The Riven Crown

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/6125821.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom</td>
<td>The Hobbit (Jackson Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Bilbo Baggins/Thorin Oakenshield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Bilbo Baggins, Thorin Oakenshield, Thorin's Company, Bard the Bowman, Thranduil (Tolkien), Tauriel (Hobbit Movies), Legolas Greenleaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags</td>
<td>Friends to Lovers, Misunderstandings, Mutual Pining, middle earth politics, Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies, Hurt/Comfort, Nightmares, POV Alternating, Slow Burn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series</td>
<td>Part 1 of The Riven Crown Universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats</td>
<td>Published: 2016-02-28 Completed: 2017-09-22 Chapters: 31/31 Words: 254269</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Riven Crown

by The_Kingmaker

Summary

‘We may have won the battle, but I fear the war with winter is just beginning.’

The aftermath of war is no laughing matter. Those who died must be honoured, those who are wounded must be healed, and those who remain need food and clothing, peace and sanctuary. With Thorin's life hanging in the balance, it is up to Bilbo and the rest of the Company to rule the rag-tag remnants of Erebor in his place.

Then there is the matter of the gold...

Can Bilbo save both king and kingdom, or is Erebor destined to fall deeper into ruin?
For Thorin

Bilbo waited.

His body ached, his skin chafed by the wind’s howl. Tears bit his eyes, and blood stained his hands. The rock upon which he sat was as hard as the bones of the earth, unyielding, yet he ignored his own discomfort. How could he think about it, when so many lives hung in the balance?

Gone was the purpose of battle. The clash of swords had fallen silent. Axes no longer banged on armour like the heavy beat of drums, and the song of arrows as they soared through the air had reached its end.

The storm had passed, leaving devastation in its wake.

Crude tents offered shelter to the stream of injured as the healers dashed around, frantic to save as many as possible. Those they could treat received hurried bandages and warm cots. Those they couldn’t…

Bilbo’s eyes slid to where the corpses lay, reverently placed to one side. The elves slept in rows, their immortal lives forever extinguished. Their armour shone in copper and gold, clean despite the gore that seemed to stain the very earth itself. The men’s arms were crossed over their chests, kingly, even when clothed in rags. They were not soldiers, but they had fought like it all the same. Weapons still filled the hands of the dwarves, their blades bloodied from the ferocity of the fight even as their bodies were rent and broken.

‘Farewell, Master Burglar.’

A hoarse noise caught in Bilbo’s throat, and he pressed his fist to his mouth as the memory of hot blood and cold stone overwhelmed him.

Above the battle, Ravenhill seemed like another world, where thick ice and barren rock ruled. He had knelt at Thorin’s side, pressing at torn flesh as crimson flowed between his fingers. Promises had fallen from his lips: things about the mountain restored with Thorin upon its throne; long winters at firesides and cool summers as the world blossomed around them.

He had poured his heart out onto the bloody ground until the eagles came, carrying them both down from those stricken slopes. He barely remembered the journey. He had been too busy pleading to any power that would listen; begging that Thorin would survive just a little longer.

Perhaps someone had been listening, because his prayers were answered. Thorin still breathed when the eagles landed. Oin had been there in an instant, cursing black and blue, and his language only got worse as he took in the damage. Chaos had surrounded them, pitching Bilbo this way and that like driftwood caught in the rapids.

He did not remember sitting down, yet here he stayed.

A drab shape moved at the edge of his vision, and the newcomer groaned as he sank onto the stone at Bilbo’s side. The smell of pipe-weed and damp wool filled his nose, its familiarity comforting, and Bilbo shifted to make space for the wizard who had dragged him on this sorry quest.

‘I have done all I can,’ Gandalf murmured, jabbing the end of his staff into the churned mud so that it stood without support, ‘and still I fear it will not be enough.’
Bilbo pursed his lips, tapping the palm of his hand against his knee before squinting into Gandalf’s lined expression. ‘You couldn’t heal them? I thought – at the Carrock …’

‘Azog’s blade bit more deeply than his warg,’ Gandalf’s stooped frame seeming to fold in on itself as he shook his head. ‘Perhaps, if it had not been for the events at Dol Guldur…’ He trailed off, his grizzled face falling slack. ‘I am tired, Bilbo. My power grows thin.’

‘But they live?’ He ducked, trying to get a better look under the drooping brim of that great, grey hat. He could just make out blue eyes, fogged with weary consideration above the hook of the wizard’s nose.

‘For now.’ Gandalf reached into his pocket, pulling out his pipe and a small stick with which he began scraping the bowl. ‘Kili, I feel, has the best chance. An Elven maid by the name of Tauriel is assisting, unasked, in his healing. She gives much, more than she can afford, but she will not be stayed from her path.’ He hummed to himself. ‘Yes, Kili’s future may not be so bleak.’

Bilbo closed his eyes, remembering the young prince as they had brought him to Oin’s care. His wound was not as deep as those suffered by his brother and uncle, but it was higher in his chest. He had seen little to hope for in his few brief glimpses, and Gandalf’s words did not reassure him.

‘Is her power really so great?’ he whispered.

‘Perhaps.’ Gandalf sighed. ‘Perhaps not, but her regard for Kili is unquestionable. She will not stop trying until all hope is lost.’ He puffed on his pipe, unblinking as he watched Bilbo’s face, no doubt gleaning all the questions that he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

‘Fili, despite the odds against him, has not yet left us. Perhaps, in his case, I have brought the healers a little more time. The wound to his body is grave, but could be worse. It is the blow to his head from that fall which is of greater concern.’ A steady stream of smoke escaped Gandalf’s mouth as he exhaled, and the fragrance of pipe-weed thickened: a blessed relief amidst the stench. ‘Even if he wakes, there is no saying how much of the dwarf we knew will remain.’

Bilbo closed his eyes, his fingers clenched over his knees like a vice. His voice strained in his throat, rough across his tongue. ‘And Thorin?’

There was no response, and when he looked up it was to see only hopeless shadows in Gandalf’s gaze. A gnarled hand squeezed his shoulder in brief consolation. ‘I have done all I can,’ he repeated, and Bilbo knew those words were all he had to offer.

Death hung in the air: an expectant fog. Yet nowhere was it as dense and imminent as over the cot of Thorin Oakenshield.

‘Will you be all right, Bilbo?’ Gandalf asked kindly. ‘There is space for you in the healer’s tent, should you require it. I am sure our dwarf friends would want you there.’

He shook his head. It was too much, watching Oin at work, peeling back layers of armour and clothing to reveal the gaping wounds beneath. Besides, Bilbo knew little of healing; he would only get in the way. Best he wait here, as invisible to most as if he still wore the ring on his finger.

‘Very well.’ Gandalf grunted, heaving his weight up on his staff. ‘I have some business to attend, but I shall return before too long.’

‘Where are you going?’ His hurried question made the wizard blink in surprise, and he wished he could swallow back the panic in his words.
‘No further than Dale. I must discover who else has suffered at the hands of the orcs, and discuss what is to become of those who remain.’ He turned away, stepping over a puddle before calling over his shoulder. ‘We may have won the battle, but I fear the war with winter is just beginning.’

As if to emphasise his grim proclamation, sleet began to fall from the leaden sky. Bilbo pulled his coat around himself, watching some nearby dwarves struggling to light a campfire.

When he glanced back, Gandalf was nowhere in sight. He was left alone, torn between relief at the solitude and misery at being abandoned to his own, dark thoughts.

‘Master Baggins?’

Balin’s soft voice carried through the air, and Bilbo tensed, anxiety thrashing in the pit of his belly. He hunched his shoulders, pressing his chin to his chest as if he could disappear. Surely there could only be one reason why Balin searched for him, and news of Thorin’s passing was not something he could face.

He’d said, months ago, that he had found his courage in the Misty Mountains; now all trace of it had fled.

A hand rested on his shoulder: a dead weight, despite Balin’s gentle intentions. ‘He’s asking for you.’

Steadily, the words sank in, penetrating the armour of cold that surrounded him. ‘He – He’s awake?’

‘Not for long, I dare say.’ The dwarf’s smile was crooked. ‘He’s pained, and the poppy Oin gave him will soon send him under again, but he lives yet, and it’s you he wants to see.’

Bilbo ignored the keening ache of his muscles as he rose, stumbling along at Balin’s side. When Thorin’s eyes slid shut up on Ravenhill, he had feared he would never wake again. Now, as he slipped into the tent set aside for the King’s use, he remembered that those fears had not been without their foundations.

Thorin seemed small beneath the furs. A sheen of clammy sweat glossed his grey face, and his lips were almost white amidst the shorn shadow of his beard. His hair tangled around his head, matted and filthy, and his fingers fluttered at his side. The only hint of colour lay in his eyes, their blue glazed, but not gone. Not yet.

A crack of sound drew Bilbo near. He knelt at the bedside, scraping his knees on the coarse sacking that covered the ground. A few oil lamps lit the tent’s interior, casting uncertain shadows across the walls as Oin and Balin busied themselves nearby, offering the illusion of privacy.

‘Master Baggins.’

His name was little more than a gasp, but urgent fingers surrounded his hand. A spasm of agony twisted Thorin’s face, and Bilbo braced him through it, returning his grip with equal fervour.

At last, the rictus eased from Thorin’s expression, and Bilbo’s breath left him in a rush. It was a tiny victory, another sliver of borrowed time, and Thorin knew it as much as he. His hand did not leave Bilbo’s, but tightened.

‘You are not banished.’ His voice cracked and his chest heaved, the bandage around his torso already stained anew. ‘Erebor will always welcome you.’

‘Shhh, Thorin. No, no, it’s –’ Bilbo huffed, shaking his head as he bit back his protests. He had no
wish for Erebor’s sanctuary – no use for it if it held nothing but the ghosts of those he called his friends. He had not come here with the Lonely Mountain or its hoard in mind. All he wanted was to help the dwarves reclaim their home. If he had known this was how it would end…

His thoughts died away, silenced by the realisation that even all this destruction changed nothing. He meant what he’d said on Ravenhill: he was glad to have shared in Thorin’s perils. If the clocks turned back and he was asked to make his choice again, aware that it would end at a bedside that may soon be a grave, his answer would still be the same.

He would not have missed this adventure, not even to spare himself the pain at its end.

‘I stole the Arkenstone.’ He winced at his careless words, but he couldn’t let Thorin do this: sweep it all under the rug as if it no longer mattered. ‘I gave it to those you consider your enemies. I betrayed you.’ He raised his eyebrows, the twist of his lips brief and mirthless. ‘Or have you forgotten that?’

‘I left you no choice.’ A faint smile curved Thorin’s mouth, and the softness in his gaze was more than Bilbo deserved. ‘Your actions were not born of greed or madness.’ His lashes fluttered, his breath leaving him in a sigh as his voice began to slur. ‘If only I could say the same.’

‘No, it’s – you – you were ill.’ Bilbo shook his head. ‘You were not yourself.’

‘A reason. Not an excuse.’ In his hand, Thorin’s grasp slackened, the bite of his fingers lessening until no strength remained.

He surged to his feet, fear choking him as he stared at Thorin’s bandaged chest, waiting for the rise and fall that would show him life still lingered. It took what felt like an age, but at last he found that steady swell, and relief made him light in the head.

‘He sleeps.’ Oin stepped forward, his palm cupping Bilbo’s elbow as he guided him to a stool nearby, nudging it closer to Thorin’s side. ‘Whether he’ll wake again? That’s in Mahal’s hands.’

Bilbo wondered how long he had been watching, ready to intercede. His horn lay on the table; the healer was too busy mixing poultices and potions to bother with the hearing aid, so perhaps he hadn’t heard what they had said. Still, it was clear his attention had never been far from the King.

The twin braids in Oin’s beard had unravelling, the bushy grey unkempt, but despite his harried appearance the old dwarf’s gaze was bright with compassion. He reached out, picking up a bowl of water as well as a clean rag. Both were pressed into Bilbo’s faltering hands without a word. They were rudimentary tools, but he knew how to put them to use. It wasn’t much, but he would help in any way he could.

He barely noticed the silence in the tent as he soaked the fabric, ignoring the cool trail of water over his own skin as he wrung it out before pressing it to Thorin’s brow.

It was slow, patient work, blotting away the grime. He banished the patina of sweat from Thorin’s cheeks, already gaunt with lingering pain, and swiped at the dirt crusted in his hairline from a long battle and a longer journey. He couldn’t recall the last time any of them had a proper bath, and it seemed like the dust of Middle Earth clung to them, set in blood and left to stain.

Oin had cleaned and dressed most of Thorin’s wounds, but his hands, blistered from wielding Orcrist without cease, had not been tended. With care, Bilbo eased the mess from scraped knuckles and swept the mud from around Thorin’s fingernails. He dipped the cloth again and again, smoothing it all away until Thorin lay, as clean and comfortable as he could make him.

When he set the bowl aside, he realised that Balin and Oin were watching him, their expressions
lined with sadness and something he could not name.

‘What is it?’

Balin glanced in Oin’s direction before summoning a strained smile. It bristled his beard, but did nothing to banish the grief in his eyes. ‘You’ve done a fine job, Master Baggins, but did you not think of yourself?’

‘My – myself?’

Oin held up an empty plate. The metal was spotted with age, but Bilbo could still see his own filthy reflection. Blood had dried down his temple, and his hair was a rat’s nest of tangles. More than one tear split the cloth of his borrowed coat, and the fabric was stained beyond repair.

It was enough to make a hobbit stare, and heat flared in his cheeks as he realised Oin had intended for him to bathe his own wounds, rather than those of a dying king.

‘Oh, I–I –’

He was saved from having to give any kind of answer by a shout from across the tent. ‘He wakes!’

The cry made him jump, and he noticed that Fili and Kili also lay nearby. He had been too engrossed in Thorin – too caught up in his faint words and whispered pleas – to notice anyone else. Now he stared, watching Tauriel as she shifted at Kili’s side, her face alight with frantic hope.

‘Eh?’ Oin scooped up his horn, lodging it in his ear and turning in her direction. ‘Say that again?’

‘He wakes! Kili wakes!’ She sucked in a breath, her words falling over one another in haste.

Oin looped the cord of his horn through his belt, dropping it to swing from his hip as he gathered supplies and crossed the tent, his age doing nothing to slow his pace. Bilbo watched him go, locked in a twist of helplessness. He longed to follow, but what could he do? He felt like he did back at the beginning of their adventure, a spare wheel with little use.

‘Fear not, Master Baggins,’ Balin urged, perching on a nearby crate. He winced beneath the burden of his armour, and the metal clanked as he shifted around, trying to get comfortable. ‘Oin will do all he can for Kili. He cares greatly. Though not, perhaps, as much as that young elf.’

There was a sparkle in his eyes, just a glimmer, but it eased the bleak chill of the air. Bilbo slumped beside him, declining the offered pipe and watching the weed in the bowl glow before Balin exhaled. ‘Things may seem grim, but I have faith. There’s none so stubborn as the line of Durin.’

A huff of laughter wheezed in Bilbo’s chest, and he bit it back before it could become a sob. ‘I’d noticed.’ His gaze drifted to Thorin’s face, his strong profile soft now as he slept. ‘A trait of kings, I suppose.’

Balin hummed in agreement. ‘Indeed, and Thorin rules still, in name, if nothing else. With no heir in adequate health to step up and take command, it falls to his advisors. The stem of the pipe clanked against his teeth as he chewed on it. ‘It’s up to me to ensure that a kingdom remains for Thorin to rule, and at a time like this, that’s never easy.’

He frowned, knowing enough of Balin by now to suspect he was hinting at something. ‘Why are you telling me this?’

The dwarf sighed, scratching his cheek as he spelt it out for him. ‘Because, Master Baggins. I am not
Thorin’s only advisor. He considered all of the Company to hold that title, including you. If you have any clever little ideas up your sleeve, now’s the time.’

‘Like bargaining the Arkenstone, you mean?’ His voice sounded bitter, even to his own ears.

‘Better it be with men and elves than in the hands of a power-mad king.’ Balin drew in a breath, exhaling a cloud of smoke. ‘Everyone has their strength. We need to make the most of that. My brother confers with Lord Dain to assess our remaining forces, while Bifur, Bofur and Gloin are building more tents. Oin leads the healers, while Bombur, Dori and Ori are sorting supplies: food, clothes and clean water.’

‘What about Nori?’ Bilbo asked, not missing the one name notably absent. He had not seen him since the battle, and a sudden dank horror stirred in his gut. Had he fallen?

‘I listen.’

The dwarf in question loitered at the tent flaps, his coiffed hair flattened and his face wet from the sleet. He looked wind-bitten and cold, but there was a cunning light in his eyes as he continued.

‘There’s mutterings in every camp. The dwarves accept the authority of the Company, for now at least.’ Nori rubbed his hands together, holding them out to warm them near the flame of one of the oil lamps. ‘The men are a ragged, sorry lot, more refugees than anything else. There’s resentment there.’

‘And the elves?’

Nori gave Balin a dark look, conveying his thoughts on the subject of that race with ease. ‘They hover on the edges. No hindrance yet, but no help either. They look to their own.’

‘Most of them,’ Bilbo pointed out. ‘One, at least, is here, doing what she can. We shouldn’t ignore her efforts.’

Nori inclined his head in agreement. ‘We owe her a great deal, from what I’ve seen. Possibly the life of a prince. If only they’d do the same for the King.’

Balin grunted. ‘We’ll not be so fortunate. There’s only so much the lass can do, and her kin will not be so eager to offer aid.’

‘Has anyone asked?’ Bilbo raised his eyebrows as he received two incredulous stares. ‘Has anyone even spoken to Thranduil since the battle?’

‘Gandalf’s soothing ruffled feathers,’ Nori conceded. ‘Either that or interfering; it’s hard to tell with wizards.’

‘The King of Mirkwood is unlikely to spare the life of a dwarf he loathes.’ Balin shook his head. ‘Thranduil will not trouble himself.’

‘Maybe not.’ Bilbo got to his feet, pressing his knuckles to his lips as he thought. His stomach thrashed with painful anxiety and his hands still shook, but he ignored it. Maybe he couldn’t heal Thorin’s wounds, but perhaps he could bring someone who could.

He didn’t have much, after all, but he did have good manners.

‘What does he want? Bard needs the gold. He’s got people to feed and shelter, but Thranduil has the forest, and the elves had no reason to march on Erebor. Why did they bother to come at all?’
'The jewels of Lasgalen.' Balin’s answer came quick and sure. ‘He says they are owed to him.’

‘Are they?’

The awkward silence that followed was the only response Bilbo needed, and he threw up his hands in disbelief. ‘Give him the gems. Ask for his help.’

‘And if he refuses?’

‘Then at least we will have tried, and if nothing else, we’ll see the back of him.’ He scrubbed at his face before pointing a finger towards the sliver of light that led to the outside world. ‘You said it yourself, there’s enough resentment as it is. If we can remove even a bit of it, our job becomes that much easier.’

Balin took one last draw from his pipe, his eyes twinkling at Bilbo through the smoke. When he finished, he tapped the clay vessel on the heel of his boot, letting the ashes drift away before climbing to his feet.

‘And that’s what I meant about strengths, Master Baggins. You’re neither dwarf, nor elf, nor man. You have no care for the gold beyond its use as a tool. You find the obvious path that the rest of us are too blind to see.’ He nodded his head, indicating Thorin’s sleeping form. ‘It was the same kind of thinking that took us on this quest in the first place, for better or worse.’

‘So you’ll do it?’ Bilbo asked. After so long raging against Thorin’s possessive madness, Balin’s easy acceptance seemed hard to believe.

‘Oh, not me. You.’ He smiled as Bilbo stuttered. ‘I’ll be with you, of course, but you’ve dealt with Thranduil before, and he may listen to a hobbit where he would refuse to even look upon a dwarf.’

Bilbo half-turned, his chest tight at the thought of stepping out of the tent. Here, Thorin still lived. It was an anchor point; a gateway between one place and another. If he left, would Thorin drift away, never to return?

It was a foolish fear – death would claim its own whether Bilbo stayed or fled – but he couldn’t escape the idea. It paralysed him, making him dither, trying to muster excuses even as he warred with himself.

The snap of canvas scattered Bilbo’s thoughts as Dwalin ducked through the threshold. The fur at his shoulders carried snowflakes like stars, and his armour was dark with orc blood. He bent his head in quick conference with his brother, his words too low for Bilbo to make out.

The gleam of weapons caught his eye, and he stared at the two guards who followed, solemn and serious. They were not the polished, processional kind, but thick-set dwarves who meant business. They stood halfway between the cots and the outside world, ready to challenge anyone who approached.

‘He’ll be safe, lad,’ Dwalin promised, folding his arms as he noticed Bilbo eyeing the soldiers. ‘These are harsh times, but I’ll not let Thorin out of my sight, nor anyone I don’t know and trust near.’

‘You think someone might …’

‘Finish him off?’ Dwalin raised an eyebrow. ‘Aye. Politics.’ He sneered, looking as if he were tempted to spit but thought better of it. ‘I’d like to see anyone try it.’
‘Are you coming, laddie?’

A bright vee of light seeped over Balin’s shoulder. It struck a white line through the tent’s shadowed interior, and Bilbo sucked in a breath. In here, he could only watch and wait, a helpless bystander to the drama unfolding before him. Yet in the bare, stricken world of the battlefield, perhaps there was something he could do to help.

Not for the sake of the men, nor the elves, nor even himself.

For Thorin.
Pain bloomed from his belly, wrapping its vines between his ribs. Every heartbeat was a labour, and each gasp felt like dragon-fire as it scoured his throat. Tattered images and slips of sound wove through the shadows, little more than phantoms to taunt him. Glimmers of fear shattered like raindrops on stone, while the promise of heat kissed the edges of his mind, tempting and deadly.

It would be a relief to slip beyond it all, down into the darkness where neither light nor life could reach him, but his body was as stubborn as his mind. Azog’s blade may have torn him asunder, but it had bestowed a slow death. He would not race into Mahal’s halls.

Not like his sister-sons.

New agony suffused him, and he dragged his eyes open, bringing the world into focus. The tent canvas billowed, a breathing creature in the wind that stirred around them. The lamps wavered, casting capering shadows, and Thorin tried to make sense of things his fog-thick head could only see as delusions.

His fingers twitched, spasming against the furs that covered them, but try as he might he could not reach out. The effort was too great and his body too spent to attempt it. A noise cracked in his throat, and a rush of confused sound reached him before a grip encircled his forearm, guiding him back from the temptation of oblivion’s abyss.

It was not the small, strong hand of Bilbo, he noticed, but meaty fingers he’d seen wrapped around a sword or axe more often than not. For a moment, he failed to focus, and when that grim face finally swam into view, he wished he could shut out the sight once more.

No smile cracked Dwalin’s chapped lips and no joy lit his eyes. His beard was matted. His armour hung from him, battered and stained. Grime streaked his skin, half obscuring the bold lines of the tattoos that marked his flesh, and haggard shadows clouded his face.

‘Fili.’ The name rasped in Thorin’s throat, broken and wretched as another joined it. ‘Kili.’

His words were neither a question nor an accusation. Who else could he blame for their deaths but himself? It had been his stories of a lost kingdom that had lit the fire in their veins, his word they had followed, and this was where it had led them. There would be no mighty city under the mountain; only the chill of a stone tomb awaited them.

He expected Dwalin to bow his head and murmur familiar, unwanted words of sympathy. He was not prepared for those massive shoulders to straighten as he jerked his thumb towards the other side of the tent.

‘Living yet, the same as when you last asked.’

Thorin frowned, his muddled mind trying to make sense of Dwalin’s pronouncement. Had he been awake before? He tried to remember, but confusion blurred the line between dream and reality. The only thing he could recall were Bilbo’s words and his desperate grip on his hand. Unless that, too, had been nothing but a fantasy.

‘I saw them slain…’

Dwalin’s brow drew down into a scowl, his tangled beard whispering against his armour as he shook his head. ‘You saw what that mongrel orc wanted you to see, same as the rest of us. He gave them
no mercy, but they live all the same.’ His fingers tightened on Thorin’s arm. ‘Listen to what I’m
telling you. Kili and Fili are not gone yet. No more than you are.’

Relief was an alien sensation, washing through his chest: one soothing moment of respite. They
lived, and if he had the strength in him to even lift his head, he would already be at their bedside,
injuries be damned.

Dwalin must have seen his intentions in his face, because his hand shifted, moving to Thorin’s
shoulder to keep him in place. ‘None of that,’ he warned. ‘Oin’d have my hide.’

Thorin closed his eyes, bringing all the power of his tattered mind to bear. It was a gargantuan effort,
but he finally managed to move his arm enough to clasp Dwalin’s wrist, trying to convey the surge
of emotion through the frailty of his fingers. It was worth it to feel the might and certainty of him: a
force on which Thorin could rely. Dwalin would watch Fili and Kili through the day and night and
all the many years beyond. They would recover, and Erebor would be theirs. He could ask for
nothing more.

Except…

‘The burglar?’

Dwalin’s deep chuckle reminded Thorin of sharing ale around the fire, of bawdy jokes and bright,
shocking laughter. It was a sound from their past, rarely heard these days, and he fought off his
exhaustion, trying to read the knowing expression on his old friend’s face.

‘Runnin’ errands with Balin, but I doubt he’ll stay away for long.’ White teeth flashed in the gloom.
‘He’ll be here when you wake again.’

Confidence underscored his words, as if there was no question of Thorin’s recovery. It was a lie;
they both knew it. Dwalin had seen too much of battle to believe he would survive. Perhaps he could
allow himself such comforts, but Thorin would permit only ruthless clarity.

He was dying.

Let his actions become beautiful in the elegant untruths of the scribes. Let him fall into legend, made
more glorious with the passing of every year and the fading of memory. There was but one thing he
would have set in stone: unfaltering. His last command.

‘He stays.’ His lashes fluttered madly, a cold sweat birthing along his brow as his words faltered
beneath the strain. ‘The hobbit stays, Dwalin, for as long as he wishes it. There will be no exile or
disgrace.’

If he were stronger, he would have mustered a scowl at the twist of amusement across his friend’s
face. As it was, he could only wheeze in pain as Dwalin bowed his head. ‘Aye, I hear you. He stays,
and no harm will come to him. Not while your Company remains. On that you have my word.’

His friend’s form was little more than a hulking silhouette against the lamp light as he got to his feet.
He towered over Thorin, but there was nothing threatening in the line of his body. That craggy
expression was pensive but wherever Dwalin’s thoughts had taken him, he did not choose to share.
Instead, he straightened his back, his brow drawn down over his dark eyes as he bowed low, one fist
clenched firm over his heart.

