But no— it was his craving, his heart's desire only, that pulled so.

"How—" And yet he was not sure he could believe until he felt her, so he took her arms lightly in his hands. And here she was. "You live."

She flinched and he let go in an instant while her face twisted slightly in a grimace at the pain woken by that mere touch; she wanted to smile, yet she ached over the course of her whole body.

"Yes," she said in haste, forcing humor that added more hurt to her worries.

No. Do not be sorry, you have done no wrong…

"It takes more than a fall to kill your Thief—"

"Thief," he repeated. My Thief. I know you mean of the Company, and yet…

He could not help as his hands reached up to gently cup her cheeks, how he wished to ease her pain, to caress away it's memory, and so he removed the dirt there, as lightly as he could as he scanned her for injury, counting every scratch.

Are you well, Asti? Has aught hurt your spirit?

He looked into her eyes as she looked back in his; the moment held them both. I am here, be warm in the comfort of my Company. My company. E’ze Mabajbūna’ê.

He felt her slight lean to the flesh of his palm and let his fingers take her in, massaging gently where he touched her there.

Her eyes closed at this tenderness.
The hand at her right he took down to her shoulder, to steady her and show he was there, for grounding. And then he moved his hand from her left side, down her neck, not touching, as he saw teeth marks buried into her soft golden skin, so cool to his touch, glaring painfully, the brutal attack imprinted over her collarbone—His stomach recoiled, his ire lit, who—? She'd been bitten. Not by Goblins, no. There would have been numbers of them, and they would have used knives first—And somehow she got free. She was free. Free, with him. He tried to breathe calmly and not crush her to himself, for comfort's sake—It would pain her, even should she welcome it—Keeping still, he hovered his hand over the wound, feeling heat rising there as her skin recovered from the savaging. *Ah Thief, this hurts so.* "This did not happen when you fell."

She shook her head to confirm it, waking to him once more.

*She could barely stand—*

Their eyes meet and his held to hers with a vengeance. *How did you come by this?*

"Gollum," she replied as if she'd heard his demand.

Gollum. *Gollum… bearer of the artifact…*

Had she found him instead of the Halfling? *And then?* "Did you…?"

She nodded yes before he could say those words.

And then her Dog whuffed and grew suddenly stiff, facing the woods below them to the South.

Sona muttered of shitting—*shitting—?*

*Are you shitting me?* Thorin would have laughed had he been able.

But then she said louder, "*We're out of time.*" He eyes flashed gold in the setting sun, showing her will sparked to action in spite of how she swayed on her feet, her body beyond weary from her struggle with the foul creature *Gollum, after she'd fallen from a cliff and lived—!* "A pack of Warg mounted Orcs has found your trail."

*Bolg.*

*The one who hunts me… His pack comes for me, my head, and as for you—* He saw them, their lives, treasures beyond worth: his One, his Kin, his Friends and his Company, in addition the Wizard.

A Warg howled.

*Gold Song—what death do I bring?*

That was when she took his hand, her callused fingers cool and firm, caressing over his—*so welcome, so wonderful, the feel of her hand on his—* waking strength, reaching the vein of hope rewarded—*Sona lived!* And then she tugged him, calling him to action, "*Time to run.*"
A/N #1: Wondering what Sona experienced after she fell? Our dual readers already know, as Sona has told it in the companion story by Jenny-wren28, 'On The Road To Find Out'... It is in my bookmarks!

A/N #2: We're still heavy in angst-filled chapters, but I hope this chapter offered some respite, with Tharkûn's Calming Ways, heh, and Sona has Come Back! Next chapter, you all know what's next, or rather, who is about to show up, and it's painful, particularly coming from Thorin's PoV. The coming chapter is also graphic in evoking the threat of the Defiler, so be warned, there's horror in the writing, more than what was contained in Bolg's Order. Even so, along with the heads-up, I want to gently remind readers that the story remains T-rated, falling within the PG 13 rating range as we saw in the six LOTR/Hobbit films.

A/N #3: I want to thank my wonderful Beta, Jenny-wren28. (She is far more than my Beta as we work through our collaborative efforts, but here I want to thank her for all she does as my Beta.) She is always incredible helpful with her feedback and suggestions. I'll point to a specific example: I am usually the one between us who is all over writing the angst. In last week's chapter, 25, I initially had the breaks partly on, (probably shy of the pain, heh, and I know Jenny doesn't love angst like I do, and I was being overly careful...) and both Thorin and Dwalin wanted to hide their deepest feeling behind denial, glower and bluster. With Jenny's nudging and super suggestions, I denied denial, hushed the glower and laid bare their heartbreak... Thank you Jenny! I'm so incredibly happy to be taking this road with you.

A/N #4: Thank you everyone who has left a comment; they make my days and help keep me inspired! Thank you also to everyone who has left kudos or bookmarked or who is silently reading along!
Her hand, cool, gripping, guiding, living, hers—! Sona took Thorin by the hand and they ran. A few moments later he’d exchanged the hold, taking her hand into his, to keep her with him, give her strength in turn, and they ran harder. They all ran, the Company and the Wizard, parallel to the slope of the Mountain, to the North. They ran, and they ran, with Sona so tired, but still she managed to move with him, as if running were breathing, the only way to live.

Dwalin was beside them, keeping her safe in their flanks.

The Orcs and Wargs cried after them, their claws bearing down, drawing nearer. Indeed, running was life.

For the whole of them.

Sona stumbled, gripping his hand, and he squeezed hers in turn as she flagged. He squeezed again, catching her gaze, beseeching: please don’t stop… make this run… we can make it—Though he did not know where… He held tighter and pulled her on. And they ran. And ran.

And cries of Wargs — close, very close—

—Breathed down their path. He could almost feel the hot stank of their breath on his neck. Looking left, right, ahead— no high ground where they could stand and defend.

Defend?

He could hear their numbers from the cries. Far too many…

She lagged, her breathing uneven, and he squeezed her hand once more, catching her eyes—are you well to run? Should I carry you—? By her determined shake no, he tugged harder. And they ran—We can make this run—! He wanted to believe it, encouraged by her belief— run with me Biriz Akmåth'ule—! And she did not stop, for running was life.

But suddenly the cries died low. They'd been spotted.

Up ahead Thorin saw a Warg converging upon them. He released Sona’s hand, trusting Dwalin had their backs, and he drew Orcrist as he leapt upon a boulder on the downward slope of the mountain. Springing from there, he aimed the blade tip into the Warg’s throat and slayed it in their path.

Dwalin took up Sona in his arms, jumped behind him, and put her between him and Thorin, with a rock to their backs.

Bofur and Nori and Bombur and Dori took out three more of the Warg Scouts

The others of the Company were at work dispatching at least a dozen more. Thorin grabbed Sona’s arm again just as another Warg lunged, to be caught by Dwalin’s Cleaver.

Black blood spattering over his Thief’s face, he could see her quake with nausea… she verged on tears, tearing his heart…

Yet she schooled her features, grabbed his hand and pressed on for a bit longer before exhaustion
and her injuries took her and she fainted. Thorin caught her and they were running again as he held her and she clung to him, and they hit a speed, running hard, following Tharkûn's hollers, "Up the trees, quick!"

The land had run out—beyond was sky, turned burnt orange to the west.

They'd run into an alcove of a massive cliff fall— A half dozen tall grown Pines lined up at the edge of it.

The sun had fully set.

And they were trapped. All that stood between the Orcs and the abyss— were Pines.

The Company did as Tharkûn ordered and fled up.

—*the trees were life now.*

Dwalin took up behind Thorin, and helped him get Sona up to higher branches, where she clung to him and woke, looking about them, at him, holding him tighter: UNUSED 019, *I am sorry... it should not be like this.*

She passed out again, and he shook her, Oh Mahal, *stay with me,* "Thief."

She focused clearer as she tried to gain her bearings, head turned back and to the side, registering the others. She tilted slightly as though she were checking her balance, and her eyes shut and opened slowly as she searched about, until they settled on her Dog— Fíli had her clutched in his arms in the next tree, together with Kíli.

The other Dwarves were also in trees, the Company spread out over three.

Fíli had managed to get Sasha up with him, and he held her. She snarled and howled but kept still upon him as he clung to a branch. Kíli helped him keep the Dog safe up in the tree.

And the Dog growled her murderous rage at the gathering Wargs approaching on the ridge behind them back up the hill. More kept coming.

Sona grasped herself to Thorin tighter, and he saw her eyes clear for a moment and recognize their danger, and he pulled her close to his side, looking out at the evil multitude approaching.

"Stay high!" he ordered his Company. "Keep HOLD!"

—*the trees were life.*

She looked over at him, eyes focused and unfocused, frowning, glancing over to Dwalin. "Why are we in a tree?" His Thief was spent, delirious. *No.*

Dwalin stared at her shocked, shook his head and glanced at Thorin, his face creased with worry.

Thorin clutched her closer. *We flee the Wargs and Orcs, Gold Song, for our lives—*

She craned her neck around, checking where everyone held tight, her moves unsteady as they balanced on a tree limb. He clenched his teeth—*as if that would hold them—Stay put please!*!

Soon she located the Wizard, "Gandalf..." she tried to reach him with her weak voice; now it could not carry to the far tree where Tharkûn sat high, chatting with a large Moth flying above his staff—
"Mahal Strike the Orc Hordes, why was Tharkûn talking to a Moth?"

"Moth," Sona muttered, she’d seen it too.

Wizards.

On another tree, Dori and Nori were sifting through their pick bags as they held on with their legs, bracing. Bofur and Bifur meddled with their ropes. Why, Thorin had no idea. There was nowhere to climb.

"Important," she mumbled, but Thorin could not tell what she meant.

There is … no time … to waste … yet all they can do is wait.

He looked desperately at Tharkûn, still engaged with a moth…

"Remember," she added, and Thorin wished he knew.

Why the MOTH, Tharkûn?

Was there nothing practical a Wizard could do?

Tharkûn ignored them all.

Thorin turned to what came. Wargs. More Wargs. Beyond them mounted Orcs on Wargs gathered on the ridge past where they’d ran. Thorin counted. Dozens on dozens of fully mounted Orcs on Wargs. This is not good. At least one hundred mounts. Many more free-roaming…

They were trapped. In Pines. No way out.

Wargs barked and howled, more of them swarming over the ridge, gathering about the one in front. Pale and incredibly large—

Thorin knew— that face. His body clenched, heart ripped in fear, fear for all of them, seeing what he now had to accept—

'Pale's Bounty', the Goblin had said.

Not possible. No—

Noooooo. A Khuzdûl Bane chant filled the back of his mind…

Lu lu lu— Urkhas tanaki—

—Thorin tried to find a way, looking everywhere at once, thinking everything at once, and breathing— he could barely catch air; it felt like he would drown in the horror he saw coming. Orcs. Wargs. Thronging their Pale Leader. They lined the crest but did not approach, not yet. They waited, as more kept coming. Kept and kept—

And there, amidst them all— Ugrûd tashniki kurdê—

There, at the ridge—the head of the snake—

Lu lu lu— Urkas tanaki—

"AzOG." Thorin gasped it, unwanted.
No way out. *There had to be some way out*… But not the way they came, swarmed with Azog and his filth.

The Pale Orc on a White Warg had come to life.

*Before him. There. On the ridge.*

The Orc's eyes met Thorin's. And the Orc smiled.

*How is he there? Disbelief and seeing red and there is no way out.*

nO way out.

cOld.

hOt.

—*lu lu lu*—

*We are here because of me.*

—*Urkhas tanaki*—

*He is here because of me. My fault. I brought this on.*

Azog's smile deepened, like a crack of one of his adorning scars, and he took a grimacing, foul-faced breath. And then his eyes caressed over Thorin, and his Company, lingering slower over Fíli, and Kíli—his *brood shoots*. Thorin felt nausea.

Bolg's *Brood Sire—This was Azog*. He wanted them—*His Sister's Sons*—for 'games'.

Who commanded him? Were *they his reward*—?

*For my head*—?

—and then those hollow eyes were back on him.

*On him.*

*Challenging.*

*What? What challenge*—?

*They were stuck in trees.*

"Do you smell it?" Azog asked his Warg in black speech, leaning in as if he would whisper, though he was loud enough for all to hear, as he pet the white head of his mount with more affection than Thorin thought possible from an Orc. *Smell it?* Thorin understood the dark speech: it had been among his studies as a young prince, taught by none other than Balin, who had also taught Fíli and Kíli—*These among his Company understood the words*. No doubt Tharkûn also, when not conversing with *Moths*. The others only felt their understanding as it gripped their guts, without context. He held Sona tighter. What *Smell*?

"The scent of *fear*?"

—*Ugrûd tashniki kurdumâ*—
The other Orcs started pulling in air, hissing like water splashed over fire, greedy for the taste of them. His Dwarves. His People. His.

Azog locked eyes with Thorin once again, the Pale Orc's widened with mock sincerity. "I remember your father reeked of it, Thorin son of Thráin."

Lu lu lu lu, 'Adadē—

How? Thorin's heart pounded in his head. This foulness yet lives. And taunts. Thorin's blood rushed. They were trapped in trees. No where to run, no way to fight. He couldn't just stay here. Fear. Anger—Red—hOt—

—cOld.

ThrÓr.

And— Thorin's eyes were on Azog, unable to look anywhere else.

His 'Adad? Azog saw his 'Adad last?

He yet lived, tortured by—

—hOt anger coursed higher, mixed with bitter loss, and Thorin couldn't clear his head from any of it — nO.

Only him.

Urus—

"It cannot be."

Lu lu lu lu—

His heart burned fire.

—Arrâs talbabi kurdē—

He'd believed his own lie for years upon years—

That was no corpse the Orcs dragged back through the gates of Moria after Thorin sliced him deeply, severing his sword arm—that was this demon, screaming his agony—

—Urkhas tanaki—

lu lu lu lu—

Thorin would finish this. He moved to climb down just when Sona caught his arm. She caught him! Ever so briefly he looked in her eyes, warm and overfull of care. 'Are you hale?' he asked her silently with naught but a look. With the slightest nod she affirmed, begging with her eyes for him to look at her… did he see that right?

He glanced back at Balin and Tharkûn, who each looked from Sona, to him and then Azog… as if the monster called.

Asti. Where have I brought you?
Azog saw it all. All of them.

"Here!" Azog raised his stump, the one Thorin made, long ago healed with jagged gray edges, a trident bursting from the remains of where his arm once extended. He pointed the trident at Thorin, face spread with a lewd and greasy grin. "That one is mine."

*I am my own, Mahal's Made, Durinul.*

"Kill the others."

Lu lu lu lu—

**Kill the others.** His Company. His Friends. His Kin. His *One.* He brought them here. He brought *her* here.

—*Ugrûd tashniki kurdumâ*—

He pulled her closer, pulled himself in, also, as if he could draw up a bridge, but he couldn't. Couldn't. No where to go.

Mahal what could he do?

A dozen Wargs bounded down upon them, and they howled and thrashed and leapt and clawed through the lower limbs of the trees, knocking off the limbs they reached, bashing their huge bodies against the trunks, shaking the Dwarves lodged in the higher branches, *to knock them down, to maul them*— But the Wargs could not reach.

One hit a branch just below them, and Sona startled, and Thorin hugged her all the closer, *lest she fall.* "Move higher!" He ordered them all as the Wargs went berserk, ripping off the lower branches.

Azog gloated.

Thorin shifted Sona upward, assisted by Dwalin. As he crawled up next to her now higher in the tree. The scent of lavender washed over him, released from her soft hair as she leaned in close. He breathed deeply, unable to help himself, trying his utmost not to move, not to give any indication. But he was *watched.* It was *foul.* He felt the eyes on him, seeing to his private places, clear to his dreams; it felt like sandpaper scraped over his soul.

One after another the branches below were sheered off by the teeth of the beasts, and the trees began to lean… Thorin's heart pounded all the more —*their foothold wavered*— shallow roots, no doubt, blocked by the hard rock beneath the soil of the cliff. He pulled the Thief closer, as close as he was able, ready to leap—

As the trees began to topple—

—The Wargs bashed and thrashed the Pines until they collapsed, one into the other, thus driving the trees down, one after another, and the Dwarves scurried back and leaped into the next falling tree as each one they clung to fell, hollering and hanging for their lives. Everyone made it, and Thorin passed Sona up to Dwalin as he clambered up the last tree standing, where Tharkûn sat near the top.

Once they were a few branches out of reach of Wargs, she stopped near the trunk, with Dwalin just the other side.

Mahal, no more falling, *please do not let her fall again.*
Suddenly Tharkûn was calling Fíli and Kíli, "oi, take these!"

And there were Pine cones on fire— The Wizard was lighting the cones on fire, and throwing them at the Wargs below. The fires caught on the brush, and spread. The Wargs howled louder and backed away in the smoke.

Azog cried out in frustrated anger, a gut curdling sound, though better than his laugh.

There was space below them, where the fire chased away the beasts.

*Dare they hope?*

But the tree… It… moved badly beneath them all… badly off the center of its line… slipping back and out… NOOOOO…

The last Pine toppled, sshwwhoowhwooop, and it was falling. With all of them on it, aiming its tip toward the deep wide chasm beyond the cliff. *Hold her. hold. hold all. Hold her—*

**And he did.**

_They all did_, though Dori and Ori barely, as they hung from Tharkûn’s staff as he struggled to pull them back up to the tree, and the others held on, legs flailing, as they angled to clamber up topside. The tree had been stopped by its roots, hanging flush to the ground, the trunk over the abyss—Sona screamed as her arms weakened too fast, but Thorin was there—

—He pulled her up to the top side of the downed tree, staring deep into her eyes, assessing if she were unhurt.

Sona nodded as she righted herself; *where did she get this strength?* "Go." She turned to help Dwalin on her other side. "Help the others." They hung for their lives—

"I take all." Azog growled, laughing.

Thorin glanced back, Azog licked his teeth, eyeing over the Dwarves in the trees, lingering on Fíli and Kíli. The Orc smirked, smiling once more at Thorin. "I see your ilk, faces shaped like yours, soon to clothe my bits."

*Bits?*

Thorin could not breathe.

Azog gripped the leather at his groin and squeezed it, pulling, smiling most foul as he shifted on the Warg.

Indeed, that was someone’s face, *once.*

Thorin’s stomach turned.

Azog’s eyes were back on Thorin, then to Sona. His smile grew deeper, more lecherous. His eyes going over their bodies, narrowing, assessing, cutting like a rake through mud.

He had his mace aimed at—

—*Sona."

"Ahhhhgh, ayech, all of you, Oakenshield." the Pale Orc groaned, pleased. "Here, your Heirs, your
"Dam, and your Head." His eyes were on Sona.

She looked back at him… into those cold voids.

"I will drink her blood." Azog's face opened into a voluptuous grin. "Bring her," he motioned to the Orcs at his side. And then he began to laugh, the obscene roll of it echoing against the rocks, shaking Thorin's insides as the White Orc pointed his mace at Sona.

Sona spoke to Thorin, but he could not hear her through Azog. *Not past those eyes.*

*No.*

*No you won't.*

Fire and smoke wisped about them.

*I will kill you first.*

He could hear nothing but blood rushing. See nothing but the eyes that should long ago have ceased to gloat. Blue. Void of spirit. Full of hate. *Full of the death of my family,* seeking more. *Seeking my heart. My head.*

*No.*

*I must shut the light out of the dead eyes. I will do it. I should have done it before.*

*I will do it now.*

Step up… to arms. *To Arms…!*

Thorin glared at the Orc, affixing his shield. Flames wrapped between them but there was an opening…

Thorin rose from the fallen tree and took a step.

Someone shouted *NO!*

Thorin couldn't tell who.

It did no good.

*Idhîth—!*

—*Fortify! Defend!*

Thorin walked.

*A Bazgel—!*

—*against the Bane of all Banes—*

The *Defiler,* Lord of Orcs. *You wake me to kill.*

*Id-ubram—!*

—*the Severer!*
—the *Lesser Cleft*…

The arm was greater… *This* remains—

*I will* remove it. The sundering…

"Thorin, NO!"

Was that Gold Song?

*Azog's eyes danced before him—*

*Rake'ê—!*

—*My arms—!*

*Azog growled, aroused to the call. I will hack you, sunder you from life.*

"*Sho hoooo, sho hoooo, sho hu hu hu,*" the Orcs chanted *all about him*, eager, luring.

Thorin heard nothing but rushing. One step. Another. There he is. Cruel joke. *Make an end to it.*

Thorin picked up momentum, walking headfast toward his Hate through the fire.

Azog's pores opened, and a stench blew off as his arms widened and his scars glowed red.

*Du'ra—!*

—*In the naked silent places—!*

*Tî'kata!*

*I will strip you! Death I bring you!*

"He's trying to bait you!"

It was *her! É'ze*. Thorin's heart pulled but he could not *stop*.

*This* foulness?! I am the bait, Biriz Amâth'amê…

*Lu lu lu lu…*

The Pale Orc's smile taunted. Thorin would reach it, remove it.

"Don't you see?" She cried, her voice soft on the wind, through ash and fire—

—*I see him who should not live!*

"This is exactly what he wants!"

*Aye, Orcs love death—*

—*This one especially.* Thorin glared into the void.

*Da're—!*

*Îshî—!*
—I strip my wounds—!

Embrace my edge!

Thorin began to run. Run run run.

—running is death.

Beat a path to your death.

Re Maka—

—And my Cheating Joke—

—still rewarded—!

Kiss Death! Azog exhaled.

Thorin ran full out.

Tarad—!

For all you gloat—!

Azog groaned with pleasure…

His arms opened all the wider, as if he awaited his lover…

Ga’na’nan’ar—!

So it has Been from the Start—!

Our Maker’s Gift! You Stole!

Azog awaited, eager and open, his heart Thorin’s target—

Thorin raised Orcrist.

Êz! Fâr—! Zafrân!

My Late! Ancestors—! Lead men!

You Stole!

Thorin groaned, there, running full—

—growling, stretching, reaching his blade—

Nahanthâ—!

You yield to me—!

Strike—Strike—

Lu lu lu lu! From the breeze, late and low, as his Company watched, late and low, late and low, deep in the depths of heart—
Thorin's blade did not connect.

Azog smashed him, his mace to his chest.

Sound stopped. Pain reeled. Thorin was down.

**PAIN**

Hold the weapon. *Hold,* turn. Rise… He's there.

White light and searing met Thorin's eyes and face, as the mace he barely saw brought him down once more.

And then the Warg was upon him, pawing, stinking; it rolled its nose in his gut, pushing, clasping teeth. "OhhhHH," the force down upon him! Hot jaws gripped over his chest and stomach, clenching and lifting and pressing! "Aaaaaaaaaahhhhh—"

Cries of *no* from somewhere far away, upside down, head swimming—

*No*

Lu lu lu

Clamping, lifting, in an instant the Warg was SwiNGING him in its maws as its teeth, large as climber's spikes, pressed holes through the armor into his flesh, pressed, rent, twisted.

**PAIN.** "Phhh…. Aaaaaahhhhaaaaah—"

The cursed Warg—

"—Aaaahhhhh—"

—did "…hooOhh…" hold fast.

It shook him, whipping back and forth as it dug its teeth deeper, until Thorin remembered his sword hand, still holding Orcrist, and he slammed it down upon the snout of the thrashing Warg.

Yowling, it flung him away.

Thorin flew until his back slammed on a far rock, breath gone, and his body went limp as more pain radiated in all directions. Stars. The night is clear and full of stars.

Azog snarled, and laughed.

Breathe. Move. GET. UP. His blade—he'd lost hold—*can't reach.* "Hhhnnnnhh" Breathe. Pain.


"Bring me the Dwarf's head." Azog.

*Move… can't.*

A shadow blocks the stars. A black blade strikes the sky.

Darkness took him.

Waking to a screaming and a crashing upon him, *Sona*—!

—She was over him, *holding* him, and over her the Orc loomed, blade descending with a howl, crashing into her *back*—!

**NOOOO Asti! what are you doing here—!?**

He heard a snap— *he felt* cracking... *bones sundered? Sona—?!*

He could have sworn it to *both*; yet she breathed. With all force of will and determination, he pulled his arms around her, *she's moving, her eyes on him!*

*How are we both still alive?* Just. Hold. He could feel her heart against his own. *Oh how that felt,* through the pain... such tender *pulsing*— *She lived!*

*What was it? What— snapped?*


His eyes widened as what stood beyond grew clear; the Orc readied for another blow, the jagged blade poised, looming over the both of them.

*Asti—no.* Thorin could barely breathe it out. His arms tightened around Sona, pulling her to his chest as he tried to roll as the Orc above them snarled.

Thorin used every ounce of will to turn, grumbling low and deep through pain, to muster strength to shield, but he had no strength to summon; there was nothing between her and the killing blow that would claim them both. His breath went out of him. He can't... Blade is rising... *'no' can't. Roll.*

But then a brown furry mass hurled howling between them, and the Thief's Dog ripped out the throat of the Orc.

"Sasha," praised the Thief with a sigh. "Good girl."

*Mahal Sent, Dog. Your teeth are...worthy... Ákmûnrak zu.*

Sona's head fell to rest on Thorin's neck, her forehead against his cheek, a scent of lavender reviving his spirit. *She lives... we live.* Her cool breath caressed his skin, the skin of the neck she saved—

*And her Dog—*

*Gold Song: You should not have—*

—*How could you risk yourself so?*

*Shhhhh...* Hold. Hold. *Feel your heart, beating time to mine. Feel your breath brush skin, an echo to my soul.* He shut his eyes and swallowed. *They lived.*

Sasha stood over them, defending with her teeth as a clash of metal sounded, his Company had made it from the Pine and battled off the Orcs, to save them further—

*Sona passed out, and he held her, trying to stay—*
—darkness came anyway—

—He woke to whooping cries and the heaving beating of large feathered wings— Sona was in his arms and they flew, grasped gently and secure, soaring through the air in the claws of an Eagle.

An Eagle?

When had Eagles come, and why?

Perhaps it was a dream, or they had died. But no, he still felt the biting aches and pain—

"Thanks Moth," she muttered.

Tharkûn's Moth?

He didn't care that she made no sense, as he focused on her lips moving on his neck, the heat of her breath on his collarbone.

He only dreamed of Eagles, sky and stars, and Sona in his arms. Her heart beat steady against his, a promise of life. Sona... Gold Song.

Biriz akmâth'amê.

Stay with me.

"Always," she murmured, or had he imagined that?

End of Part One.

To Be Continued Here with Part Two.

Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: Feels strange and good to have come so far and to be closing the door on this section. I hope you've all enjoyed! I will be taking a break before resuming with Part Two, which I will post here. Not sure how long the break will be, but I hope to be back here by mid September at the latest. I'll miss you all until I am back. Please don't hesitate to drop me a comment if you enjoyed the story so far. I love hearing from you!

A/N #2: Thanks to all of you who have commented, left kudos and bookmarked, and all who are quietly reading along. I appreciate you all!
Part 2: Chapter One: But In Dreams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stars glittered above him, and Thorin could feel the kiss of the night breeze on his cheeks, through his hair. His eyes shut to feel it better: Sweet air, the living breath, he paid attention to his breathing, how his chest rose and fell, the intake, however painful, filling him. More, there was more now, because Sona—

Cries of Eagles pierced the air, waking him—

Sona?

Oh, but it did hurt, the lances of the teeth—

and you—

Ahhh— Asti, here you are.

He had her in his arms, her firm body against his own. In the haze of his pain — smashing in his insides from the mace— he knew he was too wounded to hold her secure, and yet they pressed together, moving— moving?

He looked beside her, then down— he'd already seen the stars above—But that was only one side— Oh Mahal—!

He flexed for purchase but there was none, and the pain that followed this involuntary motion —broken ribs— brought darkness until it woke him again.

Circumstances remained the same: every side was open to sky! Land tree and rock they passed, far far below—

Wild large wings beat above them, swooping and rising, lifting and soaring. He glanced headlong into the eye of the Eagle, who blinked slowly three times as she held a tick tighter, as though she would reassure him, before she glanced up toward wherever she flew— They flew!

Mahal!

Sona. She was with him in his arms, head nestled beneath his chin.

Head split with aching, again, from the mace—

His pain would steal attention from his Thief.

No. no. He would not let it.

He focused on the feel of her hair, the shape of her face pressed against his neck dozing against his skin there, her breath gentle, caressing, as she slept evenly, cradled with him in the claws of the Eagle. He focused on the contact of her living form against his, and steadied his own breathing, now and again interrupted by darkness when pain overtook.
He dreamed. This he knew, as he felt no pain. And the woman lying in his arms, his Thief—she slept comfortably under the weight of many furs, deep in the heart of the Mountain, his home. It was vivid, again, so vivid he could smell the scent of home. Lavender, mingled with the subtle musk scent of green stone and earth, home. Nungu Azsālul'abbad Zabal—

He dreamed. This he knew, even in the firm embrace of the solid stone around them. She was there with him, like the times before… though she seemed close to sleep within it.

On the other side of dreaming they flew beneath the Eagles wings, with pain, and scars… she'd been bitten. He looked down at the clear skin of her collarbone. No doubt he dreamed—

It was gone. She bore no scrapes and bruises from all that she'd been through— the fall, then Gollum, and then…

All that came after.

This was— almost relief, only lacking as it was not real.

He was very much aware. Mahal's favor, though the pain was gone, it echoed on the edges of waking. It would return, for her as well, with her scrapes and bruises not yet healed, and so he determined to savor this respite.

She snuggled in his arms upon a pile of layered furs, and though drowsy, she hummed a tune, one like a lullaby. It sounded familiar; he had heard it before, from a song she had sung to Kíli, though he could not remember the words.

Sweet dream—

Azog. Orcs. The blade, the cracking— Sona!? No, she lived, Kaylíth, Ė'ze, also in the woken world. Let us leave pain there.

—But this. Gold Song. Here, right here, where he could feel her and he held her as if she were here in this dream. He knew better. Still. She was firm and breathing against him, the scent of lavender enveloped him, like home, calming, and the humming tune, so pleasant, he wondered how the words went, trying to recall. His arms drew her closer.

This should hurt more.

Pain tickled the edges of his dream.

—Stars glistened like diamonds in the far night, clear through the open sky window— what? The sky window? There it was, open wide, and Thorin and Sona faced the starry night lying upon a bed— a bed—? in the middle of his Parents' living quarter— wha? his Parents'—? The bed, low set and open-splayed over slender wooden crates, was one Thorin did not recognize. The crates beneath held fireless lanterns within them, setting out a light like many yellow candles, while the bed stood ostentatiously where the wide sofa had set before, before Smaug… Of all places, why here? And a bed in the living quarter?

No matter. It is a fine view.

And no wonder he felt the grounding of the Mountain, smelled the scent of home, of Sona. That's what dreams are for…

He wanted to hold her and he was holding her and…
How could you throw yourself over me like you had? Did you think to save me from it? While an Orc blade descended toward my throat? Impossible. And if you had taken that edge?

You had. Something cracked, I had felt the snap—

And if you had died there? "Amråd'mêzi, Asti?"

But she breathed with him in the clutch of the Eagle. He remembered, this remained true on the other side of waking.

How? What was that cracking? Thank Mahal, don't ask questions.

But I cannot help these questions.

How, Gold Song? After my fool move—what then? —Za'ê'markhuzd— I was already dead. You could not save my life, not you, not that way, not for me, for my foolishness as I rushed to death—Amråd'mêzi? Sweet Pacifist— you cannot take my place. "Lu’ lu’ lu’, Za'ê'markhuzd."

Yet life prevailed, in dreams and with the Eagle on the waking side, where pain would greet them, grateful for another breath.

Here, in dream, Thorin lay in the center of this wide-open, low-set bed, cushioned by a feathered matt beneath the furs, with Sona to one side, her back toward his chest, in his arms, arms that held her from the open, beneath all the layers of comforting furs, his hand over her belly, feeling the softness of her skin beneath a layer of sheer cotton. He as well lay stripped to cotton pants and tunic—

Through the scant layers he could feel her strong core and her slender muscles resting shoulder to calf against his own, and he held her close, calmed by the contact. "Kaylîth, Ė'ze."

The calls of Roäc beckoned from outside the sky window—

And then the Raven alighted there, atop one of the opened glass panes, a construct of five heavy glass panels opening out in the shape of an angular flower—

Roäc cawed Thorin's name in the tongue of the Ravens—

No flight took them in his dream, they were not in the sky, no—this was much better, welcomed by his Friend the Raven, welcomed by the stone around them. They were grounded, and the view above, just above, the sky window—! He ached for home, and here they were, beneath the Mountain! Azsâlul'abad, hints of lavender, from her, from home. His mind settled back to that. Such a thing he wished for—so far from the wings of Eagles—

Nevermind. This is a dream—

Mahal knows he missed home, and he was struck by a pang of loss, acute, recalling then and now, the lost—

—But for Sona—

The almost lost—

—Sona—

He sighed into her hair, craving so much.
I miss home, Gold Song.

Why else would I dream of here? Even if only in a dream… for now we fly.

For well he knew they flew the skies on the other side of dreaming.

—This place, I would show you my home, I would welcome you here, to this beloved space, safe, this spot I recall from my earliest days, but not this way, not after battle, not with you, Gold Song.

—She shifted, seeming to be sleeping, and words mingled into her humming—

"Nighty night…"

Nighty night? She mumbled the strains of words— That song? The one about 'dreaming dreams of me'? Thorin remembered it now, a song Kîli favored, as well as he—

"Kiss me…"

How he wished she sang this for him—

Ohhh, Mahal, spare me from dreams!

But he did not want to wake, not from this—

Her voice soothed a ravaged spirit.

"Tell me you'll miss me…"

Sona… how could you… you—

His hand moved over her belly, where he gripped her, her back to him— he could feel her heart beat against his own, and in his chest a subtle ache beneath it.

No. She lived! Kaylíth, Ė'ze.

And if she had died for this? Her wound would pose a mortal one for both of them.

No, not this, stop. Do not think it— Listen, hear the tone she hums—

"Biragishami, Ė'ze."

He pulled her closer, feeling her breath, her life, her heart—

"Thorin.” She woke, and stirred ever slightly, and he drew into her, his face in her hair, oh to hold her, sweet living soul…

"Ē'ze.” Mahal help him, he had chosen. "Mabajbûna’ê.” And she did not know. He would say, but he could not, and yet this was a dream in any case, so he told her in Khuzdûl. Mahal help him she would understand in his dream. But she could not, she would not hear, for this was only dream, and so he was free to speak the secret tongue with her, and share his heart. "Sullu'ê Asti, Mabajbûna'amê."

She snuggled closer into him, leaning her head back as he held her, so gladly.

"Amràlimê,” I only just chosen when I thought you had died, fallen— "Za'ulzan'amê," my greatest loss, after only just… "Zâ'ê Binumral'mêzu,” and you do not even know. "Birashigami, Asti.”
This was still a dream, and he felt his eyes burn, wishing it were real—As real as she felt here, snuggled close in his arms—wishing she could hear him.

But he took this solace, this embrace, and rested in it. And as she slept at peace in the dream, he kept close, grounded by the comfort of the Mountain and her steady beating heart against his own.

Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: Inspiration for this chapter is the song Sona hums. I had it on repeat a few times as I wrote:

Dream a Little Dream of Me…

Stars shining bright above you
Night breezes seem to whisper I love you
Birds singing in the sycamore tree
Dream a little dream of me
Say nighty night and kiss me
Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me
While I'm alone and blue as can be
Dream a little dream of me
Stars fading but I linger on, dear
Still craving your kiss
I'm longing to linger till dawn, dear
Just saying this
Sweet dreams till sunbeams find you
Sweet dreams that leave all worries behind you
But in your dreams whatever they be
Dream a little dream of me

… as sung duet by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong. Sona, however, was humming the Mama Cass version!

A/N #2: I'm back! I'll need a bit of time to get a queue going, but writing has resumed, and there will be more regular postings. So happy to be at it again! Thank you all for your patience, for all your reviews, the favorites the follows. I hope you enjoy what's in store.

A/N #3: As many of you know, this is a companion piece to JennyWren28's "On The Road to Find Out," now complete and posted! And so I've set down my Beta hat, tasks there completed… Oh the feelings, I have them in all the ways! Love that story, loved working with my friend on her project, am sad to see it over, and yet… I've a little time
for writing… And JennyWren28 continues as my Beta here… We are not quite finished, are we? :- )}
"Binibritami, Asti," stay—

Rock slapped softly against Thorin's back at the jarred release of the Eagle seconds before, and he woke to his body encased in pain, the beating wings of Eagles and their cries above them, intermingled with Company members calling his name, Sona's name. Where? His arms were empty. Thorin succumbed once again to darkness.

Next he woke —pain somewhat eased— to see the dawn had come. Tharkûn hovered over him, sinking his eyes deep into his own, then deeper, away, ministering some magic to minimize the damage and subdue the aches. But Thorin's arms were empty... loss...

No. He grasped Tharkûn's wrist and squeezed, wishing to call the Wizards' attention back to his eyes.

The Wizard did not respond to the press, continuing his healing chant.

"Sona?" He gasped it.

Tharkûn shut his eyes and swallowed, irritation coming to the surface of the Wizard's features, and Thorin's agitation only grew with each miniscule moment of silence until finally the Wizard answered, "Let me finish here. Your brash move left you badly injured, leaving me with quite the task of healing, and I require all my focus, Master Oakenshield, to get you whole enough to walk down this Carrock."

Leave it to the Wizard to answer without answering. And to remind him of his mad rush. One he was not likely to forget anytime soon.

"The Eagles did not wish to set us lower, with the Orcs in such high numbers and their arrows ready," the Wizard continued, well knowing that was not what Thorin asked.

"Tharkûn." His voice was rough, weak from little air, as though a lung had collapsed. He tried to catch his breath, panic setting in — had he only dreamed she lived? in both places, asleep and waking?

And that is when the Wizard hushed his panic with a hand to his head, sending calm through his being clear to his bones, but Thorin knew this was a spell, and he resisted, wanting an answer.

Tharkûn's eyes raked over him, his face poised in a frown mixed with a smile not far beneath, eyes full of worry and his typical admonishing spark.

"Between the two of you, it's a wonder either yet lives. Master Dwarf. The Lady Sona now rests—"

Rests? "No—"
“Shhhh.” Tharkûn hushed, not easing Thorin's rising panic in the slightest. "She is well, though badly fatigued from her ordeals these past days. I have sent her to sleeping, so she may heal undisturbed."

"Where?" Thorin tried to sit up, to reach, straining to find sight of her, and felt the jab of grinding bone misaligned, several of his ribs, broken, dangerously sharp inside. He froze just as the Wizard grasped him tightly by the arms and held him down.

"Stop with that, you'll stab yourself with your own ribs there. Be still now."

Thorin blinked and nodded, unable to ease the burn in his eyes.

Tharkûn's hands gripped his face, held him still, forced his calm, his attention. "She rests beside you. Óin looks after her. Ease yourself and let me finish and we will be on our way."

Thorin kept still as the Wizard's hand hovered and he resumed his healing chant, and there was an easing to his breathing, as his lungs felt—opened— and the bones of his ribs settled to proper alignment and hardened faster than the normal healing time, though remaining full of aches and soreness, as though he'd been beat with many hammers, his chest, his back and his sides, each in their turn.

Tharkûn finally opened his eyes and quieted, before calling Dori and Dwalin over to either side of Thorin, and then the Wizard winked and nodded, directing them to "assist their Leader to a seated position."

Leader. Some leader. Seemed the Wizard's words were aimed to hit low. Thorin clenched his teeth in pain as he sat up, irritably accepting the helping hands of his friends.

Tharkûn wasn't finished. "You're only to sit," he ordered, glaring down at Thorin as he shifting his staff from left to right to underline his point. "These two will see to it, you do just that."

Aye, to restrain as well as assist. Thorin briefly glared from Dori to Dwalin, his face contorted with recollections of the last time they held him, before settling his eyes back on the Thief—

—Kaylîth, Ė'ze—

Thorin awaited the Wizard's next order.

"We need to be sure your skull is hale from the blow you took to it."

Is that all? Thorin shook his head, testing for dizziness. Though ire and denial teased at him, he kept his mouth shut.

Then Tharkûn looked to Nori and Bofur. "You two scout the easiest way down; Lady Sona will need to be carried."

Carried— Mahal's Coals to Water, most likely he would be unable… Thorin put a hand to his chest feeling the places where the ribs had broken, now rapidly healing, however still quite painfully impacted.

Still, he wondered at the Wizard. Popped lung, broken ribs, these were injuries that should have taken weeks to heal this far— perhaps longer. Saved again for his recklessness.

Tharkûn moved off, back to the Thief, lying stretched out. Óin had cleared her face and arms of dirt and blood, leaving the scrapes and bruises exposed… so many. She had no cloak, Thorin wondered
how she lost it, and he wondered if she were cold…

He missed holding her.

Dwalin pressed his shoulder, gaining his attention. But then he said nothing.

Thorin waited but a second before glancing away, ahead, back to the Thief.

"Thorin?" Dwalin asked, fingers digging, seeking explanation.

Nothing more.

All the Company stood close enough to hear Dwalin's question, except for Nori and Bofur who hadn't returned from scouting a way down. The Carrock was not all that large, after all. They waited, some looking directly at him, Fíli and Kíli and Balin and Bifur, and Glóin, and others staring ahead, Dori, Ori, Bombur, Óin, who focused on his patient, the unconscious Thief—

Gold Song—

—she had nearly—

He didn't wish to explain. Hadn't that been obvious, what that was? So he kept his mouth shut and stared at the rock beneath him, before his eyes quickly returned to Sona.

Tharkûn glanced up from the Thief. "Thorin, go ahead. Take a turn up here," the Wizard waved his staff in a circle over the small area of Carrock. "See if the head blow has left you dizzy."

Thorin, at once released by Dori and Dwalin, took to his feet, glaring from the Wizard back to Dori and Dwalin as he moved to Sona's side, kneeling on Óin's left.

'She's cold. So cold.' Thorin signed the question to the Healer, unsure he could keep his voice steady, 'why so cold?'

'Needs sleep to recover, special sleep,' his Healer replied, nodding as he signed. 'A spell of the Wizard, he says it will chill her.'

Thorin moved to remove his coat, carefully and slowed by pain, and handed it to Óin.

I want to hold you, Asti.

Thorin, with Óin and Dori's assistance, had her quickly wrapped in it.

Nori and Bofur returned just as they finished bundling her.

"We've found a good enough way down, seems…" Bofur nodded, hat bouncing as he glanced about, from Sona to Thorin, and then Óin and Tharkûn, concern spread over his features. "... as well as can be seen without leaving ya'all here too long."

"Let's move, then," Thorin wanted to throttle all this silent mooning about. "Get off this rock, find some place..." His eyes settled on Sona, as a pang went through him, both of pain, and heartache. He could not carry her. She lay asleep and vulnerable, as all sorts of crashing feelings cours ed through him. "Let us find...some place safe. We need to get down, now, before nightfall, so we can set a camp."

Nori eyed him, assessing, as Thorin's hands adjusted the coat around the Thief, and he saw the slightest shift of 'no,' as if the Spy thought—
Thorin only wished he could. "I am fit to walk…" He signaled Dwalin.

The Warrior approached, wary, and Thorin's eyes followed him as he got closer, angling up, challenging. But he was well aware of what was necessary, as he remained kneeling by Sona's side. "…but I cannot carry her."

It seemed as if the Company let out a communal sigh, and tensions ebbed as an outtake of breath.

"Dwalin," Thorin made firm eye contact with his friend. "You will carry her down."

Dwalin extended his hand, and Thorin took it, rising—*biting back the pain*.

Then Dwalin had Sona scooped in his arms before he glanced at Nori, eye cocked for direction.

"Well then," Tharkûn muttered, "we'll be off. I've some idea where."

"I bet you do."

Thorin did not bother to ask, instead he followed Dwalin, Thief in arms, following Nori, who followed Bofur down.

They picked their way carefully, avoiding missteps, thank Mahal.

Thorin climbed behind, aggravating silently the entire way, watching as Dwalin carried her, worrying as they took the way slow, each treacherous step and turn, his eyes on his friend's back, who held her, her head resting on his shoulder, her feet tucked in to his side, so she would not catch on the rock bracing the path.

Sometimes he would recall the dream, where he *did* hold her, and felt the bite of it, for however real that dream felt, her heart beating against his chest, her hair brushing his cheeks, her song, the scent of lavender, of home, of her, it was *not* real.

*This* was real, climbing down from a Carrock where the Eagles had dropped them after Thorin made a mess of things —*and then some.*

*How he wished he could carry her.*

Bracing pain stretched through his core, chest and back as a steady reminder of fact. *But for Tharkûn, he too would be carried.*

Wishing got him nowhere, although they did make their way down. Thorin needed many rests along the way, with the pain coming now and again in waves, twofold from his over-tender ribs and lungs hurting to take in the air required. This was all too frustratingly noticeable by his snail pace even when they moved down, bit by bit. It took the whole day long as they labored the steep switchbacks to the valley below.

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They set camp in a protected alcove jutting a stream. Bombur sent Kíli and Fíli to fetch the water for cooking, all were hungry. Glóin and Óin were quick to get a fire going, and Óin directed Dwalin to "please bring Lady Sona closer to it."

"Wait," Thorin stopped them, pulling out his bedroll, making his way to them.

They nodded, quietly, silently, as he rolled it out. The outer leather, a large solid piece of darkest blue edged with two narrow cross-woven sections, had an oil treated side to face the ground and keep the inner layer dry. Then he laid out the inner layer over that; soft, thick, midnight blue, embroidered in
silver at the edges, evoking mithril, again, by his N'amad, with the names of his fore-bearers, recited in honor, and the names of the living, with prayers for sleep and comfort and their after-born's good fortune—the same as on his handkerchief, *the one the Thief still had*.

She'd needed it. *For crying*. It was the least he could do—

But then, there was *now*. *Now what*… *what had he brought on her*?

Dis would be sorely disappointed with him *now*.

*Never mind. It's no good, thrashing yourself, done is done.*

He gestured for Dwalin to bring her, lay her there, where Thorin tucked her in, Óin just opposite making sure this was done 'proper', her back over the embroidered hammer and anvil of the Durin Crest, her head upon the Raven Crown. For a brief moment he imagined her there, donned in the Queen's Crown. *Queen? Stop, fool Dwarf*. He blinked and pressed this fantasy from his mind. *Hot coals to his heart, how dare he picture this? Or even think it? No*. Thorin tucked the fur of his coat closer around her, the Stars of Durin on the bedroll framing her head, her hair like darkened gold against the deep blue. He shuddered slightly at the coolness still hanging close to her skin, *too cool, she would catch a fever, so chilled*.

Thorin went to tucking further, though he'd already ensured this just a moment before. *I will keep you warm, Asti. Even when—*

*No.*

*Especially now. What have I done?*

Later, after Bombur's welcome supper by the campfire, Dwalin left his log to come beside Thorin, to make sure he'd eaten.

He had, absentmindedly. Now he sat propped against the tree right next to where she lay, watching her breathing. *In and out, in and out.*

*Kaylîth, Ė'ze.*

"Why'd ya rush him, Thorin?"

Dwalin… *he asks his questions.*

The Warrior made a lame attempt to keep quiet from the others, whispering further beneath his breath. "Just about the most stupid, half baked action I've ever seen you take."

Aye, it was that. Thorin nodded, saying nothing, only remembering.

*Âkmînruk zu, Dwalin, for this blow of truth.*

"You've no word?" his friend asked, seeking some explanation where there was none, none sufficient.

"No." Thorin felt he could look nowhere, so he rested his eyes on the Thief, and continued to focus on her breathing. *Up, then down, up, then down.*
"What did the foul Orc say?" Dwalin pressed.

_His Company, his Kin, his One, his head._ No. Thorin would not repeat it. Rather watch her breathing… _Up, then down, up, then down, kaylîth._

"I was tryin' to get off the blasted fallen Pine, Thorin, and I do not know the Black Speech as well as N'adad'ē," he shrugged his shoulder toward Balin, sitting with his pipe lodged between his chin and mouth, clearly listening, as he nodded slightly, tensing…

Balin had heard the words, then…

No doubt Fíli and Kíli heard them as well: they were deep in a conversation, one with the other, both frowning, with Kíli frowning hardest, as usual, going on with each other as though none of the others were about, though they whispered soft enough none could hear their words…

And Ori as well had heard those things and understood. The lad glanced at him and away, looking more pale than after he'd read aloud the blasted leather for his bounty…

"I should've taught you better," Balin muttered, but there was no joy in it.

It did not matter.

None of it mattered.

"Taught who, what?" Dwalin asked, his exasperation vibrating through his whispering.

"The both of you, one thing and another." Balin took a puff from his pipe, looking at no one, frowning deeper.

"Whatever _that_ means," Dwalin groused. "You sound as cryptic as Tharkûn."

Thorin looked for him, finding his spot empty. The Wizard, it seemed, had left the campfire. No one was quite sure where he was off to…

_Wizards._

Dwalin glared at Thorin once more.

Thorin glared for a moment, and then took his eyes off, back to the fire, then back to Gold Song.

"Since you won't explain…"

_Azog saw it all. All of mine, all of me. I cannot say it. Won't repeat it._

"… you blasted stubborn _dim witted_ Fool Dwarf, will you at least assure us you'll not catapult yourself like that again, when your enemy so clearly has the high ground advantage, on a Warg, no less?"

"He's alive."

That silenced the Warrior. At least for the next several moments.

Thorin could barely move, could not take his eyes off the fire, shamed by his actions from before.

Finally Dwalin whispered, "Your spirit has taken damage, Buhel."
At that Thorin's eyes whipped to him but just as quickly settled back on the fire.

"You will keep you head, next time," his friend assured.

My head—

"And the Pale Orc will be off guard."

Next time…

Aye. There will be next time.

"What course shall I take?" Thorin asked him finally, as a counter to all his thoughts. "How shall I succeed?" Do they not see? He is divided to ruin by his own choice. What if she should not come?

It would take strength beyond Mahal's to leave her behind.

She did not ask for this.

How soundly she slept, how far away, at peace.

"I chose her. Sona Anand Jones of Kaleforn'ya. Without call, against Binumrâl, I chose anyway. And for her sake I stayed in the Mountains, fully aware of the danger, I kept my Company there. I would not flee the blades of Orcs, not even for my People's sake. I have—"

"Rubbish Thorin," Dwalin cut him off.

I have no counterpart.

The camp had grown silent. All were listening.

"We weren't leavin' her either." Dwalin continued, his voice lowered with his rising ire. "And she cares for you. We all have seen it. Why in Mahal's hottest furnace would she throw herself on you to save your sorry hide?"

I have no counterpart. And yet... why, Asti?

"Why indeed? It's not for love of me, and even if it were, even in my wildest dreams, Dwalin, this is not good!" Thorin jabbed the words out, feeling angry of a sudden.

He took a deep breath, wishing for the night air to fill him— Instead he was slammed with racking pain through his ribs, front back and sides, and he clenched, to keep himself from coughing. One the spasm was under control, he remained hushed.

But it was not pain or shame that moved him to silence.

He felt lost. How was he to lead this way?

Sona.

"She fell. My choice ripped from me like a reckoning. Then she was back. Alive." Kaylíth, Ŗ'ze. "Bruised, beaten. Bitten." Thorin nearly growled the words. "Then the Orc horns. We had to run."

Dwalin and Balin listened with slight nods of their heads. The others acted as though they did not hear. Thorin knew otherwise.
"Then Azog, he was there, he said things…" They all knew, even those who did not understand. "No one should hear what things he said, and imagine. I had to silence him, finish where I failed, before."

"You did not fail, laddie," Balin interjected, shaking his head, hung low.

"Save your praise, Balin, it rings hollow." Thorin knew Balin spoke of the time before the gate's of Moria, but the gaping aches of the night just past pressed deeply. He had run to his own death, and then— "I was goaded. I allowed it." He swallowed, still watching Sona breathing, coming to a decision, one he had offered before.

"Biragishami, Buhêl'amê. There is no excuse."

He knew they all listened, absent Tharkûn, who had not yet returned, and the sleeping Thief.

Biriz Akmâth'amê.

He stared from her, into the fire, one fist twitching tight, opening and closing, so happy she yet lived. Kaylîth, Ė'ze.

It was a genuine quandary, a fine mess, this… choosing. "I still have a Quest before me, with no clear path to see it through."

He was met with silence.

"Birashigami—" I would free you a fool's errand— "I said atop the Mountains, after she fell. I mean the offer still—"

"Shut up, Thorin." Balin said it, cutting him short of repeating.

"We'll pretend we didn't catch your meaning, you stubborn fool Dwarf," Dwalin muttered, moving off to a far tree to take the first watch.

"We're in this together," Fíli shot in.

Many heads nodded assent.

"To the end," Kíli added.

The bitter end? Thorin didn't want to know. It looked dire when he looked ahead. So he looked to Sona, sleeping soundly in his furs, in his bedroll. Now. Here. All more than he would have had, but for her.

Chapter End Notes

This Dwarf packs his angst, doesn't he? Hope you all enjoyed! Thank you, reviewing readers! You help keep me inspired! And thank you also to all of you who have left kudos and bookmarked the story. Means a lot to me! Onward ho, then! I'm off to the next... ;-)
Part 2: Chapter 3: By Silver Streams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kaylith... Inhèd'ul Mahal.

Biriz Akmâth, Ė'ze…

Asti.

How did it come to this?

Night wore on.

Thorin watched Sona sleep, taking comfort in her breathing, taking care to keep her covered when the furs would shift, keeping still otherwise, as any shift woke pain. Her Dog had joined her this night, sleeping rolled against her legs. Thorin was glad for her, and not only for the warmth she provided his Thief. This Dog saved his life and Sona's, taking out the Orc with her teeth—Åkmînruk zu Buhel'ul Ė'ze. Now and then, as night wore on, he'd bob off to sleep, dozing against the tree he'd leaned on. Then he'd wake with a start, the startle itself waking pain as well as his mind's sudden jarring concerns—was she well?—until his eyes lighted on her and saw her body's subtle shift as she was breathing.

Kaylith.

Glancing over the Company, Thorin saw Glóin was on watch now, staring into a patch of Aspen trees to their west, toward the most vulnerable access to their camp.

Low and searching, "who, who, who, whOoo, whOoo," Nearby a Horned Owl began her call, stringing her 'whos', all in hammer succession, even and sure. Thorin glanced up toward her voice and spotted her in a high branch in a patch of Aspens, her solitary form silhouetted against the partial moon behind her.

The Owl waited up there, Thorin knew it.

And she was lovely, majestic, so high, black against the moon.

Crickets filled the space of the night between.

Soon the Owl called again, to her mate, to no reply. Not yet.

Thorin couldn't help it; he glanced at Sona, eyes burning, heart full. Call me, I would answer.

There was a deeper peace in the voice of the Owl's call. She knew her mate would answer, either sooner or later, for it did not occur to her something could be wrong. Thorin heard this in the even-spaced nature of her calling—'who who who, whOoo whOoo'—no rushing, no worry, there is now, only now. T'm here. I wait—'

Thorin took rest in it, watching the Owl when she called again.

Glóin's head turned his way, the motion drawing Thorin's eye. The Treasurer held his gaze, stone mask firm but for the softness there. No challenge, no word. They both listened for her next call, both of them knowing it would come.
She hooted her series of calls five more times, until when, some distance to the east, her mate echoed her call: several small 'who's, then two longer ones, with the same cadence of his mate, all in return to her. The Owl's head shot up and she turned her gaze east into the Pines at the answering 'whooo's. Thorin smiled, and found Glóin smiling along with him, pipe in hand and ready to light it.

Thorin would not partake, certain that smoking would only send him to painful coughing at present, but he nodded in welcome comradery; it would do well to smell fine leaf burning, and they listened together as the pair of Owls hooted calls to each other for the duration of Glóin's bowl. The Owl pair quieted, having found each other, Thorin was certain, sometime shortly before dawn.

The Thief still slept, her Dog curled next to her.

She had partially escaped from the fur of his coat… He moved to secure it over her shoulders, she was still cold, the teeth marks and bruises achingly painful to look upon, his hand hovering over the wound, not daring to touch.

Did she feel this in her sleep? Did she hurt?

She rested.

The Dog lifted her head as he came close, but there was no threat in her, only watching, and then she laid her head back on Sona's leg as Thorin tucked her closer in the fur. Loyal— the Dog had paced and skidded close to Dwalin as he carried the Thief from the Eagles Carrock. Climbing down, Thorin had mostly overlooked the Dog, so focused was he on Dwalin's moves with the Thief in arms— not his. The Dog's outward pacing had matched the turmoil in Thorin's heart— a powerless sense they both had shared— Sasha, Buhel'ul Ţe— Ţe. The forest surrounding them woke to the sounds of birds and other wildlife. He wondered when she would wake—

His Company was already at it, up and about with the morning routine.

Bombur set a kettle of water on the fire, starting breakfast.

Aye. It was time they resume, head on.

Thorin was, however, exceedingly reluctant to leave Sona's side as Dwalin came to him and asked him to join a few of them at the river, for bathing, "we all stink."

"No," Thorin answered, short and simply.

Dwalin's eyes shot wide at the gruff denial, evidently he'd expected a different response. "Later then," he muttered, put out, sauntering off. "Fili, Kili, let's spar some, give your N'adad time to tire of his own air…" He motioned to the lads, who followed him, looking from one to the other as though this were the newest sport. Dwalin sent a hard look Thorin's way. "I'll haul you to the water myself, Buhel, if you haven't seen to it by the time we get back."

Thorin's hackles rose at the back of his departing friend and his Sister's Sons, off to spar. He wanted to go with them, to ease the edge, loose emotion— Aye, to hit something. Hard. He tensed at the thoughts coursing through him, he would have no such release, and just that small movement of protest woke deep pains that wove through his chest, sides and back. Blast it, Mahal. Anger burned through his gut, no way to quench it.
Fíli called the Dog, her head shot up but she stayed put, still wedged against Sona's side. Her body shook with pent movement, and she 'whoofed' low, looking from Fíli to Sona, resting her head once more with short whine.

"Sasha," Thorin muttered low.

Her eyes went to his, studying, waiting.

"Go," he nodded toward his Sister's Son, "wrestle for the both of us. I will look after Sona—Banthelê."

This caused Fíli to smile a great smile as the Dog quickly considered Thorin's offer, her eyes on his as she weighed his promise, one she seemed to find worthy, as she came to her feet, gave another low 'whoof' and with a lick to Sona's cheek she was off.

Soon Óin came to check on Sona, Glóin at his side. They both took seats near her, Glóin next to Thorin, though the Treasurer made no motion to speak.

Perhaps it was support. Aye, support. Glóin nodded to him with a partial smile. One to another, like kind, One'd.

Morning wore on.

Kíli, Fíli and the Dog returned from sparring just when Bombur began passing out breakfast.

Thorin smiled. Timing.

Dwalin was not among them, but Thorin was sure he was not far off.

Fíli and Kíli approached with the Dog, who, upon seeing the Thief yet slept, bounded off Fíli's side to check on her with a lick to her face, a thorough sniffing, and several low 'woofs' as though she would wake her.

Sona did not move, but her breathing was deep, and the Dog returned to Fíli's side, seemingly satisfied of the Thief's well being.

Thorin wished she'd wake.

Now.

"Thought we'd bring you this," Fíli handed Thorin a bowl of porridge and berries.

Thorin nodded his thanks.

"We see you haven't moved this whole time," Fíli muttered, crossing his arms, shushing the Dog who nudged on the Thief.

"No," Thorin settled his eyes on her face, so eager to see her wake up.

"Mabujbmê, you've chosen," Kíli said.

Thorin glanced up at the lad, surprised from his musings by the bluntness of his youngest Sister's Son.
Kíli was beaming, actually *beaming* the lad smiled so hard.

"Aye, I did not think," Thorin answered. *He should never have—*

"You thought you lost her, N'adad." Fíli rejoined, knowing Thorin's full mind.

Thorin nodded, comforted by her breathing. "She doesn't know, didn't ask."

"You do not regret," Fíli stated this rather than question him.

*No. I only feel more lost than I've ever been, and yet—*

Since there was no question Fíli asked, Thorin decided not to answer.

He rested his eyes on the Thief, so quiet and vulnerable, and cold. Again she escaped the fur of his coat. And so he shifted off the tree to her side and tucked her back into it. "She's too cold from Tharkun's spell. Speaking of, where is the Wizard?"

"No idea. He took off after dinner and has not been seen since," Kíli answered, still smiling like he'd won some *bet.*

*Had there been a bet?*

*Most likely.*

"But you have not heard." Fíli stepped up, suddenly almost as excited as his N'adad. *Seems he had not won the bet.* "Tharkun mentioned as they flew, the Eagles... he called them with a Moth, of all things."

*The Moth—*

Mahal.

Just then Tharkûn came through the clearing from the Aspens, as if he were on some urgent call, *or a bee had stung him.*

The Wizard headed directly to them, joining Óin to look over the still sleeping Thief. *He's the one who left her so. Where'd he gone to all this time?*

"Well then?" Thorin grew more impatient with each passing moment. "When's she going to wake, Tharkûn?"

"Soon enough," he replied, vaguely, now suddenly calm and slow mannered, as would be expected of the Wizard. "This morning most likely," he added, as he sighed with a smile—

*a smile?*

—and glanced knowingly at Thorin.

Thorin only wondered what he meant by *that.*

"She'll be ready to bathe once she wakes," the Wizard said.

*Wait—* Thorin's eyes shot wide. The Wizard *winked when he said that!*
"You might want to make a trip to the river yourself, Master Dwarf."

Mahal, *blast the Wizard. Just like Dwalin*— "I prefer to be here when she wakes."

"Suit yourself." Tharkûn shrugged.

---

Soon Óin asked Thorin for liberty to send someone to fetch fresh clothes from Sona's knapsack, for when she woke, she would surely be needing them.

Indeed, her tunic was badly soiled from her ordeals. "Ohh, aye…" He motioned to Nori, 'Could you fetch it? To me?'

Nori was already at it, his face crestfallen.

"Nori?"

"It… Her guitar. It is all smashed up."

*No. Not—*

—*That. Her guitar, her voice.* The body of the guitar was caved, *the neck snapped.* That was the snap he heard, *he felt*, as Sona sprang between his neck and the blade heaving for it—

What a *cost.* For his mad rush.

Stop now, *we move on.*

Thorin tried to do just that, pressing past the thought of what he'd cost her—

*Impossible.*

*So he must move with it.*

*Move—*

Nori brought the bag before him.

Thorin reached around the knapsack beneath the remnants of the Thief's beloved instrument, checking the contents of the bag, ensuring the integrity of the vessel she carried of her husband's remains. He found a tunic and one of the slim-tight pants she called 'leggings' she wore beneath. Then he found her wash kit—

"Speaking of bathing. You need it."

That was *Dwalin.*

Thorin swung round, instantly regretting the rash move as pain shot through his sides at the motion.

"It's about time you get to the River," Dwalin butted on.

"Not leaving til she wakes up—" Thorin whispered, or hissed, rather, not wishing to stoke the ire building inside himself with air for *words.*

Dwalin stepped up, challenging like a steel-horned ram. "You smell like rotten Warg dragged from a
stagnate, shit-swarmed, bug-infested swamp," Dwalin insisted, craning his neck further, as to make himself bigger… "…and if you fail to move your arse in the direction of the river NOW, I'll see fit to haul you there myself, and I don't care if I hurt you while I see to it." Dwalin was in his face.

"Not leavin til she wakes up," Thorin repeated, again with minimal air. He held his ground fully, even leaning in, so angry he felt inside.

"You want her to wake up to you, you smelling like that?"

_That was it._ "Blast it, Dwalin. I will be here when she wakes—"

"Make haste, then."

Thorin glared heavy on Dwalin, wishing to Mahal he could fight this one out, and then slowly turned to the Wizard, exhaling. "I stink… Is there time for me to make it to the river and back before she wakes?"

The Wizard only nodded, saying neither yes nor no.

_Wizards._

"I'll go with you," Glóin offered. Thorin was sure his Treasurer meant to give company, but there was some other motive as well, with the way he looked from Sona to him and then away, as if embarrassed. "There's something I've been meaning to talk over with you…" Glóin said, looking firmly at nothing.

_Embarrassed. Aye… But for what?_

Thorin, feeling pain as he gained his footing, gingerly fetched his wash kit from his own pack, and he and Glóin made way for the river, where they stripped down. Thorin was slow at this task, for the pain it caused, and now he could see the bruises on his body resulting.

Glóin dove in with all due speed.

Thorin joined what speed he could, wishing to be finished with bathing and questions. "What concerns you."

His Treasurer's face turned nearly as red as his hair. "Well, Thorin, I was just meaning to ask… It's rather a mite awkward. You don't know about it, so I'll be the one to tell you, and it's a topic no one speaks of after they've heard it the first time, you follow?"

"No, Glóin. Explain." Thorin lathered the soap over himself, newly remarking the hardship his body had taken—beneath the heavy purpling bruises and swollen areas with broken skin, in some places there would be scars where bone had exposed, other spots where a Warg tooth broke through the leather in the bare-plated sections of his brigandine. It was a thing of amazement, the speed of his healing. He drew a hand down one of the meaner gashes, his skin sore to the sensitive touch: a rib had broken through, but it was set, and this was the healing scar—Such wounds were often fatal, absent a Wizard on hand.

_Kaylíth._

He saw the truth in his injuries: he'd nearly died, and this… this was gifted time.

Âkmînruk zu, Tharkûn. And before the Wizard, Sona—Ě'ze, nO—
"Well that just means you're not to talk to anyone else about it," Glóin continued, and Thorin tried to remember the train of thought. "… ever again, except permitting with your One, if they're amenable to it."

"What are you talking about, Glóin?"

"It's about Dreams." Glóin paused as his eyes shot to his, briefly, and held there. "Nai'adâl. Have you had dreams with Sona in them?" The question was steady and sure.

Glóin already knew the answer.

Thorin stared, dumbfounded, before finally nodding. "Dreams, realistic, visceral, with her—"

Glóin held his hand up. "No need to say more."

"I'm in no mood to say anything, Glóin. Explain."

"These Dreams are not just your own. She has them too, at least she would, were she a Dwarf. I don't know if it happens among People of Men." Glóin smiled like he just found a stash of coins in an unused hidden pocket. "But, based on how she was the morning before the Storm, I'd guess she does, she's in those Dreams, she's with you, mind. In any case. Nai'adâl. They're a form of communication between Ones. Part of the bond. Gets easier controlling…"

controlling?

"… Dreams once you've been together a few years."

"Mahal— wait, she…" Thorin attempted to wrap his mind around the thought she may be sharing these dreams, when his mind tripped on the full meaning of Glóin's words. Years…

"I have not—" he stammered. "She— hasn't, doesn't… Years… A lifetime?"

Thorin felt fully exposed, and not because he was buck-naked in a stream, washing up so the Thief wouldn't be repulsed by his stench when she wakes up.

But this! She Dreams with him? What was this new gift? More to point, how was he to live with this way?

"You'll be having these, laddie, from now on out. Best get used to them."

Thorin stared at Glóin, his eyes narrowed as he catalogued the conversations in the Dream he—they—had just shared.

She sang to him, 'Dream a little dream' — this cannot be.

"Looks like you have your answer," Glóin huffed a laugh bowing slightly as he reached for his feet beneath the water.

Thorin continued wide eyed, washing slowly, waiting on the Treasurer to provide something… helpful. What was he thinking?

What could be helpful?

How was he supposed to discuss this… Dreaming… with the Thief, aside from any other matter of Ones? "She is Binumrâl, she doesn't know she's my One and I am not about to tell her, nor shall anyone else dare…. So what?"
"You need to know of them, Thorin. Ones share Dreams. Together. How this sacred gift falls specifically with each One pairing is a mystery, for no Dwarf is to tell another anything of Na'iadál." Each word was carefully spoken, as if he read from some sacred scroll, as if he'd read it many times, and yet Glóin was uncomfortable, fidgeting as he washed.

How long had he rehearsed?

"This gift is neither written nor discussed with anyone, anytime, apart from when a close friend or kin discovers their One and signs manifest that they are Dreaming, and then a loved one takes the matter up, and explains. Once. And then they never speak of it again."

"Wha?" Thorin moved rather slowly, what with the pain any motion caused, and he wasn't sure, but it seemed the knowledge of what Glóin told him took a few heartbeats to sink in— the meaning, what meaning… Oh Mahal.

Glóin looked him steady in the eye as he washed himself with precision.

But this news… This… Dreams. "Do you mean…?" He couldn't finish the question. Which question?

But Glóin nodded anyway. "She's in them, you have said."

Thorin's hands stilled from their tasks, his jaw slack.

"I saw, the morning before the Storm Giants," Glóin went on. "She woke rather shook up, staring from you, all around, and flush, I dare say it."

Indeed…

"You overslept that morning, something we rarely see."

How they watched him.

"Dwalin had no sparring partner that day… And then, once you woke, you were rather confined to your bedroll for some time." The Dwarf chuckled, going even redder, if that were possible.

Thorin's own skin flushed, remembering.

"And then later, the lass, she would stare at you every given moment you were not staring back at her.

No… Thorin was sure his friend exaggerated.

"Neither of you caught the other at it, but it happened. Then the storm came, and the Storm Giants—"

The colors in Imladris, the brush, the Forge in Erebor, the bead… sleeping beneath the stars in Erebor, dreaming Dreams. Together.

Together?

Could that possibly mean?

Oh, Mahal… could she possibly? Could he be hers?

"Well then, that's a good thing, I'd say," Glóin finished, "Keep it to yourself now, but know this; it's
Nai’adâl, what's going there, if she's in them, in your Dreams.” Glóin continued his washing, having moved to cleaning his soiled clothes, looking pointedly away from Thorin, and moving off for privacy.

*This wouldn't do.* "Wait, Glóin. What if I've got questions?” Thorin hesitated as his friend stilled from his task.

"Well then now is the time, you should ask me these questions, though I may not have the answers.”

"How do I know she shares them?”

"Aside from the obvious, of asking her…” The Treasurer actually laughed here, shaking his head. "No, I don't suppose you'll do that.” Then he peeked up at Thorin through his thick brows. "Has she said anything, spoken to you, inside the Dreams?”

Aye… but…

"Can a One Dream of One who does not return Juzrazur?”