This was not the grudging sign of respect given to a king lost in madness, but the deep devotion of
one brother-in-arms to another. Dwalin swore his fealty and offered a renewal of his oaths without
uttering a single word. In time, he would do the same for Fili and Kili, his allegiance to the line of
Durin unwavering.

It felt like farewell, and a sigh rushed between Thorin’s lips as he let the thought take him away, drawing him down into the waiting gloom.

Perhaps hours passed; there was no way to be sure. The sun and moon could have wheeled above him and he would have paid them no heed. Instead, it was the dreams that brought him some glimmer of awareness, rising in his mind like creeping damp.

Bubbles of sound and light popped, their shattered edges honed into blades. The clash and cry of battle washed over him, muffled as if his head was stuck underwater. Blood’s iron tang coated his tongue, thick and cloying, but he could not spit to free himself of the flavour. Coldness wrapped him in an icy vice as pain bled across his skin.

It was torture beyond bearing. Every fibre of his being stretched to breaking point. His jaw ached from barring his cries between clenched teeth, and his chest was aflame. He wanted to claw at his flesh, to drag out whatever shard tormented him without cease, but he was too weak.

His only choice was to succumb.

With acceptance came change, and Thorin realised that dreams must still have him in their grasp. How else could the scene alter itself so readily?

Erebor’s shadows enfolded him, safe and intimate. Here, beneath the shield of stone, the night was absolute, with neither shape nor sound to define it. Deliriously, he wondered if he had already been entombed, left to rest in a half-dreaming state until the remaking of the world.

Yet, no. Now he came to look, there was light to be seen. The shadows lessened, shrinking beneath a sallow glow, and some chittering anxiety beneath his breast fell calm as the vision unfolded before him.

The treasure hall.

Mounds of gold stretched in all directions, the vast hoard his for the taking. His gaze lingered on the curve of coin and the harsh geometry of gemstones. Uncut starlight gleamed in the rough, while others lay polished bright in riotous settings of precious metal. It was the culmination of his people’s efforts: their pleasure and their pride. His family may have perished, the numbers of the dwarven race dwindling with time and distance, but here their spirits remained eternal, captured within the products of their craft.

With a shaking hand, he trailed his fingertips through the nearest pile, sensing a pulse of power and history. He had fought for this: not just the great battle outside Erebor’s gates, or the many that had filled the intervening years since their exile from this place. He had also waged war upon the disbelief of those who had stood against him. He had broken himself apart on the rocks of his own memories, chasing a past he was never sure they could reclaim.

Now it was his.

“\textit{I will not part with it. Not one coin.}”

The words rumbled forth, cloaked in shadow and seeping through the cracks in the great, broken masonry around him. It seemed to come from the core of the mountain itself, and the hairs on the back of Thorin’s neck prickled with awareness of those terrible, triumphant tones.

He knew that voice. It had taunted him as they ran through these very halls, chased by the ever-
present threat of fire and death. But no, that could not be. Smaug had perished, tumbling from the sky to taint the lake with his rot. He was gone.

‘You are nothing but a ghost!’ His words echoed towards the distant ceiling, lost in the endless gloom. Once lamps and mirrors flooded every corner of Erebor with light. Now, the darkness reigned, and Thorin found himself arguing with shadows.

“Am I?” The roar seeped up through the soles of his boots, shaking him to his bones. “Your denials will get you nowhere, Thorin, son of Thrain.”

‘I defeated you!’ he snarled, searching the crumbling walls for any sign of the wyrm and finding nothing but ancient stones and endless darkness. ‘You and your sickness!’

“Then why do your dreams bring you here? Why is it cold coin and careless gems that warm your heart even as death cuts you to the quick? It is not your beloved mountain that you mourn, but THIS!”

The gold slithered down in a metallic rush. It spewed around his feet, never quite touching him as a hot, foul wind lifted his hair from his face. The air reeked; not the clean scent of the smelter and forge, but a stench of sulphurous brimstone. His hand clenched, reaching for his absent sword as every muscle tensed for a fight.

And far above his head, the twilight took shape.

Fire bled through Smaug’s scales, igniting the vast bellows of his chest. His jewel-encrusted belly twinkled as his wings unfurled. The rush of their movement grew to a howling gale as the dragon reared up, filling his vision with its horrific presence.

“This is your curse, Thorin Oakenshield, and there is no escaping it. Gold will be your downfall. Not your slave, but your master, just like your grandfather before you!”

Denial roared in his chest: a shapeless sound of rage and refusal. It would not reclaim him, this sickness of the mind. Once already he had broken his promises and turned against those most loyal to him, all for the sake of gold’s gleam. He had left his kin to die fighting his battles while he hid within these hallowed halls and strove to overcome the madness that caged him.

He had thought the struggle won, but now he realised that the temptation lingered. The wealth of the mountain still called to him, even as he lay on the brink of death.

He would not succumb. He would not!

“As if you have a choice.”

Air rushed into Thorin’s mouth as his body lurched, trying to break free from the grasp of Smaug’s triumph. The nightmare clung to him like cobwebs, and he writhed on the rushes of his cot, panting and stricken.

Hands brushed against his skin and a wet cloth patted his brow, but he couldn’t marry names to the familiar faces above him. They were speaking, offering comfort perhaps, or simply tending the wounds that tore at him, but their words were babble to his ears.

A shallow bowl pressed against his lips, and he tried not to gag at the taste of the poppy-infused liquid that washed down his throat. Vile, but necessary, he knew its purpose. It would dull the pain and make his slow passing a more comfortable journey, but it would also rob him of his clarity,
sending him back to where the dragon waited.

The retch came hard upon him, and strong hands guided him onto his side as bile flooded his mouth. His body howled at him, his spine twisting, and he clutched at his bandages, lost to his misery.

‘No.’ He croaked at last, once his body had stopped heaving to expel all his stomach contained. ‘No more.’

‘But Thorin –’

‘No.’ He sagged back onto the bundle of cloth that passed as a pillow, setting his teeth against the pain. He would rather spend his final hours aware of the world around him, of his kin and his Company, than lost in dreams of the dragon and its gold lust.

Oin sighed, shaking his head and tutting as he set about cleaning up the mess on the floor. He did it with a healer’s lack of fuss, sighing only at the blood that mixed with the contents. ‘Without poppy to help, it will get worse,’ he warned, ‘both the pain and the fever.’

He reached for a coarse cup, dipping a spoon inside and dribbling cool, clear water into Thorin’s mouth. It was the tiniest touch of liquid, more to soothe his sore throat and wash away the repulsive taste than anything else, but Oin’s care was obvious. He conducted every task with absolute patience, swiftly moving on to the arduous job of changing the bloodstained bandages.

‘Thank you,’ Thorin whispered when he was done, shivering under the furs that Oin arranged across his body.

‘Don’t thank me yet.’

The heaviness of Oin’s words did not pass beneath Thorin’s attention, and he twisted his lips into a rueful smile. ‘I shall thank you when I please. For my sister-sons, as well as myself.’

A panicked thought rushed over him. He remembered Dwalin’s presence, his reassurance that Fili and Kili both lived, but where was he now? Had it been real, or was it merely a figment of his imagination – an attempt to bring himself comfort in his final hours?

Turning his head to the right, he squinted across the tent, at last able to take in the size of it. Dishes of varying quality were scattered around, pressed into service by Oin so he could mix his herbs. Greasy fat burned in the lamps, lending the air a rancid scent that no amount of incense could hide. It gave a grubby light to the shadows, allowing him to see the sleeping faces of those on the beds nearby.

If he had not already been told that they lived, he would fear them gone from this world. Kili was grey-skinned, and over the short distance, Thorin could hear the rattle of each breath passing his open lips. As he watched, those young features twisted – tormented by pain, dreams or both – before falling still once more.

In Fili, it was not his suffering that caught Thorin’s attention, but his silence. He lay on Kili’s far side, his face clean and his body motionless. He neither stirred nor twitched, and Thorin could see the dark bruise clouding one cheek, seeping from beneath the bandage that swathed his brow and covered his left eye.

Oin cleared his throat, and Thorin dragged his gaze away to look into the healer’s rumpled features. ‘Kili has awoken once or twice, but fever takes him. I fear infection in his chest.’

‘And Fili?’
‘Is as you see him, and has been since we gathered him from the mountainside. He will take water, but he will not wake.’ Oin sighed, his beard bristling around pursed lips as he cast a weary eye over his patients.

‘How – how long?’ Thorin frowned, tasting his words before he clarified his question. ‘How long since the battle?’

Oin would know all too well how fever and herbs could muddle the passage of days and nights. Here, where the lamps never died and the work was never over, it was doubly confusing. ‘Less time than you think. It has been only hours since you were brought down from Ravenhill. The evening of that day has now come.’ He moved to the tent flap, pulling it aside so that Thorin could see the twilight beyond, punctuated by campfires and lanterns.

It was like looking into the world of the living, busy and purposeful. Dwarves and men alike strode between other, bigger shelters. Some carried bowls and buckets, treading over the churned earth with more speed than grace. Others stood around stewing pots, doling out what little hot food was to be had. There were no voices raised in song or celebration. Only quiet talk stirred the air, half hidden beneath the shriek and whistle of the wind.

A flash of colour made Thorin blink, and he stared at the she-elf who dashed into the tent, her red hair bright in the lamp light and her pale, thin hands clenched around some bits of twig. Her cheeks were flushed and sweat left tracks in the grime that covered her face, but she seemed indifferent to her appearance. She did not say a word as she hurried towards one of the benches where Oin worked, crushing the herbs and tipping the fragments into water.

‘You found it?’ Oin demanded. ‘In this forsaken place, you found it?’

‘I knew where to look,’ she said, stirring the concoction and counting under her breath. Her knuckles were cracked and bleeding around the cup in her hands, but she seemed ignorant of her own injuries as she moved to Kili’s side.

Thorin’s gasping groan caught her attention, and she turned to stare at him where he lay. Now he could see her face fully, he realised she was the captain of Thranduil’s guard; the elf-maid who had seen them all confined within the dungeons of Mirkwood to rot.

‘No elves,’ he wheezed, wishing he could drag her away. He could not speak of their lies and treachery; their endless indifference to the plight of his people. He could only repeat himself, trying to instil his fading words with some element of command. ‘No elves.’

Her stricken expression changed to one of resolve, her full lips pinching tight as her eyes grew hard. ‘And if it is an elf who can save one of your kin, would you still turn her away?’ The quiet question seemed to fill the tent from one stretched seam to the other, robbing Thorin of the last of his strength. ‘Would you value your disagreement with my people above his life?’

Her fingers tightened around the cup as she stepped towards his bedside, bending down and tipping the contents so he could see the liquid within. ‘Kili’s chest is full of poison. He can barely breathe. Your healers can mend his wound, but not this.’

‘And an elf can?’ There was no power in his sneer, and he shut his eyes, listening to her move away. A spoon rattled as she dripped the potion between Kili’s parted lips, and her soft words reached Thorin’s ears.

‘I can try.’
‘Why?’ He turned towards Oin when he got no answer, watching the old dwarf take a seat at his bedside. ‘Why would she help?’

Oin tapped his horn against his palm, running his thumb over the beaten metal before letting it fall. ‘She helps because her heart gives her no other choice. She saved his life in Laketown when his leg began to fester. She raced to his aid when he faced Bolg and saw him brought low by that bastard’s blade.’

He looked across the tent, and Thorin followed his gaze, forcing himself to focus on the tender expression on her face as she ministered to Kili. ‘She carried him down the mountain, though she herself was hurt, and she tends him where others would lose hope, because she cannot bear the alternative.’

Thorin watched as she worked, diligent and focused on the dwarf who lay on the bed before her. She had eyes only for Kili, and he had caught the glances his nephew cast her way during their brief meetings on their journey. He had dismissed it at the time: a fleeting fancy of Kili’s impressionable youth. He had deemed it below his notice and beneath his concern.

Now it seemed he had been mistaken.

The greasy slide of his thoughts was becoming harder to control. Shivers racked his frame, making his teeth chatter and his bones ache. His eyes burned like embers in their sockets, craving sleep, but he fought against it, struggling to speak as his body’s betrayal intensified.

‘Her name?’

Oin’s shaggy eyebrows lifted in surprise, and he stooped closer, pressing his horn into his ear. ‘Her name?’ he repeated, blinking when Thorin managed to jerk his head in a nod. ‘Her name is Tauriel.’

Thorin knew there was little he could offer her, and he suspected there was even less she would accept. She did not hover at Kili’s bedside with thoughts of politics in her head. It was where her heart told her to be. She left only to secure what may help him recover. It was that – the hopeful promise of his healing – that would be her reward.

‘Will she succeed?’

Oin’s eyes clouded as his shoulders moved in a tired shrug. ‘She has a better chance of it than the rest of us. I had done all I could for him hours ago. She was the one who thought of Tressanbane, and who found the herb when I would not have known where to look.’ He reached out, taking Thorin’s hand in his callused palm. ‘Another day and night and we will know more.’

He thought of his body, ravaged by Azog’s blade and sinking into fever. A day and a night? Such a time was beyond him. Thorin could feel his hours drawing to an end, seeping away as surely as the blood that stained his bandages. Unlike Kili, there was no higher power who would come to his aid.

It seemed that the fate of his sister-sons would be left in the hands of others, to save or squander as was their wish. He would have to trust that they fought their wounds and roused once more to rule the kingdom he left behind.

His days were done.
The Jewels Of Lasgalen

Bilbo wrinkled his nose, shifting the weight of the large box in his arms. His fingers were numb around its bulky corners, and he struggled not to drop the chest and the treasures within as he stumbled over the uneven ground.

Dusk had darkened to the thick of night, turning the camp into a world of shadows and firelight. Tents loomed like snow drifts, and people sought out what shelter they could from the ravenous wind that tore across the land. Cooking fires filled the air with the smell of wood ash and coarse stew. It was meagre fare, but Bilbo’s belly growled all the same. He could not remember the last time he’d eaten. It seemed there was always something more important to be doing.

‘Are you sure this will work, laddie?’

Balin trotted along at his side, one hand on his axe and the other on the awkward bend of Bilbo’s elbow to catch him if he tripped. Behind them, a couple of guards clanked along, deterring anyone who thought it might be a good idea to stop them about their business.

‘No. No, I’m not, but it’s the only idea I’ve got.’

‘I do not relish the thought of explaining this to Thorin.’

‘If we don’t hurry, you might not have to worry about that.’ He bit his lip, but the callous comment had already escaped his clenched teeth, forming whorls in the frosty air. He didn’t mean to speak of it, but word was that the King had sunk deep into his fever, lost to dreams and pain. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t—’

Balin shook his head and patted Bilbo on the arm. ‘Why apologise when you speak naught but the truth, Master Baggins? Thorin is running out of time.’ He sighed, his eyes bright and startling in the gloom. ‘It’s a blessing he ever made it down from that mountain.’

Bilbo kept walking, wishing there had been time to return to the healers’ tent. He’d not seen Thorin since mid-afternoon, when he had sat at his bedside and listened to impassioned promises of sanctuary, rather than exile. Since then, he’d had nothing but rumour and the occasional report from Nori to sustain him, and none of the news was good.

Thorin faded with every passing moment, slipping further beyond the reach of the world. Bilbo feared that, even if he achieved the impossible – if he somehow convinced Thranduil to offer his powers of healing to the King and his nephews – it would be too little, too late.

Ahead of them, another tent loomed, its fabric of better quality and its structure more solid than any they had passed. The crest of a rearing stag decorated the cloth in subtle embroidery, and the ropes holding it in place were thick and sure. Half a dozen Elven guards stood sentry, their armour gleaming. The spears in their hands stabbed upwards into the night, and their shields shone in the glow from the campfires.

He glanced at Balin, sharing a meaningful look. It was no surprise that Thranduil was well-protected in a place such as this, where temporary allies could turn foul at any moment. The set of the soldiers’ faces was far from welcoming, and Bilbo grimaced beneath their stares.

Two spears clanged downwards to bar his way, and he heard the Dwarven guards behind him shift their axes. It was a show of strength from both sides, like two bucks posturing with no real intention to fight. The elves would not dare start a confrontation amidst the tenuous peace, the same as the
dwarves would do no more than mutter and glare.

‘I need to speak to King Thranduil.’ Bilbo raised his voice, making sure that the occupants of the tent would hear his words. ‘I have something that I would like to return to him.’

He lifted the lid of the box a fraction, allowing the crystalline glow of the gems to seep around the breach. No words could do the stones within justice, and they required no introduction. Not to an elf.

The sentries blocking their path shared a glance, communicating with wide eyes and wrinkled brows. At length, one of them turned away, ducking inside to confer with her king. It was more than Bilbo had expected. He and Balin had discussed what they would do if the guards tried to take the gems from them. Now those rehearsed arguments died on his lips as they stood waiting in the cold.

‘Remember,’ Balin urged, ‘each of the Company holds the power to lead in Thorin’s stead. Dain of the Iron Hills and his counsel agreed. They will not interfere with negotiations unless we request their aid. Nor will any dwarf stand in your way, myself included.’

‘What – what do you mean?’

‘I mean, Master Baggins, that whatever you do today – whatever you say – you will have the support not just of the Company, but of the Crown of Erebor.’ Balin managed a tight-lipped smile. ‘Just try not to start another war, eh?’

A squeak caught in Bilbo’s throat as the enormity of what Balin was placing on his shoulders became clear. He was not here accompanying the regent. Instead, it was he who had to convince Thranduil of their cause. Balin was present as an extra pair of hands and a touch of authority, but he was leaving everything else to Bilbo.

Frankly, that seemed like a terrible idea.

Before he could protest, the guard returned, pulling aside the canvas and revealing the familiar interior. It was the same space where he had last met with Bard and Thranduil, but now the cold floor was covered in oilskins and furs. Braziers burnt in the corners, their sweet smoke seeping through the tent’s seams, while food and wine lay upon the table for the King’s enjoyment.

This time, Bard was not present. Instead, the elf Bilbo knew to be Thranduil’s son, Legolas, sat in the corner, tending his weapons with quiet diligence. He checked the fletching of his arrows and the string of his bow, as well as some blades Bilbo suspected had been captured from the enemy. In his position, Fili or Kili would have made a show of it, adding some malice to their actions, but Legolas moved with calm practice, sparing a nod of greeting before looking to his father.

Thranduil sat in his throne, a picture of grace. There was no sign of the bloodied, war-worn being Bilbo had glimpsed the previous day. His appearance was immaculate, from the crown on his brow to the soles of his boots. Long fingers cradled a cup of wine, which he sipped with every appearance of enjoyment. Only his pale, unblinking eyes gave away his interest as they settled on the box Bilbo clutched to his chest.

‘Your previous efforts at bribery did not have the outcome you desired, Halfling,’ he mused, his voice soft and low. ‘Your dwarves would have seen you thrown from the ramparts. Tell me, for what do you barter this time?’

‘Nothing.’ He cleared his throat and tried to swallow his dislike of the term “Halfling”. It was rarely said with kindness, and in Thranduil’s voice it sounded no more than an insult. ‘What I mean is, any further assistance the elves offer would be gratefully received.’ He closed his eyes, trying to smother
the wave of desperation that consumed him. The survival of three companions – friends – lay in the Elf King’s hands, but if he let that show, then Thranduil could well deny them out of spite. ‘However, I do not bring what is rightfully yours and expect repayment.’

At his side, Bilbo felt Balin grow tense, and he wished he’d had more time to go over the details of his plan. As a hobbit, so far removed from the conflict between dwarves and elves, making concessions was no hardship. It caused him no pain or dishonour to say the jewels belonged in elvish hands.

To the dwarves, it was not such a simple matter.

‘Rightfully mine?’ The arch of Thranduil’s eyebrows lifted, all mockery and surprise as he looked at Balin. ‘The dwarves would not give up what I am owed so easily.’ His gaze grew searching, the pale silver sharpening to a spear point as he glanced between the two of them. ‘Even on the brink of war I was denied. This must be some form of deception.’

He rose to his feet, towering over them both, and Bilbo did not miss the fact that Legolas watched them, his expression bland but his gaze intelligent. The unfaltering scrutiny made Bilbo aware of his torn clothes and dishevelled appearance. He wished he’d had time to at least wipe the mud off his face!

‘It is no trick.’ Balin’s firm denial brooked no argument, pitched to cut through the clamour of a mining hall rather than the peaceful confines of a tent. His ruddy face was locked into stern, diplomatic lines, and Bilbo watched the kindly dwarf he had grown to consider a friend don the unshakable appearance of a royal advisor. ‘Will you not see for yourself that which you are offered, King Thranduil?’

Bilbo opened the box, narrowing his eyes as the candlelight scattered, caught and reflected by the breath-taking jewels in his grasp. He had sought them out himself, picking his way through the foothills of the hoard to retrieve them.

The glow from the chest turned Thranduil’s pale skin to starlight as it cracked through the impassive mask of his expression. Gone was the cool serenity of his countenance, and the soft amazement that took its place was clouded with melancholy.

With trembling fingers, he reached forward, his lips pinched as if he expected Bilbo to slam the lid and withdraw what was offered. A desperate longing filled his face, yet it was not hunger for wealth or riches. Sentiment marked him, rooted as deeply in Thranduil’s heart as the trees of his forest.

‘They are real,’ he whispered in disbelief.

‘And they are yours.’ With arms weak from the awkward burden, Bilbo pushed the box into Thranduil’s grasp. As soon as he was sure that the gems would not spill at their feet, he stepped back, leaving the elf holding his prize.

He glanced at Balin, his stomach twisting in knots that only slackened when the old dwarf nodded his approval. He had known, of course, that Bilbo intended to give the Jewels of Lasgelen to the elves. As much as it would pain any dwarf to surrender in such a controversial dispute, there were greater things at stake than pride.

‘And how do I know that whichever king next sits upon Erebor’s throne will honour this act?’ Thranduil demanded, his voice growing strong and cold. ‘I am used to the deception of the dwarves, Halfling. I have never known them to come bearing gifts.’
‘It’s – uh – it’s Master Baggins, if you don’t mind,’ he said, ignoring the crease of annoyance across Thranduil’s brow. ‘And this is Balin, Son of Fundin, advisor and regent.’ The information was not new; the elves would have heard them state their names at the boundary of the tent, but Bilbo decided it was time to give the proceeds a bit more formality.

‘A position which everyone in Thorin Oakenshield’s Company holds while the King and his heirs heal.’ Balin’s clarification was smooth and to the point, taking Bilbo’s mention of his rank and bestowing it in turn. ‘We speak for the kingdom of Erebor, and none will go against us, now or in the future.’

Thranduil watched them through narrowed eyes, closing the box and setting it in pride of place at the side of his throne before reclining once more in his seat. ‘Yes, King Thorin’s riven crown, divided between the eleven who remain: his most loyal and trusted. Tell me, is he aware of the power you have seized for yourselves while he and his line breathe their last?’

Balin’s only response was silence, and Thranduil smirked, reaching for his wine. ‘Once they lie entombed, what then? Another war as you fight over Erebor and the riches within, each claiming kingship?’ His teeth flashed as his lips twisted in a sneer. ‘Thorin Oakenshield will not heal and nor, it seems, will either of those he has named his heir. His power, and by extension yours, is already on the wane.’

Bilbo shook his head, wishing he could run from the bitter truths that spilled from Thranduil’s lips. There was no grief in his words, nor anything akin to sympathy. He spoke as if discussing the weather rather than the fate of a people, their kingdom and the lands that surrounded it.

‘You speak as if you believe that would be to your benefit,’ Balin said mildly, a smile bristling his beard before it fell from his face like a stone. ‘Believe me, it would not. Without strength upon the throne, Erebor will fall into the hands of the orcs. Perhaps they will not come this year, or the next, but return they will.’

‘You pay too much heed to the fretting of wizards.’ Thranduil waved a hand, indicating the battlefield outside. ‘Any orc that survived will have fled back to the shadows. They will not return, and whichever dwarf rules Erebor is of no concern to me.’

‘I would beg to differ,’ Balin murmured, a wry chuckle rumbling in his chest. ‘There’s good and bad to be had. I doubt you would want Dain and his new-fangled weaponry so near the borders of Greenwood.’

The cup halted halfway to Thranduil’s lips, hovering there untouched before he sipped the drink within, silent but watchful.

‘At best, Dain would leave you be, offering you no share in the wealth or trade that passes through the mountain. At worst –’ Balin rolled his shoulders in an expressive shrug, his armour clanking. ‘He cares for elves even less than Thorin.’

Bilbo folded his arms, watching the effect of Balin’s quiet words. Perhaps there was no love lost between the two races, but Thranduil had lived through many an age. He had seen conflict and peace, and he knew the strain a few, short years of strife could put upon his people.

Surely he could see that having Thorin on the throne was preferable to the alternative?

‘And that is what you bring before me?’ he murmured at last, his smooth face creasing in disappointment. ‘A request to save your dying king?’
‘A request to save my friend.’

Bilbo looked down at his feet, not wanting to meet the cold disdain his words had inspired in Thranduil’s stare. This was not just about kings and kingdoms. It was about the dwarf he had followed from the sanctuary of the Shire. Yes, Thorin could be proud, rude and disagreeable, but there was more worth within him than in all the halls of Erebor combined. He did not expect Thranduil to see it, but he would not let it go unacknowledged.

‘Does he still name you as such?’ Thranduil asked. ‘After what happened with the Arkenstone?’

‘Bilbo would not be here if he did not,’ Balin interrupted, shooting a reassuring look in the hobbit’s direction. ‘The King has offered Master Baggins the sanctuary of the mountain and honours him for his efforts to stop a war when he himself could not.’

‘Do not seek to trick me with clever words, Master Dwarf. Thorin Oakenshield had his chance to prevent bloodshed. He chose to reject the opportunity.’

‘Because of the dragon sickness. In his right mind, Thorin would have seen sense, regardless of what disagreements lie between you.’ Bilbo stepped forward, his fists clenched at his sides.

‘All the more reason for the line to come to an end, if it can succumb so readily to such vileness.’ Thranduil twisted the cup in his hands, his words without forgiveness.

‘A vileness which Thorin overcame!’

‘So you say.’

‘If he had not,’ Balin said softly, ‘he would still be in that mountain, and the victory of the day may have gone to the enemy.’ He looped his thumbs under the broad band of his belt, dropping his chin to regard the elf with assessing eyes. ‘Forgive me, my lord, but do you refuse assistance? Only time is wasting, and if it is so, I would rather be at my king’s side than yours.’

Thranduil’s eyes widened at such disrespect, his lips pulling back from his teeth as he hissed, ‘I refuse. Why should I aid a dwarf such as Thorin Oakenshield? One who goes back on his word without remorse? His low character was proved the first time I was denied what is mine.’ His hand rested on the chest of gems at his throne’s side. ‘That impression has only been reinforced in the years since.’

Bilbo drew in a deep breath, his heart aching for Thorin even as he defended him. ‘A son is not his father, nor his grandfather. Thorin was not the one who refused to give you the Jewels of Lasgelen.’

‘Yet nor did he make amends for his grandfather’s dishonesty!’

‘Why would he?’ Balin asked. ‘He was told, as we all were, that you had not paid for our services. That alone might have been overlooked if you had not turned your back on us the day the dragon razed our home!’

Thranduil straightened in his throne, his lips already parted for some scathing retort, but Bilbo hurried forward, his hands raised to silence them both. ‘Please. This is not why we came.’ He swallowed, clearing his throat as he tried to keep his voice steady. ‘We have returned the stones to you. As you have refused to help Thorin or his nephews, then we shall not take up any more of your time.’

Silk and brocade rustled as Thranduil shifted in his throne, his gaze boring into Bilbo as if he were waiting for the sting in the tail of their negotiations. Yet the hobbit did not have much to offer in the way of barbs, and frankly, he was too exhausted and grieved to do more than give a shallow bow to
king and prince alike.

Fabric whispered as he slipped through the tent flaps and out into the night with Balin in tow. The cold slammed into him like a fist, robbing him of breath as the threat of tears pinched his eyes. The hope that Thranduil would put aside the feud between dwarves and elves had been a desperate one, but it was all they’d had. He should have known that the Elven King’s pride would not be easily swayed. At least, not by the likes of a hobbit and a dwarf.

‘No luck?’ Nori asked, emerging from the shadows and throwing a jaunty wink at the surprised soldiers. ‘Come on. Let’s get away from these sharp-eared bastards. I’ve got some things to tell you.’

He slung an arm around Bilbo’s shoulder, steering him through the throng. Balin followed with their guards in tow, muttering curses under his breath.

‘Is it Thorin? Is he -?’

Nori’s smile vanished, and he patted Bilbo awkwardly. ‘He still lives, but it might be best not to dawdle. He’s been asking for you, at least, as well as he is able. I take it we’re to expect no help from our elf friends?’

Behind them, Balin scoffed, striding forward so they walked three abreast. ‘As if he would waste his time. He has what he came for. No doubt they’ll be gone come morning, and good riddance!’

‘I wouldn’t wager on it.’ Nori shot a dark look at the elves in their wake. ‘I was standing outside that tent for as long as you were in it. The guards spoke not a word, but their friends around the fires weren’t so quiet. They stay to honour their allegiance to the Men, and will remain until they’re no longer needed by Bard and his people.’

Balin grunted. ‘He’ll not help and he’ll not flee back to his forest. We gave up the Jewels of Lasgalen for nothing.’

‘It was the right thing to do,’ Bilbo pointed out, stepping over rocks and potholes as he hurried towards the healers’ tent. ‘It’s one less thing for him to hold against us.’

‘He’ll still try, laddie. He’s not one to give up a good grudge without a fight.’

‘Not unlike some dwarves I know,’ Bilbo muttered, skirting one of the campfires and nodding to the guards who hovered outside Thorin’s tent. They let him in without a word, their eyes serious and the duck of their heads almost a bow as they ushered him inside.

The first thing to hit him was the smell: sickness and fever. The faint fragrance of various herbs did nothing to hide it, and Bilbo stared, unable to ignore how much worse Thorin looked. His face was slick with sweat as he shivered beneath the furs, his hoarse voice catching on small sounds of misery. His eyes were closed and sunken in his sallow face, and he twitched in response to whatever dreams or delusions clouded his mind.

A wretched, hacking cough made Bilbo jump, and he saw Kili lurch upright, hanging over the edge of his bed as his lungs laboured and wheezed. It was a terrible spasm, and Bilbo lunged, grabbing a bowl and holding it under Kili’s mouth to catch the foulness that he expelled.

His reassuring murmurs fell on deaf ears, and when Kili collapsed back onto his pillow, his eyes were glazed and his lashes fluttering. Sleep reclaimed him in seconds, and no trace of recognition coloured his face before he succumbed.

‘Good catch.’ Oin’s voice was gruff as he took the bowl from Bilbo’s hands, grimacing at the bile
within. ‘Damned orcs and their filthy blades! As if the wounds weren’t bad enough!’

‘They’re so much worse.’ He looked up, wincing in pity. Oin did not look much better than his patients, and the other healers, none of whom Bilbo knew by name, all wore harried, hunted looks as they mixed up various potions and poultices. ‘What happened?’

Oin shrugged, handing the bowl to one of his helpers and instructing them to dispose of the disgusting contents. ‘Their wounds fester. Perhaps Gandalf’s magic gave them a few hours, but it’s already begun to fade. Kili, at least, is getting some of the sickness out of him, thanks to the elf-maid’s help, but he still suffers and her strength runs low.’

A jerk of his thumb had Bilbo looking to the corner of the tent, where Tauriel slept curled on a rough pallet of rags. She looked ghost-like: colourless except for her hair and the dark shadows under her eyes. No one could doubt she had given Kili all she could, and still they were not sure it was enough.

‘And Thorin?’

The healer shook his head, his mouth pressed tight. ‘Far beyond my help, now. He refuses the poppy, which would at least ease his pain. He’s been asking for you, but he doesn’t wake for long.’

Oin beckoned him to the crude stool at Thorin’s bedside, and Bilbo sank onto it, staring at the dwarf on the bed. He had always seemed unstoppable; a force of nature driven by his passion and ambitions. Now all that was gone, waning beneath the injuries he had sustained and the poison that oozed through his blood.

Gently, he wrapped his fingers around the broad bluntness of Thorin’s palm, ignoring the clamminess of the skin in his grip. It did not take long for him to twitch in response, his grasp tightening until he was hanging on to Bilbo like a lifeline, clinging with all the meagre remains of his strength.

His eyes opened, too blue in the pallor of his face, and a delirious grin twitched his mouth as he realised who sat at his side.

His indrawn breath rattled in his chest, and Bilbo winced at the noise, bending his head to catch the whispered hush of Thorin’s voice.

‘I thought you gone.’

‘No. No, I – I would not go.’ Bilbo patted the hand in his grasp, his fingers exploring the hard line of tendons and skirting blisters. ‘I won’t go.’

He swallowed the lump in his throat, choking on the thought that it was Thorin, not himself, who was leaving. His heart ached as his stomach grew hollow. The meagre warmth in Bilbo’s body seemed to drain away with each of Thorin’s laboured breaths, until he was nothing but a shell of himself, cursed to sit at his friend’s side and watch his inevitable end.

Thorin sighed, a long, drawn out sound as his eyes dipped closed again. Around them, the lamp flames dimmed and guttered, and Bilbo heard Oin murmur something in Khuzdul, though whether it was a curse or a prayer, he couldn’t tell. All he understood was the respectful awe in the words, and the soft tranquillity that followed them.

‘He’s not gone,’ Bilbo said, struggling to breathe around the rock of grief in his throat. He looked up, trying to read the lines on the healer’s face. ‘He can’t be.’

‘No, but it won’t be long.’ Oin’s eyes were full of sorrow and pity. ‘Will you wait with him? I’ll make sure the rest of the Company are told. They’ll want to be here. I doubt they’re far off as it is.’
Bilbo gave a ragged nod, dropping his gaze back to Thorin’s grey face. He wished he could leave – that by turning his back he could deny it had ever come to this – but that was a faunt’s fantasy: a childish protest at the ways of the world. He had told Thorin he would stay, and stay he would, right until the end.
Angry voices pierced the haze of Thorin’s mind, pulling him from the depths of sleep. His thoughts slid sideways as he tried to recall the time and place of his existence. Did war wage on without him? Did he lie forgotten among the fallen?

Memory stirred, and a sigh rattled in his throat. The mountain was safe, the dragon dead and the armies of the Orc defeated. If nothing else, he could remember the slow rise of relief as he sank to his knees, brought down by his wounds. The knowledge that his task was done warmed him even as the chill crept into his bones, and now he clung to his certainty.

It was over.

A hand tightened around his palm, and Bilbo’s worried face came into focus. His hair was tousled and a smear of mud streaked across one cheek, but Thorin could not recall a more welcome sight, even as he puzzled over his presence.

Why would Bilbo be here? Why would he put himself back in harm’s way?

He could still remember the feel of the hobbit’s coat in the curl of his fist – the way the fabric had strained and creaked as he hung Bilbo out over the battlements, threatening him with a bloody death on the sharp rocks below. Blinded by madness and betrayal, he had thought only of vengeance. How close had he come to letting go?

Dwalin’s growl of fury cut off any new attempt at a weak apology, and a groan rasped in Thorin’s throat, low and wretched.

Bilbo shushed him before he could form a question, his fingers fluttering to Thorin’s shoulder as if to stop him from trying to rise from his bed. Such an effort was not within his command. He could no more stand to face his Company than he could carry the mountain on his shoulders. Despite that, his hand groped for an absent sword he had not the power to lift, and he battled to remain awake as Dwalin ducked through the entrance.

‘Elves. That thin streak of a princeling. He’s demanding to see the King.’

‘Let him in.’ Bilbo half-stood from his seat, and Thorin tightened his grip, panic rising in his throat. He did not understand what was happening, but he knew he could not let Bilbo slip from his grasp. Not if he might never see him again.

Dwalin scowled, grumbling under his breath as he yanked the open seam of the tent aside. His war axe was in his hand, the sharp angles of its blade blurring in Thorin’s vision, but the elf who ducked into the confined space nodded respectfully, his gaze skimming the patients within before he turned and bowed.

Not to Thorin, but to Bilbo.

‘You are right,’ he said, that soft voice calm and timeless. ‘King Oakenshield is not his father and nor am I mine. I would like to offer my assistance.’

A shuddering sigh, almost a sob, escaped Bilbo’s throat. ‘We – I – please. Whatever you can do would be –’ He gestured towards the bed and Legolas stepped closer, his face lined with concentration.
‘No.’ Thorin licked his lips, his head reeling and his body aflame. ‘No.’

Bilbo grabbed both his hands, squeezing them hard enough to bruise. ‘Thorin, the elves are the only ones who can help you. Oin’s tried everything—’

He shook his head, ignoring the crack of pain that echoed in his skull and shot down his spine, pooling beneath the wound on his chest. His protest did not lie in the nature of his healer. He was not so proud that he did not know his last chance stood before him, but there were others who needed an elf’s rare assistance more than he.

‘Fili. Kili.’

Screwing up his eyes, he peeled them open again, staring with all his might at the Prince of Mirkwood. His voice was too weak to command it and his body too shattered to put up a fight, but his will, at least, remained unshaken.

Legolas folded his hands behind his back, bowing in the face of Thorin’s glare before turning to where the brothers lay. He glanced from one to the other, murmuring something in his foreign tongue to the elf who had helped Kili before. He had no knowledge of what they said; their words were like bells, all noise and nonsense, but after less than a handful of moments, they appeared to reach an impasse.

‘Who would you have me aid?’ Legolas moved to crouch by Thorin’s bedside so that they were face-to-face. At another time, he would have marvelled at the show of courtesy, but the fleeting thought did not linger as a new wave of grief consumed him. The elf would not have asked such a question if he believed he could save them both, and the choice he placed at Thorin’s feet was more than any man, elf or dwarf should have to bear.

‘Do not ask this of me.’ He shuddered, clutching the furs tighter over his body. ‘I will not choose between them.’

‘You will not have to.’

Weak as he was, Thorin still grimaced at the sound of Thranduil’s languid voice. Couldn’t the bastard leave him to die in peace? Did he have to gloat over his last moments as well, a disdainful witness to all of his failures?

Cloth whispered as the Elf King swept into the room, taking in everything with a single look. His expression fell, losing all trace of smug superiority, and Thorin’s satisfaction at his discomfort held a bitter aftertaste. It was one thing to know of the slow deaths of mere mortals, but quite another to witness it, especially for the eternal elves.

‘Legolas. This one.’ Thranduil pointed to Fili’s unmoving figure but offered no further instruction, leaving his son to work as he turned to Kili. Those elegant hands spread above the young dwarf’s chest, and his low, murmuring voice transformed the air to silk and starlight.

The sudden twitch of Bilbo’s hand in his broke into Thorin’s trance, and he rolled his head on the pillow, fighting to stay awake and bear witness. He would not allow himself to pass into death unknowing of the fate that awaited his sister-sons, but it felt like a greater labour than any war he had ever faced.

‘Open the tent flaps,’ Bilbo hissed to Nori. ‘Pull them back!’

‘What? Why?’
‘This needs to be seen.’ Bilbo glanced at Thorin, licking his lips before leaning forward. Nori did the same, hanging on his every word as he explained. ‘Not just by the Company, but by as many who can be spared. If something goes wrong, if Thranduil and Legolas don’t succeed, then the dwarves need to know there was no foul play.’

‘And if they manage to save them, they will not be robbed of the credit,’ a familiar, deep voice added as Gandalf ducked into the tent, stooping low to avoid knocking off his hat. ‘Clever thinking, Bilbo. Never underestimate the cunning of Shire-folk, Master Nori.’

A strained laugh bubbled in Bilbo’s chest, far from the honest joy Thorin had heard in the past. ‘It’s a cut-throat business, guarding the family silver.’

Nori called out to Bofur and Dori, demanding their help as he swept back the skin of the tent, letting in the harsh howl of the wind. It was a brumal chill, fierce and biting, but there was comfort in its freshness. It made Thorin think of the days of his childhood spent playing and hunting in the snow. He remembered the spring, when the waters began to flow once more, clear and cold, bringing life to the sleeping land.

He wished he could have shown Bilbo Erebor when the world woke once more. Now all he had to offer was the bones of the mountain, broken by the dragon and stripped clean by winter’s teeth. That was all he would ever have. It seemed that, all throughout this quest, time had been against him, but never had he felt its lack so keenly as in that moment.

Gandalf hummed to himself, stretching his gnarled hand out above the bed. ‘I cannot give you all that you wish for, Thorin Oakenshield, but I believe I have enough strength left in me for this.’

His murmur could barely be heard over Thranduil’s chanting, but it did not lessen the effect of the ancient power. Thorin’s pain lifted, floating away like smoke. The crushing vice of discomfort eased, and his next breath was clear and steady, buzzing down his throat to fill his chest with light. He remained a drained and broken dwarf, but the fog fell from his vision and awareness swept over him, bringing the room back into focus.

He blinked at the wizard, whose face had never looked so lined and rumpled. The cost of his efforts was plain to see, and Thorin tipped his head on the pillow: the closest thing to a bow he could manage. ‘Thank you, old friend.’

Gandalf raised his eyebrows. ‘“Old friend”, am I?’ He harrumphed to himself, tapping the base of his staff on the ground before his features softened and his blue eyes sparkled. ‘Old friend indeed, Thorin. As you are to me.’

‘What did you do? Is he -?’ Bilbo’s fingers twitched towards the bandages, but he didn’t dare to touch the wound. ‘Is he better?’

‘No, Bilbo. I have removed his pain for a short while. More than that, I cannot manage.’ Gandalf sighed, shaking his head. ‘I doubt even at the peak of my strength it would have been in my power to mend these injuries.’

Thorin turned away from Bilbo’s expression, unable to watch the hope that had flared in his eyes dim to nothing. He regretted bringing the hobbit here, where all that surrounded him was dead or dying. It was no place for a creature of the Shire. Bilbo had borne the challenges admirably, Thorin had no complaints on that score, but he wished he could have spared him the cruelty of such an ending.

A sudden, awful sound from Kili shattered the peace, and Thorin jerked in his bed, half-rising before
his wounds demanded he go no further. His nephew shuddered, his grey face bathed with sweat as he coughed and spluttered. Clotted, inky fluid gathered between his lips, and he turned his head to spit it over the side of the bed, barely missing Thranduil’s pristine robes.

‘What have you done to him?’ he demanded, scowling as the elf refused to answer, maintaining his whispered chanting as he worked.

‘He’s removing the poison,’ Legolas said from where he was spooning a wine-coloured liquid between Fili’s lips. ‘Dragging it out so that the wounds can heal.’

The she-elf – Tauriel, Thorin reminded himself – had rushed to Kili’s side when Thorin could not. Torn cloth filled her hands, and she peeled away the bandages, revealing an oozing mess of blood and foulness. Immediately, she began dispelling it from his skin and casting the dirty fabric aside.

Within moments, Oin joined her, calling out orders for water and empty bowls, fresh cloth and various herbs. ‘Dori, Gloin, help Prince Legolas and Fili. Anything you need, lad, they’ll get it for you.’

The tent filled with a strange mix of smooth Sindarin and Quenyan from the elves and clipped Westron, uttered in the deep, booming tones of the dwarves. For the first time Thorin could recall, one was not arguing with the other. They worked together without complaint, united by the common goal of seeing Fili and Kili through their darkest hours.

‘It runs clear!’ Tauriel’s relief was palpable. ‘The wound runs clear!’

‘There is foulness still, deep in his chest, but it shrinks with every moment,’ Thranduil murmured. ‘You did well. Without your assistance, he would have passed from the world hours ago.’

‘And now?’ Her voice shook, and her pale, sharp face glowed with desperation. ‘Will he live?’

Thranduil dropped his hands to his sides, the smile curving his lips a far cry from his familiar sneer. Long hair slipped over his shoulder as he ducked his head, and his words seemed to fill the sky itself.

‘He will live.’

It was as if the world had been holding its breath. Even the wind sighed as the news rippled outwards. A ragged cheer rose up, first from the Company, close and dear, before it carried through the crowd. Men, elves and dwarves alike stood, held back by Dwalin and his guardsmen. Thorin had not noticed them gather, but now he glanced around the shadowed sea of faces, knowing they had all come to witness the turn of history.

‘Father?’ Legolas’ voice was almost lost amidst the noise, but the strained expression on his face spoke louder than any words he could utter. His hands hovered over Fili, not at the wound that ran him through, but cupped over his head. ‘His injury is clear, well-stitched and healing thanks to the dwarves’ good work, but –’

Thranduil stood at Fili’s bedside so he was facing Thorin, his pale eyes unfocussed as he read what he could from the dwarf’s prone form. Thorin understood no more about Elven magic than he did the wizards’ ways, but he saw the troubled frown that shadowed Thranduil’s face. He rested his palm on Fili’s smooth brow, murmuring a few words before pausing, attentive, as though listening for a response only he could hear.

At last, he stepped back, gesturing for his son to take his place. ‘I sense him still, hidden deep. He is not beyond hope, although another hour and he may have slipped beyond our grasp.’
'Can you help him?' Thorin rasped, wincing as the pain began to stir once more, forcing him down to his pillows. He could feel the ebb of Gandalf’s spell, the wizard’s final gift to him fading in power as darkness tinged the edges of his vision. He wanted to writhe against the rushes, to twist away and steal a few more moments, but the world drew in on him. Agony was his shroud, swelling in his throat and delving deep into his chest until he could only choke and gasp, railing against the end of his brief respite.

‘Thorin?’

Bilbo’s hand had never left his grasp. Now he felt another palm join the first, enfolding his knuckles in a trembling grip. Nothing in him remained to return the pressure, nor even to open his eyes and look upon Bilbo one last time. He was a slave to his torment, and all he might have said fell silent beneath its wrath.

A babble arose: fearful, hurried speech and the clatter of bowls and bottles. Someone slipped something between his lips, sweet to the taste, but he choked on it, shuddering beneath the onslaught. They were calling his name. He could make out Dwalin and Balin, their voices fondly remembered from the days of his youth and ever after. Bofur was asking Oin what he could do, while the healer himself rattled off frantic, futile instruction. Even Gandalf’s voice was there: a soft whispering that struggled to ease away the barbs of agony that hooked through Thorin’s flesh, but to no avail.

‘Cut the bindings from the worst of his wounds,’ Thranduil ordered, his smooth words slicing through the chaos. ‘Fetch fresh water and the sharpest knife you can find. A good, clean blade.’

The furs were lifted from his body, leaving him shivering and exposed, dressed in nothing but his smalls. The tightness across the wound vanished as the bandages were eased away, and Thorin’s stomach rolled at the smell that rose from the tear in his flesh.

‘I am sorry, Master Dwarf, but I am afraid I shall have to undo the good work of your stitches.’

Thorin didn’t realise the elf was speaking to Oin until the healer replied, gruff and practical. ‘You’ll get no complaints from me if it helps our king, Master Elf.’

If Thranduil took offence at Oin’s casual familiarity, Thorin didn’t see it. He screwed his eyes up tight, battling the fire that blazed along his bones, bowing him beneath its strength. It grew hotter as Thranduil carefully began undoing the thread that held the skin together. He murmured as he did so: quiet praises of Oin’s work, as well as reassurances that Thorin had never thought to hear.

‘I will need you to hold him down,’ he said, pressing something against the wound. ‘There is no way to do this kindly.’

Strong arms went across his shoulders, and Thorin blinked at Balin, his snow-white beard like a cloud around his kind face. Dori and Nori had joined him, each adding their weight to keep him where he lay.

‘It’s all right, laddie,’ Balin said, his voice soft as it had been when Thorin was a child. ‘You can see this through.’

‘Are you ready?’ Thranduil asked.

The dwarves nodded their heads, and Thorin felt their muscles brace in preparation. His fingers curled around the weak frame of the cot, the wood rough beneath his skin as Thranduil took up the same, eerie chant he had uttered over Kili.
It was pain beyond pain: more than Thorin had known in his long years of existence. Fire burned in the heart of him, fanning out through his body and down his limbs as his hoarse cry rang in his ears. Sweat popped along his brow and his jaw clattered as he jammed his teeth shut, desperate to hold in the screams that boiled in his chest.

His spine arched, restrained by the weight of those that held him down, and his heels skittered against the rushes before someone grabbed his ankles and knees. People were talking, trying to bring him comfort with words of the kingdom as it once was, and how it would be again if he could only hold on long enough for Thranduil to work his healing, but it was not enough. They were like the whispers of the wind, drowned out by the shrieking wails of his misery.

‘Legolas! Tauriel!’ For the first time since entering the tent, Thranduil sounded strained, as if he were fighting some great battle no one else could see. ‘He cannot endure this. Assist me. The Princes can hold their own, but I fear the King cannot.’

The space around his cot grew crowded as the elves answered their king’s command. Their words harmonised, neither hymn nor prayer, but ethereal to Thorin’s ears. They surrounded him like a net, pulling him back from his ravaged flesh and turning the shadows to softness and light.

His nose filled with the fragrance of rich, dark earth and tall pines: the promise of life. He could hear water gushing over stone, and warm sunlight stroked his skin, sweeping aside the bite of his wounds. He knew he still lay in a tent at the foot of the mountain, but this illusion removed him from all that, keeping him safe from the long minutes of agony wrought by Thranduil’s ministrations.

Elvish words drifted on the wind, no more than a breeze to lift his hair back from his hot face. There was an allure to this magic: a promise of permanent respite. He could stay here, where no cold winters would rasp his skin and no injuries could claim him. Perhaps he would never find Mahal’s halls, as was his due, but he would have the peace he had sought for so long.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, the illusion began to fade. Fresh air and smoke replaced the perfume of the forest, and the gushing water became the flap of canvas in the wind. Sensation seeped in at the edges of his existence, released to him gradually, as if whoever held it back from him was testing his strength.

Yet it was the voice that captured his mind: not the soft slide of Sindarin, but Westron tinted with the faint, lingering tones of the Shire.

Bilbo.

‘– and the woods at Buckland are all moss and glades: open spaces between small trees until it reaches the river. It’s slow and – and shallow. Nothing like the ride into Laketown, though frightening enough for most hobbits. We’re not the strongest of swimmers…’

Thorin dragged open his eyelids as if lifting great weights. He felt as though he had been asleep for a mere moment, but Bilbo’s face was more tired than ever. Exhaustion made him haggard and wan, and deep lines scored across the planes of his expression. He looked as if he had spent the last of himself in his vigil and was now little more than an apparition at Thorin’s side.

‘You speak to me of the Shire?’ The words slurried together as if he were thick with drink, but it was worth the effort to see Bilbo’s eyes widen and an honest smile light his face. It was like striking a flint, releasing sparks of heat and spirit from dead stone. The flatness left the hobbit’s gaze, and his back straightened, his fingers clasping Thorin’s wrist.

‘The elves said to keep you in Middle Earth,’ he murmured, his voice shaking, ‘and there’s no part of
It I know better.’ He stepped back, the warmth of his hands vanishing and leaving Thorin bereft. ‘He’s awake. The King’s awake!’

Oin appeared, his beard wild and shadows stamped hard and deep under his eyes. ‘And about time too! Someone get Thranduil, and be polite about it! No, not you, Dwalin. Balin, you go.’

‘Not until I’ve seen him for myself,’ Balin said mildly, stepping forward from beyond Thorin’s narrow field of vision and peering down into his face. His cheerful expression was etched with weariness, but there was merriment about his eyes as he nodded, reassured. ‘It’s good to have you back, Thorin. There was a time there…’ He waved a hand. ‘No matter. You’re with us now, thanks to the elves.’

The old dwarf smiled as Thorin grimaced, not requiring the reminder of to whom he and his kin were indebted. ‘Aye, grumble and groan all you like, but if I must suffer them for the sake of your life, I shall not argue against it. A fair price, in anyone’s book.’

‘And what exactly has been done to me?’ He lay a hand over the bandages, thick and sure across his stomach. No pressure touched the wound itself, yet it throbbed like a war drum, adding its rhythm to the thud of discomfort in his foot and the high sting of various scrapes and cuts.

‘What was necessary,’ a cool voice said. ‘No more and no less.’ Thranduil spoke from the tent flaps, and Thorin raised his head to see Dwalin stand aside without argument. ‘It seems the timing of my visit has been fortuitous. I’ve spared your Company the trouble of seeking me out.’

‘The fever’s faded, though I worry for its return.’ Oin said, speaking to Thranduil as he might a fellow healer. ‘The wound in his chest is clean and dry, and his foot the same. Skin’s pink but neither red nor swollen.’

‘Can I sit?’ Thorin demanded, his voice more harsh than he’d intended. It was one thing to be injured in the Elf King’s presence, but quite another to be flat on his back and helpless with it.

‘A bundle under your head and shoulders is all I’ll risk,’ Oin grumbled. ‘The injury needs time to mend, and the less you aggravate it with moving around, the better.’