Glóin just stared. Eventually he shook his head. "That's beyond my experience, Thorin.”

Thorin nodded, however unsatisfied. And then he dared say what he thought. "She does not know.”

"Neither did you.”

"I do now." *Mahal help him, he needed to avoid these Dreams.* But how? *Never mind that now—* "So then… who would speak to her as you speak to me?” Thorin knew at this point no one had done so— there had been no time since her fall and his declaration.

Glóin shrugged, shaking his head.

"No one," Thorin said firmly. *She does not want this. She didn't ask for it… But what if…? No. Just no. "No one will speak to her.”*

Glóin grunted, and Thorin was sure it was to hide more laughter. "You might have a word on this with your Sister's Sons, because I'm guessing Fíli already considers himself up to the task.” With that, Glóin left the water.

And Thorin finished, wrestling with this fine new bit of news, *gifts.*

*Imhêd’ul Mahal—*

*Nai’adâl.*

How was he to look at her next, when she woke from Tharkûn's sleep?

Chapter End Notes
A/N #1: Thank you everyone for the kudos, and for those silently reading along. And those of you who comment, thank you! Your enthusiasm helps keep the fire burning.

A/N #2: after posting, November 21, 2016: (explanation in chapter 31 notes)

Some of the Khuzdûl, translated:

Kaylith – living

Imhêd'ul – Blessing of

Buhel – Friend of friends

Banthel'ê – my oath of oaths, my promise

Mabujbmê – you have chosen

Binumrâl – lost loves, widows/ers

Juzrazur – literally, tiny chain. With Ones – the Pull. They feel each other’s life-force, as though a tiny chain connects them
Soon the Company of Dwarves were all at the river bathing, with the Dog taking particular interest in the water, splashing and whoofing and chasing the fish swimming among them.

Thorin watched quietly, scrubbing his tunic and trousers in water over a rock in an attempt to remove some of the blood stains, still reeling from Glóin's words, *Nai'adâl — shared Dreams with the Thief!* He slowly finished up, left the water and sat on the bank, where he arduously began working his aching body back into his wet clothes.

Balin was at his side.

"Has she woken?" Thorin asked, glancing past him as Kíli, Fíli and Dwalin headed out of the water to fetch their clothes, the Dog close behind his oldest Sister's Son with a bounce to her step and her tail wagging, refreshed by the water. She did not appear to worry.

Thorin could learn from that.

But he was not a Dog, with no ideas how Dogs think—

"Not when I left," Balin answered, smiling off at his N'adad and the others, all were clearing out and heading back.

Once Thorin's trousers were over his feet and his boots were on, Balin assisted him up, and into his tunic, the pain through his chest and back riddling every simple motion.

The others were on their way down the path.

"Let's get back then," Thorin muttered, growing more and more uneasy with how it would go with them when he next saw her awake. *Nai'adâl. Those Dreams. Did she have any idea?*

He wrestled his mind over it, uselessly, only half listening as Balin said, "Hear that?"

There were hollers up ahead, and Thorin suddenly alerted, and, rounding Dwalin's shoulder he saw her—!

Awake—*and well*—! She stood bunched between her happily barking Dog and Dwalin, Fíli and Kíli close by and the other Dwarves some feet away, watching alert to his reaction, all of them keyed on him.

Yet—

*There she was.*

Alive, and *... laughing!* Mahal, his heart was *full*—
—and it burned.

Was this nothing?

He stared hard, to be sure of the sight of her standing there, living, breathing, smiling, laughing, so vibrant—Kaylith—

—He remembered her falling upon him, the crashing of her being into his, and then the sight, that heavy blade of the Orc bearing down upon them, breaking over them, the blow pounding out the air from their lungs, leaving them gasping, a shatter and a snap—now he knew, that break was her guitar—

Mahal, my fault, I embraced this risk, I ran to him, to Azog and his mace, without thought, and—she could have died for that, taking that mortal blade like she did, the one meant for me.

—Asti, Biriz Akmâth—

How could I?

—She had warned him, as he ran; he remembered this as well, her voice, her words, ones he had received confused while in his blind killing-fury.

No. no—

The flash of anger spiked through his core, and he held tight, no matter the pain—stifle it—keep firm the stone mask.

His heart beat against him like an internal fist, hard and in protest.

"Hi," she said, raising one hand and waving it. So easy, so… in passing, this motion, and yet she looked at him, away, and back again, agitated toward him, why—?

Didn't matter—her voice—

He drank it in, along with her—

Biriz Akmâth'amê.

Dwalin signed him, urgent-eyed, 'Use care, your head, and mind your bossing, Buhel; she does not know your depth of feeling.'

Thorin ignored Dwalin as his eyes passed over Sona, whole and well, battered some, bruises coloring her skin, but well, and very awake—

—and staring at him, assessing, so intense, so intimate. he was held fast under her gaze, never waveriing, as she cataloged each blow, counting the cuts, no… resting on the one on his lip last—the cut, surely not his lips—and then to his black eye, the gift from Dwalin, from when she fell—

But she came back. And then. And then—

Nai’adâl. They Dreamed together… she sang to him, while snuggled in his arms. It was real. Those Dreams had all been real, and shared…

Stop—

Oh Mahal—
I want you to hold me, I want to hold you, Asti. All I ever wished and never knew.

The Company left them be.

Everything seemed to still. Except the water. He could hear that passing in the stream behind them. Recalling Dwalin's warning, he tried to keep calm as best he could, firmly setting his stone mask, only looking at her, alive, well, laughing.

But now her smile was gone, a question took over her face, and then she sighed.

That sound! ah, the urge to take her in his arms.

She studied his face, as if she could sink into it, digging for something, he didn't know what, and she tensed for what she found, clenching her hands, her irritation swelling. Thorin did not know precisely why, except for the obvious: she was angry for his mad dash toward death. Aye, that anger is earned. Yet, an unease mixed into his already confused emotions.

She should not have cared that much, not for him, not that way, not ever. Not to throw herself upon him, to save him, fool Dwarf.

No.

It would not do.

Yet a dark and terrible hope sprang within him in response to her deed—could she love him? Is that why—? Treacherous thought! The stream had not cleansed him.

She walked toward him, staring at him. She continued quite intensely staring— because of Nai'adâl? No.

"I'm so glad you're all right."

She spoke—!

Move, move now. He nodded, stiffly in reply, not trusting his voice to work.

She seemed to pale then, searching his eyes for something, still digging.

He stiffened his back, imagining rods through his feet to keep him in place. He would not move to her, no matter how his body willed it.

He waited, heart pounding, attempting to remain as still as possible, calming his features, closing his hands, he would not lift them to her, no matter how they ached to hold her, he would not. And yet here, in this moment, they both stood facing each other, quiet, awake. He looked at her for the first time, knowing she was his One.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked.

Mad for you— He couldn't say that. He could only stare. What was this question? He looked on as her eyes settled into a glare and anger flushed her skin— How she set herself tall!

How can I not be? And yet Oh Mahal, you ask this question.

And I would answer 'yes', if I could get my lips to move. So he breathed, instead, watching her legs widen for balance, her feet in a fighting stance— or for dancing— as though she would dance with him.
Aye, he wanted to kiss her.

Oh! But then, this was a kind balm, aye, that's what it was, she was angry at him! He almost wanted to smile, step in and hold her close, they were so close—how she cared.

Her irritation swelled, almost like it had the day they met, only this was different now—she cared for him. Why else? And this helped him keep still. He would feel her anger unobstructed, taking all of it, for her, for her release—

His own ire rose to meet hers, though he kept a tamper on it, and stored it under his stone mask. He felt so very charged toward her. And beneath all of this, a deep sense of happiness blossomed in return, more than he'd ever known, how is this possible?

Her hands flew to her hips, surely in challenge. "Because for the life of me, I can't think of one reason for you to be upset with me," his One glared and huffed at him as she spit her words—wild Cat.

"If anything I should be mad at you."

Aye, aye. True, that.

"È'ze," he whispered.

How he wanted to tell her. "For the life of you. Aye, Thief; that's the heart of it."

She was close now, and he saw—he almost touched—her anger as it blossomed up all 'round her, like a flower expanding.

He kept his hands as still as lead weights. He could not take his eyes away, nor one step back. No. He rather leaned closer, if only to feel the air she breathed. And then he begged her. "Do not ever do that again."

"Do what again?"

Do what? You cannot mean you do not know—

Her eyes flew wide and her face grew more stern, her gold stud flashing in the morning light. And she had drawn closer, so he tilted his head to see her eyes better, and share a bit of how he truly felt—

"Oh wait." Her hand came up; she would muzzle him!

This frustrating detail, of course. And now his anger spiked in a way he had not anticipated. She did not care for his opinion.

Recall yourself, Thorin. He tightened his jaw as if for a blow. She would reprimand him like the others. There was nothing he could say to make this better.

"You mean the part where I saved your life?" With that she drew away, folding her arms closed, shutting him out. No.

Thorin swallowed hard.

Still her anger blossomed larger.

"Well that's easy, Grump-muffin."
Why did she call him that, now? What she'd called him just before she fell? Surely she did not find him pleasant either time, like a muffin should be, so she could have stopped at Grump—

"Don't ever do something so stupid again, like, oh, I don't know, attack an entire pack of Warg mounted Orcs by yourself and I won't have to."

Stupid. Aye. This was her mind, and he agreed, finding her opinion well earned— And still, had he not braced his feet before, he thought he might have fallen back, the turn of her words cutting like no others before.

As she said her piece she flushed all over, with her anger now full blown.

Thorin's ire was equally hefty, aimed mainly at himself, by Mahal's truest strike—His words came in a whisper, quickly: "It's not for you to risk your life for mine."

Her skin grew all the darker in her fury.

And he had thought it had been full blown!

"Oh, but it's for you to do it for me, like I'm some damsel in distress, is that it?"

He drew his head up, confused. What did she mean? What is 'damsel in distress'? And yet he knew this had nothing to do with his request.

"You misunderstand me."

"No, I don't think I do." She cut him off, yet again.

He was not ready to give up, not yet. He resolved to dig his feet in further and at least clarify her misunderstanding.

She turned away and gathered the clothes and her wash kit scattered on the ground, he wondered why she'd dropped them.

"You're behaving just like every other pig-headed Man I've ever met…"

She shouldered past him, the contact waking pain, and her voice rose with each passing word. And he relished that ache, as she touched him, first time since she woke.

"…whose fragile little ego can't handle a woman helping him."

"That's not it at all!" he said quickly, talking fast to get the words out before she muzzled him again.

He followed her back to the stream edge, ready to argue, explain.

"Would you be yelling at Dwalin if he'd done what I did?"

Thorin frowned, confused once again. "No, but—"

"Exactly my point!"

NO, it's not! You are not Dwalin! But he kept his mouth clenched shut.

She took a seat with her back to him mostly, and began taking her boots off.

"If you would just let me finish one blasted sentence without willfully trying to misunderstand me,
perhaps I could explain." Frustration gripped him like the Warg's teeth.

*Why did he force this? He should leave*, but his feet held to the earth.

Mahal, *how could this be?*

*How was she Ė'ze?*

He forced himself to keep well away from her, fearing he might act on his desire to touch her, *so starved he felt.*

She sat tall—*so angry*—and opened her hand toward him without looking, waved it, giving him leave to speak. *How she moved— So Queenly.*

Stop. *Stop these thoughts.*

"This is to do with you."

How she sat there, *an ear to him.*

"Asti."

She raised a brow in disapproval.

That would not stop him. "Dwalin is a Warrior, trained to fight. *You* are not." He looked at her tenderly, stepping toward her, reaching out his hand in supplication."You have no call going into battle, ever."

"But I couldn't just watch you get killed." A startled look crossed her face, *fear tinged with worry*—

He cringed, recalling Thrór—his *severed head held high, the Pale Orc gloating*—She would have seen him lose his head.

She'd looked away, fast at work removing her second boot. But then she stopped fussing with it, as if she just remembered something. And then she looked up at him through her lashes, *oh that look… "I can't lose you too."

He was frozen by the eyes under the lashes.

*Me too?*

Slam… stun… *Asti?*

Her words seemed to have silenced her as well; her wide eyes looked about herself at nothing. And then a flush began darkening her skin. Thorin felt as though he saw beyond what she wished to reveal—*her naked, raw emotions.*

*What do you mean?*

"Any of you," she rushed to add, her face coloring all the more.

*Ahh… but I saw—*

"I can't lose anyone else I care about."

Thorin had never been struck with an arrow. He wondered if it felt anything like *this.* She would
have pulled this brash shield move for any of them.

How you care—for all of us. But not—not specifically for one. Or do you…? A fool’s hope was worming its way into his heart.

His breath caught, hitched upon that. How could he dare hope?

"I couldn't bear it."

Nor could I, and—

Thorin clenched his hands, his body, as he tried to clench his heart.

She had her boots off now, as she checked the second one carefully before setting it beside its mate. Was she using her boots for grounding?

Couldn't be helped. "Even so," he continued: he would beg, barely able to hold onto his voice past the emotions welling through him—"You must promise never to do it again."

Silence answered.

She did not look his way as she stood and reached for the edges of her bloodied tunic, lifting it, releasing appalling scents into the air, mixed with her own—

His eyes flew wide—she's—she's—

She was taking her tunic off.

"What are you doing?" he asked. It was futile. He already knew.

"What's it look like?" she bit back, and he felt it. If he had air, he would have laughed—

She faced her back to him and pulled the battle-wasted garment off over her head, gagging at the odors it contained.

oh

Oh MAHAL. His eyes trailed down the wide swath of purple, the rioting welt now bared to him as if she did not care.

Why did she—?

Her back—That welt—

He couldn't breathe past the damage hailing across her delicate skin, bruises and cuts abounding, and the big thrash of raw purpling where the sword had smashed her guitar upon her—That was his doing.

And there was more. Her entire back was scratched, mottled and bruised from her fall. He could see bruises shaped like fingers over her arms: she had been dragged.

Asti. Birashigami Biriz Akmâth'amê.

She let the tunic go to the earth as she stepped away from it, her disdain clear in the hand that released it.
The garment fell to the ground.

He could almost feel the impact as he watched, trying for composure as some tears welled. *I long to cradle you against me, you in my arms, to comfort you, and hold, to feel you breathe, to soothe your aches, to cleanse and bandage—those wounds, my fault.*

Ē’ze—

The sound of flowing water carried on.

*She took that on herself.*

Their talk finished, he would accept, *he was dismissed.*

He'd leave as bidden, there'd be no promise.

And yet why wouldn't his feet move?

Just like in *Imladris*—

*But there she had called him back.*

Would he ever learn? *It had been easier then.*

He stood confounded, wondering how he was to live this way… determined to find some measure, *some way.* For the *Quest,* for his *People.* He had to *move.*

She reached for the waist of her trousers.

*I should not be here—I will vanish.* Head ducked, he turned back to the camp, to his Company. They waited and they needed him, however miscast he was—*Ze’binishki.*

—no counterpart—

*Mahal, kuf Ze’binishki?*

No answer came, only the sound of water running.

Like the water in the stream, *carry on*— So he left her to bathe, seeking his comb to undo all the knots in his hair.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: Aye, our poor Dwarf must suffer a while. Dual readers know what's up next!

A/N #2: Thank you for your comments! I appreciate each and every one of you, as well as the kudos and for the all the people reading along! Thank you JennyWren28 for your continued Beta assistance and steady enthusiasm!

A/N #3, added after posting:
On Khuzdûl. A reader has asked I provide the Khuzdûl translations. I've contemplated this and agree it's a good idea, as Thorin is using more Khuzdûl while the story progresses. I will not translate all of it: some must wait until Sona learns the meanings. I will backtrack to earlier chapters, adding these translations as time permits, and from here on out I will provide limited translations. The Khuzdûl is from The Dwarrow Scholar. Any mistakes are Thorin's. ;-) )

Binushki – Cast away, miscast

Birashigami – my apology

Kaylîth – living

Kuf Ze'binishki – Why a One cast away?

Nai'adâl – Shared Dreams

Ze'binishki – A Cast Away (miss matched) One – miscast One

y
The Thief will do what she will do. Thorin knew this, hence the rawness of his plea. Perhaps she perceived the vulnerable emotion of his request as demand, and that she would not tolerate.

He had been fairly forward with his feelings.

Dís would say he came over like some snarling Bear.

Indeed, he might have felt so angry, though he had no clue to the disposition of Bears. And it dissipated now, this hot bed of feeling, this thing that wedged between them, and he was left empty and sour as he headed a circular way back toward camp.

He needed her to understand. But even if she listened, she would not understand. Dwarves did not think like People of Men. Dam as well as Dwarrow were respected, a thing she never assumed but had no way to measure. It was not only that, in his mind he imagined how far away she hailed, so far there were no maps to encompass the distance between them. Mahal.

These thoughts did not ease his spirit, now sunk to his feet as he forced them on. His hand gripped the comb as though it could save him, as though it were some shield. He looked down at it and smirked, though the humor was rather biting; it was carved from Oak, Oakenshield.

He was the shield for his People. He needed to remember, He should consider his Quest. And here he was, distracted by his One, one who did not return Juzrazur.

Or did she? How else then Nai'adâl?

It was said to be a sacred, secret gift, Urrak mahd. These Dreams were shared! How was this a blessing, unless?

How then. Mahal knew.

Thorin was utterly lost.

Sona had stripped bare, in silence, granting him no further word.

He knew he should not take this to heart, she had not meant to hurt, though she had been finished with arguments. So be it. She was tired, and longed to wash away the blood from battle. And the wounds she sustained had to ache—

He ached heart and soul.

Ē’ze. Everything. He recalled her—her back, all bruised and cut.

She paid no mind to what he saw or didn't see. Apparently it hadn't mattered. He wondered briefly if she'd strip like that for the others, and then he stopped, his footsteps stopping with his mind. Was she
so comfortable with him?

No. He could not afford such thinking. He shoved a low branch out of his path as he strode on, affirming with a forceful nod, *she was comfortable with all of them.*

As if she were Dwarrow.

And yet, she was so different. He had no idea what any of this meant.

And yet *he* cared.

And he could not cast her vision from his mind.

Ē’ze.

The Dreams meant *nothing,* or? He pondered whether he could be her One.

A dangerous pondering.

Suddenly he shivered, realizing something *unsettling.* He had not required his Choice—*Mabujba*—to meet the Thief in Dreams; *even before he pledged himself, she had been with him.* This shook his fragile hope; he had not thought possible to ache so low.

He must avoid these Dreams.

However, his stubborn mind clung to thoughts of her— Had he seen *inking* there upon her skin? Some of the marks, black, deliberate, almost floral, and yet edged—these had not looked like marks from wounds, but from *falltasâr.* He frowned, trying to recall, now unable. And *why did he think this way?*

Quash it, this hope for far too much. *It distracts.*

Cursed, he must be cursed, that must be it.

Foulness took seat in his expression, and thus he returned, finding Dwalin at the edge of camp, on watch, with Balin at his side. Though he eased in their company, it was only in passing. All things weighed on him, yet he could not succumb to that weight. He stopped to stand with them a moment, observing his Company without seeing anything.

Azog was not far.

Thorin's spirit grew numb. With some difficulty, he worked to clear his mind of any thought, so that he could ponder their next step, planning ways to avoid ambush on their path east. The Company rested now, he saw, refreshed from the water, all with their combs out, preparing for grooming.

Balin observed with him, hands clasped to his back, now and then glancing at him, face masked with his diplomat smile, concern tucked deep in his eyes, he waited for some word, while Dwalin glanced between them as he kept watch on the parameters. When no word came Balin finally ventured the question. "How'd your conversation fare?"

"It ended."

"Hmph," Dwalin growled, staring off, shaking his head, the matter of his unease ambiguous at best. Perhaps it was the matter of *Juzrazur,* but Thorin was in no condition to offer any guidance.

"So you left for privacy's sake?" Balin asked, eyes widening with hope.
“It went beyond that.”

"Zê'binisk’ul’ê," he told them matter-of-factly.

_He's among the miscast— Bondless Ones, not being One to their One._ This was rare, yet it happened, still happens, _case in point._

Balin leaned back with his brows scrunched, a quick shake of the head was his dismissal of this idea, and then he stared off, concerned, but having no immediate answer. He knew nothing beyond what he’d learned from books.

Dwalin scowled even more than his usual, brooding quietly in the direction of the Company. Avoiding eye contact, his glance rested briefly on the Thief’s bag before he shook himself, and scoured the woodlands around them, focused on the watch.

Neither of them wished to accept Thorin’s word.

Thorin saw it as truth and he was tired. This made him angry.

He had no time for tiredness.

"You cannot know it," Balin argued, his whole face and form full of protest.

Thorin held his hand up, stopping him. "It is not returned, and I must think of our Quest, my purpose."

"Thorin." It was Dwalin. "The Whatsafist threw herself upon you to save your head, so—"

"As she would have done for any one of us."

They stared at him, jaws slacked, but with recognition.

"She said so," he pressed, and yet he remembered, _after she said_ him— Thorin. _How she looked in his eyes—_

"Aye," Dwalin muttered, looking away, into the woods again, doing his duty on watch, angry as a prickled boar.

_She meant nothing beyond aide,_ Thorin repeated to his soul. Stop.

The others, at camp, assembled in amongst their closest, the task of hair care at hand, combs ready. Thorin gripped his comb— _His shield._

The Ur brothers sat together, a circle of hands to hair.

Glóin fussed with Óin’s braids while Óin brushed his beard.

The Ri brothers sat nearest the Thief’s bag, and Nori eyed it for what it held, as though it carried one of the fallen.

_It did—_

_It carried her guitar._

_Would she think he was worth it?_
"It saved her. It saved them of both," Ori told Nori, nudging his brother as he made ready to assist reforming Nori's hair star, unaware Thorin had returned.

"And then Sasha," Fíli added, louder, his eyes fixed on Thorin, having sometime discovered him standing there. The Dog was curled comfortably at his feet, watching him.

_Aye, the Dog—_


Thorin avoided Fíli's steady staring a moment longer, encompassing the rest.

Then, gripping his comb for grounding, he nodded to Dwalin and Balin as he took a step toward camp. He looked back at Fíli, to find Kíli watching him as well, both having spotted him now.

His youngest wore a silly grin while Fíli waved him over, but Thorin declined with a slight tilt of his head. He often groomed with his Sister's Sons, but today he did not want help with his own.

He sought no comfort, nor could he offer any.

He proceeded on, feeling the need for private space to relax his face. He grabbed his pack and heading to a far log, where he sat with his back to them all and let go, as far as he could, being still except for his hands in his hair. He hoped he could release the tension still racing through him.

_Thoughts of them all, his Sister's Sons. Sona._

Their idiot Company Leader had best be less of an idiot next time.

He kept his face toward the woods.

Because next time would come. It always came.

Sitting on the log, he dragged his pack around painfully and reached for the herbed oils in his pack. Then he began releasing the warrior braid on his right temple.

He remembered Azog's face, _those pale blue eyes leering at him from beyond the flame_, he would have them _all_, and Thorin blinked, his thoughts going back to the Thief.

_Mahal, kuf Ze'binishki?_

He noticed the forest edges, wavering greens, and he blinked again, keeping watch for movement as the colors blurred.

Once the warrior braid on his left temple was free, he worked the oils into his hair as best he could, bringing his head into his hands, fingers burrowing the oils into his scalp.

"_Mahal, kuf Ze'binishki?_" he asked aloud this time.

A fine mess it was, _Mahal— Mah'dasti. I do not like your favor._

_No matter. I will be her friend. She needs my assistance—_

What good had he been so far?

His hands reached behind to grab one of his back braids, and he hissed, discovering to his dismay
that he could not reach it. There was some residual tear of muscle deep inside his chest, front and backside, hampering his movement. Sitting alone today had been another mistake, he quickly realized as pain doubled up through his ribs.

Still he tried.

"Ze’biniski, Mahal," he whispered yet again, underscoring truth by hearing it spoken.

"Here, let me."

Sona! Thorin pulled back, flinching, to find her reaching for his comb—where—? "What are you—"

"Stop being such a stubborn ass, and let someone help you for once!"

*Help with my hair?*

But that—

—*That* was her hand on his shoulder as she reached over him, *her whole body leaned against his back*—

He stopped breathing.

As the flesh of his back felt the full form of her body against him, her soft breasts, firm lines, lavender enveloped him along with the feel of her, how well she fit, pressed there so tight. There was barely any cloth between them, just their shirts, a flimsy barrier, and how well he could feel her. He wanted more, ignoring the pain she caused by this contact in favor of the fire she lit through his body, *clear to his core.*

She took the comb.

*Why was she taking his comb? Would she do that?*

He wished this moment would *end.*

*Except she felt so good.*

She drew back, and he sucked in air, still trying his best not to move, to regain composure. Yet still he could feel her there, still so close to him, a mere hand-span between them, he could feel the air shift between them from her presence there.

"Goodness, would it kill you to ask for help?"

*How does this go with taking my comb?* Thorin stared straight into the woods, too stunned to say anything aloud. He could have sat with his Sister's Sons. That would have spared him… *this.*

Her railing.

His humiliation. His *comb.*

*This lovely feeling of her so close against him—*

He had offered it to her once, that one time. But *now she would snatch it? Why?* He could not even *move,* much less ask.

—*Maybe, just maybe, he was not miscast. Maybe, just maybe, she did have feelings for him,* feelings
beyond friendship.

Stop. Just stop.

The Company's eyes were upon him, boring through him, but he would not turn, too raw, too exposed, why? I was just trying to comb my hair.

"You're clearly still injured and going to hurt yourself if you keep at it."

And what would you do about it? Her blatant thievery set him on fire. She was a Thief after all.

She would be mortified if she knew.

So be still.

Say nothing. She wouldn't actually do it, after all. Despite their differing cultures, surely she knew well enough by now not to touch a Dwarf's—

And then her hands were in his hair.

Oh Mahal, no.

And it was all he could do not to shift 'round and kiss her.

He wanted to kiss her senseless, and never let go, her lips claiming his own, to feel her want him.

He held his body rigid as she sank her fingers into the depths of it, undoing his ties, pulling apart his braids, tearing at his soul—she didn't mean it that way, she didn't know— but her hands, and she tugged, and he could feel every shift of hair as if—

Did she want him?

Why these thoughts?

He remained frozen, wishing he could shut off all feeling.

Wishing he could never stop feeling it.

He had often thought it would be nice to feel her hands in his hair, but this!

—Imhê'd'ul Mahal— he was not prepared for this— his body was waking hard!

No. All she wished was to help him, and his raw, sensuous need to hold and be held, that he could not have. Ze'binishki. And yet her hands were in his hair!

He resisted the urge, this constant urge, to press back into her hands.

It was useless, he couldn't stop feeling. Or hearing. The Company had gone still in the clearing behind them, no doubt watching this— whatever this was— unfolding.

Binumrål. He had not asked— he had no idea!

No one to blame, so why did he feel it? This was beyond his control—

He could just— stay—

—Still—
If he moved or refused, she would surely rail into him once again for things beyond his understanding.

*Ohhhh, those hands, her fingers coursing through the strands of his hair.* He clenched his teeth to keep his breathing even, his mouth shut. She meant *nothing more than to help him.* He repeated this over and over as his body grew thoroughly ravenous.


*Never had he felt so exposed... good thing only the woods faced him—*

She slowed her hands and his heart nearly climbed out of his chest, feeling her fingertips on his scalp. Soft, hard, firm, moving. Callused fingertips from *music playing—*

*Asti—Biriz Akmâth.*

How he wished to lie back into her, cushioned against her bosom. *Just be still.*

*Why was she doing this? Is this what friends do where she comes from?*

Someone should tell her to *stop.*

Yet he said nothing. No one else dared.

"I can show you the world, shining, shimmering, splendid..."

What? She would sing *now? Why? Was this for him?*

Or perhaps his silence had made her squirm.

*How come?*

Could some semblance of his feelings be *returned?* Or maybe even *more than that?* He crushed the urge to turn and look at her, to see this confirmed or denied— *surely he dreamed.*

*They both dreamed. Nai'adâl.*

"Tell me, princess, now when did you last let your heart decide..."

*Princess? Why would she hesitate with her heart's choice—? The Dam decides.*

And suddenly he recalled his A'mad's hands—*she always sang to him when she tended his hair*—now unwarranted comfort.

He longed for the comfort of his One, and here she gave it—

He should have expected he would become aroused, should his One turn to grooming him, *but he hadn't even thought—*

"... on a magic carpet ride..."

*A what?*

"... no one to tell us no, or where to go, or say we're only dreaming..."
Her hands still worked his hair, and his body called for her and he grew hard and aching where he least expected it today. Her voice only made things worse as he listened, and Oh Mahal, he was listening, every pore could hear, and his skin stretched and cried with him.

"I'm like a shooting star, I've come so far…"

_Asti—_

"I can't go back to where I used to be…"

,—but that is what you want; you have always said you want to go home—

His body would pay no heed to reason.

_Do you want me? Could you, like I want you? Why did you have to help me this way?_

He could not stop asking this question.

_Maybe— No. This was nonsense_. She had been very clear.

She continued on grooming through numerous other songs. He tried to ignore the words after her first choice, along with everything else. He was hard pent, holding as still as some dusty dark statue, waiting for her to finish, the pain of his arousal requiring his utmost patience as it clouded out his other aches.

_This want._

He eyed the woods as she let go of his left warrior braid, his eyes welling. He would head there soon, and Mahal willing, she would not notice his… condition.

"Um… I think I'm done." She leaned into his back again, offering his comb, her body once more pressed upon him. He was nearly undone there, _so close, just the slightest provocation._

He took the comb warily, watching her hand, his head to the side to catch her arm's movement. He could not touch her hands and feed this torment, those cool delightful fingers against his own.

_No_. He would surely unravel.

He smelled her lavender mixed with the scent of his oils, this only made it worse. Still, he hung to the moment, feeling her living body against his. _She's going now._

"I'm sorry it took so long… and doesn't look as nice—"

The subtlest shake of 'no' coursed through his core, to his head, but he doubted she could see it.

"It is fine." His voice felt rough and full of gravel. He missed the feel of her hands already.

_She had meant nothing intimate._

_Oh Mahal_, it had felt _good_, and so, _why_? How could this be? Given that it seemed there could be nothing good to come from it. _Yet clearly only Mahal could have allowed it._

Thorin began to understand how hard his day to day routine would become, and he shuddered internally, not wanting it.
There was ample burden before, too much already.

Mahal, what of Azog?

And you gift this—this in addition.

Ze'binishki. You expect me to drown, surely.

"Kay… if you say so." She sighed, her words had softened. Only now he heard her doubt.

Why did she doubt?

He did not understand, but oh, how he wished to. He let his eyes shut as she moved away, emptiness returning like the cold winds. He allowed his face to relax once more, holding his chest tight, stilling the shakes that begged for release—*the need to hold and be held.*

There would be no release.

Azog is behind, and chasing—*Look to your People. The Quest. Make them a way Home.*

Thorin signed Dwalin without turning, unwilling to see their eyes, not caring who else saw his message: 'I head into the woods for a scout check. Alone.' He knew they would voice no argument for his need to privacy. 'Our enemy searches for me, for us.'

He would not be back soon, he knew, based on the firmness of his needs, as each jarring step hurt on the way into the woods.

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/T\oSo/T\oDo/T\---

Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: The Khuzdûl:

Nai'adâl – shared dreams

Mabujba – He has chosen.

Urrak mahd – sacred, secret blessing

Falltasâr – Tattoo, inking.

Zê'biniski'ul'ê – I'm of miscast Ones.

Kuf – why

Mahd'asti – your favor

Imhêd'ul Mahal – blessings of Mahal
Binibritami – stay with me

A/N #2: Thank you all for your comments, for the kudos and bookmarks, and your continued interest in my story. Your enthusiasm helps keep me motivated!

A/N #3: Wanted to give you all a heads-up on my story-writing pace. As you know, I have more than an outline. Still, I like to take time with the craft and let things percolate. I'll remain slow but steady, as things continue to remain very busy in other aspects of life in general for both myself and my Beta, JennyWren28. (Thank you Jenny, I love sharing this project with you.)

y
Thorin couldn't turn back, cock hard as the blasted trunk he slumped against.

He panted, catching breath, bracing this pain, one he had never imagined. Yet his ears tugged relentlessly, latched upon the sounds of camp, that spot where Sona had left him, his hair duly braided as she’d seen fit.

No.

In the woods. Go away. Clear your head. Calm this—unwelcome wakening.

Thorin looked deeper into the woods.

I have no say in this, nor time to grieve. I will keep to my task, and bring us home. And the Thief will do what she will.

Including grooming my hair.

How was he to tell her it would be best she kept her hands off?

He was hard, and he was punch hungry. And there was nothing for it.

She will do what she will.

He tried to curb the growl within, well knowing she had no idea.

Had she liked how it felt? His hair, in her hands?

At the thought his body tightened, the pain of this deepest arousal too hard to bear.

Blast me in the mines, Mahal, laden with heavy stone.

What would she think if she knew what she did to him?

Would it repulse her? Turn her skin dark in embarrassment?

Or would she get that look, like mischief on the wind?

She wanted a friend, not—

He smashed a knuckled fist into the tree supporting him. The Pine needles showered him as he used the press of his fist to move on, somehow hoping movement would help ease this pain.

His body took the brunt of the force with a sharpness he readily embraced. He took the moment to recall where he was and let his eyes clear as he felt his heart beating, ache echoing the beats like pulsing glass in his knuckles. No good getting lost or walking into his enemies' path while he thought...
himself up trees.

*Up trees.*

*Azog.*

His cock eased some as his eyes roved the distances through the branches for movements, aware there would be Orcs in search. No matter his state of mind, he must be on guard.

*But she put her hands in his hair!*

Tightness gripped once more: he had to tell her. *He couldn't tell her.*

His Company knew he could not.

Dís would have his beard and then some, that he hadn't stopped the Thief before she began. And why hadn't he? Because *he wanted her touch that way.*

*Even before he knew what it meant.*

*His body was worn over. From the bashing, Azog and his Warg. And from her deft fingers, callused tips over his scalp —*

*Stop!* Such thought only made it harder, with no easing.

He was worse than reckless.

He struck another passing tree. The edge remained, and the tree shook, birds swooshing up from the branches. More needles fell over his head.

*Tell her? Aye, he should.*

He centered on the jarring pain his punches caused, knowing there was no possible way he could ever get the words out.

Would one of the Company take on this task?

Perhaps they were explaining Khazâd custom even now, as he roamed the woods bent in his frustration. Who? And what would they say? *Just how would they explain?*

A new and nagging curiosity took seed. He let his weight sink into hard steps through the trees, wondering. Balin was too out of his depth in knowledge to broach the subject. Dwalin, too confused by his own new found awareness of *Juzrazur.* Bifur, he would tell her, he was close to the Thief, except for the language barrier.

Now, as he began to turn over rational thoughts, his body followed, softening, a welcome blunting. Thorin sighed, letting his mind wonder over possibilities.

Perhaps someone with a *One* would explain. Of those, Fíli was the most likely.

Thorin swallowed, peeved that his Sister's Son would have no qualms. At least he would be good with words.

He would ask Fíli on his return.

For now, he was far away from returning. Though his body was finally beginning to ease, he had too
much to ponder. How was he to look at her and move on?