Firm hands went under his body, bearing his weight as Bilbo placed a rolled fur beneath his head. It was enough to leave him half-reclined, and able, for the first time, to get a good look at his surroundings.

The walls of the tent had been tied back in place, keeping out prying eyes and the sharp ice alike. Daylight glowed beyond the fabric, but Thorin paid no attention to the leaden sky he could see over Dwalin’s shoulder. He was too busy watching Dwalin himself, who grinned as he bowed, his curled fist pressed tight over his heart.

Around him, just inside the tent, the rest of the Company stood, and one by one, they repeated the gesture. Ragged and tired as they all were, there was not one face missing a smile, and pride swelled in Thorin’s chest for the dwarves who had followed him without question, unflinching in their loyalty even as he dipped beneath the veils of madness. He could have led them all to ruin, and still they would have been at his side.

‘My friends,’ he husked, raising his right hand a bare few inches from the bed. ‘You need not bow to me. You, who have seen me at my best and worst, and who have never hesitated to come to my aid, even when I would have denied the need for it.’

He scanned the line, seeing the gratitude and joy of his Company. Yet the rank was cut short, and he
steeled himself for the absence of his sister-sons’ smiling faces. He had set out to reclaim Erebor for them, more than himself; it was their birth-right, their future… one they had almost died for.

Swallowing, he shifted on the makeshift pillow, stubbornly ignoring the complaints of his body. ‘What of Fili and Kili?’ He looked from Oin to Thranduil, craning his neck to try and see past them.

‘They sleep.’ Thranduil moved aside, and Thorin could make out Kili, curled up beneath his furs and snoring. No longer did his breath rattle and choke in his throat, and his pallor was gone, replaced with something more fitting for one who was not a corpse. ‘The younger wakes for short periods. Though he still fights a weak fever, he speaks with us all and demands to know much of yourself and his brother.’

‘And what did you tell him?’

‘The truth.’ Thranduil looked around, sweeping his robe beneath him as he perched on a stool at Thorin’s side. ‘Prince Fili stirs in his sleep, talking and twitching, though he has not yet opened his eyes. My son’s efforts to heal him are bearing fruit, but it will not be a swift process.’

‘Beyond that, he’s beginning to recover,’ Oin interrupted, tipping water into a cup before holding it to Thorin’s lips. It was cold enough to make his teeth hurt, but the flash of moisture tasted wondrous to his parched and aching throat. ‘Better than you or Kili, at any rate. He has been spared the same fever that ravaged you.’

‘And yet he still sleeps.’ Thorin closed his eyes. ‘How long? How long has it been?’

‘Since the battle? Four days.’

Thranduil’s hand shot out, fingertips pressing hard to Thorin’s chest as he tried to sit upright, shocked by the glut of time that had passed while he lay lost in dreams of woodlands. He had thought the spell of the elves a fleeting relief, lasting mere moments. He had not realised…

It was no wonder Bilbo looked like a wraith of his former self, and now he brought his mind to focus on the members of his Company, he could see that armour had been replaced with comfortable clothes. Open wounds had scabbed and begun to heal, and the thick muck of the battlefield was banished from their skin.

‘I did not know so much time had passed.’

‘Nor were you meant to.’ Thranduil reached out to the crude table nearby, picking up something and cradling it in his palm. The metal shone like oil, toxic to the eye. ‘The Orcish blades are primitive; more likely to shatter than anything of Dwarvish or Elven design. This lay deep in your wound, leaching its poison into your flesh.’ He looked up at Oin, and his next words sounded like they were oft repeated. ‘An easy thing to miss in so severe an injury. I would not have known of it if I couldn’t sense its malice.’

Thorin breathed out a sigh, forcing himself to acknowledge the gravity of Thranduil’s statement. If it were not for the elves and their healing magic, he had no doubt that he and his sister-sons would already be entombed, lost to this world forever.

His pride snarled like an animal, prickling at the thought of assistance from a race he had grown to despise, but he clamped down on the temptation to dismiss Thranduil’s efforts as inconsequential. He had brought enough shame to the mountain during his short time as king; he would not allow such a state of affairs to continue. If that meant acknowledging a debt to the elves, so be it.

Only one question remained.
‘Why did you heal us?’ He met Thranduil’s gaze, holding steadfast as the elf raised a single brow in mocking query. ‘You have made no secret of your distaste for the dwarves and there is no love lost between us. You could have returned to your woods without a backwards glance.’

Thranduil’s eyes darted to Balin, then to Bilbo, and Thorin noticed that both of them stood tense, as if waiting for the fall of an invisible axe. Something unspoken clouded the air, and a trickle of dread raced down his spine.

‘You have some very persuasive advisers,’ the elf murmured, speaking as if he were choosing his words with care. ‘Once they left empty-handed, my son did not hesitate to point out the advantages of assisting the line of Durin.’ His stare was impenetrable and cold, like ice in midwinter. The angle of his jaw looked as hard as any rock within the mountain, and no smile lifted his expression. ‘I did not help you out of the goodness of my heart, Thorin Oakenshield. I did it for the sake of my people.’

A lying elf was a difficult thing to discern, so accustomed were they to their trickery, but he could see no deception in that pointed face. If he had said it was done out of respect for Thorin or his kin, he would not have wasted the effort of believing him, but brutal as Thranduil’s explanation was, it was also the most likely.

After all, Thorin was not the only one with a kingdom to repair. Mirkwood may not have fallen to the dragon, but another evil tainted the place and wove its grasp between the trees. Thranduil had a choice: to retreat and allow the forest to fade around him or advance and rebuild a once great realm to its former glory.

His actions suggested he had chosen the latter path.

It took all Thorin’s strength, both physical and mental, to bow his head. Old prejudices railed against any such show of respect, but these were different times.

‘You have my thanks, King Thranduil,’ he rasped, ‘for saving the lives of my sister-sons and myself.’

Out of the corner of his eye, Thorin saw the reaction of his Company, who had watched the entire exchange with wary eyes. Their hands did not rest on the hilts of their weapons, but there was a sense of battle-readiness about them. The ripple of shock caused by his pronouncement was like a living thing, jumping from one face to the next before being smothered by various degrees of rueful resignation.

Only Bilbo smiled, his eyes aglow with a fierce pride Thorin had not seen aimed in his direction since before the loss of his father. The hobbit did not attempt to hide his emotion. He stood tall, his arms folded across his chest and his head held high, and his approval was all for Thorin.

‘You have my aid for as long as you need it,’ Thranduil replied, the words moving through stiff lips as though it hurt him to make such a promise. Already, he rose to his feet as if he were desperate to be distant from Thorin’s side. ‘Your Company know where to find me, should you require my services again.’

He stared at Balin, his gaze hardening with some meaning that Thorin did not understand. Then, without another word, he strode from the tent, ducking through the low threshold and into the world beyond Thorin’s reach.

Thranduil’s departure should have brought relief, but it seemed a cloud hung around his bed. The smile had gone from Bilbo’s face, and a number of the Company had made themselves scarce,
offering their well wishes and citing duties throughout the camp. Dwalin remained on guard as Oin worked nearby, but only Bilbo and Balin hovered at Thorin’s side.

‘What is it?’ He sighed, trying to push aside the aches of his body as he braced himself for whatever bad news they were about to deliver. Regret lined Balin’s face, and Bilbo wore a frown of worried determination that reminded Thorin of the way he’d looked up on the battlements, before he’d revealed what he had done with the Arkenstone.

‘It was my idea.’ Bilbo cleared his throat, clasping his hands in front of him and staring at his fingers as if fascinated. Thorin could recall their grip, firm and unyielding. It was hard to imagine that such strength could come from someone so small. ‘We needed a way to get Thranduil’s attention, and it was all I could think of.’

‘The Jewels of Lasgalen, laddie,’ Balin explained, his hand resting on the cot near Thorin’s shoulder. ‘We gave them back to Thranduil.’

Thorin winced, a weak groan rumbling in his chest. He should have known that there was a more mercenary element to Thranduil’s aid. For years, those gems had been a source of triumph over the elves, one facet of an argument between the races that went back through the ages. They had been a weapon within the political landscape of Erebor, though he could admit his grandfather’s plan had backfired, spawning more resentment than respect.

He remembered finding them during his sickness and spending hours staring at the gleam of the stones, brighter than any diamonds could achieve. However, it had not been their artistry nor their beauty that had ensnared his mind, but the notion of their influence over the King of Mirkwood.

Now, that very same influence had been brought to bear. Sane and clear-headed, could he fault either Balin or Bilbo for their choice? Could he condemn them for what they had done, knowing that their actions had played a vital role in saving him and his sister-sons?

‘Was that the price he asked for helping us?’ Thorin wet his lips, squinting at Balin before turning instead to Bilbo. Balin would coat it in grandeur and bitterness, his old prejudice against the elves as strong as Thorin’s own. Of all of them, Bilbo would be able to give a more honest, unbiased account.

‘No. No, he asked nothing.’ The hobbit cleared his throat, and Thorin noticed he was shaking as he sat down on the stool at the bedside. He did not like to see him so unsure, meek and apologetic when he should be triumphant. Despite his aching arms, Thorin managed to reach out, grasping Bilbo’s wrist weakly in his palm in a silent effort of encouragement. ‘The gems were more a way to gain an audience with him than anything else; though we hoped they would make him more amenable.’

Thorin laughed. Amenable was not a word he would have associated with Thranduil before today, and even now, it was a stretch. ‘He refused to aid us?’

‘Aye,’ Balin growled. ‘He did. We could not change his mind. Not even with pretty proclamations about the gems being rightfully his.’

‘Again, that was my idea.’ Bilbo winced, probably expecting some form of reproach. The thought lingered there, fed by the sting of pride, but Thorin was too tired to give it voice. ‘I think, in the end, it was Prince Legolas who convinced Thranduil to change his mind.’

‘And just as well.’ Balin folded his arms across his chest. He was a picture of disgruntlement, all apart from the worried gleam in his eye. He watched Thorin closely, and he realised they were both awaiting his reaction: anger or acceptance, rage or reason.
‘It pains me to say it,’ he whispered, too exhausted to lift his voice beyond a stirring breath, ‘but giving up the gems was necessary.’ He tightened his hand over Bilbo’s wrist in one, meaningful squeeze before letting his arm drop back to the cot. ‘I could not fault you for it. Thank you, Master Baggins.’

He closed his eyes, hearing Balin’s sigh of relief and Bilbo’s nervous chuckle. Both sounded as if they had received some kind of stay of execution, and Thorin spared a thought for how they must have worried, these past few days. Had it been hanging over them all this time? Had they feared that Thranduil would give away the secret before they’d had a chance to explain?

Thorin frowned, considering the Elf King’s actions. At his worst, he could be spiteful and petty, selfish and indifferent to the plight of others. The Thranduil Thorin knew would not have hesitated to stir the pot and cause strife and discomfort, yet he had held back. Somehow, he doubted it was out of sympathy for his healing patients. More likely, there was someone who had earned his elusive respect, and Thorin did not have to think hard about who that might be.

Bilbo.

The thought brought him comfort, and not for the first time on their journey, he was forced to acknowledge that Gandalf made a good choice when he had dragged the hobbit into their adventure. Without him, Thorin would have never reached Erebor. Azog’s warg would have made a meal of him, or they would have been stuck forever in Thranduil’s prison, left to rot and ruin. They may never have found the keyhole in the last light of Durin’s Day, nor lived through the battle that had almost ended them all.

Even now, he was still speaking on Thorin’s behalf, approaching the elves when none other in his Company would have wasted their time on such a doomed hope. It had been a daring move, risking disapproval from all quarters, yet he was sure Bilbo had not hesitated. It took a different kind of courage; one Thorin could acknowledge and respect as much as any battle bravery he had seen over his lifetime.

Letting go of a grudge was not something any dwarf did with ease. What lingered between him and Thranduil was not a slate to wipe clean but a wound to heal, and that would take time and effort on both sides.

Perhaps dwarves and elves would never see eye-to-eye. Maybe the resentment would always linger, but Bilbo and Balin, with the jewels in hand, had taken the first step towards paving the way for something like peace.

Shutting his eyes, Thorin lay back, allowing the rising tide of sleep to claim him. His last waking thought was simple, but honest: he would not let their efforts go to waste.
The cold air burned Bilbo’s lungs, blowing away the cobwebs in his tired mind. After the tense, thrashing anxiety that accompanied his confession about the Jewels of Lasgalen, the chill was a blessing. It tasted like freedom, and he relished it as his fingers grew numb and his teeth began to chatter.

Thorin had drifted off again, exhausted by the discussions and confessions of the day. Bilbo could not blame him. He had been through a great deal since the battle, and for the first time he did not lose himself to fever and nightmares. He slept peacefully, his body healing rather than lying on the brink of its final moments.

Bilbo’s knees shook, weak with relief he barely dared to feel. They were alive. Not just Thorin, but Fili and Kili as well. Of the thirteen dwarves he’d set out with from the Shire, none had succumbed. The Company remained unbroken, so much more fortunate than many of those around them.

‘Here, eat. You look fit for a healer’s cot yourself.’

Blinking, he smiled at Bofur, whose hat perched at a rakish angle on top of his head. The bowl of stew he offered was bland and thin, but Bilbo was too hungry to turn his nose up at the meal.

‘Thanks.’

He sipped from the rim, picking out a few small chunks of meat with his fingers and gobbling them up. His relatives would be appalled at his manners, but Bofur only laughed, his dark eyes twinkling as he clapped Bilbo on the shoulder. ‘We’ll make a dwarf out of you yet!’

‘I’m quite happy being a hobbit, thank you.’ His grin softened the primness of his voice, and he drained the last of the pale gravy with relish. It was a far cry from the fine dishes of home, and with so many mouths to feed, even Bombur’s roadside fare seemed rich in comparison. Still, it did the job, filling the hole in his belly. ‘I’m guessing everyone’s heard that Thorin’s awake?’

‘Aye, o’ course. As if we could keep it quiet! It’s all over camp and back. Nori says the mood is relief. Everyone feared the worst.’

‘With good reason.’ Bilbo’s smile wavered as he handed the bowl to Bofur. ‘Oin says his recovery could take months, and Kili’s not much better. As for Fili…’ He paused, shrugging his shoulders. The thought of the eldest Durin nephew, who still lay silent and still in his bed, was like a gaping wound. Despite the reassurances of the elves, it was hard to imagine Fili on his feet once more, laughing and joking with his brother and filling the world with his steady enthusiasm.

Bofur’s hand settled on his arm, giving him a gentle shake. ‘Much as I hate to say it, the elves are normally right. That Legolas is in there once a day, if not more, helping Fili, and the red-haired lass cannot be dragged from Kili’s side. Reminds me of a certain hobbit I know.’

His grin widened as he wiggled his eyebrows, but he soon grew serious, ignoring Bilbo’s spluttering that somehow never quite became denials. ‘You’ve barely left Thorin since Thranduil healed him, and those few times you have, it’s been to help about the place. You’ll do no good if you work yourself to death, Bilbo.’

‘But there’s so much to do.’ He gestured to the sprawl around him. More and more shelters had grown, offering protection from the elements, but the sheer size of the task before them was more than he could imagine. ‘People need food, clean water, healing, clothes… The men lost everything
when Smaug burned Laketown, and the dwarves aren’t much better.’ He shrugged, his voice falling away.

‘And what good will you do any of them too tired to see straight?’ Bofur demanded, folding his arms and raising an eyebrow, his moustache twitching as he screwed up his nose. ‘Go on, Bilbo. Balin and the rest of us have everything in hand. The only trouble we’re having is with Bard.’

‘What about him?’ Bilbo thought of the Arkenstone, wrapped in cloth and still in Bard’s keeping, or so he hoped.

‘He wants to speak with you, and you alone.’ Bofur shrugged. ‘Don’t think he has much trust for Durin’s Folk.’

‘Can you blame him, when all he knows of them is broken promises? Where is he?’

‘Talking to Gandalf last I saw.’ Bofur unfolded his arms as Bilbo turned away, dashing after him as he began to walk across the boot-churned earth. ‘You don’t have to see him now!’

‘I might as well.’ Bilbo held his hands out in surrender as Bofur rolled his eyes. ‘After I’ve heard what Bard has to say, I’ll get some sleep. I’ve had some anyway, here and there.’

‘Scraps, no more than that. Did you think your friends hadn’t noticed? You’re lucky it’s me doing this and not Dwalin, or worse, Dori. There’d be no escape then!’ Bofur grinned, nudging Bilbo in the side with his elbow before giving in. ‘I’ll come and keep an eye on you. It might not be a battlefield any more, but that doesn’t mean it’s safe for anyone to wander around on their own. Least of all you.’

‘Me?’ Bilbo asked, frowning as he skirted another campfire and listened to the raucous laughter of the dwarves surrounding it. ‘Why me? I’m just a hobbit.’

Bofur made a tight noise in his throat, somewhere between a groan and a sigh. ‘No, you’re the hobbit. The King’s hobbit. You’re – It’s –’ He licked his lips, his face slack as he failed to come up with a suitable explanation.

‘The King’s hobbit?’ Something swooped in his stomach: a rushing thrill torn between pleasure and fear.

Bofur froze, his eyes darting around in his head. He looked like a mouse that had rounded a corner and collided with a hungry cat. ‘What I mean is –’ He licked his lips, his face slack as he failed to come up with a suitable explanation.

‘That’s what people are saying? That I’m – I’m somehow tied to Thorin?’

Bilbo’s voice choked as misery bloomed in the hollow of his chest, followed by a hot tide of mortification. Between the desperate negotiations with Thranduil and the funereal calm of the healer’s tent, there hadn’t been time to worry that his thoughts might be written all over his face. He had been too involved in keeping Thorin alive to think about hiding his emotions, and this was the result.

Fool of a Baggins!

Everyone knew. How long did he have before the rumours reached Thorin’s ears? How long until he was sent back to the Shire, an embarrassment and nothing more: the hobbit who fell in love with a king?
His face must have given away his horror, because Bofur’s words stumbled in his haste to backtrack. ‘No, no. Don’t listen to me! I’m as tired as you are. Don’t know what’s coming out of my mouth half the time, even on a good day.’ He tried to grin, but it came out strained and empty. ‘Come on, ignore it. Even if that is what some people think, and I’m not saying it is, mind, you know what gossip is like. Here one minute, gone the next.’

Bilbo pushed his hands into his pockets, rounding his shoulders against the cold. A few moments ago, he’d been glad of the fresh air. Now he felt exposed, sliced open to everyone’s stares and target to their whispers.

He should have been more careful. It wasn’t as if he were a tween any more, brash and boastful of his feelings. He was a grown hobbit, a respectable Baggins… He should have been able to hide the way his heart soared when Thorin so much as looked in his direction.

In the beginning, of course, it was easy. Even those who held Thorin dear could not deny his pride often bordered on arrogance, and his determination bled into stubbornness. He had been aloof and unapproachable, sneering at Bilbo for his lack of any respectable skill. Yes, it had been simple enough to hide that first flash of interest at the strange, compelling dwarf who turned up on his doorstep, because Thorin had done nothing at all to nurture the spark. Bilbo had put aside his feelings with ease, all but forgotten.

How things changed.

He grimaced, padding through the slushy mix of ice and water that covered the ground as he walked in silence at Bofur’s side. Slowly, he had proved his worth, and Thorin had answered that with a respect that burgeoned into friendship. Scowls became smiles, and awkward silences blossomed into quiet conversations on the road. It had been soft and simple, with neither rank nor kingdom to intervene, and before long Bilbo’s traitorous heart was lost.

He had kept it a closely guarded secret, or so he’d thought. His notions had been nothing more than a fantasy – a daydream to occupy the endless days of the journey and the lonely hours of the night. Yet with each moment he dwelt upon it his feelings seemed to grow, until he found himself on Ravenhill, tears burning his eyes as Thorin begged his forgiveness and spoke of warm hearths and good books.

Bilbo’s heart had cracked to pieces in the past few days, the shards pushing their way through his skin for the world to see. Now everyone knew, but what could be done? Oh, how he wished he could slip the ring on his finger and fade into nothing, never to be seen again!

‘Bilbo?'

He jumped, his head jerking up as he stumbled back, almost falling over his own feet. Only Gandalf’s outstretched hand saved him from an undignified tumble, and he stammered his thanks as he straightened his torn and grubby coat.

‘You were in a world of your own.’ The cold bowed Gandalf’s shoulders, but the keen intelligence in his face was as bright as ever. Bilbo bore his scrutiny, doing his best not to fidget. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘Yes – yes. It’s fine. I’m fine.’ He clenched his hands into fists at his side, tapping them against his legs before managing a thin smile. ‘Bofur mentioned that Bard wished to speak with me?’

Gandalf hummed to himself, his eyes narrowed as he searched Bilbo’s face before gesturing to a cluster of men and women. They stood around a stack of crates, poring over something laid out on its surface. A ragged awning held up on splintered poles kept the sleet off their heads, but the wind still
howled beneath it, making it swell and dip.

‘Not you, Bofur.’ Gandalf’s command was firm but kind, and his staff swung down to stop the dwarf from following Bilbo to Bard’s side. ‘I need to speak with you, and Bilbo is safe enough. He’ll come to no harm from the men of Laketown.’

He watched the wizard lead his friend aside, taking comfort in the fact that they remained within shouting distance. It was not that Bilbo did not trust Bard, but these were trying times. Tempers frayed as stomachs went empty, and a long hard winter lay ahead of them. The prospect was enough to make anyone desperate.

Bilbo stepped forward, his stride heavy so that no one could accuse him of approaching the meeting by stealth. There were no guards around Bard, but a large sword rested atop the crates, its blade chipped and bare. It was a sorry looking weapon, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t cleave Bilbo’s head from his shoulders.

‘Master Baggins.’ Bard straightened as he approached, and some unspoken communication rippled through the men. Each turned to survey him, and Bilbo tried not to cringe beneath the weight of their stares. Instead, he looked back, taking in their ragged appearance and noticing the weapons each had shoved in the belts at their waists. A few were blades, but most were hammers and picks, crude and brutal.

Bilbo bowed, panicking as he realised he had no formal way to speak to the boatman who had smuggled them into Laketown. Bard wore nothing to suggest he was anything more than the man who had taken them into his home, yet it was obvious to anyone who looked that he was the one in charge.

‘I came the moment I heard you were looking for me.’ It might not have been polite, but it was true, and Bilbo noticed the subtle relaxation of the men and women around him. ‘I would have been here sooner, but –’

Bard held up a hand, heading off Bilbo’s apologies. A frail smile lit his gaunt face, and he beckoned Bilbo closer, nudging his sword aside and bracing himself over crate again.

The crowd thinned as people departed in twos and threes, stepping away to go about their business. Within minutes, there was a wide band of clear space; enough to give them something like privacy.

Bard kicked a small, low box out in invitation, and Bilbo stepped up onto it. Now he could see what captured the man’s attention: maps and lists detailing the resources of the men. Even to his eyes, the situation looked woeful, and he swallowed as Bard began to speak.

‘You’ve been busy, from what I’ve heard. I am honoured you came as quickly as you did.’ His filthy fingers tapped the coarse wood, and Bilbo watched as he seemed to struggle with his next words. ‘I am also relieved to hear that the King Under the Mountain has survived his wounds.’

Bilbo winced at the flatness of the platitude. Seeing it through their eyes, it was easy to understand why Thorin’s survival might mean so little. For them, the dwarves were responsible for the loss of their homes and loved ones, and had also failed to keep their promise to help them rebuild. What was there to love in a king twice cursed?

‘You saw him at his worst.’ Bilbo propped his elbows against the crate, speaking low in the hopes his voice would travel no further than Bard’s ears. ‘I cannot blame you for your poor opinion of him. If his madness was all I knew…’ He shrugged, shaking the thought aside. ‘The greed and fear you witnessed – that is not Thorin Oakenshield.’
‘An illness, or so the wizard says. One which has now passed.’ Bard scowled. ‘You will have to forgive me if I do not believe it.’

Bilbo nodded, knowing there was nothing he could do to convince him otherwise. Besides, it was not his task. Mending bridges with the men of Laketown was something that could take a lifetime, and it was a job for Thorin alone.

‘My people are used to broken promises,’ Bard murmured, ‘and hardship, too. Both could be forgiven more easily if I had not seen his treatment of you up on those battlements. You spoke well of him, more than once, and that was his repayment.’

Bilbo wrung his hands, twisting his fingers together at the memory of a strong grip clenched in his jacket. He could almost feel the great, yawning drop at his back, his life held upon the unravelling thread of Thorin’s madness and mercy.

‘Any blame you place on him is nothing compared to the guilt he puts on himself.’ Bilbo met those dark eyes, frowning as he tried to make him understand. ‘It wounds him.’

‘As it should.’ Bard’s clipped words rang out, and Bilbo watched him swallow back whatever insult would have followed. ‘He would have slaughtered you for the sake of a stone.’

Bilbo shut his eyes, wishing he could deny it. An ache had begun in the pit of his stomach that day, and now it flared again. ‘He was not himself.’ Straightening up, he met Bard’s gaze, lifting his chin and folding his arms. ‘I cannot earn your trust on Thorin’s behalf. That’s between the two of you, and no one else.’

Bard’s stare never wavered, not even as he reached into his coat and pulled free an object wrapped in cloth. He lay it down on the crate between them, and Bilbo did not need to uncover it to know the Arkenstone glowed within the shroud of rags.

‘It is not my trust in the King of Erebor that matters most. It is my faith in you, Master Baggins. You have always spoken kindly and well, without unnecessary deception.’ Bard pushed the bundle across the table and into Bilbo’s hands. ‘I return this to you, to do with as you see fit.’

The fabric was coarse against his wind-chapped fingertips, and the weight of the Arkenstone settled in his hand. Yet dread lay upon his shoulders like a cloak of rotting meat, heavy and putrid. For too long he had watched Thorin search for this stone without cease. He had seen him ignore all friendship and decency in pursuit of it.

Now, the thought of giving it back turned his stomach. Not because he wanted the Arkenstone for himself, but because he feared the return of that madness. He did not want to see the softness of Thorin’s expression go hard and cold beneath its mask. Bilbo knew he had thrown off the sickness, but weak and healing still, would he have the strength to fight it a second time if it came back?

His mind raced, darting through possibilities, each one darker and more dire than the last. Eventually, he shook his head, putting the rock back on the crate without preamble. There was only one choice he could see, and he watched Bard’s confusion soften with understanding as he began to speak.