Should he look as if nothing happened?

*Something certainly happened.*

*Mahal,* he couldn't even *think* about her clever fingers in his hair without fighting arousal. *How was he to live like this? How, with this, even to look at her?*

No matter. He must move. *That was the task before him.*

And so he struck another tree, all the aches in his body objecting.

More needles fell. "Life is full of needles," he grumbled, glaring up at the tree.

The trees remained unscathed apart from this shedding, as though his fist were a mere gnat that had flown against them.

No. He must fight this feeling of futility, for his Company as well as his People depended upon him, on his success. He must think of them, *and move.*

He headed back to the river. Though he felt soiled, convinced he should not have let her, aghast by what his omission brought on—*and for a Friend!* Still, he did not get back in the water.

Nor did he drink from it.

He rather stared at the water as it moved, listening to the threads of stream sliding past rocks and shore, recalling the words spoken here, looking where the grasses on the edges were pressed from the Company's recent bathing. They'd left a telling trail—

—*Bruises down her back*—

—They would be easy to find, should anyone be searching.

*Azog.*

His remaining ardor cooled to memory.

They should have set off hours ago, instead of leisurely grooming *hair.* And here he stood, staring at water, the hair she had newly groomed now riddled with pine needles. And his body ached. Oh, *how it ached.* He focused on the aches caused by Azog's mace and the Warg's teeth, as well as his knuckles. That hard, unwelcome ache was gone, and he filled with emptiness and chill.

He couldn't hang on, even if he wanted.

*Lost.*

He sat, taking his fingers to his hair—*hair that she'd touched*—and began pulling out the needles wedged in there from the Pines he had struck. He took a bit of time, careful not to undo her handiwork as he freed the errant needles. The action reminded him why he'd needed her in the first place, as pain pulled through his chest and back as he reached behind his head to fish out the shaken greenery.

*Sona.*

*Birîz Akmâth.*
Had someone done her hair in his turn? Such was the usual Khazâd custom. Custom—

—his hands in her hair—

He could only dream—Dream? No. No dreams!

He laughed, bitter and dry, but he laughed. His eyes coursed over the opposite bank, watching for signs of any unwelcome newcomers.

She stole a right to his hair—She hadn't asked: she had taken, like the Thief she was—

His Thief. Thorin laughed once more. Ė’ze.

—Had she not observed their customs?

Thorin stilled, just now realizing she had never seen the Dwarves tending hair. All of the Company, himself included, had kept these actions private, without thought, so ingrained was the Khazâd way of hair.

And now? They knew she was his One.

So—His mind raced ahead with nagging curiosity. Had anyone offered? It should have been him, but he couldn't, and he would not dare.

But who could offer? Not his Sister's Sons. This would imply familial bond, near as if he had done it himself: this would be Durinul barafi, claiming Sona kin. Same with Dwalin or Balin. Or Glóin or Óin. Or Dori, Nori or Ori. Which left Bombur, Bifur or Bofur—

Hammer to cold stone, this pondering irritated him tenfold.

He wanted what he could never hope to have, the love of his Thief, his One, his hands in her hair. How would it feel? He'd felt it briefly when he held her in the Warg attack. His hand went to his chest, over the inner-pocket where he kept her strands from when he had loaned his comb—he had a good notion how it would feel. It would be heavy and silky and different from Dwarf hair as it slid through his fingers like water—

Stop. Stop stop stop. He pressed his eyes shut briefly before continuing to survey the opposite shore.

The water burbled and sloshed its continuum past, ever changing, still seeming the same. They were past the Misty Mountains now, all that much closer to Erebor where the Fire Drake waited, should they outrun his pursuers.

Outrun them they must. He had his Kin and Company. He had his One. One who he could not be with, or without. Safe he would keep them. His fingers tightened, pressing his father's bead into the deepness of his palm. He looked down, startled once more by her handiwork in his hair.

How would he bring himself to undo them?

He choked on a laugh, bitterness swelling. He was come to this?

He would tend his own hair next time, and no pining. For the good of them all he must move.

He finished up removing the needles from his left warrior braid. He was ready.

And there he froze, beholding it—her braid, sweet work of her hands.
Her twists were not like his or those of his kin, her weaves less perfect. He smiled just as his eyes burned deeper, realizing the uneven turns made her braids that much more dear to him.

Dear. His fingers turned over the bead, forged by his Adad from before they lost Erebor. His eyes cleared as a different pain surged. Anrân—

Adad'ē—

—Where are you? Thorin's chill deepened as the river ran on. He realized his father had not been named in the foul bounty note. Dwalin and Balin would suggest this is proof, should he speak of it. Would Dís?

No—

—I should still be searching.

But with no idea where... how then?

Follow Tharkûn's advice? Such was their course.

Is it all in vain?

No. His body answered loudly with the beats of his heart, each press of blood waking pain—He lived. As did Thráin. Perchance the Pale Orc's master held him caged. But where? Or maybe he wandered, lost and mad. Again, but where? As for death—No. That was not it. The bead holding Sona's braid flashed silver from sunlight reflecting off the bouncing waters. Thorin would know.

"He still lives. I am sure of it."

On that merry note Thorin angrily forced his mind away from thoughts that brought no ready answer.

He rose and headed down the path and up, to scout the distances, shaking out the excess needles from his clothes. He climbed a ridge facing the Great East Road, wondering about what happened now, back at camp.

Surely they packed. And then he cursed once more, aware packing was but another source of woe. Sona would find her guitar smashed to ruin.

Birashigami, Biriz Akmâth'ame E'zê.

She would grieve.

Surely she grieved now while he wandered out here, a hopeless fool brooding up rain clouds, Dís would say. His hand wrapped around that last warrior braid, the last braid she touched. He would apologize once they found a moment to themselves. Someday, somehow, he would make amends.

But how would he handle a moment alone?

Stop, just. No.

He would wait, and he would listen, and he would be her friend.

He wanted that, and it warmed him slowly as he rose the banks, passing Pines as he sought high ground and a good vantage.
They would move when he returned. But where? By his own reckless disregard, he needed time to heal, and a place for it.

As well as Sona.

Yet he knew of no safe place between here and the border of the Mirkwood, and that forest was not what he’d call an improvement.

And it was still some days away from their location.

Did Tharkûn have a plan?

Nearing the peak of the ridge, Thorin's body tensed as all the birds about him grew suddenly silent. He peered over a rock ledge, cloaked by his coat.

His chest closed, remembering fear: there in the distance, on the closest ridge, ran packs of Orcs on Wargs, many of them. They trailed up and down the switchback, looking for their prey.

Thorin opened his mouth to take in air only to taste their foul stench on the breeze. The Orcs were downwind, to Thorin and Company's good fortune. His eyes gripped the Pale One, on the highest part of the ridge, who suddenly reared up on his white Warg, as if he could see Thorin watching from the shadows.

And perhaps he did, squinting as though he looked right though him.

But then a horrific roar echoed through the valley from somewhere between them, and the Pale Orc's eyes seemed to follow that cry.

Thorin shivered, looking down the ride west from where he watched.

There— there below was the largest Bear Thorin had ever seen, snarling and growling at at the packs of Wargs and approaching Orcs.

Was that—? The Thief had mentioned a Bear Man.

Thorin wasted no time wondering as he took off toward camp.

Once there, he slowed his pace, as unwelcome awkwardness took hold.

No time. No time for this. No.

He crashed through the trees into the presence of his Company, his eyes falling upon one after another of them, each and every one of them ready to go, including the Dog, who stood with her tail pointed the opposite direction of the Orcs, the direction they would run. "Good, you are packed," he muttered, not quite breathless. The Thief knew of it then, her guitar. He glanced over the camp, the fire was cracking, the pieces losing shape. She had seen to it, and though he felt her eyes upon him, he couldn't look back. Not yet.

Instead his glance rested briefly on Fili, and signed, 'Did you explain Khazâd custom on hair?'

Fili's piercing eyes betrayed nothing for a moment, but then a smile, like a crack in the clouds, lit his Sister's Son's face. He gestured toward Bofur, who nodded, hat flaps bobbing up, a sad grin across his features.

'Bifur would've, so I did,' the Miner signed before looking to the ground. 'She found her guitar.'
Thorin swallowed past the lump. "The Orcs have found our trail, and…" He forced himself to look at her then, and she looked back to him, eyes wide and wondering, still with a spark to them, as though she was angry at him. He wondered what reason now—

—No time. No time for any of this. "Closer still, there is a rather large Bear."

His Company hefted their gear. Sona took on her own, but Thorin and Dwalin had already confirmed with glances, and Dwalin would take over her pack soon enough. Glóin glanced between them, closest to the Thief. 'I will keep her with us, you lead the way away.'

Moments later they were all running again.
Run run run…

Tharkûn was at Thorin's side as they fled, with a hand pressing into his collarbone, full of spark for running. *For air.*

"How close is the pack?"

Run run run run… "Not more… than two leagues… off," Thorin huffed out between steps, amazed he had breath to run.

Orc horns sounded, a low growl rumbled much closer. *The Bear-man.*

And then, on the edge of the wind still pressing their backs, the cries of Orcs echoed toward them. Hot on the Company's trail, they hollered their glee.

Dwalin ran opposite Thorin, checking sidelong, eyes wide with a look of impossibility. He carried Sona's pack. "Did they see you?"

"No…"

"Run, just run!" Tharkûn blustered, keeping his pace close to Thorin's, gripping him now and again, infusing him somehow with that spark for running. "They didn't see you."

Thorin panted out, no words to object while his mind and body raced.

Run run run…

"But… the Bear… is close." That much Thorin managed.

The Wizard eyed him knowingly between jostled steps, this time he didn't try to hush him. Instead he blustered some unintelligible curse before yelling them on, "Run!"

And they did. Moments later he glanced back at Thorin. "There's a house… not far."

That was a boon… *not far. The running… would end.*

"Whose?" Thorin attempted to ask, jarred with each step, "…friend or…?"

"No…"

*No choice.* Thorin said nothing— *he couldn't*— while keeping on.

Run run run…

Perhaps, once there, with their breath caught, they could talk their way out of trouble.

They splashed through a stretch of wide yet shallow creeks, the water adding weight and drag to his boots, but the rocks held firm.

They sped through a grove of *Lavender,* *the mountain blooms mixed in with the white sort that*
hailed farther south—Nungu Azsâlul'abbad Zabal. Home.

É'ze—

—Sona Biriz Akmâth'ule—

There she ran, keeping pace with Glóin—!

Relief, a boost, a most welcome sight. The scent of the blooms nudged a well of caring, a well too deep to ponder.

Run run run run...

"Arrrrrrrrrrrrrrghahh!" The Bear roared!

Its power felt like everywhere at once, as if the roar surrounded them, the pressing threat through to Thorin's core. That is a big Bear. Bear-man. Thorin's Company's steps all faltered, as each slowed and turned toward that deep throated cry, scanning the brush, the beast too near but not in sight. Owner's rage, his land invaded.

The Orc horns sounded closer now.

The Dwarves hovered briefly, gauging where the cries came from, but there was no time.

"This way, quickly!" Tharkûn bellowed, gesturing the direction forward with his staff.

Run run run...

And now Tharkûn dashed ahead and Thorin awaited the rear guard, yelling "run!" to them all as they passed, feeling the weakening in his breath. Still they heard him. Dwalin remained at his side, glaring concern as they raced on, hollering a very loud "RUN!" in his wake.

His Sister's Son's were behind the Wizard, followed by Bofur and Bifur and Ori and Dori and Nori and Balin and Óin. Glóin and Sona ran side by side, neither flagging.

But Bombur has stopped on the trail.

Thorin grabbed Bombur's braid, tugged him 'round, "Come, Bombur!"

His eyes were jarred from the horror to focus on Thorin. At that they expanded ever so briefly more, and with a nod Bombur was running again, faster than he'd ever run before.

"Inside, inside!" the Wizard hollered as they stormed past a massive gate into a pasture.

They raced through, and the Dwarves ahead were stopped by the latch on the house door, slamming against it one after another. Thorin came in panting, falling in last, with Tharkûn just ahead, all crowded on the door. Thorin pressed through them and lifted the latch, with the Bear-man's growls growing loud enough to feel the vibration in the air around them.

And then they were in, along the snout of the Bear-man, who thrashed at them, wedged between the door and the frame.

The Dwarves all heaved a forward press against the door, attempting to push the Bear-man out without use of hammer or ax. None of the Company would cause injury to him, their host, now neutral to their cause at best—
And he was strong, it was clear he could break the door with his weight, as their shoulders took the brunt of the force while deft hands shoved at his maul, avoiding his teeth and eyes.

With the press, pain returned full force, but he could not stop pushing.

_Breathe… breathing… hurt… but… ahhhh.. Breathe. There would be walls between his own and the sharp edge of teeth and foe's iron._

But then the Bear-man pulled out —_Imhêd’ul Mahal— such relief—!_

Thorin sought Sona out when they turned, as if she were some magnet—_Meget’ul Amgât’ē— Ė’ze_; there she stood, off to the side with the Wizard, less winded than mortally possible: _she too had benefited from the Wizard's power for this race._

He turned away, looking about the place where a Bear-man lived.

"What was that?" Ori asked, his curious eyes lit with the question.

"That is our host," Tharkûn filled in.

_About time._

"He’s a skin-changer."

_A Bear-man. Sona had read of him in her book. His growls could be heard moving along the wall from the outside as he slowly circled the place, but he made no further attempt on the door._

Thorin listened to the Wizard explain, while his eyes followed the Thief as she moved off to explore what looked to be a large hall, furnished with hearth, home and stables. Goats and Sheep and Dogs.

She lingered at a large chess set, made of Bear-people carved in wood.

_A mind for strategy. A mind for reason. A white mouse scurried between the King and Queen, another behind the Warrior._

A golden-haired Dog very much like the Thief's, but with longer, thicker hair, circled Sasha, while Sasha did the same. The two took to each other, evidenced by wagging tails, prancing, jumping and various sniff rituals.

_But there was another, more boisterous fellow—_

"Hey, little guy!" Sona kneeled and reached out to the small Dog she found mulling about her feet, one with sandy-fur, black ears and curly tail, and a soft pug face unlike any Thorin had ever seen before. He licked and sniffed her extended hand, and then the Thief scooped him up and stood, admiring her new friend who kissed her cheek as she stroked his ears.

_Not jealous of a Dog. No._

_And then she laughed!_

Thorin stared, making sure his mouth was shut—_wishing to hear more._

"You are quite the little peanut, aren't you?"

_Peanut—? was that a nut like a pea? Or a bean-nut? Because the Dog reminded Thorin of a spotted_
"Beorn is definitely okay in my book if he keeps the likes of you for company."

And the little Dog barked, agreeing.

*She laughed again!* His heart swelled. *She laughed!* He never thought to hear that, with all their trials these past days, and yet he felt a pang, wishing he could make her laugh.

The days seemed long passed when they would speak to each other with accord.

And yet they *lived.*

*Kaylíth Ė'ze.* And here she *laughed.* He centered on the joy and exhaled, grounded by it.

And suddenly all the Company watched her.

Thorin could not stop gawking, like some *twitter-pated Dwarfling*—

And so the Bear-man, *Beorn she called him,* had won the Thief's approval, based on the Company he kept, *this pint-sized bean of a Dog.* Thorin only wondered more about their host.

"He's leaving," Ori observed, eyes going from the Thief to the door and back again as the sounds of the Bear's growls and heavy gait retreated some distance from the house.

*He would keep the Orcs at bay*—

"Come away from there," Dori muttered in frustration shared by the most of them. "It's not natural. It's obvious he's under some dark spell."

*No, he is a kind we have not met before*—

"He's under no enchantment!" Tharkûn bellowed, admonishing Dori's quick judgment, clearly irked by the Company he kept.

*Typical Wizard.* Thorin remembered his breathing and kept his thoughts to himself, well aware Tharkûn earned his ire by never bothering to explain unknown matters in the first place. He could cook in it, for all Thorin cared now.

Still watching the Thief, he remained calm as he focused on the lived-in spaces around her, benches and tables and an unlit hearth, Bombur was already there, lighting it —the Bear *lived alone as a Man*— By the hearth there were more benches and a pillowed chair large enough for someone even larger than Azog—

—Azog.

Lu lu lu lu—

No.

*Kaylíth Ė'ze Biriz Akmâth'ame.*

*Asti.* I will not think of him tonight.

The Thief angled through the Bear-man's furnishings, as though she were counting something. Was it that this Being who lived here was also a *Man*?
Tharkûn added another detail about their host, "... he's not very fond of Dwarves!"

Aye, no surprise. Not many were.

Then Sona's face eased away from frowning—

Frowning?

Thorin's eyes widened slightly, realizing she had frowned just when the Wizard mentioned the Bear man's dislike of Dwarves. It bothered her—! Mahal's hammer, this was further comfort.

This was not good!

"Alright now, get some sleep all of you." With that the Wizard gestured toward the hay beds at the opposite end of the long house, where they would find rest for the night and discover their circumstances in the morning.

"You'll be safe here tonight," the Wizard finally finished, adding "I hope" softly to his groundless promise, hesitating out of earshot of the most of them.

Not all of them were tired yet. Bombur set a pot over the fire. Some wanted something warm before sleep.

Thorin turned his attention back to the Thief, one who was not stewing in what she already knew.

She was eyeing the hay beds gratefully. Her joy was a pleasant sight.

It does her well, a night's rest in a building protected by walls.

Thorin was among those not yet ready for sleep, and so he headed toward the fire.

"Quiet goodnight, N'adad, once you find sleep." Kíli whispered close to his ear.

"Not now, Kí—" Fíli tugged on his Brother's arm from just behind.

Fíli knew about hair.

"When then?" Kíli shot back, his whisper firm between the three of them. "When we stop running? Or when he'll stop and listen?" No one spoke a moment in a quiet stand-off of wills, a stand-off it seemed his youngest wouldn't let stand. With eyes that could punch holes through metal, Kíli bore into Fíli. "You say it better," he said, almost like an order.

Agreement passed between them and Fíli faced Thorin. "We know why you rushed Azog when he had the high ground, on a Warg, no less." The steady fire of Fíli's eyes gleamed back at him. Kíli glowered, hot magma beneath a stern surface.

Both met him like a punch to the gut. No—

Then Fíli's hand gripped Thorin's arm, drawing his attention, pinching down hard enough to cloud the aches Azog had left behind.

Thorin locked eyes with his eldest, hard as it was to hold that gaze, that certainty.

"We'd have joined you; we did, just before the Eagles—"

"No." Thorin's voice was rough. One by one, he means to kill us all; by my life, he will not take
Fíli settled into staring quietly, determination resting deep in his face. "He won't succeed, not while our will and our wit outweigh the least of his vows."

Thorin wouldn't argue with that.

"We know you worry, N'adad," Kíli added, easing. "We know you're sorry. Just, well, just know it. We nearly watched you die."

—Thrór Sigin'adad'ē—!

—No one died.

"And since you didn't," now Kíli started to smirk, "next time don't be reckless."

He laughed with the slightest nod, and then their heads were touching, all three pulled into a huddle. Then Fíli nudged his brother with a bashful glance back at Thorin. "Good?"

Kíli nodded, leaning into his Brother's arm.

"Let's go, then," Fíli steered him away. "N'adad needs some peace," and with nearly matching winks, the two made off toward the hay.

---

Thorin climbed into the giant cushioned chair with his smoke kit and pipe in hand.

Glóin came to the fire soon after, and Thorin was reminded of Na'i'adâl. Sleep, blast the concept, how would he avoid it? And here he wondered what his cousin would say next.

But first, he had his own question. "You could have warned me about hair, Friend."

And that was when Bombur left the fire.

Glóin puffed and muttered as he sat down, avoiding eye contact until he was fully settled in. Then he shook his head slowly, and Thorin couldn't tell if that wasn't a smile beneath his flaming beard. "Well, it was not as though I expected she'd come on you like that, take your comb and..." he stammered there. "And then." He shrugged, sheepish. "There was nothing for it. Now you know."

"Aye, Imêd'ul Mahal," Thorin muttered, altogether missing the blessing.

"How're you going to manage it, Thorin?"

"Who knows?" Sometimes Thorin wanted a playbook, as Sona would say. Books had proven particularly useless on questions of Ones. Answering this seemed equally useless, given his circumstances, and yet the simple truth would do. "I have the Quest. My Company's reliance. Our People to see Home. And so I will manage."

They drifted into silence. Thorin tried to relax the knot growing in his brow. "It's not about me."

After a long while Glóin nodded.

"Aside from—" He stopped. He was miscast—Ze'žinishki akattibi— and so? "We need her, for any
success —Kaylíth—Her safety, her health. Her free choice to stay with us. I— I jumped a cliff, Glóin."

Glóin waited, still slowly nodding his head.

Still, Thorin had to say it aloud. He had to hear it himself.

"And then Azog. His taunts—"

"Akattibi. She is your One." There was no surprise in Glóin.

"You knew, then."

Glóin's eyes widened and he leaned forward. "Aye, akattibi," but he did not leave off with certain knowing: "I say there's a reason you rarely see paired Ones on a Quest such as this. There's a reason I advised you not to allow Danie, should she have asked—"

"She did, before you advised."

And now Glóin feigned surprise with a smile. "And you told her no. You knew, even then. So stop fussing."

They both almost laughed. How could they be smiling now? It felt good, like the warmth of the fire, no matter what would come later.

But then Glóin asked him, "Did you make a fuss back there at the river, Thorin?"

All levity left him and he sank into a glare.

"Might help if you listen."

Thorin just stared.

"Did you say anything implying the bond, that she is your One?"

A detailed question, no less—"Of course, no! Why would you even suggest it?" Thorin felt his face burn beneath his beard. This was too much.

"You looked as if you might when we left you on the path. Yet you are not her One, not yet, however much we all hope for it." His Treasurer met his gaze with fortitude and a tentative smile. "Seems you need a telling to, and being that your Sister isn't here to give it, I'll do: If you were harsh with your One down there at the river, you overstepped."

All Thorin could do was stare on. He would not grace that with any kind of response.

But it was true. He had overstepped. All of it was overstepping. He turned his face to the fire and they puffed their pipes together in long silence, until Dwalin and Balin joined them. And then the Treasurer rose, bowing out with a word about making his bed in the hay.

"You almost mope, but not quite," Dwalin observed, bearing somewhat on the gentle side, with a bit of confusion and uncertainty mixed in his observant expression. "You losing your touch?"

Thorin ignored the jab.

"Did you mess things up with her?" Ever blunt, that was Dwalin.
"You do better when your time comes."

Dwalin laughed at that, gruff and embracing. "I don't want to know."

"That won't save you," Thorin muttered, but then his face eased.

"The lot of you needs saving," Balin added in. "I don't suppose you want to to talk about it."

"No—"

"No." Thorin and Dwalin spoke at once. They both left 'it' undefined, following the deflection of their clever Advisor.

They sat quietly a long while, and each filled their pipes. Thorin was glad to be doing something so earth-borne to the senses. So he fingered through the leaf and slowly reloaded — *The taste of leaf and smoke, of promise in sweetness, breathing. Kaylith.*

Soon Dwalin broke the silence. "Did you see her with the little Dog, some kind of nut she called it?"

"Peanut."

"Aye, 'peanut'," Balin explained quietly. "I read of them once, long ago in the Mountain's library. It's a nut they grow in hot regions far to the south-east of Gondor." And then Balin spoke on the origin of certain lesser-known nuts.

Thorin was relieved, listening eagerly to a subject not about him, all the while soothed by Balin's narrative as well as his voice.

Just then he heard water flowing, soft bells— *the bangles!* and his heart picked up speed as he saw her in the doorway watching them, her face expanded as if she'd flooded the forge—

—*She touched his hair!*

Only *now she* looked embarrassed, darkened with it even, as though maybe—*No, she could not be attracted.* And then she was backing away, *running again!*

"Oh! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you. I'll leave."

"No, no, you stay, Whatsafist—" Dwalin, too fast for her, rose and met her before she could get two steps back.

"—Pacifist—" she muttered, flustered but for the smile crossing her lips just then.

*Her lips.*

He stared, and then looked up. Her eyes were on Dwalin's, as big as a pair of saucers.

"We were just about to turn in anyways, lass," Balin offered, to quash the awkward stumbling. *Awkward as if they'd just met—*

How many months has it been?

*Ē'ze.*

And the Brothers were past her in another breath.
Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: Slow but steady, here's another! Things will remain slow but steady, that is my life right now, and same goes for my Beta, Jenny-wren28. Good news is I'm already well into the next chapter, so that one shouldn't be too long. I know many of you coming from On the Road to Find Out have been anxiously awaiting that talk... :)

A/N #2: Thank you Jenny-Wren28 for being my awesome Beta! And thank you readers, for your kudos, bookmarks and comments! I appreciate them all, & they help me stay inspired.

A/N #3: The Khuzdûl:

Nai'adâl – shared dreams

Akattibi – with certainty, I know

Kaylíth – living

Ze'binishki – A Cast Away (miss-matched) One – miscast One

Amgât – attraction

Meget – lodestone magnet

Meget'ul Amgât'ē – Loadstone of attraction, mine.

Nungu Azsâlu'abbad Zabal – Flower of the lonely Mountain Purple (lavender)
She was there still, staring and flustered, now eyeing him from the side.

So he rose gently, a good choice for his aching body.

Would she berate him once more? Now, he was tired.

Apologize. Just apologize. You've done enough to be sorry for.

Hopefully she had calmed. Hopefully she would stay. Hopefully she cared for him—No! He almost laughed here, his beating heart, his wish. And she was ready to go the way she came, or stay if she wanted, not like some Pony startled by the wind. Such things as howling winds never troubled the Thief, not without a Troll or a Warg or an Orc pack mixed in. So it was from the start. He almost smiled then, remembering her stealthy steps through their camp the second time they met.

He was no howling wind. Nor was he a Troll or a Warg or an Orc. He wondered if he could be better company as he waited to see if she would indeed join him.

He motioned toward the soft chair he'd been warming, looking her over, cataloguing the bruises he could still see. There were far too many.

He took the hardwood bench nearest the chair.

And then she stepped in, a short smile took her face as she passed him, and then he watched her backside as she climbed atop the chair, her muscles so tight, round, he wanted—His mouth opened in unwelcome response and just then she turned in her seat, a crease in her brow as she eyed him with a question left open—

She saw him look—!

His face felt the flush of the forge's fire—he shouldn't have stared—friends don't ogle friends—What did she think?

"Akmînruk zu," she whispered breathless, low, the Khuzdûl sultry from her chest.

Stop.

But he couldn't. And so he did not know what to say.

She sat and he waited. And this was no good.

"My apologies—"

"I'm sorry—"

They spoke as one!
He broke into a smile, charmed by the grin she shared with him.

Why did she look like that?

But he continued, to clear the air. He had overstepped, and he needed her to know, whether she understood or not. "My apologies. I have not behaved toward you as I should."

And then he shut his mouth, watching her.

She waited a moment, still basking in a smile left over from the bloom. A question settled over her features, an invitation.

He was not about to explain. *Mahal, let the fire last the forging.*

In past conversations he'd given her cultural explanations, 'lessons' Balin would have called them. These were not always welcome, as he recalled the time he spoke to her of *color*—

*But now?* Now she clearly wanted to know.

And now, any explanation by him would be *further trespass*.

He had no place.

His Azog rush was a fool's move, and for it he was sorry, but that seemed obvious, one would think, one would hope.

But for her it was *more*, for part of him rushed for her.

*Binumral'ame zê'biniski'ul'ê.* And then how he spoke to her, his needs expressed aloud, his desperate pleas coming off as *commands*. He had no call.

Small comfort to his required silence: she would not understand, given that she did not return this bond.

*How could she?*

So he hoped his simple apology would suffice.

Once she realized he was finished speaking, she took a moment to think about it, watching him with her head tilted, her braid falling to the side.

*Bifur had done it.*

*How did it feel?* It looked heavy and soft, shining in the firelight. He wished it were loose —*how she'd let it down at dinners in the Elven City*— *Now he would card his fingers through her curls*—

Stop.

"I accept your apology and hope you accept mine in return." Her eyes held steady.

Relief passed over him: she held no grudge. But her cheeks darkened all the more. *Why this blush, was it hard to apologize? Or was it... something else?* What was with this futile hoping?

"Though, obviously, you don't have to."
He nodded, but I will, leaning ever so slightly forward, letting his eyes settle over her face as she looked back, basking in her gaze.

"I'm sorry for how I behaved this morning, I should not have yelled at you and kept interrupting every time you tried to speak."

Asti—why not? You always muzzle me. I should have left the moment I found you well, and let you wash.

Then she stopped, stilling her lips with her teeth. Why did she do that?

"I definitely should not have forced an ending to our argument."

And how—! A swift disrobing, the bloodied tunic pulled above her, her body torn and bruised—"...You have just as much right to express your opinions and feelings as I do."

*I have none, Asti—* He stared. *It's a different world you come from.*

She watched him through the veil of her long lashes.

He swallowed. *I should be courteous, caring and fair and leave you to your way. I am yours to the limit of*—He forced these thoughts down.

"No, I carry blame for that, too." He knew she would not let him take all blame, though she had none.

And yet his heart eased, realizing she prized his company in spite of his blunders. He tilted his head to draw closer, and watched her eyes skit over the braids as they fell over him, he watched her watch them fall, the art of her handiwork. Did she like what she saw? Had she liked how it felt? Her hands though, they fisted in her lap, and he wondered.

"I know how you detest conflict," here he would elaborate. "How it wounds your spirit." He smiled, though it hurt, so much he wished to share and understand. *So much beyond reach.* Her eyes would not leave his, and he wished time could stop. This was where he wanted to be, *staring in her eyes.* "I should not have pressed the argument, not when I knew all you wanted—all you needed—was cleansing from the violence—"

With that her eyes fell.

*Too much?* He waited. It was all he could do, with how lost he felt. Still, it was good to be lost in her company.

And then she shrugged, a tiny motion, something she did when she was uneasy, as if she would let her cares slip into a wash-bucket by her side. "Also," she added, "I'm sorry about the hair thing." This part she rushed, clearly shamed by the knowledge Bofur shared.

He watched her hard swallow, knowing now she understood, remembering how good it felt.

*Stop. Focus*—

Bofur had explained to her. Thorin wondered what words he'd chosen. Suddenly his heart was racing as these thoughts progressed. *Do you know what you do to me?* No—she didn't know that. But what had Bofur said? And how did she feel about this... *new discovery, Mabakhnrulkul?* Clearly it made her uncomfortable, but *in what way?*
"I… I didn't know the rules… what it means in your culture."

Asti, you know now— and?

Her knuckles where white, holding tightly to her braid, for grounding.

"I only meant to help you."

"Thief—" He wished she would stop.

"No, please let me finish." She shushed him with a chuckle, that sound—and muzzled once more, how she did that! Even when he would excuse her—

He wished he could tell her he liked it. And ohhh, how much. But he was muzzled prior: Binumrâl. He wished she would stop hurting for not knowing their ways.

And then she laughed, oh that sound—bells over the valley, Kethem 'udban'ul.

And she looked at him sideways, assessing, a bit of mischief remained from the laughter on her lips. "I know I just apologized for interrupting you, but please let me say this before I lose my nerve and run away."

You won’t run. He leaned forward slightly before stopping himself. How do I know? Wait. Wait for her word. And how he waited, as if on the narrow cliff-walk he had not seen before turning the bend.

"I am also sorry about the flowers."

And soft air escaped him. What had he held onto?

The words she nearly spit, so rushed was she by nerves. Ah, Sona, Birashagimi—

But then her body eased just after she spoke, and she relaxed more fully in her seat, contentment spreading visibly with her relief.

He was grateful to see it, following her moves, watching gentleness carry over.

And yet he felt a slight dropping on the inside, as a welling of feeling pressed forward, one he was only just now finding. He had somehow stored up hope— But he’d known she had not meant the flowers for courtship!

"I only meant the lavender to help you sleep better…"

Does she watch me sleep?

"I worry about you."

You do?

He looked at her again, holding still above the storm within, oh she was warm to look at, eyes alight upon the fire as she pulled her legs up tight to rest her head upon her knees, her feet basking in the firelight reflecting off her face, flickering in her eyes…

He kept going back to her eyes— Meget’ul Amgât'ē—

Of course you do. As you care for all of us— And yet, there is more, more than for the others: why
do you pay me this extra attention? Have I become your closest friend in this world not your own? A tremor shifted deep within him at the prospect, like settling stone opening paths, revealing the treasure beyond.

"As for the other, I have no excuse for the flower crown."

*That—*

Aye, and I knew it. *So why this denial to my core* —stemmed from *hope*— when did *that* take seed?

And she shrugged again, that pouring movement she made, to slide away her edge. "I… I just wanted to make you laugh."

*What? Why?* He watched her more intently.

"You have a lovely laugh."

*I… you…* Oh blessed *Mahal*. Thorin's mind seemed to freeze on 'lovely'. He would not let it think any further, but how he wanted to *know*.

"I wish," she said, *and how he waited to hear!*

But then she stopped. A slight frown bloomed on her brow as she flexed her feet before the fire, the red polish almost gone now, except for the big toes, with specks of orange flashing on the nails in the light.

She shivered slightly, nuzzled cozily in the chair, enjoying the crackling flames that kept the night chill at bay, pressing her feet closer to the flames, there to warm them—*He wished he could take them in his hands to warm them faster—*

After a bit he knew she was not going to tell him what she *wished*. *Blast it.* So he leaned forward on the bench, bracing his aching chest with his arms above his knees, resting his head on his fisted knuckles. And he asked: "What do you wish, Thief?"

She stared at him for a single blazing moment, her mouth ajar, a feeling there he could not define, but before he knew it she was staring back in the fire, stuttering "Uhhh" before she fell silent once more.


"I wish that the closeness we seemed to have before the cliff, before Azog, and before I found..."

She pointed to her name ring—"...was still there."

*Closeness…?* How much did she want of it? She had no idea. *Still there?* It was only *growing*, for his part. *And he needed control!*

Ē'ze.

Azog— *Mahal, he intends to slay us all*, and yet that is not the end of it:

Azog had a Commander, and that Commander wanted the *artifact*.

*Kâmin zashar.*

Ruination for all. The Great Threat, and *these unwelcome feelings*. Thorin's frustrations sank deeper, where he wished he could hide them.
She shook her head. What would she deny?

And he couldn’t help returning to a nagging thought: why did she like his laugh?

"I don't want to jeopardize what we have. What we… had."

Not possible. And yet, what… was that exactly?

Then she looked at him. Oh Mahal, how he needed assistance where there was none.

"Your friendship means so much to me… I don't want to lose it just because I'm an ignorant idiot."

No— and her face dropped for shame. No!

My friendship is already yours!

And she was waiting, cringing waiting, for how he would respond. He gave her best what he thought she needed, gentle assurance, like the kind he gave Kíli at near misses when his Sister's Son began learning the bow: "While you may be ignorant of our ways, of things we have not shared, you are most certainly no idiot."

Her eyes returned to him, relief blooming in their depths.

She wanted his friendship, fiercely, so it seemed.

How this both moved him and stilled him at once.

I would give you everything you want. He swallowed. And nothing more.

"Do you want to see it?"

Wha— see what?