‘You would be doing the dwarves of Erebor a great service by keeping this safe.’ He took a breath, rushing on before anyone could interrupt. ‘The Arkenstone is more than a treasure. It is a political tool: one that should be removed for the time being. We would be even further in your debt, and eager to repay it.’ He jerked his head meaningfully to the parchment scattered before them, upon which were scribbled numbers and notes.
The man followed his gaze, his broad shoulders slumping in the face of Bilbo’s earnest expression. He picked up the Arkenstone again, turning it over in his palms and staring at its slick surface with blank indifference before tucking it away in his coat. ‘You need only ask for its return,’ he said. ‘You or any of the Company. I will not have it said that it was stolen, nor that we continue to hold it as a bargaining chip.’

Bilbo nodded. ‘Then tell me how we can help.’

Bard did not hold back as he laid out the facts, outlining the desperate state of his people. ‘Dale is a ruin, and even with all the gold in Erebor we could not rebuild it now. We have neither the skill nor the materials, and winter comes in hard.’ He pulled out a list, crossing off a few more names of those who had fallen to their injuries. ‘There are too few of us left able to hunt or fish. We have some supplies, brought by King Thranduil, but we cannot rely on his charity. Besides, if they do not starve, my people will freeze: men, women and children alike.’

‘Food and shelter.’ Bilbo nodded, knowing that the dwarves shared the same plight. There had already been mumblings of moving back into the mountain, before the cold sank its teeth in too hard, but it was not a simple matter. Smaug’s residence had caused untold damage, rendering some rooms unsafe and others beyond repair.

Even if he could guarantee that the mountain would not come crashing down on their heads, there was still the issue of the gold. What would become of them all, locked away within the caverns of Erebor, where already high tensions may be driven to breaking point by the wyrm-tainted treasure?

‘I don’t wish to promise our assistance only to discover it would do more harm than good.’ He grabbed a scrap of paper and a stick of sharpened charcoal, ignoring the way it flaked as he scrawled a couple of hasty notes. ‘I need to know how many people need shelter, the injured and able. Also, how much food you have left. There are more dwarves than men. Pooling our resources may not work in your favour.’

Bard nodded, straightening up. ‘I’ll send a runner to the King’s tent as soon as I have what you need. I hope you will be able to return him with an answer.’

‘It might take us some time to hammer out the details, but if he wishes to stay with us while he waits, I’m sure he’d be well fed and cared for.’ When Bard did not reply, Bilbo looked up at him, trying to read the expression on his half-shadowed face. ‘What?’

‘You speak as if you consider yourself one of them – as if their problems are your own.’

Bilbo smiled, worrying the edge of the ragged parchment with his hands. ‘I’ve travelled halfway across Middle Earth with them, fighting wargs, orcs, spiders and who knows what else. You’d consider yourself one of them too, if you’d shared in their perils the way I have.’

‘And do they show you the same honour? Do they treat you as their own?’ Bard frowned, his eyes dark with concern.

Bilbo tried to think how it must look to an outsider: a single hobbit in the company of so many dwarves. In this place, he was the only one of his kind – outnumbered and alone.

Except that wasn’t true. The Company was always there, making sure he was fed, clothed and informed. There was rarely a moment when there wasn’t at least one of them nearby, ready to jump in and help at the first sign of anything like trouble.

‘Yes.’ He smiled, folding up the list and sticking it in his pocket. ‘Yes they do.’
‘Very well.’ Bard pressed the heel of his hand to one eye, and Bilbo could see the same exhaustion that dragged at him pulling the man down into its clutches. ‘Should you find that things change – that you once more fall from favour – know that you can seek refuge with us. You will not be denied.’

His words were earnest, and Bilbo stared, unable to understand how Bard could make so generous an offer. Did he not realise that, should Thorin’s madness return, then such an action could lead to war? That he could be driving his people into another battle with the dwarves, all for a single hobbit from the Shire?

‘I – I don’t –’ A hand on his arm stopped him, and he looked away, overwhelmed. ‘Thank you. I hope I never need it, but thank you.’

Bard nodded, squeezing Bilbo’s shoulder. ‘I hope the same, Master Baggins, for all our sakes.’ He gestured to the camp that lay before them, where fires danced in the gathering twilight. The peak of the Lonely Mountain loomed over them, and Bilbo found himself staring at the summit where snow already gathered, thick and impenetrable.

From here, it looked far from welcoming. Could Erebor really become a home to them over the coming months? Would those empty halls welcome them, or were they too haunted by Smaug’s desolation? It seemed impossible to imagine this ruined kingdom returned to its former glory, but if nothing else, Bilbo trusted in the stubbornness of the dwarves. They would make it happen, no matter the cost.

‘I need to speak to the rest of the Company.’ He tapped his pocket, and the list he’d made rustled in its depths. ‘Once we know what we’re about, you’ll be one of the first to know.’

Bard smiled, placing his open palm over his heart and bowing low. When he straightened again, Bilbo could see that the lines etching his face had eased, turned shallow and faint at his promise. ‘Thank you.’ He gestured to a couple of men nearby and raised his voice. ‘See Master Baggins safely back to the King’s tent.’

He tried to protest, but before he’d managed more than a word or two, he realised there would be no swaying Bard from his decision. Besides, he made the offer out of more than friendly concern. If something happened to Bilbo, then it would be Bard’s people who took the blame. He didn’t understand why he, more than anyone else in the Company, might be in danger, but he was happy to let Bard have his way.

‘Thank you.’ He hopped down from the crate, letting the men fall in behind him as Bofur and Gandalf approached. They had been waiting off to the side, out of earshot, and now Bofur pounced, his question defiant as he shot a suspicious look at the men who followed a few paces behind.

‘Well, what did he want?’

Bilbo dug in his pocket, pulling out the information he’d got from Bard and trying to read his own distracted scrawl. ‘The same as the dwarves. Warmth, shelter and food to see them through the winter.’

Gandalf cleared his throat. ‘You see, Master Dwarf? Gold does not come into it.’

Bofur sighed, easing the list from Bilbo’s grasp and tugging at his earlobe as he scanned it. ‘Fair enough. We’ll need to talk to everyone else, see what they say. There’s a lot to consider, and not much time left.’ He looked up at the sky, taking in the fall of night and the thick clouds overhead that blocked both the moon and stars. ‘Moving this many into the mountain won’t be quick or easy.’
‘That’s if the mountain can take you.’ Gandalf’s staff tapped on the ground, the slush now frozen underfoot. ‘Dwarvish stonework is built to endure many things, but dragons may not be one of them.’

‘And then there’s the gold,’ Bilbo murmured, seeing the wizard nod his head out of the corner of his eye.

‘Indeed. There is much to discuss, but there is a little time yet before a decision must be made.’ He looked kindly down at Bilbo as they approached the healer’s tent. ‘Time enough for a good night’s sleep, and no arguments, Bilbo. You’re dead on your feet.’

There was no denying it. Talking to Bard had kept his fatigue at bay, but now it dragged at every inch of him like wet cloth, making his limbs heavy and stiff. His stumbling stride left his toes sore where he stubbed them into icy stone, and his eyes burned in their sockets, aching every time he blinked. Yet before he could find somewhere to rest his head, there was one more thing that had to be done.

‘Talk to them,’ he said, grabbing Bofur’s elbow and gesturing to the men who stood nearby, hovering uncertainly in the midst of so many loud dwarves. ‘Give them food if they want it; invite them to share the fire. Make them feel at home.’ He stared at the dwarf’s baffled expression, wishing he had the intelligence to explain, but he was too weary to put his thoughts into words. ‘Please. It might be important.’

‘Aye, will do.’ Bofur grabbed his hat, jamming it down on his head as he gave a firm nod. ‘Don’t you worry. We’ll see them sorted. Now away with you, before you fall where you stand.’ He ushered Bilbo towards the tent, his hands firm on his back until he all but shoved him through the flaps and into the small room beyond.

The air within was warm, and new herbs burnt in a bowl near one of the lamps, dispelling the fragrance of fever and blood. Oin was cutting strips of cloth for fresh bandages, but he abandoned his task immediately, making disapproving noises at Bilbo’s appearance.

‘Bed,’ he ordered, pacing around the room and grabbing unused furs and blankets, thrusting them into Bilbo’s arms. ‘We’ve no cots going free, so this will have to do.’

It was probably a great deal more than most of the others had to sleep on, and Bilbo murmured his thanks as he dropped them on the floor at the foot of Thorin’s bed. ‘Is there any change?’ he whispered as he built himself a nest, too tired to consider washing his face or even taking off his coat.

‘Aye, and all for the best. I’ll tell you in the morning.’ Oin folded his arms, and try as he might, Bilbo could not wheedle another word out of him. In the end, he climbed into his temporary bed, burrowing under the blankets and burying his nose in the furs to block out the winter drafts that slipped in under the tent canvas.

There was much to do: food to find, homes to make and friends to heal, but he knew when he was beaten. All the jobs and news, worries and joys would still be there in the morning. For now, Bilbo slept.
‘Uncle?’

A restless cry pierced the thin edges of Thorin’s doze. He jerked awake, his hand reaching for Orcrist only to find empty air. Disoriented, he searched the shadows for threats. A single lantern gave the gloom some definition, but no enemies lingered there as he struggled to understand what had dragged him from the depths of sleep.

‘Fili?’

Kili’s voice was rough with disuse, but it was still music to Thorin’s ears. For too long he had heard only choking breaths and heavy silence. Now, his youngest nephew lay propped on one elbow, reaching out to his brother as if he could somehow narrow the distance between their beds through force of will alone.

Fili shuddered, his eyes screwed up tight and his words hoarse as he cried out again, pleading for them both. Sweat matted his blond hair to his forehead and tremors shook his frame. It looked like a nightmare, reminding Thorin of when Fili was just a child, shaking and sobbing as he dreamt of his father’s death.

‘No!’

The wail had Thorin surging from his cot, too intent on reaching Fili’s side to think anything of his wounds. Yet strong as his mind was, his body could not match it. The hole in his foot and the one in his chest battled for dominance, both shrieking their abuse, and his knees turned to water before he could take so much as a step.

‘Careful!’ Thin arms banded his waist, saving him from collapse, and his rescuer grunted with the effort of bearing his weight. The scent of sleep-warm, dusty skin filled his nose, and the cloth against his bare chest was rough, threadbare velvet. A small hand patted his side fretfully, and he blinked down into Bilbo’s upturned face, where alarm was writ large.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Get him back into bed,’ Oin ordered from the other side of the tent, hobbling towards Fili with a bowl in his hands. His hair was a mess and creases rumpled his clothes as if he had just sprung from his slumber. ‘Someone find Prince Legolas. Tell him that there’s been some change.’

‘Is he hurt?’ Kili’s voice shook, stealing the question from Thorin’s lips. He craned his neck, straining against the burden of his injuries as he tried to get a good look at his brother.

‘Not as far as I can tell. It looks like a bad dream.’ Oin frowned, glaring around the room before hurrying over to the tent flaps and snapping at the guards beyond. ‘Get in here. I need your help moving the cots.’ He did not wait for them to obey before he began shoving at crates and making space, set about on some purpose Thorin couldn’t comprehend.

‘Come on, down you go,’ Bilbo urged, easing him back onto the straw mattress. It was a complicated, ungainly effort, made worse by the fact that he could not support his own weight. It was all up to Bilbo, who struggled against the burden of Thorin’s uncooperative frame and blushed when he lost his balance and sprawled across Thorin’s bare chest.

‘Sorry. Sorry.’ He extricated himself, stepping back with haste, his hand fluttering for a moment over
the clean bandage. ‘Are you all right?’ Do you need Oin?’

Thorin shook his head, not daring to divide the healer’s attention. The pain was already fading, creeping down to a level he could bear, and a quick glance at his dressings showed no gruesome stain. His foot throbbed and fear tightened his chest, but there was nothing that could not wait.

‘I am well, Master Baggins. Thank you.’ He grimaced, gnashing his teeth at the thought of his own frailty. He had acted on instinct when he rose from his bed, driven to race to Fili’s side and ease his suffering. It galled him that so simple an action could have brought him so low.

‘Fool of a dwarf,’ Oin grumbled, shooting a weary glare in Thorin’s direction. ‘You’re lucky you didn’t undo all of the elves’ hard work. Stay there. You can’t come to Fili, but perhaps we can bring him to you. Over here. Come on.’ He pestered the guards, grabbing one end of Fili’s cot in his gnarled hands and urging them to take the other. ‘Careful now, between Kili and the King. Put them close.’

They did as instructed, moving with exaggerated care as they switched around the furniture and the occupants within. Soon, Fili’s bed lay near enough to reach, and Thorin drank in the sight of him. No more did he have to satisfy himself with glimpses and the occasional flash of hair. Instead, he was visible in every detail, from the bruise down the side of his face to the tense set of his features.

He reached out, taking his nephew’s hand as Kili did the same. They both hung on, but it was Kili who spoke, his words a rush of reassurance. They poured out of him, quick and quiet: not just about Thorin and himself, but about the battle and the mountain.

‘We live. All of us. Uncle and the Company, you and me, Gandalf and Bilbo.’ He smiled, his teeth a flash of white in the lamp-lit gloom. ‘The dragon is dead and so are the orcs. It’s all over, Fili. Erebor is ours!’

‘And we will make it great again,’ Thorin added, his voice deep with promise. In his hand, Fili’s fingers twitched, moving with more purpose than they had before. This was not an idle flicker, but a questing grasp, as if he sought to anchor himself, and Thorin returned it desperately. ‘Fili?’

Blond lashes fluttered against those gaunt cheeks, and his face twisted as if he struggled through some gargantuan task of strength. At last, after what felt like hours of breathless silence, he opened his eyes for the first time since he fell in battle.

‘Uncle? Kili?’

He swallowed hard, wincing from the pain of a parched throat. It was a discomfort Thorin knew well. Before he could look around for a drink, Bilbo was there, standing at the top of Fili’s bed with a shallow bowl in his hands. Oin was right behind him, giving quiet, careful instructions.

‘Sip it, Fili, that’s a good lad. No, no don’t lift your head. Not yet. Not until we know what the elf has to say.’ There was a space just wide enough for one person between each of the beds, and Oin slipped into it, grumbling at the confines before he perched by Fili’s shoulder. ‘Tell me how you feel, if you can manage it. Take your time.’

Fili looked confused, as if he were struggling to make sense of the question. Yet slowly, he began to speak, his words halting and clumsy, but still a blessing after so long silent. ‘Hurts. My head. My chest. Everything’s -’ He squinted again, and Thorin wondered if the meek light bothered his eyes. ‘Foggy. I can’t see well.’

‘Don’t be alarmed.’ Legolas strode forward from where he hovered by the tent flaps, clearly listening
to everything Fili said. ‘I expect your vision will improve. Can you tell me more about your head? Describe the pain?’

‘Thudding. Deep. Like hammers.’ Fili licked his lips, frowning at the ceiling. ‘I know your voice.’

‘I am one of the elves who captured your Company in Greenwood. Legolas Greenleaf is my name.’

Fili’s smile was a joy to see, despite its weakness, and a weight lifted from Thorin’s shoulders. After days of uncertainty about how much of the dwarf they knew would return to them, it seemed their hopes had been realised. Bolg may have torn at Fili’s body and smashed his skull, but he had not broken his spirit.

‘I’ve known you since. You were there when I…’ He trailed off with a frown, his lips framing silent noises as he struggled. ‘Azlifi.’

‘Slept,’ Kili translated. ‘You couldn’t remember the Westron word?’

Fili went to shake his head, and a visceral groan tore itself from his chest. His face took on a waxen sheen, and it was Oin’s quick thinking that had a bowl ready. Thorin and Kili both drew away, giving him space as he vomited nothing but water and a few flecks of bile.

‘I led you home,’ Legolas explained, easing Fili down to the rushes, one long-fingered hand cradling the back of his abused head. He bundled some clean rags into rolls and lay them at each side of Fili’s skull with quick competence. Either he had dealt with this kind of injury before, or he had been watching Oin at work. ‘You were lost within yourself, unable to wake.’

Fili reached out without looking, his fingers curving over Thorin’s wrist and giving a weak squeeze. Later, Thorin wondered if it was an apology for needing the help of an elf, but in that moment, all he felt was relief that Fili had the strength for such a gesture.

‘Thank you.’

‘I only showed you the way.’ Legolas’ voice was kind. ‘The rest you did yourself.’

‘And now?’ Thorin asked. ‘What of his head? Will he be all right?’ He heard Kili murmur something, low and secretive, and saw both his nephews smile. One was wider than the other, but both were like the sun coming out after a long winter storm, lifting his heart and brightening what had been a bleak and uncertain future.

‘If he moves but little and sleeps all he can, he will recover.’ Legolas met Oin’s eye. ‘Time is what you all need, and what we seem to lack. I have heard rumour that you’ll be going into the mountain.’

Thorin blinked, thrown by the intrusion of reality into their secluded space. In the healer’s tent, cut off from all but the most personal concerns, it was easy to forget that there was a sprawling camp of people beyond the canvas. He knew his Company ruled in his stead, dealing with all the simple facts of survival, but Legolas’ words made him painfully aware of his distance from those who looked to him for answers.

‘We’ll have to.’ Bilbo cleared his throat, his voice wavering before he ploughed on. ‘I need to talk to the rest of the Company about the details, but the weather will force our hand before long. How soon can Fili be moved?’

‘I would ask for a few more days,’ Legolas murmured, looking away, his gaze unfocussed as if he stared into another world, ‘but a storm approaches. We will see to it that the injured can travel safely when you give the call to march, Master Baggins.’
Bilbo scrubbed his hand through his hair and squinted through the tent flap, where the meek, morning light turned the air pale. ‘It won’t be today, but nor will it be long. I’ll let you know as soon as I have more news.’

He moved as if to step away, and Thorin reached out without thinking, eager to latch on to the one person who had been such an anchor over the past few, delirious days. Anxiety fluttered in his stomach – dread without reason – and his voice caught in his throat as he tried to speak.

‘Stay?’ he rasped, trapping the cuff of Bilbo’s tattered coat between his fingertips as he searched desperately for some form of excuse. ‘Have some breakfast, at least?’

A whirl of emotion darted across Bilbo’s face, and an ache that had nothing to do with his wounds bloomed in Thorin’s chest. Gone were the glimmers of soft pleasure and pride. The expression that took their place was strained and wary: polite, but distant. He could feel the space yawning between them: a great, invisible expanse that he could not bridge.

‘I’m sorry.’ Bilbo released a shuddering breath as he ducked his head. ‘I – I can’t. I have to go.’ He sketched a clumsy bow, the first, in Thorin’s memory, that he had ever offered, before slipping away into the outside world. To Thorin’s eyes, he all but fled, and his stomach tangled in knots as he watched him leave.

Disappointment was a knife in his chest, and Thorin scowled at his own selfishness. He’d had reports from the others, in various tones of worried approval, that Bilbo worked all hours of the day and well into the night, dividing his time between the needs of the kingdom and those of its healing king. It seemed whenever he woke, there Bilbo was, and there he would stay until sleep claimed him once more.

Now, that had changed, and Thorin wondered if Bilbo’s explanation of being so busy was the whole story. There was no denying the demands on his time were high, but did he resent it, or was he glad of the excuse to get away?

His thoughts cloyed his mind like ink, and Thorin sank back against the pillows, listening with half an ear to the weak whispers of his nephews as he lost himself to his own considerations.

Bleeding and broken, he had been something to be pitied. A few days ago, the world had been stripped down to the sharpest of priorities, and forgiveness came easy when the offending party lay on his deathbed. Now that he was healing, it seemed his apologies – heartfelt as they were – could not undo the damage of his actions up on the battlements.

What else could explain Bilbo’s sudden eagerness to be so far from his side?

He had hoped, in the haze of his delirium, that all was as it had once been between them. Even from the beginning, when he had seen Bilbo as little more than a burden to slow them down, there had been a nagging concern for the well-being of this soft, small creature who had joined their Company.

Over time, that had only grown, tempered by battles shared and quiet conversations, sometimes deep into the night. Bilbo listened, not because of Thorin’s rank or any past allegiance, but because he wanted to. His quick wit and sharp intelligence meant he could offer far more than platitudes, and Thorin revelled in their connection.

As time went on and their journey continued, fleeting moments of contact took on an extra layer of meaning. Their gazes would lock and linger a little too long, and the promise of more had once hovered on the edge of every moment.
He should have seized upon those times while he had the chance, but his pride had held him back. He wanted to give Bilbo everything, to prove his worth in gold and riches, as well as deeds. He had promised himself, time and again, that once the kingdom was won he would speak his mind and heart with ease, hands full to brimming with all he could offer in return for Bilbo’s affections.

Instead, the hoard had robbed him of his clarity, and anything Bilbo may have felt for him had vanished without a trace.

‘Uncle?’

Kili interrupted his morose thoughts, and he closed his eyes as he tried to school his expression into indifference. He was king, first and foremost, and he could not let his confusion or weakness show.

‘He always comes back, you know. Whenever he leaves, it’s never for long.’

‘What Master Baggins chooses to do with his time is not my concern.’ The harsh words rang hollow around him, made worse by Kili squinting at him across Fili’s chest, an amused smile tugging at his lips.

‘What he does may well save all the kingdoms of Erebor,’ Legolas said from where he worked at a nearby table, mixing something to help Fili with his pain. ‘He meets with elves, dwarves and men alike. He eats little and sleeps even less, and when he is not out there, tending the needs of others, he is here, caring for you.’ The elf paused, his lips softening with a smile. ‘None of his actions are out of obligation. They are done by his choice.’

‘You should not speak of what you do not understand,’ Thorin growled, staring at the ceiling so he would not have to witness the knowing looks from his nephews and the elvish interloper in their midst.

‘I understand more than you might think. You broke one another’s trust and now do not know how to regain it.’

Legolas’ words lit a fire in Thorin’s gut. It blazed up his spine and along his veins, heavy with self-loathing. ‘I almost took his life. I thought nothing of our friendship, nor all that he has done for us on the journey. Nothing stayed my hand, and all because of the loss of a stone that should be no more than a trinket.’

‘You’re too hard on yourself,’ Kili murmured, sagging back against his pillow so that he lay out of sight. Briefly, Thorin considered sitting up to cast him a glare, but the effort seemed too great. His nephew’s loyalty warmed him, but he could not let it stand. He would not allow his misdeeds to be so easily dismissed.

‘You deny my actions?’

‘No,’ Kili shifted, and the sound of fingernails rasping against skin reached Thorin’s ears, making him think he was scratching at his injuries, ‘but I understand why it came to that. It was not what was taken that distressed you, but who did the taking. You expected the rest of the Company to betray you, but even when you were unwell, you never thought it possible of Bilbo. I think he knows that, too. He knows he hurt you.’

Thorin closed his eyes, remembering afresh the sharp slice of shock when Bilbo confessed what he had done. Madness may have clouded his mind, but it did nothing to soften the blow. Instead, it only removed his rationality, and wild fury had been the result. The roar of his rage was a thin veil for his agony. He could still recall the line of Bilbo’s fragile throat beneath his gauntleted palm and the
‘He has done nothing for which he should apologise,’ he rasped, his voice choking at the pain of the memory. ‘No wrong has been committed by Master Baggins.’

‘That is not your decision alone to make.’ Thorin turned his head to watch Gandalf amble into the room. Gone was the drag of exhaustion about his bent frame. He seemed bright and alert, his eyes agleam, even if his body was slow from the cold. ‘I cannot speak for Bilbo’s forgiveness, but I would urge you not to give up hope. Let his actions speak where his words cannot, and allow yours to do the same.’

The cryptic undertones of Gandalf’s statement were as familiar as they were frustrating, and Thorin heaved a sigh. ‘Can you not speak clearly, old friend?’

The wizard looked at him, tugging the brim of his hat further down his brow. ‘Bilbo Baggins would not trouble himself with the suffering of your kingdom if he did not still hold some respect for its king.’ He tapped his staff on the ground, running his fingers over the wood before meeting Thorin’s eye, his expression shrewd. ‘Hobbits may be a peaceful race, but their kindness has its limits. You crossed those long ago, back in the Misty Mountains, when you disparaged everything he was and could hope to be.’ He straightened up, the peak of his pointy hat brushing the tent’s ceiling. ‘The goodness of his heart is not the only thing that has driven Bilbo along this road, nor is it all that drives him still. There is more to his departure from your side today than meets the eye.’

Thorin groaned, wishing he could reach out and shake the wizard until all his secrets fell out of him. The dwarves, even in the throes of diplomatic negotiation, were known for being direct, while it seemed wizards everywhere thrived on mystery. None more so than the one who now took a seat at his side, perching on a stool so short that his knees almost touched his chest.

‘What would you have me do?’ He shook his head against his pillow. ‘What more can I say beyond what has been said? I will offer him any repetition of apology, any plea for forgiveness, but they are nothing that he has not already heard.’

‘Then perhaps you should stop speaking and start listening,’ Gandalf suggested. ‘You may feel you are the only one who needs to apologise, but I suspect Bilbo thinks differently. You have had little time nor opportunity to speak with him, these past few days.’

‘Nor am I likely to get the chance now.’ He gestured around him, taking in the tent and its occupants with a weak sweep of his arm. ‘My injuries trap me here, and he moves beyond my reach.’

It was foolish to resent the demands of his kingdom for robbing him of Bilbo’s company, yet resent them he did. Perhaps he would be less bitter if he could be sure of his return, but the image of the hobbit’s hunted expression kept rising before his eyes, a spectre to haunt his waking moments.

‘Bilbo will return,’ Gandalf smiled, speaking as if he were reading the thoughts straight from Thorin’s mind. ‘When he does, I suggest you heed my advice. Allow him to speak without interruption. What you learn may surprise you.’

He reached into his robes, groping around in one of his numerous pockets. ‘In the meantime, Balin bade me give you this.’ He offered up a sheaf of parchment, ragged and stained. No doubt it had been scavenged and had passed through several sets of hands before reaching him. ‘He thought you would like to be kept informed.’
Greedily, Thorin latched onto the papers, grateful for the distraction from both his doubts and his pain. Balin’s familiar hand outlined a number of essential facts: the living and the dead, as well as the needs of men and dwarves alike. There was news on the structure of the mountain and its integrity, and much needed reassurance that work was already underway to make it safe.

In every line, Thorin could read the dedication of his Company. They had followed him to the slopes of Erebor, their thoughts full of the riches within and their reward. Now it became clear that their devotion extended far beyond the notion of monetary gain. Many minds bent to the task meant no consideration remained untended, and steadily, a plan of action began to unfurl in the notes before him.

‘Good news, I trust?’ Gandalf asked, raising one eyebrow.

Thorin did not believe for a moment that the wizard had not read his fill, equipping himself with the knowledge of this shattered land. He answered grudgingly, speaking more for the sake of his listening nephews that anyone else.

‘All sides took heavy losses, but the men of Laketown suffered the most, and their number was not so great to begin with. They were ill prepared for a fight, not to mention the dragon. The mountain is being made safe, while all races work to build up a store of supplies.’

‘Is there enough?’ Kili asked, propping himself up with a wince, trying to read the papers in his uncle’s hands despite Fili’s presence between them.

‘Not yet. We have many mouths to feed, and few strong enough to hunt.’

‘What of the dead?’ Fili’s voice surprised him. He had thought he slept anew, carried under by the medicine Legolas had dripped between his lips. ‘What will become of them?’

‘They have already been burned.’ Gandalf said softly. ‘Great pyres lit the night and filled the sky with smoke. It was our only choice. The ground is too hard for burial, all ice and stone, and we have not the time to construct so many tombs. It was Bilbo’s suggestion, and one which met with approval from men and elves, as well as dwarves.’

‘And the orcs?’

‘Separated and set ablaze on barren rock, so that their evil cannot poison what remains of the soil.’

Silence, respectful and absolute, met Gandalf’s response. It pained Thorin to think of all those who had been slain. How many had lost their lives while he hid, a captive to his madness? How many could have been spared if he had only broken free and taken his place in the fight sooner?

Grimly, he tried to push the thought aside. Their salvation would not be found in lingering regrets. Only quick action could save them from the clutches of winter. He may already be exhausted by the conversation and aching from his ill-advised effort to leave the bed, but he could not allow himself to slip back into the depths. There was much to do, and while he could not lift and carry, nor rebuild and repair, he could still make plans with those who possessed the strength to act.

‘Summon Dain to my tent as soon as he is able, and spread word to the others that a meeting is to convene here before the sun sets.’ He scratched at his beard, narrowing his eyes as he gave the matter some thought. ‘The invitation should also extend to Bard and Thranduil; matters that surround Erebor concern them both.’

‘Thorin, your injuries…’ Oin began, his face grim, but he halted the old dwarf’s protest with a wave of his hand.
‘I shall not leave this bed, but the demands of the kingdom cannot wait for my recovery. I will be relying on you, my friend, to see me through.’

Oin grumbled, clattering bowls and bottles around in obvious disapproval, but before long he relented, seeing Thorin’s logic even if he did not agree with it. ‘Drink this,’ he ordered, handing him a cup with a drop or two of liquid in the bottom. ‘It will help the pain without clouding your mind, and also give you a short bout of deep sleep: an hour, no more. You’ll wake again by the time Dain gets here, and rest is what you need.’

Thorin did as he was told, ignoring the bitter taste of the dose as it slid down his throat. Almost immediately, he felt a heaviness overtake his frame, and he hoped Oin was right as he collapsed back to his pillows. Sleep may be what his body needed, but it was not a luxury he could afford. Erebor awaited him, and he would not be found wanting. Not this time.
Bilbo was not hiding, no matter what it looked like. He was merely taking a moment to himself; there was nothing wrong with that.

Of course, he could understand why people might make such an assumption. Half-a dozen barrels sheltered him from the wind, and the oilsman draped over the top formed a small, dark space: the perfect place to find a moment’s peace.

The apple he had scavenged had seen better days. Its withered skin lay slack around the fruit, but at least it was not full of worms. He’d eaten worse, and he was hungry enough not to care about the appearance of his meagre meal. The juice was sharp, reminiscent of the gaffer’s cider, and the flesh was softer than most, but it would do.

In less than a minute, the morsel was gone, and Bilbo grimaced as the ache in his belly remained. Not that he was surprised. Heartache, not hunger, made his guts clench, and he could do nothing but suffer.

It had been the coward’s way out, leaving the tent when no one could give chase, but he had not had the courage to stay. Not even when Thorin practically begged him, all earnest eyes and gentle warmth.

He’d almost given in. It would be so easy to remain at Thorin’s side; there was nowhere else in all of Middle Earth he would rather be, not even the Shire. Yet he could not take that risk, not when the memory of Thorin’s heat burned his hands like a brand and the recollection of his heartbeat still thudded in his ears.

Bilbo had only meant to save him from falling, as any good companion would. Instead, his efforts had left him with a dry mouth and a light head; far more fascinated in Thorin’s healing body than a mere friend had any right to be.

He groaned, pulling his knees up to his chest and burying his flaming face in the thin cloth that covered them. There had been hints of desire before, on and off throughout their journey. It would come across him at times both extraordinary and mundane, conjured up by anything, from Thorin’s quiet smile to the way his tunic clung to his muscles after their trip in barrels down the river.

He had thought it would fade over time, withering away as it went ignored. Instead it had flourished, wrapping Bilbo in its vines until there was no escape. Worse, others had seen it. Bofur’s words about the rumours around camp kept coming back to him, adding to his unease. It was one thing to admire Thorin in the privacy of one’s own head, but quite another to let the whole world see.

No, he could not have stayed there and risked revealing his feelings to the one dwarf who mattered most. At least this way, if the gossip ever reached Thorin’s ears, Bilbo might still be able to laugh it off as idle chatter. He had not yet damned himself in Thorin’s eyes, and nor would he do so.

Not if he could help it.

He would not lose Thorin’s friendship all because of a little crush, and that was what would happen if it came to light. Bilbo had no illusions to the contrary. Perhaps, once or twice, he had thought he’d seen the gleam of something similar in Thorin’s eyes, but it was always pulled back and tamped down out of sight. Over time, he had written off such glimpses as figments of his imagination. After all, why would Thorin want him?
He was a king, and Bilbo was – he was nothing. Not even a burglar.

A wave of misery washed through him, and he clenched his teeth, ruthlessly shoving it aside. ‘None of that,’ he berated himself, clearing his throat and climbing to his feet. ‘You’ve got better things to do than sit here moping.’

He bundled his emotions up and, with great effort, shoved them down deep into his chest where they belonged. Perhaps later, when they were all safe within the mountain, he would look at them properly, but now there were greater demands on his time. He had already ferreted himself away here, out of sight, for too long.

Duty called.

Moving a camp this size was no easy task. Dwarves and men worked together, building carts to carry the wounded while the able-bodied formed hunting parties, ready to scour the land for game. Foragers sought out the berries, mushrooms and roots that might see them through the cold months ahead. Bilbo was not sure how much luck they’d have in this barren place, but he had to trust those who knew it better than he.

‘Master Bilbo!’ A hand waved above the heads of some nearby dwarves, catching his attention, and he saw Dori hurrying towards him, his arms full of a cloth bundle. Right behind him was Ori, similarly burdened, his youthful face torn between determination and apology. ‘There you are. We’ve been looking everywhere!’

‘Well you found me.’ Bilbo managed a strained smile, wishing that they’d overlooked him. Handling the anonymity of organising men and dwarves was one thing, but he felt too fragile to deal with the smiling faces of his friends. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘As well as can be expected, given the circumstances.’ Dori puffed out a breath, hooking his hand into Bilbo’s elbow and steering him along, talking all the while. ‘A meeting’s been called. All the Company, as well as Dain, Bard and Thranduil, though I expect the latter is more out of politeness than because anyone wants him there.’

Bilbo made a rough sound, considering reminding them that it was the elves who had saved Thorin’s life. It wouldn’t be the first time he had pointed it out over the past few days, to general mutterings. Old prejudices died hard, but this time Bilbo held his tongue on the subject.

‘Who called the meeting? Balin?’

‘No, the King.’ Dori tutted in disapproval. ‘Not that he’s well enough to be doing much, mind, but that’s the way he is.’

‘And – and that’s where we’re going is it?’

Dori stopped, turning to give Bilbo a hard stare. Behind them, Ori smothered a laugh, managing to turn it into a cough before his older brother could comment.

‘No, Master Baggins. Busy we may be, but I think we’ve spent quite long enough looking like ruffians.’ Dori eyed Bilbo’s torn coat meaningfully. ‘It’s taken days of searching to get enough warm clothes and furs for those in need. Now, I can turn my attention to the Company.’

‘He’s already got to most of us.’ The cloth Ori carried muffled his voice, but he managed to shift his bundle so Bilbo could take in his appearance. His tunic was worn in places, but clever, quick repairs had mended holes, and there was no mistaking the distinctive style. There was nothing of Laketown about Ori’s outfit now, and Dori beamed with pride. ‘You’re next.’
'We may not be able to go to this meeting dressed in fine clothes, but at least they will be dwarvish.'

‘Er – but I’m not a dwarf.’ Bilbo raised his eyebrows as Dori guided him into a tiny tent. There was barely any space beyond a crude wooden screen banged into the ground. A couple of braziers smoked fitfully, and a number of jagged, hasty seams let in the wind, making Bilbo shiver.

‘Never mind that,’ Dori muttered, putting the clothes on a nearby crate. ‘Get in, before the water gets cold.’

The hobbit screwed up his face, casting a baffled look at Ori. The young dwarf took pity on him, pointing behind the screen. ‘We banged it together out of a few broken cooking pots. Big ones. It leaks a bit, but no one’s complained yet.’

Bilbo stared at the object, taking in the rough iron vessel in disbelief. No doubt there were one or two sharp edges, but he could not bring himself to care. Not when the bowl of it was three quarters full with steaming water.

‘A bath?’ he asked, ‘but where – how –?’

‘Never mind that,’ Dori interrupted. ‘Go on, get in before the heat’s all gone. We don’t have much time to spare.’

‘Most of us made do with a wet rag and just wiped off the worst of the dirt,’ Ori confided, turning his back to give Bilbo extra privacy, ‘but we thought you might like this more.’ There was no judgement in his voice, and he spoke the truth. The bath was an unexpected luxury, well worth the brief chill of the air as he removed his clothes and stepped into the water.

Bilbo submerged himself, careful of the coarse metalwork. He could feel the dirt sloughing off of him, taking away traces of blood with it. Cuts and scrapes stung in protest, but it was a small pain in comparison to the sheer relief the warmth brought to tired muscles and aching bones.

He gasped as he breached the surface, raising his hands to swipe his hair back from his face. It needed cutting, and he vowed to find some scissors or a sharp knife at the first opportunity. A sweep or two of his palms rubbed the worst of the dirt off his skin: fingers and elbows, knees and feet. There was no soap of course, but Bilbo would take what he could get. Hot water was rare enough in this desperate place, and he wished he could make the most of it.

‘You haven’t drowned, have you?’ Ori asked, his voice coming through the modesty screen. Bilbo suspected the ramshackle arrangement was for his sake. After all, the dwarves had no qualms about public nudity, unlike hobbits.

‘No, but I’m not looking forward to getting out.’ He grimaced at the thought of the ice-cold air, untouched by the flames in the braziers. The tent would be warmer than the outside world, but only just.

‘You’ll need to dress quickly,’ Dori advised. ‘Smalls and undershirt are on top of the screen. Dry off with the inside of your old clothes and put them on. We’ll help you with the rest.’ There was a brief pause before his voice turned beseeching. ‘I don’t suppose I can convince you to wear some boots?’

‘No.’ Bilbo kept his reply flat. ‘And no funny long trousers either, thank you.’

He smiled as Dori muttered something under his breath, taking a few more moments to bask in the warm waters before he clambered out. The cold seized him like a vice, and Bilbo shivered, grabbing his old tunic. It had been under the mithril shirt and nothing worse than his own sweat stained the fabric. His hands shook as he wiped the water away from his skin and ruffled it through his hair,
getting rid of the stray droplets that fell to his shoulders and raced down his spine.

Reaching up, he grabbed the essentials Dori had provided, covering his dignity before diving into the soft material of the replacement undershirt. It seemed like a fine garment, untouched by moth or rot, and it smelt like herbs. It lay against his skin and fell halfway to his knees: a bit too long, but he honestly didn’t expect anything else.

Glancing at the modesty screen, he made sure neither of the dwarves were looking before he rummaged through his old clothes, digging in the pockets until his fingers seized the objects he sought. The ring was heavy: fat and golden in the weak light. Compared to the acorn he had carried from Beorn’s, it looked gaudy and distasteful, but he couldn’t bring himself to cast such a useful thing away.

Hiding them both in the curl of his palm, he raised his voice. ‘All right, what’s next?’

‘This.’ Ori stepped around the screen and scooped the mithril up from the floor. His fingers skimmed reverently over the gleaming metal before he slid it over Bilbo’s head, ignoring his muffled protests.

‘Do I still need the armour? No one else is wearing it.’

‘Better safe than sorry.’ Dori stepped forward, checking the sleeves as he avoided Bilbo’s eyes. He got the distinct feeling there was something they weren’t telling him, but before he could ask any questions, the dwarf began passing him various garments.

‘Trousers.’ He shoved them into Bilbo’s hands, standing back as he hopped into them and fastened them around his waist. A smooth lining brushed against his skin, so much thicker than what he had worn before, with no holes to let in the wind. ‘I cut them off just below your knee and tacked them with a quick running stitch.’ Dori scowled. ‘Shoddy, but it will have to do. With any luck, people will be too busy to notice.’ He picked up a padded tunic, watching Bilbo like a hawk as he put it on.

As soon as it was in place, he swooped in, fastening a belt around Bilbo’s waist to cinch the fabric into neat pleats down his back. It made it look more like one of the jackets he may have worn in Hobbiton, and he had to admit that while the cloth may be that of the dwarves, he couldn’t be mistaken for one of them. Not by a long shot.

‘Shouldn’t this be a bit –’ He fluttered his fingers at the slashed collar of the tunic, indicating where its embroidered edges parted to reveal the metal beneath. ‘– higher?’

‘Some things need to be seen, Master Baggins.’ He spoke as if no further explanation was required, and Bilbo silently cursed the secretive attitude of the dwarves.

Dori stepped back, rummaging in his pocket. ‘A finishing touch,’ he explained, holding up something for Bilbo to see. It was a pair of beads made from dark wood and hastily carved smooth. There was something rugged and bold about them, and Bilbo noticed that matching ones decorated some of Dori and Ori’s braids. ‘Bifur made them, for those that are in the Company. By wearing the braid and the beads, you’re telling the world.’

‘Telling them what?’

He paused, his voice softening as he smiled. ‘That you belong here. With us.’

A lump caught in Bilbo’s throat, sharp and unexpected at such honesty. Dori spoke without preamble, as if nothing made more sense than a rowdy group of dwarves deciding to show everyone that a quiet, unassuming little hobbit was one of their own. It was more than anyone had ever done for him in the past, and he swallowed, genuinely touched.
’I’d – I’d be honoured to wear them. Will it work?’ He lifted his hand to his hair, which lay damp around his ears.

’Should do,’ Ori said, leading him over to stand near the shallow bowl of warmth one of the braziers offered. ’Your hair is a different texture than ours, but it’s long enough now, especially when it’s wet.’

His fingers flew as he worked, selecting a piece of hair at Bilbo’s right temple and weaving it together, tracking it back towards his ear before allowing it to fall downwards. One bead went in halfway along, and the other at the end, though he had no idea what held it in place.

’There you go.’ Ori admired his handiwork, and Dori gave a satisfied nod over his shoulder. ’It’s not much, but ...’

’It’s wonderful.’ Bilbo smiled, tipping his head to the side as he grew accustomed to the change in weight. It was a small braid, easy to tuck into his curls if he wished, but for now he was more than happy to keep it on display. ’What do you think? Am I ready?’

He spread his hands, showing off the results of their efforts. It may not be the most elegant of clothing, but it beat the sorry stuff he had been wearing before by a wide margin. The cloth, though coarse, was dyed a rich, dark green, and some embroidery still circled around the cuffs in pale thread. The trousers covering his legs were slate grey and entirely respectable, and his skin was clean for the first time in his remembering.

’As ready as you’ll ever be.’ Dori cast a rueful look at Bilbo’s bare feet before picking up one last piece from the pile. It was a coat made of hide and lined with fur, fitting for a dwarf, but so long on Bilbo that it reminded him more of his dressing gown than anything to be worn out of doors. ’Take this. It’s too cold to pretend you don’t need it, and you’re not used to these harsh climes.’

The stern look in Dori’s eyes suggested arguing was useless, and Bilbo shrugged his arms into the sleeves before he set about rolling up the cuffs. The difference was immediate. Dancing shivers abated as soft fur surrounded the bare skin of his neck. The smell of old rooms filled his nose, and he realised the coat must have come from the mountain. It was a miracle anything of use had survived Smaug’s occupation, but then dwarves made things to last.

Almost as soon as the weight of the fabric had settled on his shoulders, Dori began to bustle around, collecting up his bundle once more before striding towards the tent flaps. ’Come on, come on,’ he urged, peeling them aside and standing back to let Bilbo and Ori pass. ’Straight to the King’s tent, now. We can’t be late.’

’I don’t think they’ll start without us,’ Ori offered.

’It wouldn’t matter if they did.’ Bilbo winced as the gale slammed into him, making him grateful that Dori had bullied him in to the big coat. He thrust his hands deep in the pockets and hunched his shoulders. ’We can always slip in at the back. I don’t think I’ve got much to say anyway.’

’Bard and Thranduil might disagree.’ Dori lifted his voice as the wind shrieked across the plateau. ’They’ll speak with us if they must, but it’s always you they’re after.’

Bilbo sighed, nodding to the guards outside Thorin’s tent. There were dwarves and elves alike, both trying to stand straighter than the other as they flanked the entrance. Occasionally they’d exchange a sneer before going back to ignoring one another, feigning indifference.

The men, on the other hand, sat by the nearest campfire, laughing at their counterparts and enjoying
the respite. They were near enough that they could be on their feet in moments if Bard raised his voice, but Bilbo thought them the wisest of all, prioritising comfort over petty squabbles and showmanship.

‘They’re waiting for you, Master Baggins,’ one of the dwarves murmured, sketching a bow. Bilbo’s embarrassment at such respect only intensified when he realised the elves had also inclined their heads. He stammered his thanks, ducking inside and looking around at the altered interior in surprise.

Oin’s functional tent was flooded with light, heated by braziers that burnt incense to freshen the air. Rugs lay on top of the sacking on the floor, while blankets in the blues of Durin had been spread over the furs on the beds, lending an air of authority to those who still lay confined.

Kili was propped on his pillows, his face pale and his eyes bright. Fili was beside him, flat on his back but awake. He looked better than he had that morning, more alert than ever. Legolas sat nearby, along with Tauriel. They all spoke quietly, with none of the forced formality that seemed to weigh heavy on everyone else.

The rest of the Company ranged around in a rough semi-circle. Some perched on crates, murmuring to one another and casting doubtful glances at their companions. Other stood in silence, lost in their private thoughts. Gandalf had settled himself in a corner away from the main press of bodies and was smoking his pipe with every sign of enjoyment. It was tempting to join him, but before Bilbo could do more than glance in his direction, Balin beckoned him.

He and Dain sat to the right of Thorin’s cot, and that, too, had changed since Bilbo saw it last. A large piece of wood had been fixed to the frame at the head of the bed. Plain and unembellished, it still reminded Bilbo of a throne, allowing Thorin to face friends and questionable allies alike. The effort clearly cost him; pain lined his eyes and pinched his mouth, but determination won out.

A coat similar to the one Bilbo wore was cast around his shoulders like a robe. No crown adorned his brow and no braids wove through his hair, but despite his injuries, there was still an air of power about him: hard and unyielding.

An empty stool sat near Thorin’s left hand, and Bilbo drew a breath as Balin cast a meaningful look in its direction. He hadn’t intended to be so central to proceedings, preferring the idea of clinging to the shadows as the dwarves got on with whatever this was about, but it seemed the Company had other ideas. They all made way for him with smiles and fond looks. Some murmured greetings and Bofur tugged at the matching braid in his own hair, giving Bilbo a grin and a wink.

He shrugged out of the coat, knowing he’d be too hot in the confined atmosphere. On the other side of the tent, Thranduil straightened, his eyes narrowing as his gaze rested at Bilbo’s throat. Reaching up, he realised that the elf was staring at the mithril where it sat on display, and he wasn’t the only one.

The dwarves kept shooting him furtive stares, all looking pleased with themselves. It made Bilbo wonder if they had set him up for some kind of joke. Was he insulting the elves by wearing armour in their presence? It sounded like just the sort of mischief his friends would enjoy, though Dori didn’t usually join in their fun and games. Surely the fussy dwarf, who put so much stock in manners and etiquette, wouldn’t help with such a scheme?

‘Master Baggins.’ Thorin’s rough voice broke into his thoughts, and he looked around to see that the stern lines of his face had softened. Blue eyes, alight now with intelligence and life, seemed to pin him in place, and Bilbo cursed his sudden breathlessness.

All he could see was the dwarf he had once known – the one he’d grown to care for over the course
of their journey. All trace of greed and tyranny had fled, replaced with an aura of responsibility. It was hard to remember how he had been in the mountain: his self-obsession and his lust for gold.

Thorin’s lips parted as if to speak, and Bilbo’s traitorous heart leapt in his chest, picking up its beat to a fretful patter. Yet Thorin swallowed back whatever he may have been about say, restraining himself to bowing his head in greeting. Bilbo returned the gesture, shifting on his seat as the general murmurs fell to silence and the men, elves and dwarves assumed an expectant air.

‘I have summoned you all here so that we can discuss our strategy for the days and months ahead.’ Thorin’s resonant voice was far stronger than Bilbo knew his body to be. ‘Winter comes hard upon us, and I know you have all worked ceaselessly to prepare for it in my absence. The time to act fast approaches, and the more knowledge we share, the greater our chances of success.’

Thorin looked over at Dain, and Bilbo took in the sight of the great, grizzled dwarf. His shock of red hair was made more fearsome by the tusks woven into his beard. Looking at him, Bilbo could see how the dwarves gained a reputation for warfare. He looked like a veteran soldier, harder even than Dwalin, yet when he spoke his thick brogue was soft and thoughtful, the brashness of the battlefield gone.

‘Half my forces will stay with Thorin and his Company, to protect and serve however the King sees fit. There’ll be less mouths to feed, but the kingdom’s defences won’t suffer as a result.’

‘The dwarves of the Iron Hills are superior smiths,’ Thorin explained. ‘As well as assisting with the protection of Erebor, they can repair armour, weaponry, and everyday items we may find in short supply.’

‘Aye,’ Dain agreed. ‘Smithing is their strong suit, but they’re able stonemasons as well. Erebor won’t want for repairs. It will be made safe again: a home for dwarves and men alike, for as long as they need it.’

Bard nodded, propping his elbows on his knees as he hunkered on what looked like an old barrel tipped on its side. ‘You have my thanks. We are simple folk, fishermen and traders mostly, but you won’t find us wanting if there is work to be done.’

‘We would be thankful of any strength the men of Laketown choose to share.’ Thorin’s words were formal, but heartfelt, and the grim line of his mouth eased. ‘Feeding your people and mine is the biggest challenge we face. Bombur, were you able to get the information you needed?’

The large, round dwarf clasped sausage-like fingers in front of him as he spoke, soft-voiced but certain. ‘Dain’s men said there was a wagon train following the army. It’s due to arrive any day now. It won’t keep us going all winter, but add what they can spare to our supplies and it’s possible.’ He scratched his head, red-faced from the heat. ‘We’ll need hunting parties and foragers still, but we should have enough.’

‘I have sent most of my soldiers back to Greenwood.’ Thranduil examined one of the rings on his fingers, choosing to look at Bilbo as he continued. ‘As long as the way to Erebor does not become blocked in the coming days, they will return with additional supplies. Fresh meat, I fear, may be hard to find, but there are other gifts the forest can bestow: nuts and dried fruit, as well as sweet roots and other fillings foods.’

‘Thank you.’ Thorin’s jaw was tense as his voice recaptured Thranduil’s attention, but Bilbo thought the gratitude came easier this time, as though it cost his pride less. ‘Should your elves find themselves unable to return to Greenwood due to winter storms, we will of course offer our hospitality.’
‘The wells are clear.’ Bofur spoke before Thranduil could answer, perhaps hoping to cut short any efforts at insult before the strained politeness of the meeting could take a turn for the worse. ‘We checked them all. Water still runs beneath the stones, clean and fresh.’

‘The forges are another matter.’ Gloin shuffled in his seat, spreading his hands. ‘Those we used before the battle are cracked from the heat of the dragon fire. They’ll need work before we can get them going again.’

‘Do any remain?’ Thorin asked, the concern in his voice something Bilbo didn’t understand. Surely there were higher priorities than getting Erebor’s mines started again?

‘One is good. I’ve dwarves standing by to light it on your command.’ Gloin straightened up, explaining to the room at large. ‘Without the forges, their feeds and exhausts, there would be nothing to heat the mountain. Campfires would do little to fight the deep chill of untouched stone. Even one forge can warm Erebor, as well as the water that runs through it.’

‘Good for health,’ Oin commented. ‘The spread of disease is easy if we’re all packed together. Hot water will help keep things clean.’

‘And make quick work of cooking.’ Bombur’s smile was huge and bright like the sun, as if Gloin had given him the best gift he could hope for. ‘A kitchen is nothing without warm water.’

‘Get the forge lit,’ Thorin ordered, ‘and check the flues are clear while Erebor remains unoccupied. It will reduce our chances of being exposed to poison and fume.’ If he noticed the alarm on Bilbo and Bard’s faces, he did not mention it. ‘Is there enough to fuel it?’

‘Aye, plenty. The dragon had interest in naught but the gold.’ Gloin got to his feet, sticking his head through the tent flap and passing on Thorin’s orders.

‘Is – is poison likely?’ Bilbo asked, smiling as Bard flashed him a grateful look. The risks the dwarves took in their stride were more than a little alarming, and he wanted to be sure that they knew what they were about.

‘If the smoke from the forge cannot escape, it builds up in pockets and causes problems. Sickening and such.’ Thorin managed a smile. ‘It’s best we resolve that uncertainty before there is anyone to suffer. It will take a few hours, no more.’

‘And what of the gold?’ Gandalf’s question echoed through the tent, quiet, yet as shocking as a thunderclap. It stunned the dwarves into wary silence and drew the air taut. Every wandering eye sought out Thorin, awaiting his answer.

‘The gold is a concern.’ His voice was heavy and slow, as if it pained him to speak of the treasures within Erebor’s halls. ‘I cannot deny the effect it had on me and, to a lesser extent, my kin and Company. Balin, Dain and myself discussed the matter earlier, and have put in place legal documents that would allow the removal of any ruler of Erebor, now or in years to come, should the dragon sickness strike once more.’