Her hand glanced off the ring on her small finger, and understanding hit him— the artifact. Quite a sudden, jarring change of topic, and it pulled him back in his seat.

Yet she drew closer, and in a flash she was off the cushioned chair and on the bench right next to him, tucking her feet beneath her, leaning closer, and fishing out his handkerchief from her waistband pocket. Mahal, she stored the artifact in it's folds—!

She set the bundle on her open palm, and, with a tight intake of air, she slowly unpacked it, keeping the cloth between her skin and the object she carried. Then, with her face full of disgust, she thrust it at him, meaning for him to take it in hand.

Still he saw reluctant hesitation in her eyes.

Why did she offer it? Surely not to give it. He did not want it.

But he would take it if it eased her way.

He reached his hand above it, and felt the power there.

How it attempted to pull, but could not find the lever within him, searching… searching… no chain to grasp, large or small. Still it tried.

Showing, sharing sound and vision. 'One Ring to rule them all' it whispered, chanting softly as he
took it in hand, 'One Ring to bring them,' seductive like a black ink bath, 'and in the darkness bind them.' Looking through the gap where a finger should go, Thorin saw Azog. The Orc stood with a dark wavering formless Being, a ball of force with countless arms and fingers shaped like wisps of cloud—It spoke. 'We grow in strength. We grow in numbers.'

Who? Thorin asked in thought.

But it was not in his head, Imhêd'ul Mahal.

Still it spoke to him, sharing Azog's reaction, a grimace, a welcome? 'Lead my armies.'

Who?

'Oakenshield.'

Never.

'War is coming. You lead. You lead.'

Aye, and not for you.

'Death will come to all.'

Thorin blinked and looked at the Thief as he still held the artifact. Her face looked a bit green, as though she felt ill while she watched him. And it. A prick of anger spiked through him, so he stilled to contain it, pulling his lips against his teeth to feel the bite.

He would calm her. "... so much fear and doubt over so small a thing." He drew it closer to his eyes, challenging the one beyond: "Such a little thing."

And with that he put it back on the handkerchief still spilled over the Thief's outstretched hand.

"That's it?" She asked, shocked, her face somehow paled at the words he had spoken. Her body shook with relief and yet she still appeared sick.

What? He looked at her, wondering. And he realized a wondrous thing: she trusted him, and he came through.

"Don't you..." She swallowed the rest of her question. But then she repeated, "don't you want to keep it? Aren't you drawn to it?"

"No." She was surprised it had no pull on him. But it did. "I feel its power, as anyone so near it would." He glanced up into Sona's eyes. Far better to look here. "But the Rings of Power hold little sway over Mahal's Children."

Her lips parted, and she looked a bit shocked, and once searching and angry, and then she rolled her eyes slightly and nodded understanding—a tale worked beneath her brow he wished he knew—and then she looked once more in his eyes.

He continued to explain. "They only magnify our natural tendencies for desiring gold and hoarding it, among other effects." Gold sickness—the madness of his line. A gift of the Seventh Ring—

Adad'ê—Where are you, do you bear it still?

"I bet Sauron was pissed when he realized that."
Sauron—Pissed? Did her book say the Dark Lord drank so?

And she called him by name, casually, as though he were some footnote in an ancient history—her books.

Not anymore; he lived. And he had no body. He was naught but clouds of tendrilled-cloying darkness weaving—he couldn't drink a thimble of ale, much less get pissed.

Would the artifact bring his body back from the festering darkness?

Thorin focused on Sona's smile. It made him feel less lost.

"His perfect plan to control all the Peoples of Middle-earth ruined by one stubborn bunch." She partly smiled, a balm.

Aye, things never go as planned. He tried to smile back, but it was no good. And yet, the way she said that: she admired his People for their stubbornness. A thrill, like the deep humming of the Mountain, moved him quietly.

He leaned closer, his braids shifting with him, and her eyes caught upon them, and he wondered yet again what she thought of his hair.

Stop. She worried. "And what of you? You are of Men. Are you not drawn to it?"

"Yes, and no. I..." she glared at it, as if she could strangle it somehow by merely looking peeved. "I don't want to touch it. But I don't want anyone else to touch it, either. I hate it."

Thorin frowned, his stomach turning. The Thief never hated.

"I hate how it makes me feel."

So do I.

"I want to throw up every time I touch it."

_Asti, Lu'anran Ė'ze Biriz Akmāth'ule—_

"And the worst part is it's as if it knows, and it's laughing at me, and it's just a stupid inanimate object except that it's not, and it's evil, and it must be destroyed."

At that she covered it with the handkerchief.

_We could do that now, first, if you know the way_—but he did not say it. He stared briefly at his sister's embroidery stitches, trimmed along the edges.

"But not yet."

_No?"

"First Erebor. Then the Ring, like we planned."

Thorin looked deep in her eyes, at the certainty he saw there, reminding him of Fili's just earlier. But he was not sure. "Are you certain?"

He saw her clench as she nodded. "Yes."
Did she have another idea? He let the question go unasked.

And her face went back to the artifact, where suddenly she looked horror-struck once more, "Oh! Oh no!" She hurriedly let the ring fall to the side of her tunic, tying it into a corner of fabric at the end, and then only the handkerchief remained between them. "I'm so sorry—" She held it out to him. "I can't believe I still haven't given this back to you. No wonder you still call me a Thief."

*You stole my heart, Thief.*

He stared at his Sister's fine stitches, not daring to look at Sona, for fear of what she would see reflecting from his eyes. *This is but cloth, however dear.* He reached back to her hand, and wrapped her fingers back around it, holding her cool hand briefly, coveting her touch.

"Keep it." *You would steal my Sister's heart as well, as worthy Sister.*

Shock spread over her features. "But… but I thought gifts were a no no."

A chill went down his spine. He smiled—*Maybe they were*— She looked at his mouth now, his beard—*truly they were. But not impossible, no*— *Is she? No. She likes my laugh.*

She wanted a friend as well as he. He leaned toward her. "Close friends may exchange gifts."

She leaned toward him in return.

"You gifted me lavender to aide my rest," he continued as they drew in. "I give you my handkerchief to ease your burden. It's no more than any true friend would do, and nothing improper." Dís would say he was forward. Right now he didn't care, staring into her happy smile. "Now you should rest." He hoped she could rest, *that one of them could.* "You are still injured and healing."

"So are you," she did not merely say this—*when had she reached for him*—? Her hand was near, *her fingers thrummed three times upon his chest, over his heart, touching above it*—

—*Yours, Ē'ze, no matter what comes.*

He wished she would keep thrumming. *He wanted to grab that hand and pull her closer*—

A strange smile graced her lips, lingering there with mischief in her eyes, and uncertainty.

*What then?* "Out with it. I promise whatever it is…" *no— do not overstep once again or promise what cannot be kept.* "That is to say, you may ask me anything without fear."

"Well—" *Blast it if she didn't bite her lip once more.* "It's just that… based on that logic… what with us being such close friends and all..." She stopped—*but she did not*— as her body moved closer and closer to him on the bench—*her hand even more so.*

*What did she want?* He hoped—*for what?* He held, waiting.

The mischief within her expounded tenfold in the space of the distance she closed. "…technically.." she still came closer.

*What was she doing?* He held, still waiting, still hoping—*for what?* So close she moved.

"I did nothing wrong when I helped you with your hair this morning."
I know, you did not know, but—

Suddenly she grasped one of his warrior braids and gave it a teasing tug.

His breath stopped. She would do that, now, anytime she felt like?

What had he done...?

And without looking back she was gone the next instant, but then she hung in the doorway, stopped like a wave before falling. "Goodnight, Thorin," she said, voice edged with hesitation. Did she wonder if she overstepped once more? She still did not look.

For the best, not to see his shock, his ruin.

This was the way they would live. 'Find peace,' his Sister's Son had said. Where should he find it? But hers, her peace: this he could provide, absolving words, calming words. "Goodnight, Thief."

Chapter End Notes

A/N#1: Aye, the long-awaited talk. Thank you all for staying with me in all the ways you do.

A/N#2: The Khuzdûl:
Birashagimi – Sorry
Binumral'ame zê'biniski'ul'ê. – Mine without love I'm of miscast Ones.
Zê'biniski'ul'ê – I'm of miscast Ones.
Mabakhnrukul – that which is discovered, new discovery
Kethum Azsâlutul'abbad – Bells of the (Mountain.)
'Udban – Greatest Valley
Kethem 'udban'ul – Bells of the valley, sublime.
Imhêd'ul Mahal – Blessing of Mahal
Meget'ul Amgât'ē – loadstone my desire, hnnngh, he never says it out loud.
Lu'anrân – no grief
Part 2: Chapter 9: But Now Comes the Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Another something unexpected. And Thorin knew with Sona's teasing, all was well with them. So much she valued his fellowship, that she would play with him, but mean no malice by it. They shared a level of friendship akin to siblings. Often had he pulled Frerin's hair in younger days, and Dís even later.

But this?

No—

The Thief was nothing like a Sister, not to him.

How could he say such a thing, close friends? Indeed, it seemed it would be a long while before he came to his senses regarding this—new truth—Baktith.

His One cared for him deeply, and he returned this caring. He looked forward to the deepening counsel of friendship, as well as the banter that comes with it, yet he had not thought of this.

He should have.

Now with joy he felt a keen pain weighing.

This living would be hard, but they lived, kaylith. And he would do all in his power to keep them all living, breathing.

He stayed there on the hard bench, absorbing the edge of it against his thigh, thinking of too many concerns, with a mind far from sleep.

Bofur joined him after some while. "My Lord, still keeping warm?"

Thorin nodded, not about to admit he couldn't sleep.

"Might I join you by the fire?"

Thorin nodded again, gesturing toward the flame he stared in, to welcome the Miner, who sat across from him and pulled out his pipe and leaf.

"I'd still be sleeping, but I woke to the sounds of the Bear passing by the wall, then well, thought I'd have a smoke before settling back in."

Thorin took to subtle nodding, swaying into them, with hopes Bofur would keep talking; it soothed somehow, the ordinariness of it. Well, except for the part of the Bear-man passing by the wall.

There would be introductions in the morning, when perhaps the Man would show.

But now they sat before the fire, welcome company.
"I told the lass, as you heard already."

Sona.

Thorin's eyes were suddenly fixed on the Miner.

Bofur signed 'heard' as he spoke, recalling Thorin's short conversation with Fíli just before the race to the Bear-man's house.

"I explained some Khuzdûl ways, you know, about the thing of gifts and hair—" He stopped then, staring at Thorin who continued staring back at him, to absorb any shred of news, how was she when you said it?

Bofur looked slightly confused and startled by the intensity of Thorin's gaze.

So he blinked to ease it, discreetly swallowed and moved back. Yet he would not give up his curiosity. With a firm nod Thorin's hand went to his lip, pressing his teeth, but it wasn't enough.

"How did she take it, Mabakhnrukul?"

So much that was new. Who would think it after nearing two hundred years?

But the question fully eased Bofur, who sighed and smiled at the same time. "Oh, a mite shocked, I'd say. Like she'd stepped all over it, and well, it seemed so. She said "oh no" and took it with her eyes clenched shut."

Her mortification. This was a lesson she hadn't wished to attend.

"She asked for us to tell her when she got something wrong, and well, Bifur would have. She cringed and all, embarrassed, covering her face, but still I could see it."

She blushed then.

"There was more to it than shock, seemed to shake her feelings, all come to the fore. Birashigami. It was just after she saw her guitar, but the timing couldn't be helped."

Her guitar.

Too much. Thorin worried his lip, glad for their prior conversation all the more. She needed the easing of her mind, to sleep, to recover.

"You know she cares for you, yes, my Lord?" Bofur asked, jarring Thorin from his thoughts.

Thorin glanced sidelong. "We are friends," he said low, repeating, keeping 'close' to himself. Imhed'ul Mahal.

"Oh, that's good," Bofur beamed, nodding while looking a tad shy for the curious Miner. "I mean, she hasn't given anyone else flowers, see? Even not knowing what they mean to us. Could'a happened, were all of us equal to her in her mind, in her heart." He smiled, eyes turning in to the fire. "It's obvious to all of us you're more to her than the rest. Pay attention, if you don't mind my suggesting it."

I do— I am— I will.

"Why don't you tell her that you care more for her, as well?" Bofur didn't hesitate staring straight at him, his rugged smile good company.
Thorin wasn't angry, even knowing Bofur should already realize the answer to his question. "Do you have Juzarazur, Bofur?"

The Miner's smile broadened, followed by a wink, clearly understanding his Lord wouldn't answer his too-forward question. "Aye, though they've not yet shown their face."

"So you've no idea, but a bit of one, in any case." Thorin smiled back at him.

Bofur bobbed his head, hiding his big grin behind a draw of his pipe.

Bombur and Bifur join them just then, each with a nod of greeting, and Bofur quipped, "Bear woke you too?"

Bombur headed straight to the fire as if he hadn't heard the question. Bifur sat next to Bofur, nodding and shrugging 'Bears,' attuned to his brother as if he waited for an answer to a question no one asked.

*Perhaps they had heard*—

The Cook dipped his ladle in the pot and stirred. "Ah good, hot and ready now. Anyone like some broth?" He poured for all, and then looked Thorin in the eye with a fragile smile, holding the cup.

"Aye, Bombur, I would." Thorin nodded encouragement, accepting it.

His Cook beamed and sat among them with his own. It was a vegetable broth, with a meat stock from jerky Bombur had stashed somewhere in his bags.

After Thorin finished his pipe weed and his broth, he bowed out and left the Brothers to themselves in an attempt to get rest before dawn came.

The others all hunkered in the sleeping quarters, a barn by the looks of it, filled with loads of fresh hay. Thorin took a spot away from them, near the door.

The Thief slept curled around the little Bean, Peanut she called him, with Sasha at her back and Fíli on the other side.

Thorin rested his head on his arms and let his eyes close, not expecting sleep, but wishing for it all the same.

*But what if he did?*

His eyes popped open and he looked at her sleeping there, at peace. *Nai'adal. Would he Dream? How could he stop it? She didn't know.*

It was not right she didn't know, but—

She *couldn't* know.

Somehow he needed to avoid those Dreams.

He shut his eyes again, and pushed himself deeper into the hay, not bothering to pull out his bedroll, not expecting sleep in any case.

Oh, but he must have.

Light came through the slats of the wall.
And she was there, right next to him, was he Dreaming? He could feel her breathing, and she had her bedroll, wrapping it around him and up beneath his chin. Not Nai’adal, he knew he roused from sleep and she was already woken, yet still with him. Better that it was no Dream, better so…

She stayed there with her hand, fingers over his beard, slight shifting the hair, waking his spirit.

*Why did she continuously want to touch his hair?*

He would remain forever lost if this kept on.

She tucked him closer into her bedroll, and he breathed deep, her lavender, like home—

Ē’ze—

*Biriz Akmâth'ule—*

*Nungu Azsâlul'abbad Zabal.*

Thorin kept his eyes shut, unwilling to break the moment or to startle her.

And he wasn’t sure if it were only wishful thinking, but it seemed she lingered with him. *Was she watching him now?*

*Was there something to Bofur's words?* He wondered if he frowned, and tried his best to clear his mind, taking another deep and even breath as her hand still touched his bearded cheek.

Maybe his hair fascinated her. But *why,* when— she couldn't be attracted, she wanted his friendship.

*She had no idea—*

Well, now she did. Now she thought he slept.

She took a deep breath, one he felt as well as heard, and he wondered.

And then she was gone. He relaxed all the more, dozing in the warmth she left with him, duly tucked in her bedroll as she’d seen fit, wrapped in the lavender smell of her, almost as though he were wrapped in her arms. Now he wanted to dream, to feel the comfort of her holding, to rest happy in the extra care she showed for him.

But the movement of his Company woke him fully, and his Sister's Son's, it seemed, had come to gather him. Thorin's eyes cracked to their chuckled greeting. A sly look passed from Kili to Fili; they had noted the bedroll draping over his body as if she owned him. Well.

Thorin blew out, shifting beneath the cloth, reluctant and yet eager to move all at once. But his Sister's Sons took pleasure, drawing time out of a moment he wasn't inclined to rush. They nudged each other, gawking at him, smiling brighter than their usual luminescence. Though awkward, Thorin didn't mind, rising with a curt smile.

Kili laughed then. "Tharkûn sent us to wake you, seems someone else beat us to it." His eyes remained fixed on the bedroll.

"She didn't wake me," Thorin began, feeling slightly peeved.

Both lad's faces gleamed loud with their doubts, smiling all the same, and Thorin shut his mouth. Any words would only make things worse.
His mind wandered to the Wizard in quiet deflection. "And Tharkûn?"

Fíli nodded, smiling deeper at the dodge. "There'll be introductions soon."

Thorin laid the Thief's bedroll out over the hay—*she had tucked him in to keep him warm*—*he still felt warm*. He did not let his mind wander where it wanted.


Still. That was what she is, and he as well for her, and that was *good*, no question.

He pushed his hair up and back, stretching his limbs, stopped up some by the remaining aches. Healing would take a while, he frowned, considering he didn't have *a while* to take *healing*. Settling his features, he followed his Sister's Son's out into the main hall, expecting to find the others of the Company.

He could smell breakfast cooking, porridge and cakes, Bombur was already at it, with Glóin and Óin's assistance. The others milled about.

*But they were not all there*—

Thorin's eyes searched the place twice, and Sona was not in it.

"She's at the hives," Tharkûn told him, as if Thorin had asked.

"Hives?" What did he mean? Thorin looked out through the open door and noticed Bees bustling and buzzing beyond the frame, Bees larger than he'd ever seen.

"Aye," Tharkûn took a breath and blinked once, as though he braced himself. "There to meet Beorn."

By now all the Dwarves were watching the two of them.

"You watched her go out there, without a mind to try and stop her, or at least tell us?"

"She was quite confident."

Thorin frowned all the harder. "She's a Pacifist, Tharkûn, and who knows what the Bear-man will do—*do you?*"

"No," the Wizard shoot his head, to Thorin's consternation. "but rest assured she's in no danger."

"I'm not resting," Thorin nearly growled. How can Tharkûn know? And why did he have that funny look on his face, again, as if he knew a secret, and there was something naughty about it, something about the Bear-man and the Thief, just the Thief.

Thorin focused on the door, determining to go and get her. "Where are the hives?"

"You'd best stay here," Tharkûn replied, in answer to Thorin's next move.

The Wizard's non-response was not a bother to Thorin. "I'll follow the Bees." He was outside now, with Tharkûn beside him. The others hovered on the inside of the doorway.

"They're on their way back," Tharkûn muttered and smiled at the same time in that infuriating way he mastered ages ago. "I suspect she's charmed him."
Thorin stared at the Wizard with his jaw dropped.

Tharkûn actually wagged his brows then. "You'll only ruin it."

Ruin what, and—what—? Thorin felt his skin flush as he glared the Wizard down. Did the blasted Wizard read his mind?

Fíli was suddenly at Thorin's side, a hand on his arm. "Sasha is with her, along with the golden Dog and the little Nut."

"Bean," Thorin muttered, relaxing slightly.

"Peanut," Balin corrected, staring out the door and into the meadow. "There they are." He pointed toward a grove of Sunflowers.

And there she was, walking out of the field of flowers—

—far more golden, Birîz Akmâth—

—smiling with the sunlight glancing off her hair, smiling up, to the one at her side—

A giant of a Man, all told, at least as tall as Azog—

And yet, no foe, as such.

And yet Thorin's heart raced for battle.

Not his. Not his.

And yet—

Thorin exhaled and concentrated on the weight in his boots, and washed his face clean of any scowl, donning his stone mask.

He had no call, and would bear no posture as if he had one.

Frozen, he wondered how he was to look at this: The Man's eyes combed over Sona's whole body, as if he touched her, staring down at her while he carried two large clay pots in his arms.

The Thief looked back up, carrying her own pot, and, Mahal help him, she blushed. The Man, the Bear-man—? He was telling her things.

And she smiled and looked upon him the whole way back.

What if she liked him? What if she more than liked him?

Why had I not considered this?

The fellow batted his brows the Thief, flirting with abandon over something, who knew what.

And she giggled — giggled—! In response to this brazen baiting.

Thorin stared at her mouth, her throat, absorbing the sound from afar, this laughter she had. Kethem 'udban'ul—

Mahal, why did you take my capacity to reason when I got lost in the fogs?
Meget'ul Amgât'ê—

Binumral'ame zê'biniski'ul'ê—

How should I handle life should she choose to bond with another?

Mahal.

His heart hammered to break through.

His feet held firm, and he waited at the door.

The Man bore a long thick mane of hair over broad shoulders strong from heavy working. He wore no cloth above his waist, all of it decked in scars. *His forearms wore shackles as bracers*—

He had been prisoner.

Thorin wondered who, and how he got away.

But this thought skipped away as he watched them approach.

Ē'ze.

She liked the Man. This he could see by the ease in her walk, and how she kept her eyes on him as they walked closer.

She was barefoot. So easy she felt.

A lump grew in his chest, he had no idea where from.

"Yes, I suppose we did already have a treat this morning," she said to the Bear-man.

What treat? Now he could hear them. He wished he could stop himself from gaping and scowling.

"The honey was delicious," she went on.

A sigh escaped him, relief. From what?

That it was honey, and not something else?

"I can't wait to have more," she finished.

There must be honey in the pots.

The Man grew serious at what she had said. "Neither can I." He did not mean the honey.

Thorin's heart rammed all the harder as he clawed his hands into fists to hold himself still. He had no place, to own such jealousy.

"Now," the Man rumbled, sparing the crowd within his door a glance, "will you please introduce me to your escort so I may properly welcome them to my home?"

Her escort—

"Yes," she said, at once staring straight at Thorin, clear through his heart.

Irritation flickered across her forehead, and she blinked, and swallowed, and looked a bit— confused
if he thought about it.

Bofur and Bifur stepped outside, at once forward and curious. *The Thief felt no threat, so neither did they.*

Thorin worked to keep his stone mask set, though he knew he failed miserably.

And now the Man glared steel, his lips curled in distaste. "Dwarves," he drawled, letting the word stand on its own.

Thorin could almost see the hair rise upon the Man, as he tensed, ready for fighting.

But the Thief was onto him, slightly frowning, her hand was on his arm in the breadth of a second. "Yes. Is that a problem?"

It was obvious it would bother her if it was, judging by the crease in her brow, and Thorin took comfort in this, however small.

When the Man looked back at her, she eased.

"Are they your escort?" the Man asked, still poised for battle.

"Yes." She'd slipped into a polite smile, one that did not reach her eyes, her hand pressing into his arm.

*What was she doing, there? Did she think she could stop him, with her hand?* Thorin was fleetingly reminded of the Trolls, and how they required a song—

"Then no, it is not a problem."

Thorin almost barked a laugh, but caught himself. *Her hand was enough.*

And now she patted the Man's arm where she'd held him, as if he were Sasha, her Dog, who bounded in the field near-by with the golden one. The Bean was at her feet. *Peanut.*

"Come," she said, looking over the Company. "Let me introduce you to my friends."

*My close Friend—the closeness is ours.*

The Company was all outside now, watching with interest, all calm by the fact that she was so at ease with this… very large Man who was a Bear. She proceeded to name each in the Company, stopping last at Thorin with a sparkle in her eye, and was that a warning? *For what?*

"This is the leader of our Company, Thorin Oakenshield."

And now the Man stared down at him as if he were some Worm. "Leader of your Company?" The Man did not like this news, it was clear as his muscles tensed all over his shoulders and his hand gripped the pots so hard Thorin thought they might implode at the pressure there. But *then, then—*  

*Thorin was not sure if he could take it—*  

—*Then* the Man put his hand on Sona's shoulder, as if she were *his.*  

No—
É'ze, she would make her own way.

Blood rushed through him, it was all he could do to stay still. And yet she had bargained for peace… their Pacifist. He could not ruin it.

Thorin held this peace, waiting.

"Do you mean he is your lead escort?"

Thorin exhaled, feeling the way open before him— he'd take it.

"Uhhh… well…" she stammered, not seeing the breach… "That is to say…"

"Aye," Thorin reached for her, like he had done before in the Elven City, hoping he would catch her eye. "I am."

She saw his hand, and her eyes jumped to his face as big relief blossomed there, spreading one of her most pleasant smiles. For him. And as quick as a blink her hand was in his, and he caressed the tops of her knuckles—

With that he led her inside.

Chapter End Notes

A/N #1: It has been a long time. I am slow. To those still remaining, a wave hello. I hope you enjoy the new chapter, and I hope to have more to share soon.

A/N #2: The Khuzdûl:

Dums'ul Binumrâl – Law of Widows

Mabakhnrukul – that which is discovered, new discovery

Baktith – new fact (truth)

Nungu Azsâlu'l'abbad Zabal – Flower of the Lonely Mountain Purple (lavender)

Imhêd'ul Mahal – blessings of Mahal

Kethem 'udban'ul – Bells of the valley, sublime.
Meget'ul Amgâtê – loadstone my desire

Binumral'ame zê'biniski'ulê. – Mine without love I'm of miscast Ones.
She wanted him to be there, her hand with his. *She called him lead escort. And he liked it.*

She shivered as she saw their hands—*she felt his caress.*

That was beyond the bounds of close friends.

She did not object, no. Instead she settled there.

And so did he.

What was the task of lead escort in the mind of Sona, É'ze? Thorin wondered briefly, a short smile playing on the edge of his lips, a smile he did not let show. *At the very least it meant he would find her a seat next to him at breakfast.*

And being as they were here for now, it would surely involve other tasks as well.

Now his hand held still as he led them to the massive wood-hewn table being set for breakfast by the Company. Still, not for shame. He felt none. He kept still so he could feel her and sense how much she liked it. In this moment he had no doubt she accepted him beyond the kindness of simple friendship—Dennar—

—*this was extra*—

Perhaps when he let go the sentiment would be lost to him. Perhaps he would think his way out, *a pity.* Now he did not care. Now he took the moment for his own, together, with her.

His close friend.

Thorin chose the far end and sat next to her so she should have no other to contend with.

She would make her own way, *and he would help see to it.*

Balin observed, brows pointed in thought.

*Was that rebuke? I dare you say it.* Thorin glared back with the faintest edge of smile on his lips. I am her *lead escort* — 'Dennar,' he signed the single word and Balin couldn't help but shrug and smile.

Good. What his Advisor thought now, or anyone else besides Sona, did not concern him, however bothered he felt about the whole matter at hand. And Sona herself had called him *Dennar.* The thought almost made him warm inside, except for the company of their Host, the Bear Man, Beorn. His presence only made Thorin hot, hot with annoyance that anyone would dare pursue Sona under his own watch, to see his One contended for, and in the contender's house.

"Can I help with anything?" Sona asked the Bear Man as the others took their seats along the table being set by Ori and Dori while Bombur carried over various platters of food balanced with delicate
ease.

"No, Honey,"

_Honey? Wh–? That— Did the cursed Bear Man just call Sona HONEY??_

The Bear Man nearly purred his satisfaction, as if he _tasted_ honey. Blast it.

"I have many helping paws."

_I bet you do._

Honey. Thorin loved honey. He swallowed his anger as best he could. That was not her name, and the endearment— _she allowed it? _Certainly she didn't introduce herself as Honey. He flatly just knew she would not. Sona would tell the Bear Man her name, so why wouldn't he use it? And how could the Bear Man _presume_?

How had it come to this? He looked away, around the room, at his Company, Bombur back at the heath, beyond, the goats and some chickens and farther back a few sheep, Sasha and the gold Dog circled in play… Bees everywhere. Bees. Did something happen at the hives?

None of it made sense. Thorin looked back at Sona, and waited, confused. It hurt, and he wasn't sure from what. He felt restless, wishing he could sleep: but sleep, it held its own dangers.

And it occurred to him, just as he felt the prick of _Honey_ dig ever deeper, _she ignored it_. It was almost as if she hadn't heard the Bear Man.

Thorin knew better. He frowned deeper, both bothered by the Bear Man's presumption, and the fact that Sona made no corrective response.

He knew the feeling being on the receiving end of Sona's ire, and the idea of seeing her aiming that ire at the Bear Man filled him with uncomfortable excitement.

Yet he had to admit, her lack of response was no sign of approval.

_In fact, one could think she was quite the Diplomat._

He swallowed again, anger curling, without a fix, fully aware he had no say in how she took the Bear Man's new … form of address for his Ė'ze.

Thorin let out a quiet exhale, wondering how the next hour would go, much less the remaining day.

"And you are my guest," the Bear man finished, still pouring milk in Sona's large tankard, a gift, he explained, from his small herd of Cows. He poured slowly, taking his time, hovering near her, his guest.

Sona. _Honey!?_

Ē'ze—

—_Biriz Akmâth._

The rest of them, to this Bear Man, existed to wait upon Sona. Not a bad thing, Thorin happily considered, but a thing these Dwarves did only with her allowance: _she did not like being served._

Thorin smiled to himself, the leader of her Escort, she called him. _Dennar._ Indeed.
"And you are the one they call 'Oakenshield'." The Bear Man, so it seems, had heard of him.

Thorin, jarred from his thought, nodded slightly, wondering how much the Bear Man knew about him, and from where, as the Bear Man moved off, filling other mugs with milk. He did not have time to think before the Bear Man asked his next question. "Why is Azog the Defiler hunting you?"

Thorin's heart took a jolt—

—The arm. Only that was gone. Thorin saw Azog in his memory of recently, recalling in the haze of anger and fire, the Pale Orc standing high on the White Warg: there'd been a trident embedded in his flesh where his arm had once been—

—Would have done more good to kill him when the chance had been his. Why had he not thrust again at Azanulbizar? Thorin stalled in the battle haze, so shocked that he'd managed to best his foe. His body failed to move before a horde of Orcs pulled Azog away and out of sight, back into the darkness of Moria where Thorin imagined he had died.

He had not died.

Lu lu lu—

—And he was near.

Sona kept her brows in a knot, and though she seemed fully concentrated on her breakfast with her eyes, she still did not touch it.

"You know of Azog. How?" Thorin asked his own question. His eyes gravitated to the manacle fixed to Beorn's arm. He surveyed the scars around it, spreading all over his body, some scars intentionally drawn for pain, others self inflicted, as though he fought so hard he nearly tore himself apart escaping. And yet the manacle remained.

"My People were the first to live in the Mountains, before the Orcs came down from the North." The Bear man glared, inwardly now, as if none of them were there. "The Defiler killed most of my family." He stared away, heaved the jug of milk, and gestured toward the manacle still fest on his wrist.

Thorin had the sudden urge to remove it.

Beorn continued, eyes on the metal, "But some he enslaved; not for work, you understand—"

Lu lu lu—

Hold—

—too soon,

wait, listen.

"—but for sport. Caging Skin Changers and torturing them seemed to amuse him."

Beorn put the jug on the table and began pacing slowly behind them.

Thorin's fists clenched as he glanced off, eyes combing over his Company, Fíli and Kíli stared back at him, both too pale with knowing.

Still none of them had any idea, not as much as this Bear Man who had lived confined by Azog, and
then lived to escape his fate.

Thorin briefly wondered if the Bear Man would allow them to remove the manacle when Sona abruptly pushed her plate forward. Talk of forced servitude and torture for sport dampened more than her appetite: she looked pale, slightly green with upset.

Thorin caught her with his eyes, where she hovered briefly, smiling that smile as if it were nothing, he wished they could stay in that space. And then she angled her face back to their host, as if concern for her was beside the point.

All things considered, Thorin understood, though he disagreed.

She was never beside the point.

He wished she would keep her appetite, build strength.

She needed it.

They were all going to need their strengths.

And with that, Thorin made a point of not answering the opening question, why Azog the Defiler hunted them. And thankfully the Bear Man did not ask him again.

Instead Beorn meandered on with his memories of times when there were more of his own kind. He was the last.

Sona took a second shove at her plate. Too much talk of violence.

Thorin caught her eye, but she only shook her head and continued listening, plate neglected.

"Honey—" The Bear Man went on—

—quit with the honey—

"—tells me you were escorting her home—"

—She should be home—

"—I assume you need to be there—wherever that may be—"

—Not your business, Bear Man.

"—before the last days of Autumn, and the weather turns too foul for travel."

"Before Durin's Day, yes," Tharkûn replied instantly, as if staving off Thorin's possible preferred choice of words.

"You are running out of time," only now did the Bear Man focus on the Thief's full plate of food.

Tharkûn nodded firmly, "which is why we must go through Mirkwood."

The Greenwood no more—

"A darkness lies upon that forest—fell things creep beneath those trees. There is an alliance between the Orcs of Moria and the Necromancer in Dol Guldur—"

Azog—
"I would not venture there, except in great need," the Bear Man finished.

Thorin's eyes rested on Sona, safe next to him. The fire blazed, yet a chill crept deep through his bones.

"We will take the Elven Road, that path is still safe." Tharkûn seemed sure.

Thorin frowned, uncertain.

"Safe?" the Bear Man asked back, sharing Thorin's doubt. "The Wood Elves of Mirkwood are not like their Kin. They are less wise and more dangerous."

_Aye, a fact they agreed upon_—Thorin could vouch personally after Imladris; Lord Elrond had been fully unlike the Greenwood Elf, who had never honored their alliance nor aided Thorin's people when they lost their home, both slights too sharp to ignore.

Thorin preferred traveling North of the Elven Path, but time required a certain risk, a confidence that the Elf kept that path safe for travelers.

And then the little Bean was under the table, just in front of Sona's feet, making himself known so she would lift him to her, and that she did quite happily, and there the Dog settled into her lap, her hands over his ears, a sweet furry distraction from the vile conversation at hand.

"But it matters not," The Bear Man wasn't finished.

"What do you mean," Thorin asked, jerked from softer thoughts.

"These lands are crawling with Orcs—"

---_Azog and his_---

"—their numbers are growing and you are on foot. You will never reach the forest alive."

---_Nothing like the bluntness of the Bear Man_---

Sona froze.

Thorin felt a shift in the seat beneath him, though nothing moved. He was left with only difficult choices. He looked into the eyes of the Bear Man, who returned his gaze with a face lacking all affection while full of disdain—a look Thorin was accustomed to from strangers.

Thorin looked back at him, fairly unaffected by it.

He was tired.

And yet he was irked by the Bear Man's demeanor hurled toward him.

For _what_? Beyond that Beorn had a craving for _honey_? And Sona traveled with _Thorin_?

Thorin glanced at Sona, who was not only still, but stiff now.

"I don't like Dwarves—"

---_Do tell._---
"They're greedy and blind." And with that he picked up a white Mouse that had been helping herself to Dwalin's plate. After a bit, the Warrior set her aside, and that is when the Bear Man noticed her—"Blind to the lives of those they deem lesser than their own."

Thorin kept his eyes open, as was his practiced response to remarks such as these.

Sona's hands froze once more, the stiffness channeling an anger Thorin found pleasant to observe, although he wasn't quite sure exactly why. Her fingers gentled over the Dog's ear, the soft fur, and he wondered what it felt like—

—her fingers—

—the fur.

He'd never seen a Dog like that. He blinked again—

—So tired.

"But Orcs I hate more." Beorn released the Mouse on the chess game.

And Thorin looked back at Sona: she was full of an angry posture now—though he was fairly certain the Bear Man wouldn't notice—Thorin rested looking there.

Suddenly her eyes widened, and he followed them briefly to the Bear Man's, to find him with a gaping smile—almost leering—

—so blatantly attempting to claim her.

Fool Bear Man.

She did not encourage him, and nor did she wish to be claimed.

"What do you need, Honey?"

Stop it with the honey.

Sona blinked and shot Thorin a look of utter panic.

Why? No, no, he nodded for her to go ahead and answer the Bear Man, certainly she knew their needs.

"Well, if it's not too much trouble—"

"It is not." Bear Man circled the long table, continuing to serve his milk to the hungry Company, all watching on.

"—then I think we should stay here for at least a week—"

Wait, what?

Here? No. Not here. With this Bear Man working on you—But where then? Where better? There was no better. This was it.

"—if not more, while injuries heal—"

—that wasn't quite what I'd been thinking—
"I'm still not a hundred percent—" Sona added.

_What??_ Thorin frowned, looking her over for anything they may have missed in addition to the too many injuries she'd already sustained—

"I could use the rest, even if you are all ready to move."

Thorin felt the soreness in his body raise objections, in spite of his concerns.

"Plus," she added, "by cutting through Mirkwood we'll save time, so long as we avoid any Dooshee Elves."

Thorin remembered, and suppressed his sudden mirth at her joke. *Sweet Thief cracking jabs again. She is feeling better.*

"And for that we'll need Ponies and fresh supplies."

The Bear Man had finished his circle of the table, and he starred down at Sona, just beside her, just in front of Thorin. Sona was again petting the ears of the little Bean.

She flashed one of her most charm-filled smiles up at Beorn—

—*Mahal*—

—*Breathe. Just breathe*—

Not like one of her smiles for him—

È'ze—

—*Biriz Akmâth*—

—Here she bore the mask of *Diplomat*, on behalf of Thorin and the Company.

"Besides, I can't leave Peanut yet. I'm only just getting to know him."

—*Aye, the Bean*.  

"It will be as you say," the Bear Man rumbled low, almost purring. 

*They would have aide.*

And yet with that the Bear Man's big hand came down across Sona's shoulder, to the head of the small Dog, where he encompassed her hand in a patting motion—

—*taking her hand? Taking*—

But she did not take hand in return, not like she willingly took Thorin's _so many times._

And still, Thorin shut his eyes, wishing there were boulders over his heart.

"I will never deny you anything that is in my power to give."

*Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you, Bear Man?*_

The Thief recoiled, toward Thorin, and the moment with their overbearing Host was thankfully broken.
Thorin wondered what it all meant, suddenly confused while at the same time a bit more assured.

He had no cause for assurance.

He wanted to hit something.

As the table dispersed, he motioned Dwalin to meet him outside.

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdûl:

Dennar – Supreme Guide

A/N: Hello dear readers. Please pardon my long absence. Life interrupted. I’m working to be here a while, with several chapters ready in the queue, grateful that for now the block has eased and I'm on a good roll.

Big big thanks Jenny-Wren28 for the recent forays back into story. With the Happy Holiday tale she recently posted in addendum to On The Road to Find Out, I got to warm up again as her Beta, and warm up writing Thorin as well. And with that lovely project, and following on here, she's helped me get this story rolling once more. Thank you, Buhel.
"Let's spar," Thorin motioned farther out the field, away from the hall, the barn, \textit{whatever it was the Bear Man lived in}—

\textit{a safe place}—

"Bollocks, Thorin, today we do forms, you—"

"Don't tell me what I need, Buhel." Thorin was at the bag, pulling out the woods for practice.

And then they were out in the field, Thorin doing his best to pummel Dwalin, failing miserably but moving nonetheless, however bad that movement felt.

It didn't take long. Thorin glanced toward the building to spot Sona with her pack, close to the Bear Man, discussing—

\textit{something}.

And Dwalin caught him, crushing wood to his jaw.

\textit{Blast} it. Thorin continued circling, looking for that opening Dwalin failed to give, muttering curses.

And then he saw her again, this time leaving, she headed toward the bathing creek with her wash kit, Sasha accompanying her as well as the golden Dog. And the Bean.

That was when Dwalin knocked him off his feet. "You're not \textit{sparring}, Thorin, when you're watchingWhatsafist."

Thorin got back up, glaring and unsatisfied.

That is when Nori appeared at the edge of their spar circle, near a tree, crossing his arms and waiting.

And Thorin kept on, to Dwalin's annoyance, he could tell. His Warrior was losing patience while Thorin was losing his breath—

\textit{and wondering where the Bear Man had gone}—

\textit{Whomp}.

Dwalin was in his face now, with a scowl that surely matched his own.

"Are you done yet?"

"Fine." Thorin threw down the wood and turned to Nori. "What brings you?"

Nori bowed his head slightly, looking above the spar field, in Thorin's eyes, one brow cocked, no smile showing, one could only imagine what the Spy thought—"You might like to know, Sona just now told our Host he can bugger off."
"Did she? Thorin let that sink in. "Those words? To him?—"

—*Where was the uproar? He was part Bear, after all—*

"I paraphrase, and well. Not directly. Even so, she denied him firmly for any care or company. He wanted to take her bathing, see, to help her find the water." Now Nori smiled. "She told him, quite specifically, she could find it on her own, pointing just across the glade," Nori pointed the way to the creek, across the field and partly among the trees, partly visible from where they stood, and partly not—the obscured area people used for bathing—

—the Thief was there now, *getting wet and naked*—

"Her face clearly showed how ridiculous she thought *that* was," Nori went on. "She told him she saw the water. And that Sasha would see to her safety. Only Sasha, 'thank you very much.'"

"So what, Nori?" Dwalin wiped a band of sweat off his brow. "*Whatsafist's always polite, that's telling off nothing.*"

Nori nodded, and without a blink, went on, "*No, the best part came when she stomped off, free of him, out of earshot, and she mutters, I'm a grown ass woman who doesn't need an Ihnêfabbing escort for a bath."

*Ihnêfab–bing?*

Dwalin's eyes shot to Nori, frowning the unspoken question.

And Nori shrugged as if this were normal, to teach the Thief Khuzdûl in *such a way.* "I taught her that one."

*Indeed.*

Thorin considered her word choice, escort, she used it once more—

This time with a *stabbing* rejection.

Thorin smirked.

That had not been the case the first time Sona used that word—*for me.*

—*Dennarê—*

—*I'm her lead escort.*

Thorin would have loved to escort Sona to the creek, *except—*

Now Nori stared Thorin straight in the eyes, not hiding the gleam in his own. "And then she called him a creep."

Dwalin scratched his beard, slightly frowning in thought.

"So," Nori went on, "*I say a creep is kinda like a snooper or something—*

"Then you must be a creep," Dwalin eyed him pointedly.

Nori gave only a silent stare as response.
A moment passed, wind cooling the sweat on Thorin's chest, his body aching from too much everything. "Good." That was all he would say.

And just then they all saw Sona returning from the water, surrounded by Sasha, the golden Dog, and the little Bean, all cleaned and fresh—Žabal nungu Aẓsâlul'abbad—

—Biriz Akmâth'ulê—

—her scent caught on the wind.

"Dwalin," Thorin motioned back toward the water. "Let's get the sweat off."

At the water, Dwalin has settled in, sitting at a shallow flow, leaning back against a large river stone. "You realize, Buhel, Nori's only told you what you already know."

Thorin was in the water, cold and fresh, up to the waist, and this was the perfect time to take a dunk. The sweet cold touched his aching body as nothing else could. He glanced to his Friend, who listened like no other, with an air of unconcern, but Thorin knew it was there, hinged on every motion—

—and he would shield his friend from every heartache, however, he knew this was impossible.

And what had Dwalin said? Ah yes, the Thief had flinched when the Bear Man attempted to take her hand. She clearly didn't want him that way—

—what way?

Thorin recalled it. She had shown them her mind and spirit, by her body revealed, like a swing reflex of heart, and her body would mind the command—

She never flinched at Thorin's hand—

Ē'ze—

—Imhed'ul Mahal—

Yet she did not know, she had no way of knowing, and she had not chosen.

Binumrâl. Widows make their own way.

"And our Host," Dwalin's face rested momentarily on a frown, before he wiped it with cool hands. "He's made his intentions noxiously clear. And so she has conveyed to him, Buhel, she does not require him, in aWhatsafist way that still provides security and aide to the Company. Don't forget that."

—Our Diplomat—

Thorin took another dunk, unsure what to think, not liking the path his mind chose. What if she loved someone else? Someone they should meet along the way? She had told him time and again, Men could love more than one, and yet, this pain he had not considered—

—nor anticipated.

Even at the thought she would reject him.
Imhed’ul Mahal.

Still, it could happen. Thorin was glad it hadn't happened here, with the Bear Man. Perhaps Beorn would have been better— He was big, strong, escaped Azog. Survived. People could find his strength and physical form attractive—

—Ē’ze—

—She could have found his strength and physical form attractive.

This was new, this feeling—

Beorn had a good place, Sona seemed to like it here, and it seemed Orcs couldn't get through the fencing, so, if she had wanted the Bear Man's affections—

—Mahal. This feeling, this jealousy, he didn't like it.

Maybe it would have been better. But he couldn't get himself to swallow this beyond the logic of it. And he was spared—

—she did not find Beorn so.

Dwalin said no, others saw, and her recoiling confirmed this fact.

And in spite of everything this made him happy—

—for now.

And yet, Thorin's gladness was fairly blunted by their dangerous reality: she could have been safer, staying here, safe from all that chased Thorin.

This tore inside, the thought that Thorin would prefer Sona living at risk, with him, as opposed to the goodbyes required for leaving her in a safer place—

And yet, would she be?

—could she be safer parted from him?

Not likely.

She had the artifact. She could never be safe, carrying that. He imagined it with the Bear Man—aside from the horror of this thought in itself—who knew how the artifact would reach for him? There was Man in the Bear.

He needed decision. And yet it seemed to him, their circumstances defined the actions they must take. Juzrazur'ul Sona Ė’ze Mabajbūna'ule. He thought he was beyond this, before the fogs. An impossible thing, one he hadn't missed. But now? Here they were. Now he wouldn't go back. The Thief stole past that point. And now it looked all the more impossible. He had a Quest. For his People. For all he lived for, and now he stood to lose his way by having found his One. He could not afford to lose his way.

Or his close friend.

He already knew he could never leave her. He tried it from Imladris, and that was before he chose. Mabujba.
Dwalin relaxed in the water, not a care in the world, though for all of them it was there. *Our whole fate rests with hers. I could not leave her even if I knew I should.*

"I need to keep going," Thorin carefully pulled himself out of the water, up the bank.

"Not today you don't," Dwalin muttered, following.

Thorin nodded. The next best thing was his harp, and a song. And to that he found a private space in the sun.

---

Warm glade, cool breeze in the early afternoon, Thorin began to play. He would seek the peace to say goodbye, though he already knew he could never follow through.

*Rubbish.*

His hands felt good on the strings, though he should not have stayed so long in the water: it left his flesh a bit tender, sticking the strings, as he began tooling on his song—

—A travel song he'd been working on as their journey began, to give the journey a place in musical records. His composition began a month before the fogs, give or take some days—

—*Akmâth'ul'ê Kadmith*—

It started with goodbyes—

"Farewell we call to hearth and hall—"

—*If only he were strong enough—or if ever she wanted goodbye*—

"Though wind may blow and rain may fall—"

—*wind blows, rain falls*—

The Thief would be safe, *home*. He wanted to imagine it.

Falling water sounded, *Arwen’s gift, those telling bangles!* Sona was here.

His eyes opened to see her through the leaves of the Aspens. All he could do was stare, yet he kept on, his hands over the strings, his voice sounding the words, his eyes holding her—

*Binibritami Asti*—

—*will you stay with me?*

He could not ask, and so, he waited, playing, singing.

And a quiet delight set in. She hovered there, appearing to wonder, and he wondered if she would stay, or leave, though honestly, she did not appear to have any desire to leave—*Imhed’ul Mahal*. His delight settled deeper.

"We must away ere break of day—"

*Could you be safer without me?* No.

He hung on the motion of his music.
"Far over the wood and mountain tall."

She stood there, her posture calm and pleased, as if she considered his unspoken question, and he could see her answer—

Her foot began it, one step forward.

Thorin's gaze followed up from her foot to her eyes, his body and soul both elated and relieved. And even so he feared.

*How can this be all at once?*

His voice stopped but his fingers kept moving. And then she came into the glade, sitting in the grass nearby, the little Bean at her feet—

Peanut, she called him. He was in her lap the minute she was kneeling, settling in just as she got down.

Thorin tried not to laugh, and thankfully just then she wasn't looking at him. His heart—*fool heart*—sped up as she arrived, so happy to be with her, it beat blissfully on, unaware of other necessities or requirements.

"That's my first happy memory of Middle-earth."

*What?* He stared at her there with her eyes closed petting the Peanut Dog, not wishing to disturb her, but this made no sense, blast the confusion. Surely her first happy memory was in Imladris; he saw it happen. And it had little to nothing to do with him. Yet here they sat, alone in the Bear Man's field of grass.

*How?*

"This moment?"

"No, back at the Shire, I fainted—"

Thorin's eyes widened as he looked her over, quickly again, for injury, before admonishing himself in his head—she's fine, she was fine. Nothing happened.

"—when I figured out where I was and who exactly was in the house before me."

Myself, my Company, Tharkûn, and the Grocer—*And now she pats the Bean's belly.* He smiled inwardly, hands continuing over the strings—*steady the stone mask*—he wasn't sure it worked, hiding his desire.

"I was pulled to wakefulness by this song—"

*I was pulled by you—Asti Ė'ze Juzrazurê—"

"—by you—"

*Could you read my mind?*

"—by all of you—"

—*Of course*—
―singing it."

Thorin remembered that moment. That strange pull outside the window as he sang this song, and how strange it was, that he’d found comfort in it. He remembered how alive he’d felt, how ready for this Quest, and called. He looked at her sidelong, knowing. It had been her. And she had been outside that window, and he had felt her looking, and felt safe. Of course he had felt safe. She was so gentle.

She had been there.

A jumble of confused feeling welled now—

Ē’ze—

—Lost and hungry—

—Why had she not knocked?

He knew very well why, or who, was to blame. The culprit with the crazy blade was in that house, singing songs with his Company, having days before threatened her life for stealing his food.

He sighed, fingers still moving over the harp. Things had improved since then—

—close friend—

—Dennar—

Now she would knock on his door. And he would see her safe.

His eyes went back to her hands on the Dog. His hands moved over the strings, weaving the harmonies of his Company singing with him.

But they were not safe.

It seemed as moments passed she grew uneasy, and he wondered how he had offended her, but then banished the thought: he had done nothing but play his harp.

Thorin kept playing, considering, as an expression of pain passed over her face, like the memory of a dead friend.

He looked away, keeping his fingers moving, offering space for whatever troubled her.

"Do you need to calm your mind?"

Ah Mahal, she's getting up!

—Binibritami Asti—

What had she asked, rising with the Bean in her arms?

What do you need to hear? Could he say nothing to make her want to stay? Friends. Close friends. She had been more than pleased. There was hope he could say something—

"Hmmm."
"Sometimes I play for the simple pleasure of it." He tried smiling at her, but felt muddled just the same.

"You didn't answer my question."

"No, I did not." Thorin returned his gaze to his harp, knowing he needed to say something, anything, so she would stay. But what words? He felt so much, no word seemed even remotely appropriate—

Asti—

—You pierce my soul—

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No." This he said with no hesitation.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

What?

"You know, whatever it is that's bothering you."

You, Asti—

—You don't bother me—My reactions, well. Those are right-altogether-bothersome. And no, I can't talk about this with you, but it's not a bad idea to watch your fingers ruffling over the sleeping Dog—

"I can see it in your face." And now she avoided his eyes, looking past the Aspens toward the water. "You're worried about...something."

You notice much, Thief.

Azog—

—He is not finished—

—I must stop him or everyone I love will die.

Oh, and you are my One, Ŗ'ze. And it grieves me you do not share it, or even know I have chosen—

—But this matters little, while I have no Home to share with you—

—I've nothing but a Quest and a Dragon before me, with Azog ever after.

—And you bear a great burden—

I will be your friend—

—the best you could ask for—

—but I cannot tell you why I worry.

Binumrâl—It is not for me to say.

"The Quest weighs heavily on me."
"Oh, don't give me that." She waved her hand at him.

He nearly laughed, smiling behind the harp, keeping his hands moving over the strings, enjoying the tone in her voice, the spark in it, the way her hand swatted up, that commanding move, like a natural—

"The Quest always weighs heavily on you. You worry about a lot of things."

How she was lovely, here, with him. She tapped her lips, and then pointed at him.

—Asti.

"This is something new."

—I would grab your finger, pull you close—

"You're a bigger grump-muffin than usual."

I almost got you killed. Some foul mood should be allowed. Dwalin says I've been almost too calm. He felt the bruise rising on his jawline—well, maybe not so calm.

And grump-muffin—You keep repeating—How am I a muffin?

"Have you been sleeping?"

—Have you been watching, to see?

And besides—

"Maybe I should see if I can find you more lavender—"

—Aye. NO!

Flower of home—

—Zabal nungu Azsâlul'abbad—

"I sleep." I kept the lavender you gave me—It does not work like you wish it would.

"I'm sorry I pushed." The little Bean shifted in her lap. "I just want to help." And then she pertly changed the subject, smiling directly at him. "How did sparring with Dwalin go?"

Mahal. Dwalin caught him off guard. He felt the burn on his cheek now that she mentioned it.

She pointed her brow at him, prodding comfortably, "Were you distracted? He usually can't land a hit like that."

"Dwalin had the advantage," Thorin muttered low.

"Which reminds me," she turned her head, "why did you and Dwalin both have black eyes wile everyone was fine when I rejoined the Company after I fell?"

Thorin's hands stilled.

"Did you guys run into some trouble?"

—You fell.
"No. No trouble." *Mabujba Ė'ze. I was going after you the most direct route, when Dwalin used his fist for thinking.*

She did not probe—*Imhed'ul Mahal*—and soon enough his hands began moving once again, fingers over the strings, like grounding.

Quieting, she stretched out in the grass, her arm cupped her head, her hair splayed out behind her, dark and golden strands drying in the sun—*her hair still wet from the washing a while ago*—

—a hint of lavender on the breeze—*Zabal nungu Azsâlul'abbad.*

And he imagined her, stretched out like this, just like this, but on the Mountain, in a field of lavender, *home.* And he would stop playing his harp as the light waned golden red and blue in the sky, and he would curl in behind her, holding her close, to watch the sun together, like in *Nai'adal,* as they were carried by Eagles. And when the sky waned lavender, he would carry her in, to the chambers they shared there, as she would have forgotten her slippers in favor of feeling the earth—

But here they were, on the lands of the Bear Man, and he looked at her as he played, so happy in this moment, just to see her.

And then she began to hum the melody of the music he played—

*Sona*—

—*Birîz Akmâth'ulê*—

—my Gold Song.

—weaving her voice in and out with the harmonies, filling him with momentary happiness, that, amidst all this confusion and danger, he found to be a most unusual and welcome feeling.

Her presence was his only rest, the best medicine, he smiled inwardly. So he lingered without thinking, playing on the harp.

Because if he thought, he knew this could not last.

He would keep her safe.

*Here she is safe. Here he can play them music.*

The little Bean settled snuggled next to her and she sighed.

Thorin took a deep breath, wishing he could hold her while she sighed, sinking into the silken sands of her voice humming his tune.

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Chapter End Notes
Khuzdûl:

Ihnêfab – the act of stabbing.

Binibritami – stay with me

Thank you Jenny-Wren28! Hugs to you, Buhel; it's good to be back. :)
Thorin took to the air just as the sun went down, finding a spot along by the wash creek, below, out of sight from the Bear Man's lodgings. He began loading his pipe, amazed he somehow managed to get out without even Dwalin following.

A Wolf cry pierced the growing dark, followed by others nearby. No Wargs, these. The sounds were a comfort, as it portended a certain safety—the two kind did not roam together, natural born foes.

It seemed indeed the Bear Man kept his borders well protected.

Somewhere between observing the far side of the water, and listening to the Wolves, Thorin realized he was no longer alone.

Nori had found him, but he said nothing, waiting at the edge of the path as if he would be invisible.

And he would be, to many.

How long had he been there?

Only Nori knew.

"I overheard something."

Thorin nodded toward a sitting rock across from the one he had found, motioned Nori to sit.

"There you are—" and that was Dwalin, right behind him. So much for a moment alone. He took the spot opposite Nori, so he could glare between the two of them, if need be.

After they each took their time loading their pipes, Nori stared at Thorin with his unreadable expression.

"What then? Go on." Thorin somehow both enjoyed the company and felt impatient at the same time.

Nori took a glance at Dwalin, and both seemed to communicate something silent between them. Blast secrets.

Then Nori looked him directly in the eye. "Just now Sona told our Host she has no interest in his romantic intentions."

"Romantic," Dwalin snorted. "He's a Bear, and more clumsy—"

Nori stared at him until he quit snorting.

Thorin gaped, pipe loose in his hand, smoke neglected, contemplating the Thief saying such a thing. That she would be so blunt? Thorin smiled, feeling irked all the same. She'd never said anything so blunt to him, regarding romance. Then again, he'd never given her cause, none like the Bear Man's
blundering advances, even with Balin calling question to Thorin's forward behaviors, holding Sona's hand when she wished it, taking her side as her lead escort——

—Dennar'ê—

So Sona silenced the all-too-eager Beorn.

And with Thorin, the subject never came up. Why would it?

That made Thorin wonder what she thought of romantic intentions in general, but he kept his wondering to himself.

Both Dwalin and Nori stared at him, as if he were some book they could read.

So he nodded—stone mask set—not bad Spy work for Nori, in spite of providing nothing Thorin didn't already know.

Nori returned to his telling. "Our Host already knew this——"

What? Beorn could not have noticed—he did not know her that well.

"—and well, you may be surprised at this bit: He told her, Sasha—Well. Sasha introduced herself as Chases Butterflies—"

"The Dog," Dwalin leaned in, "named herself?"

Nori nodded.

Thorin glanced at Dwalin and shrugged. Made sense. The Ravens had names as well.

And Thorin thought: Chases Butterflies—Fierce, loyal and brave Sasha's name for herself. Thorin recalled her, earlier in the day, playing in the fields, a game of fetch the staff with Fíli ad Kíli and the golden Dog—Chases Butterflies—This chosen name fit her, and how she clearly loved life, and indeed chasing Butterflies—there were many Butterflies in the field, and she was after them, leaping and barking at play.

"I wasn't finished," Nori went on. "Chases Butterflies said Honey has a Mate."

After saying that Nori glanced briefly to the ground, watching the passing water, and then back to Dwalin, and then firmly back to Thorin, where he waited for any questions.

"Chases Butterflies—" all Thorin could do was repeat.

Nori nodded. "She talks, aye, and our Host can understand her. Sona can't anymore than we do, and she appeared just as surprised. But that's not the detail you should notice. Chases Butterflies said Sona has a Mate—"

"You said Honey before," Thorin interrupted.

Nori glared, waiting before he spoke. "Aye, I did, that's how she said it."

"So Chases Butterflies calls Sona Honey." Thorin finished without saying the rest, pleased to have discovered the source of his earlier irritation—that's what with the Bear Man calling her Honey.

"Aye." Nori stood there, like a spring ready to fly, but not for long. "I'm trying to explain. The Dog said has. Has. And our Host repeated this after Sona corrected him: he said it was curious, Chases
Butterflies said she does. Our Host said nothing more to this, listen. Chases Butterflies knows their deceased has passed on. Dogs remember then as well as now." Here Nori slowed for a moment, watching Thorin carefully.

Who then?

Thorin had no answer for it, but somehow his heart seemed to open with hope—could Sasha—Chases Butterflies—mean me? And immediately Thorin quashed that hope, as well as the irritation that accompanied his need to quash it—Even if she did, this does not mean Sona thinks likewise. Sona was as confused about all this—by Nori's telling—as I am.

They all smoked a while in silence.

Then Dwalin nudged the Spy. "Did you learn anything else about our Host, creeping?"

Nodding, ignoring the jab, Nori knocked his pipe against the rock beneath him, and began refilling it, taking his time. And then, in the quiet, he finished. "Our Host doesn't hold a grudge, unless it's Orcs."

That was something they held in common.

Azog—
—bluewhite eyes glowing, prodding—

Anger gone, spirit dying, Thorin failed.

No, he dreamed, the edges all unrefined.

He tried to wake, and failed.

—Azog mouthed a name beneath the bluewhite eyes glowing, but no sound came—

'Thráin.'

—Thráin Adad'ë Kaylith'ul Anran'ulê—

Azog knew, he nodded. Shook his head with his mouth now closed. He would never tell. Instead he cut himself, smiling straight into Thorin's eyes as if he were there—

—really there—

Thorin was still in the lodgings of the Bear Man, Sona slept soundly, as did all the Company around him, undisturbed by this—sorcerer's attack.

That was no normal nightmare, no—

He was glad he had removed his outer kit before sleep, as the rest of his clothes stuck, and there was ice, like the ice he dreamed of, and it hurt to swallow.

What was that sorcery?

He quickly slipped out of the frozen clothes and into his fur cloak, binding it shut, then he snatched his smoke satchel and headed for the door, almost running with his need to get out.
He remembered what he saw when he held the artifact—

—*These two were getting stronger.*

Had Thorin seen the future?

*Luu luu—*

—*that was a sorcerer's trick.*

He nearly ran into Tharkûn on his way out the door.

"Where are you off to?"

Thorin pushed past his scrutinizing eyes. But Tharkûn kept pace beside him, blast his prying gaze.

Thorin stopped at a rock on the far side of the glade, moon in full view.

And the Wolves again, one after another, calling through the night.

Thorin took a deep breath, happy for the warmth in the air—

—*happy for the cry of Wolves.*

"Did something wake you, Thorin?"

Thorin returned his gaze, attempting to see nothing but the Wizard's face, setting his stone mask, pulling out his pipe and pouch of tobacco. He began to load it, calculating some reply. He wished he could ask him a question about the ability of Wizard's to enter other people's minds—but that would bring him too close to the topic of the artifact. He would not betray Sona's trust. He could ask nothing.

"A bad dream, and I woke."

No, it was *no dream.*

Tharkûn's eyes expanded in doubt. "I could help, you know."

Thorin frowned, unsure he wanted what was offered. "You bring trouble, Tharkûn."

The Wizard laughed, filling his own pipe, and thankfully asking no further questions.

A while later they saw the Bear Man return through the large gate, pulling a sleeveless vest over his shoulders as he entered, the manacle glinting off the light of the moon.

---

Thorin was up early the next day, with little sleep after the nightmare—

—*if that's what that was.*

Thorin doubted, but now he no longer had ice in his bedclothes to prove otherwise.

After watching Bifur braid the Thief's hair, with speed—*Imhed'ul Mahal.*

It ached every time—this longing to touch her hair, *to be the one braiding.* Blast these feelings. He remembered the time he held her, after the Wargs attacked, the scent of lavender in her hair, and sage, the brush of her braid against his hand, holding her close. Or the time after that, when she
spoke of her Mother and her Sister, and asked Thorin if he were King, how she gathered lavender
while she asked him things, weaving strands into shape—a crown I would discover—the tail of your
braid brushing my fingers when you turned away after crowning—

—stunning me.

—Only later did I recall the feel of your hair—

—Asti.

Thorin was again outside, aching, body and soul, and unsure of just about everything.

He wanted to leave the fenced gates, join the Bear Man on his midnight hunts, however, he was as
yet in no condition for combat—so distracted—his lack never failed to show in the sparring sessions
with Dwalin—

The creek provided cooling consolation after their sessions.

That morning, coming back from the water, Thorin caught sight of Sona, decked in the colors of a
lapiz stone—in her blue kurta, golden tan leggings, and her golden embroidered shawl gracing her
shoulder and whipping in the wind, tiny crystal beads sparkling under the sun. She was through the
Aspens in another separate glade, adjacent to the one where he'd settled with his harp—

She danced—!

—his Gold Song—

Moving like fire and water in the breeze over the meadow—

Her flowing scarf flickering around her, hugging her blue form flashing, keeping with her
movements, strong movements full of grace—moving to some music she hummed. Thorin strained to
hear words, but she did not sing them.

Asti—

—you dance to music in your mind, humming song—what story are you singing—?

—I would join you, if I could—yet I see you move—and how you move—I wonder at the meaning
in the motion of your hands, your feet, arms, legs—all of you. There are symbols in the moves of
your dance, full of life—Is this dance a custom of your people? I would know them, Asti, if I could.

Then he shook himself, to break free from her beautiful spell—

Your dance—

It was no good watching her, when she did not know he was watching, staring—

Creeping—

Oh, no. No. Yet, even as he forced himself to to leave, he could not help glancing back one last time
as he turned away—

—and then he heard the footsteps of others approaching.

He headed toward whoever it was, to find Fíli and Kíli on their way to the wash creek, Thorin lead
them off a little farther down, out of sight of the dancing Thief—
This, of course, did not deter the Thief from watching him while he sparred with Dwalin each morning after breakfast. It baffled Thorin, as he knew she did not like the fighting, still he saw her, day after day, tracking his moves. Sometimes Dwalin would catch him off his guard, mostly when Thorin would look for her next to his Sister's Son's, or anyone else who came to watch, Bofur and Nori, among others, all who watched either to learn, or to alleviate boredom.

"She's watching your ass, Buhel," Dwalin said in the first session, loud enough for all to hear. Thorin's jaw dropped, blood rushed to his face—more than the usual sparring flush, surely—full of embarrassment that his Friend would speak so loudly where Sona could hear!

It wasn't until Thorin turned toward the onlookers—to get hit yet again by Dwalin's wood—when he realized Dwalin spoke in Khuzdûl, and Sona could not possibly understand.

And sure enough, she was watching his ass. And it was his ass, not Dwalin's, because whenever Thorin looked, her eyes found his, and Dwalin's wood found a hit upon him.

Blast it.

"You take unfair advantage, Dwalin."

That moment Bofur saw and heard, and his banter rang back to them in Khuzdûl, "Watch Honey, get a whompin'."

And he did.

Sona didn't pay a mind to Bofur, not while her eyes were on Thorin, not while the taunts were in Khuzdûl. Thorin tried not to think about it. He tried to get the sessions finished with as few hits to himself as he could manage.

Each day, even as his body healed, he felt tired, stretched from restless sleep, and after sparring he went for the water.

After the water he would head for his harp, in the glade he found before, and day after day the Thief found him there, and they spent the time together in the music, a blissful reprieve. He wished he could live in those peaceful moments of simple company forever.

Night after night he tried to rest and sleep. And not to Dream.

—at least he faced no further Sorcerer's attack.

His temper stretched, with a lack of finding rest, aside from those quiet times with Sona and his Harp.

He did his best to manage this by saying as little as possible most of the time.

Still, they all took note.

Breakfast after restless nights was a pleasing distraction of Bombur's pastries and sweet pies, clattering plates and chatter.
That is when they spent most time with the Bear Man.

He had stopped making flirtatious advances toward the Thief, just after Nori had told him about what Sasha—*Chases Butterflies*—had said—*Of course she talks*—Her word had been enough for the Bear Man.

Dís always said her Cats knew a thing or two, and shared their mind with her in their own way.

And the Ravens. Thorin could speak with those.

He watched *Chases Butterflies* play with the golden one, always together in the fields, in the lodging, twisted among Fíli and Kíli while sleeping at night—Thorin wondered for a moment what the golden Dog called herself, and made a point of asking the Bear Man after breakfast, as both found themselves at the edge of the glade watching Fíli and Kíli and the Dogs happily at *practice*.

"They have bonded," the Bear Man observed, nodding his chin toward the playing Dogs.

"The gold one, how is he called?" Thorin asked, observing how the Bear Man took his question.

"Ah," then the Bear Man turned to look at him as if there were something new to study in his face. "She calls herself Smells the Flowers." And then Beorn waited.

Thorin smiled, "she's a she," he said low, remembering how he'd made the same mistake with *Chases Butterflies*, back before they had been—*more politely introduced*. A hand to his wrist, Thorin looked back at the Dogs and his Sister's Sons at *practice*.

"You like Dogs?" The Bear Man asked, as if he'd been goaded, and had to ask *something*.

Thorin smiled more, and nodded. "*Chases Butterflies* has fighting heart."

Beorn's jaw dropped in surprise, then a smile opened on his face that could have swallowed his lodgings whole, so big it was.

As for the other Dog—Peanut, the little Bean kept close watch over the Thief through the days, and slept curled against her at night—

After breakfast, the Bear Man went off to sleep during the heat of the days, while the Dwarves took to tasks of mending kits, sharpening blades.

Bifur began carving a new comb. Thorin had a pretty good idea who it was meant for: every time he did the Thief's hair, with *speed*—*Imhed'ul Mahal*—the Woodmaster's brows twisted in distaste for her brush.

Tharkûn was seldom to be seen. In fact, Thorin suspected he was on some unspecified mission, so obvious was his absence during their stay here.

Wizards.

In the midnight hours, the Bear Man would leave, to hunt Orcs. Thorin envied him every time, as he sought rest in an uneasy sleep.

The manacle glinted off the fire light, every time the Bear Man moved through the lodgings before he would hunt.

The urge to remove it grew as the days passed, and yet he knew somehow the Bear Man would not sit still for it.
Perhaps Balin could help him find a way. Somehow they must win the chance.

And, seeing the board day after day, Thorin wished to know how the Bear Man played chess.

And so, on this late afternoon the game was set.

The little white Mouse had found Dwalin's plate again at the midday meal, and after letting her have her tiny fill, Dwalin picked her up gently, glaring at the Bear Man all the while, who was listening to Balin's suggestions on who would win what, depending.

Sona whispered something to Bifur, glanced at Thorin, and quietly exited the room, Chases Butterflies and the Bean following her, heading to the back rooms, or the exit, most likely seeking some necessary solitude—*however I miss you when you leave*.

Every evening Sona would some time to stray off and be alone, and Thorin knew it was nothing against their Company, no—*you crave your private time, for grounding, Ė'ze*.

Sometimes that was when she went *dancing*.

And then he remembered how she looked, *dancing*—

He wanted dwell on this memory, *her dancing*—but now—*now I need focus*.

"Now if you should win, Master Beorn, you can ask us a favor. And the same goes for us, if I win, I can ask you a favor. That will be the prize."

"You already have my aide, at Honey's request. What more favor could you ask?"

"Well," Balin glanced at Thorin, who shook his head. "Let's just see when we get there, eh?"

"You assume you will win, Old One?"

Balin laughed, studying the board. All the pieces were fashioned in the likeness of various Bears—*even the Horses*. "No, certainly not. This is a fine set you have here."

And indeed, Balin had to fight to win, and both the Bear Man and Balin had few pieces left by the time it was finished. Beorn kept his Horses to the end, but Balin won check mate with the Queen.

"Your Honey speaks like a Queen," Beorn rumbled low.

*My Honey?*

Thorin glanced over the room, noticing she had not come back from before, wondering and worrying slightly, even though there was no cause—even though it was perfectly safe here for her to seek private time. It was light outside still, and Chases Butterflies and the Bean were with her, she was safe for *dancing*—

Again he saw her his his mind, *dancing*, his Thief in the glade. Blast these recurring imaginings—*Friends do not creep on Friends—nor do they creep on Mates*—

—Ē'ze.