He held up a hand, stemming the protests of the loyal dwarves who surrounded him. It was a bold move, even Bilbo could see that, and not one without risk. ‘I would ask that the precise knowledge of our plan remains within these walls. Assure others that steps have been taken, but spare them the details. In the wrong hands, this policy could easily become a weapon.’

Thorin watched Thranduil from beneath a creased brow, and Bilbo followed his line of sight. For once, there was no sneer on that slender expression. The elf watched, silent and still, his fingers
curled over his lips in thought.

‘It is not a permanent solution. Once we have secured food to last us through the winter, I will reconsider the matter of the treasure hall. For now, our survival is paramount. The gold cannot feed us, nor can it buy goods while the weather remains too fierce for traders to travel.’

‘So we do nothing?’ Bilbo asked, his voice straining in his throat. Logic lay thick in Thorin’s words, unquestionable, but he could not shake the dank fear that settled in his gut. It was one thing to be beneath the open sky with the gold several miles away and buried within the mountain, but once they were confined to Erebor’s halls, what then? Would they be able to resist the call of all that wealth, or were they doomed to succumb all over again?

Thorin met his gaze, and to his surprise, there was an echo of his concern in those blue depths. For all the certainty in his voice, he looked as afraid as Bilbo felt. His shadowed brow twisted and his left hand clenched, tucked into the furs where only Bilbo could see. It was a brief exposure of Thorin’s mood, something private shared between them, and Bilbo let out a shuddering breath as the dwarf confirmed his fears.

‘We do nothing.’

‘Your care for your people does you credit,’ Gandalf murmured, coughing on the smoke from his pipe as he rose wearily. ‘If I may, I shall stay within Erebor’s walls until the snow passes. I fear my bones have grown too old to travel the lands in such weather, and I am sure Bilbo will understand the need to delay his return to the Shire until spring.’

A wave of shock rippled through the tent, and Bilbo caught more than one stricken expression among his friends at the mention of his departure. He fidgeted, studiously avoiding even a glance in Thorin’s direction as he clasped his hands in his lap. ‘I never assumed we would leave before the thaw,’ he managed, trying to speak around the knot of conflicting emotion in his throat.

In truth, he had avoided all thoughts of his return to Bag End. Once, the idea would have brought only relief and joy. He still missed his armchair and his books, his warm smial and the golden, glowing days so often found in the Shire. Yet sometimes the notion of returning to the home he’d always known – empty and quiet – made him anxious, torn between longing and fear.

‘Quite so.’ Gandalf smiled: an amiable, harmless expression, but it didn’t fool Bilbo for one second. The wizard was up to something, possibly many somethings, and there was no point trying to guess at what they may be. When it came to games like this Gandalf could outmanoeuvre them all, even the elves. All he could do was let him get on with it, and brace himself for whatever the wizard had in store. ‘In the meantime, I will look into the gold. Perhaps we can silence its call.’

Bilbo breathed a sigh, reassured at the thought of Gandalf’s assistance. The memory of the dwarves’ stupor and Thorin’s cruelty still lingered, and the idea of returning to that was not one he relished. At least now he wouldn’t be alone. The wizard would be there, and so would Bard and his people. He only hoped that they were immune to the treasure’s thrall.

‘And what of the Arkenstone?’ Thranduil raised an eyebrow, his gaze sliding in Bard’s direction. The man returned his look with calm indifference, even as a rash of panic shot down Bilbo’s spine. So far, no one had asked for the King’s jewel, and he had kept that facet of his meeting with Bard under wraps. Trust an elf to push thoughts of it to the forefront of everyone’s minds.

‘What of it?’ To anyone who didn’t know him, Thorin’s question sounded light, as if they were discussing nothing more than the weather. Bilbo wondered how much it had cost him to keep his voice free of anger. He could see the faint tremor in Thorin’s fingers, hidden from others by the
blankets, and he fought the longing to reach out and enclose them in his grasp.

‘I would have thought reclaiming the symbol of your right to rule would be paramount; especially after all you risked attaining it and who you threw aside in its pursuit.’ He glanced in Bilbo’s direction, his meaning clear to everyone.

Dimly, Bilbo heard Legolas whisper something in Sindarin, and he glanced over to see him staring at his father, his eyes clouded by a frown. Next to him, Kili looked furious, dividing his attention between quietly describing the scene to his brother and offering hesitant smiles to Tauriel.

Dain moved like a landslide, unstoppable. Broad shoulders squared beneath his chainmail, and the sneer on his lips bared his teeth. ‘Now you listen to me, you pointy-eared bastard. The right to rule is none of yer concern. Let us worry about the Arkenstone, unless you seek it for yerself?’

Thranduil wrinkled his nose in distaste, the thin veneer of politeness falling from his face. ‘It will be my concern when armies of dwarves are fighting one another on my doorstep. Do you think I do not heed the rumours? There are those who consider marching on Erebor now, while the throne lies empty.’

‘Winter will claim any foolish enough to make the attempt.’ Thorin’s words over-ruled whatever Dain may have said in retort, and a quelling glare eased the ire of the Lord of the Iron Hills. ‘As for the stone itself, I am certain it is safe.’

‘It is in the hands of people we trust.’ Bilbo tried not to cringe as he became the centre of attention. He did not mean his words as a slight to elves, wizards or his friends, but he spoke the truth. Of all of them, Bard and his kind were the most neutral, and Bilbo knew it was foolish to dismiss the political power of the gem in the bargeman’s possession. ‘Perhaps that is where it should stay.’

He expected cries of outrage and fury, not the thick, stunned silence that settled in the tent like a shroud. It seemed as if everyone was holding their breath, and he spoke quickly, before their shock could fade and their anger could rise.

‘If people think the right to rule this kingdom lies in a stone, instead of being earned in long journeys and battle wounds, then fair enough, but that’s not how I see it.’ He cleared his throat, forcing himself to continue. ‘For me, it belongs to the dwarf who had the courage to reclaim the land in the first place. The Arkenstone became a symbol of royalty during Thror’s time, but others came before him. They ruled well, with no heart of the mountain to help them.’

He risked looking up, and found himself ensnared by Thorin’s gaze, deep blue and alert, despite the King’s exhaustion. His lips parted as he leant forward, no doubt straining his wounds as he hung on Bilbo’s every word. The attention made him blush and swallow hard, feeling like too small a creature to say such grand things. Yet he had started now, so he would finish, and let the others argue over it like wolves over meat.

‘Perhaps it’s time to return to those days?’ he asked, his voice barely more than a whisper. ‘The Arkenstone is only as important as we allow it to be.’

Outside, the noises of the camp carried on, and Bilbo listened, filling his mind with the domestic, busy sounds so that he would not fall into the abyss of silence that surrounded him.

No one breathed. It was as if they had all been painted or put under a spell. Even Gandalf stood frozen by the tent flaps, his pipe halfway to his lips as he stared. The hobbit could almost hear the cogs turning in that wise old mind, and he saw the moment Gandalf’s expression began to change.
Slowly, his brow smoothed and his eyes began to gleam with the kind of delight he usually reserved for his fireworks. Yet there was a hint of pride there, too, as if Bilbo had said or done something exceptionally clever.

Now he looked closer, Bilbo realised that the wizard was not the only one with approval written across his face. Kili beamed at him, bursting with enthusiasm. Balin’s eyes were bright, and Dain looked as if he were grinning to himself within the depths of his mighty beard.

Yet none of them could have the final say when it came to the Arkenstone; that lay in Thorin’s hands, and so far, he had not said a word. His expression was thunderstruck, as if Bilbo had hit him over the head rather than spoken softly, and try as he might, Bilbo couldn’t read anything more from his bottomless stare.

At last, he seemed to blink awake, tearing his eyes away from Bilbo’s face as he leant back against the board at the top of his bed. He looked strained, his complexion pale as the first gleam of sweat began to show across his brow. Yet when he spoke, there was no trace of weakness nor any avenue for argument.

‘The Arkenstone is a matter for another time. As Master Baggins says, it is in the care of those we trust.’ His gaze flickered to Bard, and Bilbo realised Thorin already knew who kept the King’s jewel in safekeeping. ‘For now, that is where it will stay, with Erebor’s thanks. We have greater concerns. Arguing over who wears the crown is meaningless if we do not survive the winter. How long do we have?’

‘A storm approaches from the north,’ Legolas informed him, while Oin nodded in grim agreement. ‘It will fall upon us by the third dawn from this night.’

‘And that’s if we’re lucky,’ the healer added, rising to his feet with a groan. He did not bother lifting his horn to his ear as he spoke, no doubt uninterested in whatever arguments came his way. ‘Now, with the utmost respect, we need to bring this meeting to a close. Kings and princes you may be, but in this tent, I am the one whose word is law. My patients grow weary, and they’ll need their rest if they are to be moved.’

‘When must we be ready?’ Bard asked, manhandling his barrel out of the way. ‘We cannot do it by tomorrow, not even if we work all night.’

‘Then at first light the next day.’ Thorin closed his eyes, letting out a breath. ‘We dare not stay beyond that.’

Those words carried a deep finality, and Bilbo tried to calm the anxious worms that twisted in his belly. He knew they had no choice in the matter. The weather forced their hand, and death was all that awaited them if they stayed where they were, but he could not feel glad at the decision.

His first experiences of Erebor had not been happy ones. How could they be, when the kingdom was a tomb presided over by a dragon? Thorin had told him, in the few peaceful moments along their journey, of his youthful memories of his home. Perhaps one day it would be restored to its former splendour, but all Bilbo could see was fear and horror, gold and greed.

Would it happen again? Would the shaky alliances the dwarves and men had built be torn apart once more, all for the sake of a bit of treasure? There was no way to be sure, but they would find out soon enough. The mountain awaited them and, for better or worse, they would all answer its call.
Dawn broke on the second day, shedding its light on the swelling mayhem of the camp. The sun, barely visible through the thick bank of cloud that seemed to draw in from all directions, did little to warm the land beneath it. Winter was no longer a promise in the air but a weight bearing down upon them all, and time was of the essence.

Oin bustled about the healer’s tent, packing everything he could lay his hands on. Thorin and his sister-sons were doomed to watch, confined to their cots by their injuries as the world around them erupted into frantic activity. The enforced bed-rest, though necessary, chafed at Thorin’s pride, and he sulked amidst his furs, sullen and foul-tempered.

The arrival of Legolas shortly after daybreak did nothing to improve his mood. He considered pulling the blankets over his head like a dwarfling just to avoid the Prince of Mirkwood. His dignity would not allow it, but it was a close run thing. He had hoped the last of the elves had already departed, beginning their procession back to the shelter of their precious trees, but some, it seemed, chose to linger.

‘King Thorin. I would request an immediate audience.’ The formality of it made him sigh, and he did not miss the way Gandalf hovered at Legolas’ shoulder, a great grey shadow in permanent attendance.

‘I suspect I have no choice. What would you ask of me?’

Legolas’ eyes darted across the tent, and Thorin followed his gaze to where Kili was dozing, oblivious to Oin’s frantic to-and-fro. Immediately, he knew what was about to come, and every fibre of his being tensed, torn between the demands of gratitude and the denial of instinct.

‘I would ask that you allow Tauriel to join you in your halls.’ He did not mince his words, nor pander to Thorin’s vanity. He was direct in a way his father was not, but that did not make this situation any easier.

Thorin forced himself not to clench his fists and bit back his first snarl of outright refusal. It came from an old, dark corner of his heart, where all elves were tarred with the same brush and none were worthy of his time. Two, at least, had proven him wrong: the prince who stood before him and the warrior who had fought so hard for his sister-sons.

‘Erebor is no place for an elf,’ he said, mustering his excuses. ‘She would better with her own kind.’

‘That way is shut to her. My father has committed her to exile.’ Legolas’ shoulders dropped, his eyes downcast. ‘It is either the mountain, or the winter.’

He saw it then, the same look he had seen on the she-elf’s face when she stood over Kili, desperately trying to heal him. It was love and dread all wrapped into the same, terrible package that branded Legolas’ features, but where Tauriel had found hope and relief, the prince had none.

Unexpected pity filled Thorin’s chest. Legolas was young, in elven terms, but he had already proven himself better than his father. With his request, he thought not of himself but of the woman he loved, even if she did not return the sentiment. It would have been easy for the elf to fall into resentment – to separate her from Kili without any consideration for her feelings. Instead, he sought nothing but her safety and happiness.

Neither of which Thorin was sure she would find with the dwarves.
He scowled, attempting to untangle old loathing from genuine fears as he struggled to explain. ‘She hides from me, preferring to see Kili only when they believe me asleep. I doubt she would be happy to live under my rule if she cannot face me in the light of day, and I cannot risk another voice of dissent. There will be enough of those already.’

‘She wished to avoid you undue distress,’ Gandalf interrupted, giving Thorin the kind of look that made him want to squirm. ‘She respects your rule and would follow any reasonable command. She also respects your disapproval, Thorin, though it may sadden you to hear that she does not fear it. No more, I think, than Kili.’

He clenched his jaw, scowling across the tent at the nephew in question and wondering if he was only feigning sleep. Both of them were silent and motionless, but a bit too quiet to be genuine in his opinion. Perhaps that was for the best, as he had no wish to repeat himself.

‘I would not have her fear me.’ He swallowed, wishing he could say the words without choking on them. Decades of prejudice tried to still his tongue, and he could hear his grandfather’s bile in the back of his mind, slating the elves and all who befriended them.

Yet times had changed; maybe the hour had come to acknowledge that. ‘She has done much for us, and if she is not welcome among her kin, then she may take shelter in Erebor. As for my disapproval –’ He raised his voice a fraction, glaring at his sister-sons as he saw Kili grasping his brother’s hand tight, despite the fact his eyes remained shut. ‘Perhaps she will change my mind on that score.’

Gandalf smiled, but his approval was nothing compared to the bow Legolas bestowed, deeper and more genuine than any that had preceded it. Thorin wondered what Thranduil would think if he could see his son offering such respect, but it was a petty thought, soon pushed aside. Legolas was not under his father’s thumb any more than Kili and Fili were under Thorin’s.

‘She comes unarmed,’ Dwalin growled from outside the tent, loitering at the threshold under the guise of standing sentry. Of course the grizzled soldier was nearby, ready to protect Thorin and his kin from any threat that emerged. He stuck his head through the canvas flaps, glaring at Legolas. ‘I’ll not have her entering the mountain with bow and blade in hand.’

The Elf Prince frowned, his face pinched. ‘Are you sure you can afford to make such a demand?’ He gestured to the bed-ridden occupants of the tent. ‘The road to Erebor is by no means safe, and with so many wounded, denying Tauriel her weapons might be unwise.’

‘There are dwarves enough to protect those who cannot take care of themselves, with sword, axe and fist if necessary.’

‘But not with arrows,’ he pointed out. ‘Tauriel can fell a threat long before they make their move. Would you throw away such an advantage?’

The dwarf and elf stared at each other, tense and unyielding as they waited for the other to surrender. Seconds ticked by, and Thorin could see that there would be no concession on either side. It made him desperate for Bilbo’s calm intervention. The hobbit had a way with words that Thorin had never mastered and seemed to have charmed people all across the camp. Impartiality was something to be valued. He may be a member of the Company, but his race alone set him apart, making him an ideal intermediary.

As if summoned by his thoughts, a small figure slipped past Dwalin, nodding to Oin before taking in the standoff. Bilbo’s brow wrinkled, furling over his tired eyes as he crossed his arms. ‘What’s going on?’ he demanded, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘No, never mind. I don’t want to know. We don’t have time for this, whatever it is. We’re ready to move.’
‘Already?’ Kili asked, all illusion of sleep cast aside at the sound of Bilbo’s voice.

‘We can’t delay any longer. The weather’s on the turn.’ Bilbo sounded breathless, and he managed a strained smile in Thorin’s direction as he began helping Oin, scooping up pots and herbs and stuffing them into the bags. ‘There’s a cart waiting just outside the tent for all three of you.’

‘I suppose walking is out of the question?’ Thorin murmured with more hope than expectation. He doubted he would be allowed to exert himself, and his suspicions were confirmed when Oin’s chest swelled with outrage.

‘You’d undo all my hard work before you went five paces. And that goes for you two as well.’ He jabbed a finger at Fili and Kili, the latter of whom pulled a face. ‘You’ll be carried, and that’s my final word on the matter.’

There was no arguing with the healer, and Thorin resigned himself to an invalid’s treatment. True, his wounds still bit deep, only just starting to heal, but gradually he felt is as if he were regaining the strength to rule, even if that did mean sorting out squabbles between stubborn dwarves and ice-calm elves.

‘Dwalin, Tauriel will keep her weapons.’ He lifted his voice, making sure everyone in earshot heard his command. ‘Prince Legolas makes a sound argument. There could well be more waiting for us on the journey than wild animals and bad weather.’ He shifted, biting back a grunt of pain as he turned his head in Bilbo’s direction.

‘Master Baggins –’

He paused, overwhelmed by all that he wished to say. For too long he had hoped to catch him alone – to thank him for his unshakable faith and unquestioning loyalty. Both still held strong despite everything, and Thorin could only marvel at the hobbit’s fortitude.

He remembered the speech Bilbo had made, quiet but sure, that night he called a meeting in this very tent. Thorin had hoarded every word because they gave him hope. How could the hobbit speak of him with such faith if he did not hold him in some regard? How could he vouch for Thorin’s character, despite what had happened, if he hated the dwarf for all he had done?

Then he had spoken of the Arkenstone, about the worth and merit of the jewel compared to that of the dwarves themselves – and Thorin in particular. No one else in his Company would have said such things, probably lacking the courage to do so, and still Bilbo had drawn breath, laying forth his outsider’s view and defending Thorin’s rule.

Perhaps all was not lost between them after all.

Yet now was not the time to speak of it. He could not ask the questions that burned through his mind, nor offer his genuine thanks for all that Bilbo had said in his name. This place was more a political stage than a healer’s tent; he must guard his words as carefully as he hid his weaknesses. Anything spoken here would reach far beyond the Company, and Thorin did not want to expose Bilbo to that kind of speculation, nor himself to their judgement. A king had little opportunity for privacy, but Thorin promised himself he would find some once they were in Erebor.

All he had to do was get there.

He realised Bilbo was waiting for him to speak, restless and expectant. He toyed with the braid one of the Company had wound over his ear, his fingers curling back and forth along its length. Thorin swallowed, tearing his eyes away from the motion. Something so innocent should not be so
captivating, and he stared at the ceiling as he spoke.

‘We have delayed long enough. If someone could assist me and my kin, we can depart this wretched place.’

His words spurred those around him into action. Some dismantled the tent, peeling back the canvas like the skin of a fruit. Others threw rugs onto the bed of a crude four-wheeled cart, making it as comfortable as possible for those who would lie within it for the duration of the journey. Thorin did not relish the thought, but he allowed himself to be lifted without complaint and placed, shoulder-to-shoulder, in between the two warm bodies of his sister-sons.

Extra blankets blocked out the worst of the chill, but he still shivered at the shock of it, blinking up at a sky he had not seen for what felt like an age. Leaden clouds sulked above his head, blocking the blue vault from sight. Ravens flew above them, calling to one another in the raucous voices of their kind, and no other bird attempted to cross their path. Idly, Thorin wondered what had happened to the knocking thrush. Perhaps it had found somewhere warm and safe to roost: a creature of sense.

‘I’d rather be walking,’ Kili muttered from where he lay at Thorin’s side, forced to stare at the same view by Oin’s strict orders. ‘I don’t care if it would hurt. We should be on our feet when we enter the mountain.’

‘We’d fall flat on our faces. All of us.’ Fili sighed, lifting a hand to scratch his nose and prodding the bandage that still covered his left eye. ‘Some grand entrance that would be.’

‘Be glad you’re alive to see your return at all,’ Thorin reminded them, firm, but not unkind. He knew how Kili felt. The indignity of returning to his kingdom an invalid rankled at him, but he would rather suffer this than face the most likely alternative. ‘Better to be borne on our backs to the healing rooms than on the shoulders of our friends into our tombs.’

Oin was packing bags and bottles around their heads, filling all the available space, and Thorin tried not to think of himself as another piece of cargo. There was much to transport into Erebor, and only a few carts to carry it all. It was a miracle they had managed to pack so quickly. He could not have asked for a faster response, and as a snowflake drifted down to catch on his eyelashes, he realised they were moving just in time.

‘I shall take my leave,’ Legolas said, already on horseback with a cloak around his shoulders. He offered Tauriel a small smile, one that even to Thorin’s eyes barely hid his pain, before turning back to the king. ‘I wish you and the men of Laketown all the best, and hope the winter does not fall too harsh upon the land. I would like to return here one day, if I am welcome?’

Thorin managed a nod, knowing that Thranduil would not have bothered with such niceties. He would simply have arrived if the fancy took him, taking great pleasure in the uproar he caused. ‘Safe travels, Prince Legolas.’

‘And to you, King Under The Mountain.’

He wheeled his horse around, and Thorin listened to the steady rhythm of hooves across the hard ground as it took flight, bearing its rider out of sight and back to the sheltering branches of Mirkwood.

The cart jolted, moving ponderously towards the road that would lead them home. Bottles and jars clanked, setting up a strange clatter that only added to the din of the main convoy as they joined its ranks. The march of feet and the shouts of the men drummed at his ears, and Thorin could hear Dwalin growling orders. Scouts would have been sent on the few remaining beasts fit to carry them,
and the occasional bleat of a ram rang out across the plain.

A dainty laugh nearby made Thorin sigh, and he glanced over at Kili to see him lift his head for a better look: as if he needed his eyes to know the source of that musical mirth. No dwarf, male or female, would ever make such a noise.

Another chuckle joined the first, but this one at least brought Thorin comfort rather than uncertainty. It was a sound he had not heard often enough, these past few months, and he found himself mimicking his nephew, propping himself on his elbow and craning his neck, wounds be damned.

Bilbo sat with his back to them, perched on the open tail of the cart with his feet swinging over the unforgiving road. The she-elf walked behind, her cheeks chapped red from the cold and her hair tangled by the icy wind. All her attention was on Bilbo, apparently delighted by his company.

It seemed an easy friendship had bloomed between them, born of shared vigils and nights of worry. Now that he knew of Tauriel’s exile, the unlikely pair made more sense. They were both one-of-a-kind amidst the party bound for Erebor. No elves remained except Tauriel, and Bilbo had been the only hobbit since they set foot beyond the boundaries of the Shire, all that time ago.

Thorin smiled. It was good to hear Bilbo laugh again.

‘You’re hopeless.’ Fili whispered, his voice quiet and fond so only his brother and uncle could hear it. ‘Nungbuhà. Both as bad as each other.’

Thorin rolled his eyes as his sister’s favourite insult-cum-endearment for him fell from his nephew’s lips. Loveable idiot indeed. She liked to trot it out when she thought he was being obtuse, and nothing, not his years of seniority nor a crown on his brow had ever stopped her.

‘I am not as bad as Kili,’ he muttered, lying down and nudging Fili’s shoulder as a bright, joyful laugh erupted from his older nephew’s chest. He could feel the gazes of those around them swing their way, and he didn’t glance up for fear of meeting Bilbo’s eye. Stoic indifference was hard enough in the face of Fili’s enthusiasm. A kind, warm look from the hobbit and he feared he would be utterly lost.

If he wasn’t already.

‘Yes you are. You might even be worse.’ Fili turned his head, wincing as he did so. His wound still caused him daily pain, and his one uncovered eye watered in the weak daylight. ‘Kili and Tauriel at least talk to each other when they get the chance.’

‘Fili!’ Kili’s hissed warning strained the air, and Thorin watched him hunch back down in the bed of the cart. The confined space did not allow him to bring his knees up to his chest, but it was clear Kili would rather not be having this conversation in front of his uncle.

Yet Fili had other ideas. At first glance, his behaviour seemed out of sorts. Normally, between his sister-sons, Fili was the more reserved of the two. He carried a maturity with him that went beyond his years, and Thorin spared a fleeting fear that the damage to his head had changed all that, but it soon faded. His nephew’s cheerful smile was still in place, but it had hardened with determination. This was no accidental, clumsy chatter, but something deliberate.

‘Uncle has not seen what I have, Kili. He doesn’t know…’

Kili made a choked noise in his throat, his eyes widening before he screwed them up tight. Perhaps if his wounds were not so severe, he would have fled the cart, but that was not an option. His younger sister-son, who had faced spiders and orcs along their journey with only a glimmer of appropriate
horror now looked as if he would rather be anywhere than at his uncle’s side.

Maybe Gandalf had been wrong, and Kili did fear his disapproval after all.

A small part of him triumphed at his nephew’s discomfort. Through the long years of his grandfather’s reign, Thorin had been taught that any association with an elf could bring nothing but shame. In Thror’s eyes, such affection went against the very laws of nature.

Yet he was not his grandfather. His was a time of change, and he would not turn his back on Kili in the name of keeping old prejudices alive.

‘He does not want to know,’ Kili whispered, his eyes still closed and his hands curled into miserable fists at his sides.

‘What is it you believe you and your elf have kept from me?’ Thorin sighed. ‘Do you think I do not know what she has done for you, or the high regard you have, not just for her grace but for her skills as a warrior?’ He pursed his lips, running his tongue along his teeth before laying out the most telling piece of all. ‘Do you truly believe I don’t know who has your rune-stone, the one your mother gave you?’

Even Fili seemed surprised, not at Kili’s sentiments towards the elf, but at the depth of Thorin’s knowledge of it. He could sense the weight of his eldest nephew’s gaze upon him, and he struggled not to smile. It was good that he could still surprise these boys, who both thought themselves full-grown already.

‘And knowing all that,’ Kili began, his voice strained, ‘you let her stay?’

He turned his head, glad to see that Kili had at last opened his eyes. He held himself stiff, as if expecting a scathing reprimand, but there was courage too in the set of his jaw. Part of Thorin ached to see him so. He may be of age to do what he wished with his life, but to him his nephews still seemed painfully young.

‘Yes.’ He clenched his teeth, trying to sort through the mess of his thoughts for the right words to explain his reservations. He did not begrudge Kili his affection for the elf, not now he had recovered from his instinctive denial of the possibility. Kili had always liked things that were different or new. He was the adventurous one, often driven to recklessness in search of something to fill that need within himself.

No, Kili was the known quantity in this. His nephew, he understood. The elf, he did not. Old paranoia whispered in his ear, suggesting she was Thranduil’s spy sent to glean information from their halls. Perhaps she was, yet he had never seen her exchange more than a word or two with her liege. In fact, she rarely spoke to her own kind, lending credibility to Legolas’ revelation that she had been cast out.