"Guard her like one." And now Beorn's eyes were fixed on Thorin.

—*Dennar'ê Uzbada'amê*—
—my One—she is regal—
—Of course I would guard her—
—And she is more.

The Bear Man must know by now—he was no fool.

*She is my close Friend.*

Thorin glanced at Dwalin, next to him. He still had the Mouse on his shoulder, who appeared to appreciate the view. Thorin knew there was nothing greater than the greatest of Friends.

He needed to keep them alive. *All of them.*

And they all stood endangered between himself and his adversary.

Or did they?

Sona had the artifact—

—the Necromancer sought more than revenge.

They were all ensnared to win or die.

"Well?" Beorn asked, annoyed to be owing Dwarves yet again, in spite of Honey.

Balin glanced at Thorin, smiling, and Thorin gestured for him to speak the request. "I should like permission to have my colleagues here," he gestured at Dori, Bofur, Thorin and Oín, the four most capable for the task at hand, "remove that manacle from your wrist."

Beorn's face lost expression as his eyes dropped to the device, and then to Thorin. "That's not—"

Thorin raised his brows, not taking his eyes of the Bear Man.

"It is in fact the agreement we made before we played, Master Beorn." Balin held his voice sure sitting across the table from their Host.

"You set this up." His eyes were on Thorin.

"And if I did?" Thorin would not be dissuaded without argument.

"I want to keep it. I have reasons."

"Fuel for revenge?" Thorin recalled his own mad dash at Azog, a dash for vengeance that nearly killed himself, nearly killed his Thief. Thorin imagined her once more, *at dance in the glade—*There would be no dancing, but for the loss of her guitar, but for the bravery of Chases Butterflies—"You don't need that." Thorin's eyes went to the manacle, the sores beneath, and frowned back at Beorn.

Suddenly Tharkûn was in the room, showing up as if from nowhere, smiling his satisfaction. "You may as well let them at it, Master Beorn, surely by now you've learned first hand the stubbornness of Dwarves. And besides, now is the time to look to the future, not to dwell in the past."

"Tharkûn," Thorin glared at his sudden presence. "You're back."

The Wizard nodded and smiled, swaying that way he did, pulling his staff across his line of sight,
surveying the hall, keeping his secrets to himself.

With that, amid mutters and grumbles, it was settled, tools were procured, Dori braced the Bear Man's arms to hold him steady, Thorin began a careful separation opposite the seam, with Bofur bracing the metal steady while Thorin cut through it, all while the Bear Man glared in Thorin's face, subduing growls—

—Thorin kept his eye on his work—

—and soon the the manacle took an honored place on the mantle and the Bear Man's arm was finally free. Oín kept Beorn still long enough to apply a healing salve and bandage to the chaffed skin, and orders for him to wash it daily until the lesions healed.

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdûl:

Uzbada'amê – Queen Mine

Thank you readers, special thanks for your reviews, and special special thanks to JennyWren28!

Thorin would catch himself searching for Sona—*in Nai’adâl*—and wake, jarred, unrested, to turn away from looking at her, curled close to the little Bean.

—*At least no further sorcerous attacks came from the vile ones, pairing their evil talents.*

The day neared when they must leave the Bear Man's lodgings, *and yet*—

Readiness eluded him, as though fatigue were mud to slow his steps.

Today—*while she watched*—Dwalin managed to knock him off his feet. Three times.

He knew better.

And Thorin couldn't get his body to work like it should. Back on his feet, facing Dwalin laughing, Thorin readied to continue, in spite of the pull in his muscles.

Dwalin shook his head, smile fading. "We're done here."

"I'm not done."

"Today, aye, you are."

And today the Company had all assembled, with Sona among them, having seen all that.

Thorin couldn't argue. It was too much and no use at the same time. He shoved Dwalin in passing, dumped his wood in the pile and went to the water without further word.

It was no wonder Dwalin did not follow.

He was not good company, and he knew it—

*I know it, because I can't stop thinking about this—this untenable situation with Sona. What am I to do? To think? Given what Chases Butterflies had said—mate—given what the Bear Man had said—my Honey—given how the Thief spent every day with me at my harp, after watching my ass every day sparring with Dwalin—and she doesn't like violence. Why would she watch, then? If not to see my ass?*

*Can it be, she sees me—romantically?*

—*my ass.*

More likely Thorin just saw what he wanted to see because, fact was, Thorin was exhausted. *Why do I fight Nai’adâl when they are so pleasant, and she seems to like them, too?*

*Why think this way? It does no good, these circles.*
The creek, burbling calmly, waited. Thorin should have been here an hour ago, yet he still wanted to hit something. It was no good. The cool water reflected the morning light as he tore out of his boots, his bracers, his armor, whipping off the laces on one side of his plated brigandine, throwing down the armor over his shoulder as he slid it off and himself out of it—Off—Useless metal, and every strip of clothes beneath, removed in short order, all piled in a heap at the creek's edge.

Free of it, he knelt by his bag, digging out his oils, kept in a little wash satchel.

And then he was in the water, ohh.

Aye, the cooling quickly settled his mood, from anger to—

—Just wash—

He sponged the water over his torso, ready to dunk.

—think of nothing but the water flowing,

An empty mind was better than one full of doubts.

And he sunk in, floating below the surface till his air was spent, rising, his hair weighted by the water, pleasing streams. He got his oils out and began to wash, eyes facing the sun, away from the Bear Man's lodgings, away from thought—

He worked his fingers into his scalp, over his chest, dunking as the scent of pine and cardamom rose all about him, the washing oils another gift from Dís, soothing his aching muscles. He dunked again, staying under again until his air was gone, to rise and rinse out the excess—His mind wandered to thought—blast circumstance—as he wondered what N'amadê would think of the Thief.

No.

It was far too soon for any reason to wonder such things, and surely Dís would tell him exactly that.

Or maybe not. He frowned, but it wasn't unpleasant, not here, realizing he really didn't know.

He dunked one last time, lingering, enjoying that feeling of being enveloped by the water, wishing he could keep the calm his spirit seemed to find in the water.

And so he stayed in the river, in the sun, rinsing even once the need was gone.

A Bird flew out of the brush across the creek, followed by a garbled barking—the Bean woofed! the little Dog, Peanut—!

Then he heard different water falling—on the bank behind him, Arwen's bangles—

—Asti!

He straightened, turned his head to see her—to confirm—Aye! Right there on the bank! How have you startled me so?

His heart soared as it always did when she was near, and he whirled, turning so quickly he nearly lost his footing on a loose river stone, stepping back slightly to regain his balance. But how lovely she looked, poised on the bank, her wide eyes focused on his. Thorin's heart swelled, just as his surprise increased.

She stood before him, mouth open—in shock that she found him—still bathing? At seeing him so?
At—

What are you doing there?

Watching me? How had he not noticed her there? How long?

He berated himself for letting his guard down, not hearing the Bean sneak upon him—Too preoccupied—too lax in tracking my surroundings—
—with you, Asti!

This was unexpected.

He hadn't been prepared—to expect this—

And yet, there she was.

Thorin found himself entirely exposed, and it wasn't for the lack of clothes he left on the bank. No, but his face, would she see his feeling there? Thorin sought cover under a careless mask, or was it carefree?

Part of him desperately wanted to smile. Another part feared.

Could he remember the water, and stay calm?

He waited, watching her watch him—

—soon he would know.

Already she exuded awkwardness, like when he spoke to her of colors among the Dwarrow—and yet now—her feet were planted.

How things had changed between us since the Elven City—

Here was something new—As if you were hungry, and I—

No.

She swallowed, she struggled. Then her eyes dropped, to his neck, his chest, where she lingered, a slight lingering, as her eyes darted first to one side of his chest and then to the other, over his inkings—Fallatazâr'ê—following the patterns—

—I would tell you their stories, Ė'ze, one by one.

Then she tracked his body lower—over me—

You look for more of me—

Thorin's eyes followed hers as his heart rushed, and then he quickly refocused on her face, to see this—to catch her bite her lip, staring where his body submerged, at the line of the water undulating around him at his hips.

His face tugged toward smiling, such a situation for jokes, yet he attempted to keep his face still, in stone mask, while his heart kept speed, knowing this—

—You like how I look!
Restraint was called for: there he stood entirely unclothed.

—could it mean?

But no. Liking did not mean she thought beyond looking—And if she did, wouldn't she do something? She had said she'd wanted nothing beyond close friendship.

Chases Butterflies said Sona has a Mate.

Binumral—

—Mahal.

What did it all mean?

Now she saw she couldn't see beyond the depth of water, and her brows slightly curved in ire—

You would scold the water, Asti, for hiding me.

It was all he could do to stop the laughter he felt growing, all jumbled and nerves like a small Dwarfling on Durin's Day. Only better.

Her hands fisted and her bangles sounded, adding to the river's burble, startling his Thief. And then the words flowed from her, bursting for release. "Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry!"

He knew his smile wasn't hidden now, but he was powerless to prevent it.

"I didn't mean to!" Her skin flushed darker, for panic, or for want—

How long were you there, Thief?

"I didn't know!"

You saw me sparring, surely you saw where I headed after—

"I didn't see anything I swear!"

Now, there, my spying Thief—And I know you wanted more to see.

Her brows drew in, for worry—

—You worry for me!? No.

He lifted his arm, raising his hand for calm, and, to his additional surprise, she stilled and her words stalled. And now, even so, she looked in his eyes, with glances over him here and there while she waited. Thorin focused on the sound of the water traveling over the rocks, as grounding, and he held tight to the river stones beneath his feet, like an embrace.

She didn't say anything. Instead she listened for him, and the water passing.

How had he managed to silence her, with just a motion of his arm?

Part of him wondered why she would not turn and go, if she would not speak.

And yet he knew better, with how she looked at him.

The Thief wanted more. And she was quiet! Those two things together amazed him. And he
remembered, she waited for him.

*For what?* "I am finishing. If you would give me a moment, we can carry on our conversation—"

_Conversation? Well. What else was this—?_

She stared back at him, as if his words caught up with her mind later than she heard them, while her eyes continued to clearly enjoy the view.

So sweetly ridiculous, Thorin was close to bursting with laughter.

Then her eyes widened suddenly as things caught up with her. "I—

—*Asti*—

"—ohhhhh."

_Indeed._

Then she slammed her eyes shut and twirled to face away.

And he hurried out, now that her eyes were off him, not for fear she would see—

—*she wanted to see._

But she didn't need to see the rest of him —*even if she thinks she wants to*—He couldn't help it, this funny truth—

_Asti—_

—*you liked how I look beneath it all—_

—*stunningly so._

He hurried wet into his trousers, his boots—

She waited while he hurried. _She came for him._

Thorin wanted to know why.

He climbed into his shirt—

_Mahal._

She liked him like that. But now her back was tight. He needed to _hurry his ass—the ass she stared at during sparring_*—She looked like a frightened Doe ready to bolt—*without saying what she came for*—Thorin couldn't have it.

Once clothed, absent his armor still on the bank, he hurried to the point. "Now, what urgent calling brought you to interrupt my bath?" He aimed to tease her, hoping this would ease her nerves—

And to his relief, her shoulders eased.

He smiled.

And she glanced back at him, not turning yet, looking him over as if something were missing—*likely, the free view._
He smiled a little more.

"I—" She turned to face him now, somehow managing to look past his smile, deeper into his face with a serious probing. "—I’m worried about you."

Thorin gripped into his boots, missing the river stones as he felt the shift in their conversation move to something far more serious.

Ah, Asti—

And then she moved— her hand reached up and she touched his cheek, the tender spot, just where Dwalin had caught him with the wood before— her touch like the lightest brush of a flower petal—

—you're touching me!

Oh Mahal, he could sink into that hand—

He went totally still as every part of him absorbed her touching.

She caressed his cheek with the back of her fingers, a light silky touch, just barely grazing his skin. Too soon she left there, to rest her hand upon his shoulder in the manner of good friends—

He could feel the warmth of her through the cotton of his shirt.

—close friends—

—I'm warmed that you care.

And she stayed there. Her hand upon him. "You aren't sleeping—"

—You are watching me—

"And it's getting worse."

—so observant, Asti.

She asked so sweetly, though it was no question. "I know you don't want to talk to me about whatever it is—"

—Asti.

"—but please talk to someone—"

Now who would I talk to—about you?

"Balin—"

No.

"Glóin—"

No.

"Gandalf—"

Mahal NO.
"Anyone. It helps. I promise." Her hand grabbed holding to him, tighter upon his shoulder—as if she would dig her understanding into his flesh.

And I would take it—

"You can't carry all these burdens on your own—"

I don't. But some I must.

"You'll go crazy—"

Mahal— I might.

And then she let go, and the space about him tugged at the physical memory, heating his skin—gone too soon.

He would recover it—your touch.

"I know from experience," she said, so sad, and then her head dropped, and her grief showed, and she bit her lip.

Thorin bit his own. He would not answer her, fairly certain she wouldn't notice—Not after seeing me stripped naked in the river.

But he couldn't leave her grieving. And now new freedom availed him—after you, Thief, I can help ease your grief— He reached back to her, his hand under her chin, lifting her face so she would look at him again—touching you.

Her skin, so soft—and she responded, lifting up.

I want to sink in those big brown eyes. "Thank you for your care, Thief."

A smile returned to her features, and he let go of her chin, only to reach out to her with an invitation to hold her hand on their walk back to the lodgings of the Bear Man.

I'm your lead escort—Dennarê. "Now come, let us return. I'm famished—" Not only for food, Thief.

"Me too," she said.

For me, as well? Thorin smiled, his invitation open—Asti, I see it, with how you looked at me, all bare in the water.

Happily, she smiled in return to his unspoken question, settling her hand snugly in his.

And they headed back toward the lodgings, while the little Bean ran along behind, barking his own pleasure in their company.

Bombur had the midday meal prepared by now—

The Thief's voice came from the lodging, "My name is Sona Anand Jones—"

What?

I know your name, and—you're right here next to me, your hand in mine! How is your voice sounding clear across the distance, around the corner from us? Was this some sorcery, yet again?
Thorin held tighter, he would not let go of Sona.

And she held tighter, too, tensing in his hand, hearing her own voice displaced so, and a horrified expression filled her whole face.

"—If you’re watching this—"

—watching? What?

"—then hopefully that means I’ve been found."

—Mahal—I found you—I’m staring at you.

"—I’m from Ana’haim Kaleforn’ya—

—Your home country—!

"—and I left my home nine days ago—"

The fogs—you speak of long ago. Back before we met!

Sona began to run, tugging Thorin behind her—Toward her own voice—!

"—to hike and camp in Big Bear for a night."

Big Bear? The Bear Man? We’ve been at Beorn’s nearly two weeks—

She kept a vice grip on Thorin as they ran together. Once around the bend, before the main door of the Bear Man’s home, her voice—Sona’s but not Sona’s—came from there—!

"I’m not sure where I am now—"

—neither am I—

—but I can tell you it’s not So Cal."

—so cold? Have you been cold?

Her voice grew louder, coming from where the group of his Company stood, Nori in the center of it, holding a shiny black—crystal, polished tourmaline? Obsidian? The voice came from it, this black flat, glossy object in his hand.

Thorin had seen this object among Sona’s belongings.

It had always been black. But not now.

Now color, like light and paint, emanated from the center.

And now it held Sona’s voice, somehow called forth by Nori—?

Nori looked back at him, his face full of guilt.

What in Durin’s name?

His Spy—he held it—

Creeping and snooping—’Did you take that from her pack?’ Thorin signed the question.
But Nori had already answered.

—what had he done?

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdûl:

Fallatazârê – my tattoos

A/N: Thank you Jenny-Wren28, for helping me achieve what we’ve both been waiting for—It's been a pleasure working with you again.

E
"Wait, Thorin," Balin hailed low, eying Thorin's hand joined in Sona's with an arched brow.

Thorin's posture was a step beyond Denmar—Thorin did not care. He held all the more to Sona's hand, in satisfying response to Balin's eye—You did not see her at the water.

His Advisor stood on the outskirts of the Company circle, along with Óin and Glóin; the three waited to intercept him. All eyes were glancing over Thorin, as if he'd forgotten—what? Glóin couldn't take his eyes off their joined hands, but Balin did not hesitate to show his question directly, in spite of all his quiet. Balin nodded once toward the problem at hand. "His Brothers handle it now."

Thorin silenced his Advisor with a glare.

Ri'N'adâd struggled, and Nori still held the object.

Sona stared at the gathered Company.

His Company. She, a Member of it.

Ori and Dori wrestled with their Brother, attempting to snatch Sona's black object from Nori's hands, until now unsuccessful, wiry Nori being nimble with hands and feet.

Fíli and Kíli stood by with the Dogs, faces slack with the shock of this scene. Chases Butterflies slouched with Smells the Flowers, both Dogs panting and worn—surely his Sister's Sons just came upon this moment after gaming with the Dogs—at practice.

Kíli caught his eye, his own full of wonder, "It's Sona," he said quickly, as his eyes darted between Sona and Thorin, both still holding hands, and back to Sona's black object, still in Nori's hand—although Dori and Ori made quite an effort—Kíli said further, "she's in this—flat rock."

Dwalin fumed, his metal bracers flashing, "No, she isn't." Then Dwalin's eyes gravitated toward their joined hands, and up into Thorin's eyes, his face full of a similar question to Balin's, however in Dwalin's case it wasn't a question—"She's with Thorin, not in some—rock." Nostrils flaring, Dwalin's hands clenched, clearly he wanted to punch Nori, bracers and all.

Thorin glanced over the area. Where was Tharkûn? The Wizard—gone again—how had he missed all of this?

Thorin's thoughts were interrupted by Sona's voice—from before—? She still spoke!

"—I'm doing my best to find civilization—"

She seeks Civilization! Suddenly Thorin realized—This was before we met—!
Thorin could barely feel, for shock—*but for her hand in his right now*—! And yet the edge in her voice—*from her object*—! The panic she tried to hide: Thorin felt Sona's panic repeating through her hand holding his.

*And here Nori had pilfered Sona's bag!*  

Violating her trust, her privacy—*Such betrayal*, now that she’d found *civilization*—*and how*—! Guilt hit Thorin as he recalled his blade between them, that first time they met—*he, glaring into the face of his Thief*—! His hand gentled over hers— *Dennar’ê Asti—I will shield you and protect you, lead where you require.*

Sona spoke—*again from her object, "But just in case*—"

*In case*—what? *In case you found no help? Fine help you found*—Thorin glared at Nori, knowing this went beyond Nori. Thorin's anger intensified, as he remembered too vividly his own violent welcoming of his One, just when she sought help, just when she was at greatest need, and his thoughts toward himself grew darker, curdling, burning.

"Mom, Dad, and Priya. I love you."

*You said your goodbyes*—!

Sona gasped, and Thorin felt the shudder go through her.

*You set your message in this strange object you’ve carried, some kind of Seeing Stone*—!

And then she dropped his hand and bolted.

The loss of touch slapped his balance, as she cast him off so—*deservedly*.

Thorin turned to go after, stayed by what he *deserved*. It burned where she let go. At the same time Balin and Glóin each placed a hand on his shoulders. He glared at them, one to the other, unmoving. *Do you think I will jump, like before? After she casts me off? He would both run, and burn, now— She casts me off, deservedly, remembering as well as I, the help she found when she found me.*

His flaw fueled his anger all the more, heat welling inside with nowhere to release it.

"We need you here," Balin said low enough for only Thorin, nodding back toward where *Ri N’adâd* still struggled over Sona’s black object—*She had needed him; if only he had been there*—And Thorin noticed neither of his Advisors gripped fast.

*Either they, too, know my faults*— *Or they serve only to remind me.*

*Of course they need me here, of course they do.*

Thorin had never thought leading could be so difficult, until he met his One. *And she is running toward the woods!*  

*What if she passed the gates?*

Thorin's glance darted toward Dwalin, to order him after her, only to find his Warrior already racing to catch his Thief.

Everyone seemed to speak at once, with bustling commotions and movements combined, about Nori, around Nori, about the object, about Sona in the "flat rock" as Kíli kept calling it, about Sona off in the woods with Dwalin chasing, and Balin muttering to Glóin about how to calm Thorin, other
scattered remarks on Thorin's attire—what? and hands, holding hands, who's business was it?

No one's.

Thorin felt his boiling anger rise and reach no peak, watching Sona disappear into the woods—Asti—and Dwalin right behind her.

I've lost you—I've never had you—it felt like a shattering, losing sight of her. All for this object Nori stole, this thing with record of her voice, her heart, from before—Where she left her message, not for my ears—Not for our ears—She left them private. Her privacy, her trust, all violated all at once.

Thorin's glance settled upon Nori, his burning hand set on a pummeling.

"Natatakîn!"

Everyone froze on his command. Ri N'adâd slowly turned to look at him, Nori with particular focus.

Thorin glanced at the hands still on his shoulders, and then to the faces owning them. Balin and Glóin bowed and let go.

And as calmly as he could, Thorin took steps toward Nori. Once in striking distance, he held out his hand.

Nori dropped Sona's object there without hesitation, and then Ori and Dori tugged him out of Thorin's reach. Nori didn't struggle as they pulled him. He just stared back at Thorin. Everyone stared at Thorin, waiting.

An awkward silence took over the entire Company.

It stretched.

Thorin let it.

Sona's absence, as well as Dwalin's, proved incalculably hard to swallow.

Finally, Dori broke that silence, stepping away from his brothers. "Shaknatha? Will you expel Nori?"

Thorin stared at Nori with a gaze full of fury he could not see past.

Expulsion was the stiffest possible penalty for such a breach of trust.

Thorin still said nothing. They deserved more, but he had no judgment he could give presently, for he could barely think, so hot with anger.

Who would presume to violate his One's privacy so?

Nori.

Yet Thorin was no better than Nori, as Thorin recalled it—just now, with this visceral reminder. Her need, my blade.

Things between Sona and Thorin had improved beyond anything Thorin had ever deserved. How had I been so cold? And now? Now his heart felt embittered by betrayal. And a sinking feeling. And a waiting for loss.
Nori waited, too. Guilty of this newest betrayal— one of my Company.

Thorin felt guilt, staring at Nori—*As if I had done it, inviting Sona to join us, so we could help her*—

How had Thorin ever thought he was helping?

Thorin could ask for excuses. For both of them, he could. He looked from the strange object back to Nori. He could make excuses up, for the sake of easing his mind.

*But there were none.*

He continued to glare at Nori, until Nori couldn't take it anymore, and the Spy's eyes dropping to stare at his feet.

"Will you allow him to make amends if she will allow it?" Dori interrupted the awkward silence, wanting an answer. "And we would like to make amends as well," he gestured toward Ori, who nodded in silence, his face red with anger, eyes wet with pain.

*So should I, make amends.* If— Thorin stopped his thought with a glance toward the wood, hoping she would come back, frustrated to find no sight of her.

"Look what you did, Nori," Ori was back to smacking Nori as if he still had something to recover from those deft fingers. Nori did little to protect himself. "Why'd you have to go and do that?" Ori continued berating him profusely, hands swatting twofold through the telling. "Why couldn't you ask her what it was, if you so badly needed to know? What are we supposed to do if she decides you must go? And what about you? Fool Bandit."

Dori, hands wringing, looked from his brothers to Thorin and back again.

Thorin had no answer in his wrath.

And then Thorin's eyes were back on the clearing edge—*Ē'ze* was returning! Dwalin walked with her towards him—*Imhed'ul Mahal*—Thorin exhaled.

He gave a nod at Dori, signing 'Sona would decide.'

They came upon the Company, Sona's face swollen from tears—*She had been crying*—! Though her tears had been dried away, Thorin's upset resurged, stricken by the evidence of her suffering. He wondered briefly how Dwalin had managed to quiet her tears—*she had been crying!*

As for Dwalin, he did not look at Nori. His face was blank—*war mask on*—he knew the choice to come, and who was required to make it. Dwalin kept a hand on Sona's back, guiding her to them, however reluctantly she approached.

For surely, she would not want them to see her pain. She would not want to face Nori for his misdeed. And yet she came to them.

It calmed Thorin that she came to them, in spite of whatever they *deserved.*

"Shameless—" Ori berated his brother further as the two came near, "You deserve it, dishonoring our family so—But Nori! How dare you steal from a fellow Member of the Company?"

*Indeed.* Thorin kept his own war mask on, his white anger contained somewhat, now that he saw her. His hands clenched, tight as banded fire agate—

*Asti*—
What now?

Because Thorin knew theirs was not the only choice Sona had, but her own. Would she leave them—me—for this breach? He recalled the feeling of her hand discarding his, dropping and running as if for her life, away from me.

His hand burned as he recalled it.

For a moment, more awkward waiting followed. Thorin did not wish to explain these choices to his One. Instead, he continued to stare at Nori, fueling his anger through his fists, tightly woven, one hand still gripping Sona's black object.

And Nori answered. Barely able to look at Thorin, Nori wordlessly shoved past Ori, past Dori who reached to stop him, shaking his head, feet never wavering until he stood before Thorin and waited, almost demanding his judgment, ready to take punishment, no matter what it was—

Blast you, I would hit you, and ban you, and—

'Birashigami Uzbad'imê,' Nori signed and held out his hand for the object, bowing slightly as he did so.

Apologies for your King? Thorin's eyes narrowed—

—Impertinent Spy.

Thorin glared at him, considering, holding tighter to the object, pondering his choices—I could make this judgment—Save the Thief her trouble.

It riled Thorin's ire, the thought of giving the stolen object back to the one who stole it.

I would give it back. Not you.

Nori made no move to speak again, nor did he lower his hand.

If I don't return this to your mischievous hand, you cannot make amends.

This way leads to nothing good.

But I will make you wait. And think maybe.

Thorin let the Spy stew in it. After a bit, Thorin glanced over at his Thief, who watched on, clearly wondering what Thorin would do, not yet knowing she would be the one to judge. And Thorin's eyes caught on the handkerchief Sona held tightly in her fingers—

The Thief had dried her eyes! and now—

Thorin felt a shred of hope, woven in the threads of his Sister's stolen gift—

Thorin's grip loosened, his fingers spread over the object, and Thorin dropped it in Nori's hand, where he could barely feel himself move.

Nori backed away, nimbly, not to give Thorin a second chance to take matters into his own hands. Ė'ze will decide it.
Nori took no time to think as he turned to begin his apology, angling himself before Sona, posture full of contrition. From there he pulled out his coin pouch and reached to give up the object and the pouch, whole. Nori would keep nothing. Thorin smirked, absent the joy of ordinary circumstance, knowing here more was less, because if the Spy managed to stay among them, he would win a similar sum in no time. Nori was good at gambling.

Sona took her object and the pouch, looking at the pouch with suspicion.

"Lady Sona—"

The Thief frowned just barely—bothered by the title—? If only you knew, Ė'ze—he just now called me King.

"I most humbly apologize for taking something of yours."

After a fraction of breath, Ori cleared his throat, as yet unsatisfied with what his Brother said.

"And for the incursion upon your privacy. You trusted us all and by acting thusly, I broke that trust."

His Brothers stood right behind him, and stepped up once Nori stepped aside. Each carried their own bags of coin.

Thorin watched on ruefully. These two would have a harder time replacing theirs, likely an amount matching Nori's twice over. They handed their pouches to Sona, who took them, her bewildered expression increasing with each additional Ri gold sack.

Perplexed, she shifted the bags in her hand.

*Do they not offer restitution in the lands where you come from?*

And there Nori appeared to feel it most; the Spy, now entirely deflated, his shoulder's slouched lower at the cost to his family, to the Company. If he managed to stay, he would surely earn his Brother's coin twice over in gains.

"Lady Sona," Dori began his apology, his face downcast, but he couldn't finish it.

"We too must give you our most humblest apologies," Ori finished for him, "on behalf of our family."

"Dori, Ori, there's nothing to forgive," she said, smiling such a smile, the warmest kind.

It was all Thoirn could do, but stare—*You aren't leaving!*

Happy relief followed on.

Now she moved to return the gold, but Dwalin held to her arm, with a mild nod, *no— You must keep it.*

"As for you, Nori—"

The only sound came from the Bees, as every Dwarf there awaited her verdict, on the edge of a precipice, *what will you decide, for Nori?*

"I will accept your apology, if you will accept mine."

*What? How? You hadn't—* just as quickly Thorin quashed that thought, wishing he could embrace her, in spite of not quite understanding *why—You should not apologize where there is no ground for*
An embrace would go too far—

Instead he looked over his Company, all eyes awed and aimed at Sona in stunned appreciation, for her grace, and more, for her gentle spirit overflowing—but why apologize? And her eyes roamed over all of them, except for his. Why don't you look at me? Like you did at the water?

No matter, I will look at you—

How you do it once more, saving us from sorrow—

Gold Song.

And yet he was incredibly pleased he'd passed judgment to the Thief.

Only she would get it just right.

"I owe all of you an apology, for that matter—"

Sure you do. Convince me, Ē'ze.

"I've not been completely honest with you—"

How much will you share, Asti—?

His brows creased, wondering something impossible.

"—and I know how curious Dwarves are."

Indeed.

Bofur suppressed a laugh, nodding all the same.

But what about thieving, Thief?

"I know that doesn't excuse bad behavior—"

It surely does not.

"—but still—"

You paddle backwards, Thief.

"—I'm almost surprised this didn't happen sooner—"

Sooner?! Did you think so low of us, that we would steal from you—Sooner? Thorin knew he still felt raw inside, to think such thoughts from her, of them. That was not how she meant her words. And besides. You have stolen, and you were never low—Asti.

I brought my sword between us, while you hungered.

And then her eyes fell again upon Nori, who stared back at her with his mouth still opened. "So, do you accept my apology?"

You are a most clever Thief.
Somehow, mysteriously, as if fresh air seeped in through a tiny crevice to daylight, Thorin wasn't angry anymore.

Nori didn't quite know what to do, so he looked to his Brothers first, for guidance, and there they enthusiastically beamed and nodded, with Ori signing 'Aye, accept her grace, fool Bandit.'

"Aye," Nori repeated, answering, hesitating—"so unusual, compared to our usual customs—"But—"

"Then I accept yours." She was fast.

And how deftly you silence poor Nori's legitimate objections. Thorin had been muzzled by Sona before, but this—this is art, how you do this. To be sure, when Sona muzzled Thorin, he had far less vantage to see how well she did it—Skills beyond a Diplomat's—È'ze.

"And that means we are good, and you are forgiven, and as far as I'm concerned, this never happened." She partly smiled. Thorin guessed she smiled to ease the Spy, and perhaps, to ease herself, unused to duties such as pardoning—"Next time, just ask, okay?"

And the Spy nodded. Certainly, he couldn't help it.

He will honor you with favors for a lifetime, now, Thief, and you won't need to ask.

And then Sona's smile blossomed full—What now?

Thorin glanced over the rest of the Company, all following her words, faces bearing similar expressions of shock such as Nori's.

"Well, I suppose the Cat's out of the bag now."

Cats? Thorin hadn't seen any, and with the Mice, like Dwalin's new friend, Thorin wasn't sure the Bear Man had Cats—and what bag?

Fíli and Kíli, as well as Dwalin and a few others, looked over the field to find any stray Cats, each coming up short and looking more intently at Sona, while Thorin wondered if the Bear Man kept Cats in bags in order keep his Mice safe—More likely, Beorn had no Cats.

Thorin remembered how it felt to be put in a bag. He glanced over at Sona and swallowed, remembering how close they were, after capture by the Trolls, as she tugged on the ropes with her rainbow knife—

We all know now, that you are not from here.

She bit her lip.

Thorin bit his own.

She shrugged.

Mahal.

"What would you like to know?"

Next thing Thorin knew, his One was answering curious questions, and Dwalin was next to him, whispering low, "She clutched your hanky the whole time she cried, Thorin."

Thorin's eyes shot up at Dwalin, brows knit, then back to Sona—the Thief still held the
handkerchief, no longer so tightly. It had given comfort, Thorin knew, however hard his heart wished he had been there to offer a warmer sort of comfort—"What happened out there, aside from Sona's tears?"

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdûl:

Natatkatîn – Silence; shut up with each other.

Shaknatha – banish him

Phone + Nori = Boom. :-)) Thank you Jenny-Wren28!

E
Dwalin waited with his answer, joining Thorin as he listened and watched Sona handle the barrage of Dwarven curiosity, multiplied. Thorin's eyes panned from the face of his One to the handkerchief she held, and back again.

_The whole time you cried?_

"Have you told us the truth?" Bofur asked, rather somberly, his body held still in anticipation of the answer he hoped for.

"Yes," she answered quickly, far more quickly than she gifted him songs.

And relief bloomed large and bouncing on the Miner's face, as well as for all in the Company.

"How'd you get here?" Kíli asked, and Thorin smirked; the lad rarely cared to go deep into how things worked, as long as they worked. But indeed, in this case, the _how_ of all this would most certainly be _interesting._

Unfortunately, Sona couldn't tell him how, not knowing herself.

The fogs—_Mahal knows._

"Why are you here?" Fíli asked, ever more the Philosopher; perhaps why would at least explain the reason for how. _Mahal hasn't said._

Sona shrugged, shaking her head, "I know some things, but not that," drawing closer to all of them. "Will you swear to keep a secret?"

Thorin smiled, admiring her way of explaining, her choice of words and how she got started—_admiring the grace in your shoulders as you shrug._

"Hurry, and aye, all in favor, say 'Aye,'" Balin took the roll, and Sona got her oath, as every member of the Company hastily agreed. His Company had no problem keeping secrets.

"I'm from the future," she began. "The faaaar future. Middle-earth is just called Earth now and everything that happens in your time has been recorded in our histories."

Thorin started somewhat, remembering she had not mentioned the _future_ back when she explained things to Tharkûn. Confused, Thorin tried to see meaning in her face as she spoke, because this was different—_You told the Wizard you were from another world—And we were in books—stories from that world you come from. Now you speak of history, not some book's tale with a grocer as a hero._

Thorin looked his Company over as they took this news—_do you adjust for better understanding, Asti?_

Dwalin showed no reaction. The Warrior already had a good idea from prior conversations. As well as Fíli. And Balin. The rest of them stared with mouths gaped, full of concentration on her every
"To many, it's been so long, you're considered legend at this point."

_You did not lie then_—Thorin recalled how disturbed he had felt, hearing this; that they were some characters in books, their stories pre-written— _and I still don't understand._

"So, " Fíli asked, already aware Sona had traveled so far, "you know all that awaits us; what will come to pass?"

_Fíli goes to the question._

"Oh goodness no, not at all." Curious eyes followed back to Sona. "I have a broad general knowledge of things, but, for the most part I'd been a poor history student."

_You knew my name when we met, Asti._

"I focused on the big picture events and cultures of Middle-earth, particularly in this era, rather than specific individuals."

_You punched me with it—all your knowing._

"Ah, that's why you know so much about Elves," Balin said, nodding and smiling that way he did when enjoying a good tease. "They likely read on paper much prettier than Durin's folk."

Thorin almost burst laughing, signing his advisor, 'Surely the Elves wrote these histories, Balin.'

Sona's eyes flickered between Thorin and Balin, catching the motion absent his meaning. And then she answered, head cocked, brow arched, _so regal_. "Or perhaps it's because Durin's folk are so damn secretive there wasn't much to read about."

Balin blushed.

Thorin returned her barb with a warm smile, how he wanted to laugh, enjoying the color in her face. _Of course you have an answer._

"But Gimli!" Glóin asked without asking. "You know of my wee lad, Gimli."

Her eyes shined, "Yes, I do." Like his namesake, Gimli would be a shining star. Thorin saw, they all saw, by her expression, especially Glóin. Gimli would grow strong and brave, and he would meet challenge and not be dimmed. Glóin asked for no elaboration, knowing it best, somehow, to rest with mystery and hope. "'Tis enough to see your smile and the way your eyes light with excitement at the mention of his name."

"Tell us about that black rock, if you could, how it works, what is it?" again, Kíli asked, his curiosity a show of interest that would have Dís ruffled and beaming. "It flashes your—you—But you're not in it."

It was then Sona pulled her object back out. "It's not rock, Kíli," she smiled slightly, to reassure. "It's my _fone._"

_Fone?_ "That's what she called it, Thorin, while we were out there." Dwalin nodded back toward her.
"Many people, nearly everyone has these where I come from. It's how we keep in touch."

Everyone watched her, eyes wide and waiting, wondering. Then Ori spoke up. "So you don't write letters in the future?"

Sona laughed—oh the sound of it—flashing her smile back at Ori. "Yes, some of us still do that."

Ori smiled back, a look of relief on his face.

"And with these you can call long distance," she continued to explain her fone. "But there's no internet here."

Internet?

Then she shook her head a bit, slightly smiling at everyone's shared expression of bafflement. "Here. I'll show you some things it can do." She put her hand over the side, and suddenly it was lighting again, and a loud song began playing, with words imprinted over shining stripes of color bands, and various voices with instruments sounding. Thorin recognized the music—from where? The players couldn't be seen—was it memory? I know this— how do I know this? It was not any kind of music I have heard before, and yet—he could not pin it down. The banded colors and writing appeared on the flat surface of the object, emitting light as if from inside it— And then it hit him. Raise Your Glass—! Surprised, he recognized the notes of that song Sona taught them, that song they all loved. But here it was different, with many voices, many instruments. This version was clashing-hammers loud, and with long-wired vibrating sounds combined, and many drums. Sona looked over at Thorin, and mouthed, 'I play acoustic.'

Thorin nodded, now he understood.

"What about your family? Can you tell us about them? Can we see them?" Bombur asked Sona.

And suddenly there were portraits showing on the black object, and Sona was telling them who they were, a face to each of her loved ones, friends, the country of her homeland in the backgrounds. Thorin glanced over at Ori, who studied the portraits as they seemed to flash by with a particular interest, and somehow Thorin was heartened—because she is so far from home— it is good we see them.

And then she called for the Company to all gather behind her, that she would take their picture. Not knowing what she meant—and not caring—they all gathered in, happy to be happy in her company. She asked them all to smile for the 'kamera', and they all smiled—for Sona—as a strange click followed, and then her fone went black once more.

The open air suddenly quiet, everyone stood around her as she turned to them, looking down sadly at her strange black object—her fone. Thorin watched her chest rise and fall, followed by a sigh and a shrug, and then she looked up to them, a brave smile on her face, as she slipped the fone back in her bag.

Why so sad now, Thief?

"I knew it had to run out of battery sooner or later," she answered, as if she heard his silent question. "And now it is truly dead."

Battery? And how had that—fone ever lived? Thorin wondered.

This was when Bombur interrupted, suggesting they eat the meal he'd prepared before it was time to prepare the next one.
Dwalin gripped Thorin's shoulder, glancing over him, noticing—more than Thorin offered to tell. "Where's your kit? How are you only half dressed here, Thorin?"

Balin passed by them, eyes going over Thorin, making his own assessment, wisely offering no comment.

The others made their way inside. Sona, filing in among them, was now in an intense conversation with Ori about the details of her family pictures he'd seen on her fone before it died.

Thorin sighed, hungry—not only for food. "At the river," he answered, recalling. "I'm going there now." It was then he took a walk back to the bank.

"If we hurry, there'll be food left," Dwalin said, keeping pace.

"How'd this come about, Thorin? Strolling back to the Bear Man's lodgings with Whatsafist, you half dressed, hand in hand with her, you oblivious you're half dressed—when have you ever left your armor on the bank of a river after bathing?"

"We were talking—"

"Aye, plain as day all cozy like, you were talking, you, with your armor still at the wash spot—at the WASH SPOT!" Dwalin was full of words. "What was Whatsafist doing out there with you at the wash spot?"

"Pacifist. And you're sputtering," Thorin muttered, pulling into his armor, remembering earlier, just over there—she touched me, twice. His skin remembered both spots, but the cheek first and most fondly, as he half glared at his Friend who glared back, all red in the face. You would laugh if I thanked you for hitting me, Buhel.

"Well? You going to explain it?" Dwalin stepped back, leaned against a tree, and attempted to cool the red in his face.

"She found me here, just so you know."

"What's that matter? You don't see yourself all undone."

"I wasn't finished." Thorin pulled the tie lace out of the opened side of his brigandine, slipped his other arm and head through, and glanced back at his glaring Friend, who now looked about the bank as if he lost something.

"No?" Then Dwalin saw the water—as if for the first time. "Finished with what?"

Wasn't that obvious? Thorin stared at him, waiting. His hands fiddled with the lace, eyes still on Dwalin. "Mind helping me here?" Thorin could lace himself in, but there stood Dwalin—thinking too much.

"Wait," Dwalin's jaw dropped, eyes still on the water, and it took him a moment, but then he dug into his questions, too rattled to register Thorin's request—"She saw you bare?"

Thorin began lacing.

"What happened here?" Dwalin looked around the bank, searching for evidence—of what?

"What are you thinking, Dwalin?" Thorin interrupted his Friend's interrogation. Obviously, his prior remark had not elicited the desired result—I said too much.
"This looks like you've—"

"Stop." Thorin didn't want to know. "Blast it all, I told you, we were having a conversation—" One of few words—

With Gold Song looking at me, and how.


Indeed.

But Thorin had his own questions. "You never told me what she said out there—" when she cried, holding my handkerchief for comfort—"After Nori took her fone?"

"I'd like to punch him for that one—"

You are not the only one. "Sona gave her decision. It did not include a beating, Dwalin."

"He made her cry, that's—" Dwalin shook his head and let it go. "But then she said a lot, a lot that made her cry more, and she never let go of your hanky—"

A comfort.

Dwalin stopped on the word, with that look in his eye again. "That's been a mighty long loan, Thorin. She still has your hanky from when you loaned her your comb—"

"I gave it to her."

"You did what?"

Mahal.

"You gave her your hanky?"

Thorin adjusted his bracers. "Now you hear me."

"You're giving her gifts! And she saw you naked and bathing there? What now?" The color in Dwalin's face intensified. "Are you braiding her hair in secret, too?"

"Shut up, Dwalin," but Thorin didn't want his silence—"Tell me what she said."

Does she want to go back? Does she regret her circumstance?

"She misses kin, she misses home, she misses things from—home. Her loved ones, she thinks they think she's dead, and she's right, they most likely do."

Dwalin let loose these words in spite of the glare he received in return.

"But as we know, Dwalin, she is not dead." Thorin let that sink in, until unspoken understanding appeared to register and his Friend looked away. "It is a nightmare, to be alive and thought dead. For both Sona and her family." Thorin made no mention of his own. "So, what did she say about this?"

Because surely she said something.

"She feels guilt, as if she could amend anything, just by wishing it, and because we've been so busy, getting here, she thinks she hasn't thought of them enough." Dwalin studied the bank across the
"It's gotten worse since Azog. Her guitar. It's part of her missing, like, even more than losing her—" Dwalin glanced at Thorin, "Her—

"David," Thorin helped his Friend. "Her deceased husband."

"Aye," Dwalin nodded, somehow eased by Thorin's directness. "But her guitar, being so much part of her, losing it now has made her more confused. And your hanky, she never let it go." Now Dwalin smiled a bit as he looked at him.

*You see the comfort, too, Buhel.*

"And she said she doesn't regret a thing," Dwalin went on. "I tell you in case your stubborn head thinks she does. But she worries she doesn't know her use anymore, as if all we wanted were a Minstrel in Waiting from her company among us." Dwalin's smile bloomed full grown. "If she only knew."

"Knew what, Dwalin?" Thorin would admit nothing, being sure of nothing.

Dwalin huffed and shrugged, now wagging his brows at Thorin. "Losing it makes her wonder what she's doing here." Then Dwalin leaned in, staring deeper into Thorin's face. "She said the White Witch of Lothlorien said once Whatafist finds who she's looking for, she could go back, well. Sona says she did find him. And now she wonders why she hasn't all of a sudden disappeared back to wherever it was she came from, from the far faaaar future. Any idea who she's talking about, Thorin?"

Thorin stared, drawing his brows into a tighter frown. "I cannot say I know." This was too close to topics best shielded from any and all.

"She even mentioned the Valar," Dwalin wasn't finished. "Mahal, Thorin. And Tharkûn suggesting some high purpose to her coming here."

*Sona came, and now she carries a heavy burden, one on behalf of all free folk of Middle-earth.*

Thorin wondered if she gave permission, in the fogs, before, and somehow forgot. Else why would the Valar consent to such displacement? But he could not voice these considerations.

Dwalin stared into him, all the while, as if he saw more than any word Thorin refused to say, and doubted Thorin's judgment in addition. "Keep your secrets, then."

*I will.*

And it took a while for Dwalin to continue, as he surveyed the river bank this side of the water.

Thorin took a nudge at Dwalin's shoulder, as if to catch his attention. "Well?"

"Did I mention she kept hold of your hanky, as if it were her grounding stone, Buhel?"

"Aye." *Several times.*

"We've been roughing it, out here, on the journey," Dwalin mused, his voice going a bit soft. "I couldn't fathom what she meant, not all of it, but she misses comforts of home, and home as well."

"So what did you tell her, Dwalin?" *How did you convince her not to cry?*

Dwalin's face became a bit sheepish as he replied, "I told her she makes us greater, gives us heart. I didn't mention you." He snorted, then went on. "She's always welcome among us, but that only she
can decide what road she would take."

*Binumräl.* Thorin nodded. That was the crux of it.

"And after that, well," Dwalin continued. "She wanted to come back, although she—I could tell she didn't much want to deal with Nori, blast him."

*She wanted to come back.*

Thorin let it go at that. "Let's get back, before the food is gone."

And they quickly made their way back to their midday meal, happy to discover Sona and Bombur had made sure to save them each a full plate of food.

Several of the others were leaving the table, and Thorin spotted Nori aiming for the door, so he could disappear without notice. Dwalin saw as well, and would have none of it, hailing low at the Spy, "*Ihnēfab'bing Creep.*" Dwalin attempted to shove him in passing.

Nori dodged the shove and ducked out of the lodgings without a word, not having spoken since accepting the Thief's apology. Not out of arrogance, Thorin knew. But for shame. This shame stemmed not from the actual act of going through Sona's belongings—*surely Nori wanted to make sure Sona was who she claimed to be, as a service, one could not be too careful*—and he thought of Thorin as *Uzbad'ê—*

—*However unsettling that was.*

No, it was the damage that action caused Nori's family and the Company. That was the thing that shamed him.

Thorin wondered how long it would take Sona's forgiveness to sink in, as he settled into a big plate of Bombur's finest berry muffins, served with *honey,* by Honey, and milk.

Later that evening, long after the Bear Man had left to hunt Orc, the Company gathered and continued questioning the Thief, their curiosity over her homeland and customs hard to quench. Thorin took a place by the door, and watched them query her.

Nori came in late. He gave Thorin a single silent look as he passed in through the door, choosing the path just in front of Dwalin, where, to Thorin's shock, the Spy muttered, "*Bullshit,*" his finger like a dagger aimed at Dwalin—

*Bullshit— Ė'ze liked to say it.*

*It seems the Spy has accepted the Thief's forgiveness.*

Nori glanced between the two of them. Catching Thorin's eye, he signed with a flourish, 'Honey taught me that one.'

*Audacious Spy. You know who saved you.*

Then Nori sat himself right next to Sona and offered her the most sincere smile he could muster in all humility, sly Dwarf. He asked her if she would tell them a story, not about her, he didn't want to pry, but popular tales of her times.

"Any specific kind?" she asked, smiling sweetly in return.
Oh, the openings you give. Thorin waited, quite curious, now that the Spy was talking once again. Evidently, Sona was curious too.

Then Nori glanced a knowing look at Thorin, before looking to Sona again, and clarified, "like the story in the songs you were singing at base the Carrock—"

When she had been braiding my hair— Her faced darkened, taking in that request, remembering in hindsight just what she had done—her hands in my hair.

Why do you bring up that time, Spy? Are you an ingrate as well as audacious? Do you wish to mortify us both?

But no, Nori was a Spy who thieved now and then, that's why he wanted to hear it, surely.

Though Thorin wasn't so sure.

It was best to give Nori the benefit of doubt, so Sona sang a lively rendition of the story again, the story of the Thief called Aladdin, who, with help from his friends, magical creatures from magical realms, aids and wins the heart of the grieved Princess of the land. This time Thorin was able to concentrate on the plot, and he laughed to himself, remembering his mortification—how it felt, to feel your hands—and realizing she told a such a story of a Thief. He smiled at his Thief. Thorin knew his smile showed. He glanced and Dwalin, who could not help himself, how much he enjoyed this telling. And Nori as well. In spite of themselves, there was a thing they agreed upon.

When she finished the tale of Aladdin and the Princess, Bofur asked her for another.

No—this could go on all night, but not this night— "We leave for Mirkwood in the morning." Thorin announced it. There'd been enough healing, and rest would be what it would be, wherever they stopped on their travels.

All eyes found his and quieted, nodding, chattering breaking the silence, and soon each was off to pack and make ready, and sleep before the morrow.

He found her in the kitchen, looking through her bag by the light of a single lamp. He heard the chime of coin, and her sigh. "What the hell."

Hell—? Thorin wondered—not for the first time—what hell was.

Whatever it was, she didn't like it.

She didn't want the coin. More than that—you don't know what to do with it.

Surely you understand restitution. "Honor demanded it," Thorin explained from the doorway. A use for the coin she would surely find later. What did they use in the lands where she came from, to barter an exchange among people, when the goods themselves could not be carried, and time was too short to offer service of skills? In all her belongings, he had not seen coin. It was no good for a woman of her abilities to go about on a journey over leagues with no coin—Although I do say, thus far you have done just fine without.

Her shoulder's sagged slightly as she shifted through her things. "Our cultures are so very different."

Asti—

It hurts me to think you feel alone.
"I wonder if I'll ever come to understand yours."

What? "Do you want to?" Thorin blinked and asked at the same time. There'd been a time he believed she hadn't held the slightest interest. So far we have come.

"Oh yes!" How excited and quickly she answered, giving it not the slightest thought.

Why?

"I find it fascinating."

Fascinating? How are we so interesting, Thief?

It disturbed him to wonder where they failed—Why think they failed, when she never suggested such? Why must I look for the fault line?

Uncertainty grew as the dawn drew nearer. It had built all day and into the night, along with the realization they were ready to be on their way, in spite of uncertainty. She was coming with them—with me—as if this were her only choice, as if the journey meant living, as automatic as breathing. Kaylith. Indeed. They must go, but Azog was out there, after him and all he loved, several of them here with him on this Quest. Here. Right now.

I must be faster and smarter than Azog and the Sourcerer of Dol Guldur.

Not to mention the Dragon they head toward.

She watched him, and her face got serious, as if she'd stepped in a mess or something. "I don't mean in like a 'Oh! Look at these quaint little Dwarves and their backward ways'—"

What?

"But in a 'there is so much richness, depth, and majesty to them—"

Asti, I know you like us—

"I wonder how much they'll be willing to share with me' kind of way."

Everything, all of it—Asti Zarazrakmê—But you avoid my eyes, when it was you who saw me at the water, Asti.

"I keep waiting for one of you to tell me to stop asking questions," she said, turning her name ring for grounding, "to stop being so nosey, that it's none of my business."

Thorin smiled. You have seen the nosiness of Dwarves. Why would we condemn your questions?

But she would not look at him. She seemed almost shy, was that it—? Do you fear what I might see—? She faded in thought, and sighed, looking at her name ring by the dim light of the lamp, the shadows on her face exposing her weariness. She looked nearly as tired as he felt. "Will you not retire?" He asked, hoping she would rest before they traveled on.

Of a sudden her eyes were on his, sparked by an idea and the slightest hint of a smile as she looked him over. Do you remember me, in the water, Asti?

"Sure," she replied, rising, and for the briefest second, he imagined she had answered his silent question. "If you do."
Aye, I do—

But then he recalled the moment they were in, now. And he realized she meant him, retiring as well—No. It was too early. "I still have much to—"

"Nope. No way. Don't give me that, Grump-muffin."

Muzzled once more, Asti. How you do that, calling me that—muffin.

Her hands were on her hips in a power stance much like N'amad'ê took when she set her mind to business, or to sisterly force, and the smirk on the Thief's face did not hide the seriousness she carried beneath it. "You're exhausted and you're going to at least try to sleep tonight. Come on."

And then she had hold of his hand again—sweet hand—and they were heading to the sleeping quarters of the Bear Man's lodging, one last night in the hay. Thorin intended to wait on the Thief falling asleep, knowing sleep would elude him, but she would not get into her bedroll until he got into his, and there she watched him, the little Bean snuggled close to her. Sona watched to be sure Thorin shut his eyes, and he checked, now and then, to see if she still watched, and thusly, indeed, before he even thought he could be irritated—grump muffin—in spite of himself, and all his efforts otherwise, rest came.

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdûl:

Zarazrukmê – improve what's already complete

A/N: Thank you readers! And thank you Jenny-Wren28! We are almost on the road again.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Honey—*Honey Scones*—Thorin woke to the scent of honey scones baking, the area about him empty of all his Company, but for the Bees. Indeed, *rest had come.*

He rose from the hay, looking down at it, all settled in. He had *slept.*

*Aye, that I had—and I could not escape the Thief.* Suddenly he was entirely awake.

*Blast, I've done it again—!*

*In Erebor, at my harp! She was there!*

Now he recalled Arwen saying something—*once,* when he tried to outrun the Thief in waking hours. Seems not even in Dreams could he do this.

*In Erebor—!* So real within *the Halls of my Father's*—returned after what seems an age—why *Erebor?*

Most likely the Thief wanted to see it— "I heard you playing—"

He smiled, recalling how she just—* barged in*—He'd found his family's private rooms where their instruments waited—drums, lute, and harp, and she found him there. "*I came to see you."*

Of course she did.

Folding his bedroll, feeling fully rested, Thorin thought about it. How good it felt to be home again, even if just in Dream, even if he had been full of anxious need to both find her there and keep himself away. He had avoided *Nai'adâl* for weeks now, with success it had seemed, and for what good other than to make him barely tolerable. She even said as much, Dreaming. "*You've never minded before.*"

He laughed at his own thought, *barely tolerable—you saw me bare,* Asti. *And I pleased you. And you called me grump-muffin. Muffins don't smell as good as honey scones baking.*

*And how, you told me "Skootch." What a command is that? Skootch.*

*And then you laid your hands on me again, one sweetly inked in a winding point from wrist to finger,* sensual—in red ink Thorin knew was not meant to stay, but meant to bejewel her hand, *and how—I would take that hand, trace the markings, ask you what they mean, kiss your palm.*

*Did you know we were both Dreaming together?*

It seemed yes.

*But you would have lessons—*

*Ê'ze—*
And I would give them, sweetly holding you against me, my harp between our legs, my body surrounding you, my hands over yours, your fingers on the strings—

Thorin swallowed, bed roll folded. He sat back a moment, drawn to the scent of the scones, but unwilling to move away from the spot where they'd all slept, somehow sad this part of the journey was past. Like the harp he and Gold Song played. His harp was of the past, but somehow waited in their future, perhaps, if fortunes favored them. Blast it, she wanted to be there, with them. Aye—with him, even in a most private of spaces, in Nai'adâl.

She had been there willingly, even more so, demandingly. He had to admit he enjoyed it, how she took up the space between him and his harp so naturally. How she admired the instrument, just as she sank into him with her backside, her eyes on the carvings in the wood 'Amadê commissioned from the Elves before trade relations soured, the carvings by Dwarven hands, two pairs of them, the famous twins of Zulnur of the Iron Hills—Dâin had introduced his mother to the artists. Thorin had smiled in his Dream, realizing Sona liked the woodcraft of Dwarves. The strings had been crafted in the Mountain, mithril wire, wrapped tightly by Astlin, one of the finest musical smiths of Erebor, back in earlier days, before the Dragon. Thorin had played it every day, before the Dragon.

He glanced down at his hands. He could still feel the strings, and Sona's hands, now that they Dreamed playing his old harp together.

Losses. Possibilities. Thorin thought of Gold Song's lost guitar and his grief blossomed twofold. But he could not let that grief settle in now, no. Not today. He took a deep breath, and savored the scents of his favorite breakfast.

Laughter echoed back from the kitchen.

"Did you sleep well, N'adad?" It was Fíli, studying him, partly smiling, partly frowning.

Thorin wondered how long he had been there. He continued folding away his belongings, giving no answer.

"Kíli, get up," Fíli called, and then Thorin realized the lad was still sound asleep under a patch of hay.

Kíli rose out of it, yawning.

"What's taking you so long?" Kíli asked, looking back toward the kitchen where the scent of scones wafted on.

But Fíli only smiled at Thorin, his smile one of knowing too much, obviously, where no words would be shared. "By the looks of it, you rested. Bout time, just before leaving. Bombur's made your favorite breakfast, Honey Scones."

"Honey!" Kíli glanced at Thorin and winked.

"Sona's at the hives," Fíli said, as if Thorin had asked.

"Honey honey. Beorn's off with Sona getting honey."

Now Fíli was in the room, lightly hauling his Brother out of the hay, "stop your nonsense."

Kíli only laughed, falling back in it.

Fíli sighed and threw up his hands. "Stay then, Hay-Head; the scones await us." With that he
grabbed Thorin by the arm and tugged him toward the kitchen. "He won't be long," Fíli added with a grin.

Thorin made his way toward the table, taking a spot next to Glóin, while Fíli looked for Chases Butterflies in the main hall, who wrestled with Smells the Flowers over one of Fíli's several throw-sticks collected for the Dogs'—practice.

Bofur and Óin nodded as he passed, both engrossed in the Bear Man's game of chess.

Company glances fell hard upon Thorin. So odd it felt to be up last—or almost last—Thorin smiled to himself thinking of Kíli buried in hay. He ignored the Company's eyes, all except for Bombur, whom he greeted with a smile and a word, "Âkmînruk zu," as he filled his plate.

Bombur smiled back, beaming gratitude for the appreciation, adding more scones to his plate as he passed with a new tray full of them, pointing to the jars of honey scattering the table, "there's more honey," with a smile, almost a wink as he said that—Honey.

Thorin glanced over the room; the Thief and the Bear Man were not back yet. Still off to get her last batch of honey with their Host. It would be quiet here, soon, Thorin mused, pouring the Bee's works over his scones, honey from the honeycombs, the best they've ever had.

Looking out the door, he saw Tharkûn standing in the sun, just outside.

"Good for a day's trek, to be rested and well fed ahead of it," Glóin muttered low on the other side of Thorin, studying him with smiling eyes.

Thorin made no response aside from biting into a scone.

Glóin leaned into Thorin's shoulder with his own, bumping unspoken reassurance, just to show he was there, his company a lift to spirits.

On the other side of Glóin, Bifur sat whittling a shank of wood he kept beneath the table—a secret for someone, a bemused smile beneath his focused eyes. Ori sat to another side, also done with eating and now working on sketching, charcoal in hand, his face full of happy concentration, nose deep in his notebook.

"You're back!" Sona said to the Wizard, just out of view of the door.

Thorin's heart picked up a pace, as if he were suddenly sprinting—What does she think of shared Dreams? Would she ask him about it?

Not here. Not at breakfast.

"Indeed my Dear," Tharkûn bowed, giving her a once over. "You've been busy."

What in Mahal did the Wizard mean by that? What busy? They've simply been healing here, all while Tharkûn had been here and there on mysterious Wizard business.

Just then Sona was in the doorway.

Thorin bit into a scone, wondering, at the same time tamping on that wonder. It did no good to worry what she thought. Instead he focused on Bombur's scones. Delicious. Warm. A comfort for a good day's beginning, Thorin could hope, as he tried his best not to think of how good it felt, holding her at his harp.
Dori came by with a milk jug to fill his mug.

Bombur saw her coming, and had her tea ready and warm by the fire. "My Lady," he placed it in her grateful palms, somehow the Thief looked a bit rattled, or distracted.

*Was it residual feeling, or feeling awkward from their Dream?*

Thorin took another bite of scone, licking the honey as it escaped onto his plate.

"You've got honey in your beard," Dwalin whispered, attempting to goad him.

Throrin just smiled, took another bite, ignoring his Friend for the sake of his scones.

Dwalin sat across from him, between Nori, who appeared completely at ease this morning, as if indeed yesterday's event were now completely forgotten, and Balin, who had his maps out, and now smiled up at Thorin as he began to fold them away. Thorin wasn't sure if his Advisor's smile was for the honey in his beard, or Honey at the door, or the day of travel ahead. They were all ready for leaving.

And it seemed they would all tease him about Honey.

Thorin smiled more into his scone. He didn't care.

"I'm sorry, Gandalf," Sona said. "What were you saying?"

*Indeed, distracted.*

Tharkûn came in without gracing Sona an answer. Instead he attempted to catch Thorin's eye, and failing, the Wizard sat next to his Advisor, helping himself to a scone like a happy, carefree proprietor.

Sona followed him in, seeming a bit dazed, if Thorin were pressed to describe how she moved. And she sat beside Thorin, a place the Company had made sure to keep free, Thorin observed after the fact.

Thorin smiled at her from behind a scone, and offered her one from his plate, as she had forgotten to take a plate when she came in.

*Are you distracted, Asti?*

*Try one of these... the scones are good for another kind of distraction.*

Just then Kíli joined the table. Eyeing Thorin's plate full of scones, he made a grab for one as he passed, and Thorin smacked his hand away.

Kíli's eyes passed mischievously from Sona to Thorin as he went looking for his own.

They were very good, the scones, and the honey, and Thorin discovered he was hungry. He dug in, his eyes surveying Sona when she wasn't looking, watching her nibble the scone he had offered, how carefully she took to it, for crumbs and honey.

He let himself sigh through the eating of these scones, and watched her color darken as she looked around, settling in, sipping tea, ignoring her own blush.

Thorin leaned into the scones still remaining on his plate.
The Bear Man had come in a few minutes behind Sona, his manner less friendly than he had been the past week, in stark contrast to the bustling excitement among the Dwarves. Anticipation of the coming quiet, no doubt, coming soon after the parting of new-found Friends.

Dwalin was dropping crumbs by the Mouse at his plate when Nori leaned in at his side, whispering and smiling, eyes darting between Dwalin and Sona and Thorin.

Dwalin burst out laughing, clapping lightly on the table to get others attention, not so loud as to disturb the Mouse. "Aye, let's sing, shall we?"

Indeed, Nori and Company had forgiven yesterday's failing.

Bombur laughed, setting down the last tray of scones, waiting for it.

Bofur's head popped up from the game with Óin. "Aye, a journey song, as we'll soon be on our way!" He pulled out his flute, and both he and Óin left their game to join the singing. Dori's face broke into laughter and he set down the milk flask once Bofur's flute began to sound.

"Not just any journey song," Nori cut in low, shaking his head at Bofur and the rest of them, following Dwalin's lead. They had already chosen one, his Warrior and his Spy.

And they didn't wait for agreement as Dwalin took up the chorus with a wink toward Thorin, opening into 'A Whole New World—' That song the Thief sang when she braided my hair—how fast they've learned the words.

Dwalin and Nori were quickly joined by the rest of them.

Thorin took another bite of scone, smiling behind it, humming approval under his breath, no, he did not mind it, remembering her hands in his hair as he listened to the song once again, this time with other voices joining, and Sona—laughing—!

Biriz Akmâth—!

She settled into song and a smile, growing more comfortable in the space here at breakfast, enjoying her honey scone as well as the song, and perhaps the recollection of her hands in his hair.

Did you like it, Asti? The feel of my hair?

Thorin swallowed, smiling, remembering.

The Company gathered with Beorn's Ponies and Horses in the woods just beyond the fence's edge while Tharkûn and Beorn conversed just out of earshot, serious demands etching the face of the Bear Man.

Thorin shook his head, reluctant to mount before the Wizard returned, quite sure the Wizard's answers—whatever they were—would not satisfy their Host. Dwalin was at Thorin's side, waiting as well, while the rest of them took their mounts—all except for Sona, who stood nuzzling the whining Bean—Peanut, her face colored with grief as she watched the Wizard and the Bear Man, tense with waiting, impending goodbyes—the Bean will be difficult. "I wish I could take you with me," he heard her say, arms wrapped around him. "But a journey like this is no place for a little fellow like you."

And you, Asti?
Doubt pricked him as he watched her set Peanut down, and aye, the Bean expressed his grief in piercing wailings clear to all. And he was back in Sona's arms again, for another moment at least. Sona's eyes were casting about the mounted Company, full of anxious nerves as she glanced over the Ponies.

It had been a while since they lost their own Ponies, after the first Warg attack, where Tharkûn had also lost his Horse. The Thief hadn't been fond of riding. Thorin remembered; she had held to the Wizard in stiff-bodied fear through all her riding. And yet she had asked the Bear Man for the use of his Ponies just two weeks past.

"Honey, I have a friend for you," suddenly the Bear Man was next to Sona, with a brown Horse at his side. Beorn and Tharkûn had finished their goodbye without Thorin's notice, because he'd been all focused on the Thief and her unease—

*I need to pay better attention, for the sake of everything.*

And Sona appeared twofold panicked when she saw the Horse Beorn offered. She clutched the Bean closer and shook her head.

"This is Violet—"

Pretty name for the brown Horse. Thorin's eyes went from her to the Bear Man—*You intend for her to—*

"She's agreed to bear you."

*You say so? And to what has Sona agreed?* Thorin stepped away from his Pony. Clearly the Bear Man had never seen Sona ride.

"Oh, well." Sona looked perplexed from the Horse back to Beorn. "That's kind of her. But, uh, you know what?"

Thorin waited for the Thief to tell Beorn she would ride with Tharkûn.

"I'm walking."

*You're what?*

*No.*

Sona looked about her, here and there, like she would run away. But there was no place to run. "So please thank her for me, but no. I'm walking."

*This is no way to get moving, with my Thief steeped in such fear.*

Thorin took two more steps toward her, worried Beorn wouldn't listen.

Indeed the Bear Man only laughed at her reply, swooped her up, Bean and all, and set her on the back of Violet. She screamed out in surprise when he sat her there and then he swept the little Bean away, squealing, his cries pierced the air—

Gut-curling, like the feeling Thorin had when Sona cried out.

Sona's hands raced for the saddle horn, and there she held, too stiff to be stable in the seat.

Violet felt the Thief's fear and responded by tossing her head and blowing air, causing the Thief to
cry out once more.

Thorin was at Sona's side a second later, wishing to help, his hand over Violet's forehead, whispering to the Mare, "Shhh, gentle one. Honey is not accustomed to being carried," hoping Violet would calm. "I would join her and steady your load."

Violet whinnied and nicked, and Thorin took hold of the saddle, set a boot in the stirrup, and pulled up behind his Thief.

Sona had calmed a bit when he approached, but this?

Suddenly they were pressed together, touching, from chest to shin, as close as back when he pushed her from the Warg; that had been a brief embrace—*but this? Oh Mahal*—Thorin had not thought this through—*Today they would ride together*—She smelled so good, lavender in her hair—*Nungu Azsåluł'abbad Zabal*.

Thorin pressed into her back as he reached around to grab the reins. How solid she was, how good all against him, his arms around her, to retrieve the reins, to keep her safe.

Again, she remained completely tensed all over.

*Had he overstepped?* He could not leave her on Violet unattended; she could not ride on her own. He took over the reins.

He had loved their Dream—*Imhed'ul Nai'adâl*—how he held her, their hands together over the harp strings, how real it felt, and the memory as real as any other—

*But this?* They didn't need to sleep to get here. This felt *good*—*touching you, fully holding you steady on Violet*.

She remained rigid, petrified of riding, or—?

The moving Horse kept Sona's edge up, even though they weren't walking yet. Sona's back held stiff and straight—*for fear*. He wondered how he could make her feel safe riding Violet, hoping it would not take long for her worries to ease.

The Bean wailed in the Bear Man's arms, squirming and clawing to escape back to Sona. Beorn began petting the wee Dog's head in a vain effort to comfort him, but Peanut had none of it, and his cries were fraught with despair.

Sona, seeing the Dog so distressed, for a moment forgot her own, and stared sadly back at the grief struck Bean.

The Bear Man saw her grief. "Peanut and I hope you will come back for a visit some time once you complete your journey. You will always be welcome here."

Sona half smiled back, uneasy on the Horse—*and grieved by goodbyes*—"Thank you, Beorn. We all thank you for your generous hospitality." She relaxed a fraction more—*how well you fit here, Thief*—spotting Chases Butterflies with Smells the Flowers at play. "And if you ever need anything from any of us, don't hesitate to ask."

Beorn glanced at Thorin, blinked once with the barest hint of a nod, his once-manacled wrist hidden under Peanut's squirming body.

Then Sona leaned out! Thorin held her, giving her balance, his hands around her waist, core strong
on her own, sure in his hold; it was almost like dancing on Violet. And he smiled, pleased to see—and feel—her so relaxed now that he sat with her in Violet's saddle—much closer than on the harp—far more solid and real—no sleep required.

Asti. That you would lean out to reach something, or someone, with such a confidence!

She kissed the Bear Man lightly on the cheek.

Thorin held tighter, breathing deeply, knowing this kiss was a token of a Friend's affection, no more. Add to that, it was not nearly as intimate as the touch of her hand to his cheek just yesterday, where Dwalin had landed a hit. Thorin exhaled, glad he had no need to be jealous now.

And Sona told Beorn, "One day your Son will be a great Chieftain among your People."

The Bear Man studied her with a look of hope.

Thorin wished he could explain that Honey knew more than most, but time for talk had passed.

Beorn's eyes fell to the hands holding Sona's waist—my hands—and his expression of hope faded to a sullen frown.

Then Sona kissed the head of the little Bean and took hold of his little fur ears for a final rubbing, before she leaned back in the seat, keeping her back straight, tight once again, as if she suddenly remembered she was riding a Horse.

Thorin was not sure if it was for fear of riding, or the awareness of touching, an idea he found amusing in light of her attitude in their shared Dream at his harp—

Do you remember it, Ē'ze? Surely you do, Naï'adâl—Your ease in the Halls of my Fathers? In Erebor, with me at my harp, commanding the grace of a Queen?

You want this?

"Of course. I wouldn't have asked you otherwise."

As you wish, Thief.

Beorn's face turned to worry when he looked back up at Thorin. "Go now. While you have the light. Your hunters are not far."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: On the road again. Thanks you readers, reviewers, and thank you Jenny-Wren28!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!