‘You – you approve?’ Doubt ran thick in Kili’s words. He said it like a challenge, as if daring Thorin to push his reservations down and out of sight – to ignore them in favour of family harmony. It was tempting, but such a deception would only do more damage in the long run.

‘Would it matter if I did not?’ Thorin raised an eyebrow, shaking his head as Kili stammered and scowled. ‘It is not as straightforward as you make it seem. I know little of her, not her trade nor her kin, nor even if she will tolerate the mountain, so far from woods and starlight. I cannot say how she will look at you, now the danger of battle has passed, but that is something you both need the time to discover for yourselves.’ He sighed, watching the clouds overhead and feeling the bounce of the wheels along the dirt road. ‘I shall not deny you the opportunity.’
He waited, expecting one of his sister-sons to point out how he would have spoken differently a mere week ago. He would have railed against their choice of such a partner, seeing nothing but pointed ears and silver eyes. Truthfully, it was not easy to look beyond the surface and see Tauriel’s potential. If not for Kili, he knew he would not have made the effort.

But then, if not for Kili, she would have had no reason to help them in the first place.

Rough fingers sought out his hand, and he smiled behind his beard at the tightness of Kili’s grip. He could feel his nephew shaking, some nameless tension finding its relief. Kili had been ready to fight for the way he felt, that much was clear. It made Thorin wonder what would happen if he’d denied Legolas’ request. Would Kili have stayed, arguing on Tauriel’s behalf until he relented? Would he have left, losing himself in a bitter winter simply to return to her embrace? Would he have faded into himself, surrendering the light that made him so carefree until he was nothing more than another soldier in Erebor’s halls?

Thorin hoped he would never find out.

‘You’ll be the one to tell your mother. Not me.’

Kili’s laugh was loud and bright, and Fili’s chuckles in his other ear made Thorin smile. It was unlikely Dis would object. Her highest priority had always been the happiness of her family, and Thorin knew that wouldn’t change. His only promise to his sister had been that he would keep her boys alive, and thank Mahal he had managed that much. Matters of the heart were not his concern.

Bilbo’s voice reached his ears again: a soft blur of sound that plucked at Thorin’s body like he were a harp string. The noise was a balm to his mind, smoothing out the jagged edges of his concerns and making them bearable. His shoulders relaxed, the tension draining from his muscles despite the constant, nagging pain of his injuries, and he closed his eyes, letting the murmur of Bilbo’s words soothe him.

He was too far away to hear what the hobbit said. The din of their convoy made it impossible, but he could still pick out the tone of Bilbo’s voice. It was kind, laced with an edge of reassurance, and Thorin suspected that he was answering Tauriel’s questions, perhaps about the dwarves themselves or the mountain up ahead. He wondered what Bilbo told her. Did he speak of them in flattering terms? Did he talk about Erebor’s greatness, or did he only mention the damage of the dragon and the stubbornness of those that mined within the land’s heart?

Before he had a chance to dwell on the possibilities, he became aware of a change in the air. The easy camaraderie fled, replaced with a sharp hiss of breath and the faint thud of feet on rough wood. Opening his eyes, he saw that Tauriel had leapt up into the bed of the cart before climbing on its edge, her body poised as she stared out across the landscape. Behind her, Bilbo was up on his knees, squinting in the watery daylight as he strained for a clear view over the heads of the crowd around them.

‘What is it?’ Thorin demanded, struggling to sit up and getting caught in his furs. ‘What do you see?’

‘No, no don’t move.’ Bilbo reached out, patting Thorin’s good foot blindly. ‘Better to stay out of sight, just in case.’

A dozen scenarios raced through Thorin’s mind, from wolves to wargs to rampaging orcs, intent on their revenge. He could hear Dwalin shouting orders to the scouts, his booming voice unmissable, and around the cart the gleam of weapons became more pronounced as the dwarves hefted their axes.
‘It’s a wagon train heading for the mountain.’ Tauriel shielded her eyes from the sun’s weak glow, her weight leaned forward as if she were about to pounce. ‘It looks like more dwarves from this distance, but there are wounded among them.’

‘Dain’s supplies, maybe?’ Bilbo let out a breath, catching Thorin’s gaze with a questioning gleam in his eye. ‘We were expecting them to arrive before now. If they’ve been attacked, it might explain their delay.’

‘They’re alone?’ Thorin asked, still debating whether to damn Oin’s demands, cast his blankets aside and get a good look for himself. ‘They have not been followed?’

‘I don’t –’

Tauriel’s words died in her throat as she twisted where she stood, her eyes scanning the land to the west. Thorin could picture it well: a short stretch of plateau before the earth rose in a toothy ridge. Once, trees had covered it, softening the harsh edges of stone, but since the dragon’s desolation all had been stark and bare. Still, there were plenty of crevices where creatures could skulk, waiting for their moment.

‘Bilbo –’

Something shrieked through the air, landing with a sickening thunk in the wood at Tauriel’s feet. The crude shaft of the arrow quivered, its tattered fletching half-unravelled and the shape unmistakably Orcish in design.

‘To the west!’ Tauriel’s cry rang loud around them, and her bow was in her hand before Thorin could blink. The dwarves roared, their battle cries lost in the general clamour of their rage. Dain and Dwalin shouted orders, organising the rank and file for a quick and deadly charge as more arrows followed the first, speckling the sky with their flight.

‘The King!’ Dwalin yelled. ‘Protect the King and the wounded!’

Thorin’s hand flailed for his sword as he got to his knees, scrabbling among the cargo for Orcrist. He knew it was here. He had seen Dwalin hide it with a nod and a wink, and he was not the only one so armed. Fili had already grabbed a weapon, and Kili’s knives gleamed in his palms. None of them were at their best, far from it, but they would not lie here defenceless!

Struggling to find his feet in the cramped space, Thorin managed nothing more than a wheeze of surprise as a flash of colour whirled across his vision, followed by the slam of a small, compact form against his chest. Pain shot through him as he went sprawling, banging his head on the cart’s planks and jolting his wounds. His body thrummed in protest, but he ignored it, his left arm going around Bilbo’s back as he fell on top of him.

‘Stay down!’ Bilbo ordered, the shield on his arm covering Thorin’s head more than his own as he hunkered low, trying to keep out of the line of fire. ‘Stay where you are, all of you!’

‘But –!’

A storm of dwarves assailed the carts, leaping up onto the sides and crouching on the floor. Each carried a shield, braced and raised to join Bilbo’s, and within moments the wagon was completely covered by an interlocking roof. The arrows bounced away, harmless, as they lay panting beneath its protection, safe but trapped.

The smell of sweat and panic filled Thorin’s noise, reminding him of the battle. A faint, metallic tang suggested someone was bleeding, and he prayed it was minor as he waited. He could hear the
screams of the orcs up on the ridge and the clang of metal. Kili had rolled on his side, his eye pressed to a narrow crack to try and get a better view, while Fili was counting under his breath, his whispers matching the thud and skitter of the arrows that rained down upon them.

Gradually, the bombardment began to thin, reduced from a cascade to a stream and then a trickle, like the fading of a summer storm. Yet even once it had stopped, no one dared drop the shields, not until they had received the all clear.

Bilbo lay on Thorin’s chest, his lungs working around every panted breath and his body shaking. His shield was gone, unnecessary now they were so well-protected, and Thorin squinted down at him, trying to see his face in the gloom.

‘Master Baggins, are you all right?’

A tight sound reached his ears: meek reassurance uttered through gritted teeth. It was a hollow offering, and he groped in the darkness, his palms catching in the creases of Bilbo’s coat as he tried to find the source of the hobbit’s distress. His heart rose in his chest, thrumming a mad rhythm, but all he found as he smoothed his hands up Bilbo’s back was dry fabric and, beneath it, the faint chime of mithril.

‘Light,’ Thorin called out, feeling the dwarves around him stir. ‘I need light!’

The shields overhead moved, parting a fraction here and there to let in the meek glow of the day beyond. They were a weakness in their defences, but the tide of the skirmish had turned in their favour. It was a risk he was willing to take for one good look at the shaking hobbit in his arms.

His breath caught in his throat, locked in place when he saw the bright red stain of blood coating the side of Bilbo’s face. It marked the collar of his coat and shone like fine wine across his skin, clotting thick and dark in his hair. His weathered cheeks had lost all trace of colour, but worse than all of that was the long, slim shape jutting from the meat at the top of Bilbo’s shoulder.

An orc’s arrow.
In Gratitude

‘Iklifumunî rukhs unbazu!’

Bilbo winced. He may not speak khuzdul, but some things needed no translation. Thorin’s anger bled into the air around them, thickening the tension. However, despite his fury, the fingers that brushed against Bilbo’s skin were feather-light. He did not prod or poke, but instead strained his body to get a better look at the injury.

Bilbo was tempted to snap at him to lie down, but he doubted Thorin would listen. Stubborn to the bone, all three injured dwarves would have leapt into the fray if he hadn’t intervened. Their bodies may be wounded but their spirits were strong. At times like this, that wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

He jumped as someone banged on the side of the wagon. The arrow shifted, sending a fresh wave of pain through him as his head began to spin. Vaguely, he thought he ought to move. He still lay on top of Thorin, the two of them sprawled in the bottom of the cart. Not only was it probably hurting Thorin’s wounds, but the weight of strong arms around him made his face flush in the most inappropriate way.

His apology was little more than a stammer as he tried to lever himself up, only to slump again with a pitiful moan as his strength deserted him. The shield strapped to his arm weighed it down, too heavy to lift, and every time he breathed a new shock flashed across his shoulder. Moving hurt and his head was twirling like a top, sending the world into a jumbled mess of colour and sound.

Someone bellowed for Oin, their deafening voice a wall of noise in Bilbo’s ear. He managed a faint protest at the din, but didn’t bother shifting away. Thorin’s simple tunic was rough against his cheek, and the skin beneath it felt warm and comforting. People would talk, but right now, Bilbo was happy to let them get on with it, at least until the world had stopped its mad rush and set itself to rights.

‘We need to take the arrow out.’ Kili sounded sick, and Bilbo risked opening one eye to look at the young prince. He was hunkered less than an arm’s length away, his expression pale and serious. ‘Can you do anything?’

‘We should wait for your healer.’ Tauriel’s gentle voice was pitched to soothe the tense anxiety that filled the air like fog. ‘If nothing else, he knows more of hobbits than I do. I wouldn’t want to do Bilbo harm through rash action.’

‘He’s on his way,’ Fili said from where he lay, the only one of the dwarves not to have moved from his makeshift bed. ‘I can hear him coming.’

True enough, now Bilbo listened, he could discern a steady muttering, cursing battles, orcs and their blasted arrows. The cart dipped on its wheels as the old dwarf clambered into the back, out of breath and bad-tempered.

‘Out of the way. Out of the way. Let’s see what we’ve got.’

His hiss of sympathy was gratifying, and Bilbo wrinkled his nose, peeling apart his lips to try and offer some reassurance. ‘It’s all right,’ he promised, wishing his voice didn’t sound so thin. ‘I think it looks worse than it is.’

‘I hope so, Master Baggins, because it looks messy.’

Thorin’s fingers retreated from where they had been toying with the cloth of Bilbo’s bloodstained
coat, and Bilbo wondered if this was the moment that he withdrew. He wouldn’t blame Thorin for pulling away. Anyone would agree that his duty as friend and comrade had been met, and he braced himself for the deprivation of his touch.

Yet it never came. Thorin’s hand shifted away from the wound but lingered at the edges of Bilbo’s back, ready to help the moment Oin asked for assistance. He did not shift Bilbo’s weight – which was by no means meagre, even after months on the road. Instead, he held him steady, calming him with the measured swell of each breath as Oin gave his verdict.

‘Unlucky,’ the healer murmured, his sigh tickling the hair on Bilbo’s nape. ‘A little to the left and the mithril would have stopped it in its tracks. Still, it’s shallow.’ He sighed, his words coming softer now as he braced one palm on the curve of Bilbo’s shoulder and seized the shaft of the arrow with the other. ‘This might sting a bit, lad.’

It was a flash like a lightning strike, hot and bright. He tensed all over, teeth gritted against the sickness rolling in his belly. Oin was talking, giving instructions as blood welled and trickled, but Bilbo barely heard any of it, too intent on keeping it together.

Soon enough, the pain faded to a sullen, angry throb, made worse by the wad of cloth that Thorin pressed against the gash to staunch the flow. It ached, but at least there was no longer the dragging weight of the arrow tearing at the meat of his shoulder.

‘That should be the worst of it over,’ Oin said bracingly, stooping low so that his face slipped in to Bilbo’s line of sight. ‘Can you sit? I need to take a closer look at that head of yours. See what’s what.’

He sucked in a deep breath, trying to ignore the way Thorin’s scent filled his nose as he gingerly did as Oin instructed. Strong hands cupped his uninjured shoulder, bracing his weight and helping him up. It was a huge struggle, made worse by the shakes that assailed him. The cart had been hot and cramped beneath the roof of shields, yet now Bilbo shivered, cold and miserable.

He can’t have looked too good, because someone held an empty bowl under his chin, ready to catch the mess if he lost the scant breakfast he had eaten hours ago. It wasn’t necessary, but Bilbo was grateful all the same, and he managed a faint smile in Kili’s direction.

‘Shouldn’t you be lying down?’ he asked, blinking in confusion as Kili rolled his eyes.

‘Shhh. Don’t remind him.’ He jerked his head towards Oin, who scowled and glared in return. ‘I’ll be flat on my back again in a minute anyway. I’m just making sure you’re all right. You gave us all a bit of a fright.’ He dropped his voice to a murmur as he added, ‘though some more than others, maybe.’

He shot a meaningful glance at Thorin, his eyebrows raised and his youthful face lit with a grin, but there was none to answer it in Thorin’s expression. His brow creased with a frown, and something sharp glowed in his eyes, squashing the brief flutter of hope Kili’s words had spawned in Bilbo’s chest.

‘Perhaps it has slipped beneath your notice, nephew, but that arrow was meant for one of us. We owe Master Baggins a debt.’

An odd silence stretched around them, and not for the first time, Bilbo wondered what he was missing. It didn’t happen often, but sometimes unspoken knowledge seemed to pass between the dwarves that went entirely over his head.
‘No, no debt. It’s fine,’ he repeated, pressing his palms to the rough planks beneath him in an effort to keep his bearings. ‘Just a scrape, that’s all.’

‘I think I’ll be the judge of that.’ Oin offered a soft apology as Bilbo flinched away from the wet cloth in his hand. ‘Cold water’s all we’ve got. As soon as I’m sure you’re in fit shape, we’ll get going again.’ He patted the side of Bilbo’s face and moved back through his hair, working until the bowl of water in his palm was crimson and the extent of the wounds became clear.

‘One must have clipped you. It took a chunk out of your ear and left a gash just behind. Nothing too bad, I dare say, but I can get a better look once we’re in Erebor.’ He pursed his lips, shifting around and nudging Kili aside until he knelt in front of Bilbo, cupping his jaw in his gnarled hands and peering into his eyes. ‘Yer head spinning?’ he demanded, nodding when Bilbo groaned in reply. ‘That’s to be expected. Best lie down in the cart with Thorin and the boys until we’re safe. There’s space enough for someone small.’

Bilbo didn’t bother arguing. There was no point, not when Oin had that look on his face and half the Company were standing there to make sure Bilbo did as the healer said. Instead, he murmured his thanks as Thorin, Fili and Kili shuffled around, pushing aside jars and crates.

It was not the softest bed, and once the wheels began to roll once more, it didn’t help the lurch and shudder of his head. Still, grey furs kept out the cold, and there was something familiar about lying between the bulky forms of the dwarves, just as he had done on their journey. Of course, there had been a bit more distance between them then. Now, if he rolled over, he’d jab at least two others with his elbows thanks to such confines.

‘It won’t be long,’ Thorin said, perhaps sensing some of Bilbo’s discomfort. ‘Assuming there’s no one else waiting for us up ahead, we should be in Erebor within the hour.’

Bilbo grunted, letting his eyes slip shut to block out the waltzing world. He knew he should not fall asleep – remembered that much from when he was a faunt and fell out of the oak tree – but it was tempting to dip into a doze, if only to pass the time. His shoulder ached and his head throbbed, but as much as they hurt, he had to admit it was worth it.

Thorin and his sister-sons were safe. That’s what mattered most.

‘Thank you.’

The gruff gratitude made Bilbo crack open one eye, and he realised just how close he and Thorin lay. This was not the midst of battle nor the fretful first concern over some injury, where their nearness could be brushed away as necessary contact in the heat of the moment. Now they were almost nose-to-nose, able to whisper should they desire it. He could make out the dusting of freckles across Thorin’s cheeks earned on their days exposed to the elements. It took all his strength not to stare, mute and mesmerised, and he swallowed hard as he struggled to speak.

‘For what?’

Thorin’s broad shoulders lifted in a shrug, his lashes fluttering as a sigh left him. ‘The arrow that struck you may not have been meant for me, but the ones that followed it would have found their mark if you had not pushed us to the floor.’

‘The shields –’

‘Would have been of no use if the first attack hit home.’

Bilbo shuddered, trying not to picture shafts and fletching jutting from the bodies of his friends, so
recently saved. His next breath hitched in his throat, and only the splay of Thorin’s hand, tentative but firm over the furs covering his arm, kept him anchored in the present.

Over the past few days, he had been too busy to let all he’d seen during the battle return to haunt him. Now those memories circled the edges of his mind, waiting for an opportunity to strike. All he had to distract him was Thorin’s presence, and Bilbo forced himself to focus on each sensation, rooting himself in the here and now.

He could hear Thorin’s breathing, slow and steady. It set up a flowing rhythm, and Bilbo tried his best to match it, borrowing some of that calm. The heat of him was like a glowing ember at his side – something he could bask in – and the fragrance of Oin’s healing herbs tickled his nose.

‘It is not merely your actions today for which I owe you my thanks.’ Thorin’s deep voice was low, as if he were sharing a secret. Perhaps, in some ways, he was. All Bilbo had to do was look at him to know that these words were not those of a king, but of a friend.

‘The others have told me what you’ve been doing. How you’ve spoken on my behalf with both the men and elves when they would have turned any dwarf away. It is more than I could have asked of anyone.’ Thorin swallowed, and Bilbo watched the movement of his throat, his eyes arrested by the steady flicker of the pulse he could see there. Soon he would have to stop staring, but for a few more minutes he allowed himself this guilty pleasure.

‘Then you spoke of the right to rule belonging to the one with the courage to take back the mountain, rather than the dwarf who held the Arkenstone…’ He shook his head, and for the first time since he had met him, Bilbo watched Thorin struggle for words. ‘I could not acknowledge your faith in me then, nor the depth of my gratitude for it – not without making a political statement Erebor may not be ready to hear, but you must know what it meant to me. You have my thanks, Master Baggins, for that and more.’

Bilbo blinked, struggling to take it all in. Thorin spoke with as much feeling as he had up on the Carrock, except this time there was no trace of guile. There were no false accusations, only honesty in his unmasked expression. Bilbo had not realised how he craved such words: not the delirium of fever nor the commands of a king, but soft conversation between friends. It took him back to their journey, where despite all their perils, far less stood between them.

‘You – you called me Bilbo, before.’ It was an odd thing to pick up on. Later, he would blame his head injury for focusing on something so trivial, but in that moment it was the one thing that mattered to him the most. He could not undo what had happened in the mountain, nor in the battle afterwards, but perhaps this he could set to rights.

It was rare that Thorin addressed him by his given name, but right towards the end, he had done so. It had stirred up a fluttering feeling in his chest each time. Yet ever since Ravenhill, Thorin had called him “Master Baggins.” From anyone else, the formality didn’t chafe. Many of the dwarves used his title or name interchangeably, depending on their mood and his, but to hear such politeness from Thorin rubbed him raw.

Thorin bowed his head, his hand tightening where it rested on Bilbo’s arm. The march of feet and chatter of people outside the cart filled the silence, but Bilbo ignored it as he waited, aching for a response. He was not sure what he expected, but he knew the importance of Thorin’s answer. It would give him insight into the workings of the dwarf’s mind, which had only grown more opaque since they had found their way into the dragon’s presence. Once, he would have at least attempted to guess Thorin’s feelings, but these days he did not waste his time on the impossible.

‘I lost that right up on the battlements.’ The confession fell into the slender space between them,
spoken to woollen blankets and heavy furs. Thorin did not meet his gaze as he withdrew his hand and tucked it against his bandaged chest: distant and chaste. ‘Perhaps I never truly earned it. There is much you have done for us all, Master Baggins, and I have done little to repay you.’

Bilbo closed his eyes, swallowing his first, impetuous protest. It would be easy to offer meaningless denials, but he suspected Thorin would not believe him. Oh, he would listen, but he would decide Bilbo spoke out of politeness, or to avoid another confrontation. Already there had been apologies enough and forgiveness to match it, but perhaps it was that readiness to put the past behind them that Thorin did not trust. Maybe he believed Bilbo only spoke so to placate him, rather than because he meant every word.

Clenching his fingers in the furs, Bilbo cleared his throat. ‘If you have lost the right to my familiarity and friendship, then it follows that I have done the same. You were not the only one who caused pain with your actions that day.’

‘What you did was for the good of Erebor and the sake of your friends. You had no choice –!’

‘Perhaps, but the reason is not what’s important. I hurt you.’ Bilbo shrugged, plucking blindly at the blankets. ‘We broke each other’s trust, but I am hoping we can earn it once more.’

He waited, his head full of lingering fog and sullen aches. This was not just about the wrongdoings Thorin carried upon his shoulders. If they were both stuck clinging to their guilt while insisting there was nothing to forgive of the other, then they would never be able to move forward form this place. Whatever lay between them would remain brittle, unable to bend but ready to break.

‘You would give me that chance?’ Thorin asked, his voice soft with the kind of awe that made Bilbo breathless. He knew that dwarves could hold a grudge for centuries, passing it down from one generation to the next. Their treatment of the elves was proof enough of that. He wondered if dwarven culture was not well-blessed with the idea of redemption. Did they not believe that future triumphs could erase the wrongs of the past? Were their mistakes allowed to linger, a permanent stain against their character, regardless of the circumstances?

Well, if that was the case, then the dwarves were about to learn that hobbits did things rather differently.

‘Of course,’ he replied. ‘I meant what I said, Thorin, up on Ravenhill. I forgive you.’ Back then, the words had been easy, born of a deathbed’s urgency. Thorin had been fading fast, and Bilbo had been desperate to put his mind at rest. Maybe it had not been absolute, perhaps some blame had lingered, but it was the best he could manage at the time.

This was different. Thorin was not turning his back on what he had done, nor dismissing it as irrelevant. The guilt he carried with him was like a living thing; now he asked for the chance to slay it for good, and Bilbo was more than happy to oblige.

‘I only hope that, one day, you can say the same.’

He reached out, sweeping his fingertips over the back of Thorin’s fist where it lay curled close to his chest. Slowly, Thorin’s other hand began to move, brushing across Bilbo’s knuckles so that his fingers were caught beneath the weight of that broad palm. His heat was a shocking contrast to the chill that pressed down around them, and Bilbo relished the warmth.

‘If there is anything to forgive, Master Baggins, then please believe me: it is already done.’

Bilbo hesitated. He had seen the flare of agony when Thorin realised who had handed over the
Arkenstone. Fury, he could have written off as madness, but that flash of heartbreak in Thorin’s face did not have its root in dragon sickness. It came from the dwarf himself, visible for anyone to see before the rage had overtaken him.

Their friendship had shattered that day, and he had not been sure it was something they could reclaim. Yet here they were, neither one lingering in resentment but instead taking steps to reforge what they’d once had.

‘It’s “Bilbo”, Thorin. Whatever else, you have earned that much.’

He could feel that blue gaze watching him, measuring the weight of his words. He did his best not to look away, but it was hard to hold his focus. He felt dizzy, and not just from the blow to his head. They were so close that Thorin’s every breath whispered across his cheek, and his skin thrilled in response to its ghostly caress.

‘Bilbo.’

A smile swelled his cheeks and lifted his heart in his chest. Thorin said his name like a vow, soft but firm, and he could see it for what it was: a promise to move forward. Forgiveness was as much a process as it was a decision. It would take time, but the results would be more than worth the effort.

‘Thank you.’ He licked his lips, telling himself that his parched throat had nothing to do with the dwarf who lay beside him. He wished there was something he could do or say in return: a peace offering of sorts, and his mind alighted on the Arkenstone. He had not removed it from Erebor to punish Thorin, but he knew it might look different in the eyes of others. Now, it wasn’t his to give back, but he could at least explain that it was there for the taking, should he choose.

‘Bard will hand over the Arkenstone the moment you ask for it. The only reason I didn’t return it to you was because I thought it might do more harm than good.’ He swallowed, trying not to feel as if he were awaiting Thorin’s judgement. He hadn’t meant for what he said to be a test, but he soon realised how much hinged on Thorin’s reaction. Would he demand the stone for himself, opening the way for his madness once more, or would he see wisdom in Bilbo’s choice?

He needn’t have worried.

‘I have bigger concerns than a single jewel,’ Thorin replied, his expression grim. ‘Perhaps one day the stone will return to Erebor, but you were right.’ He sounded exhausted, drained by the effort of the journey and the conversation between them, but he carried on regardless. ‘The Arkenstone’s power is of our own making. It is only the symbol of our right to rule because, in the absence of great deeds, we made it so.’

Bilbo stared, barely daring to believe his ears. He had known Thorin was listening when he’d given his speech about the Arkenstone, but he had not realised he had taken his words to heart. The dwarf who had chased the dragon from Erebor would never have questioned the necessity of the King’s Jewel. He would have fought to his last breath to keep it in his clutches, but now Thorin surrendered it freely, eager to give priority to those under his care.

‘Will the others accept that? The other dwarves, I mean? Won’t someone try and challenge you for the crown?’

Thorin huffed a weak laugh, wincing as it jolted his wounds. ‘I’m not sure how many see Erebor as a prize. It is my home, the kingdom I was born to rule and the realm that I would leave to my heirs. To others, it’s little more than a tomb. If it weren’t for the gold…’ He trailed off, rubbing the back of Bilbo’s hand as he became lost in his thoughts.
Bilbo grimaced, hating how it always came back to the hoard. He had seen the lofty piles within Erebor’s halls, huge beyond imagining, but in the dull light from the dragon’s flame the riches had seemed sinister. He feared that it didn’t matter who had the crown. As long as the treasure hall remained untouched, the gold would rule the mountain.

‘What will you do?’ He winced as the cart turned a corner, making bottles clank and boxes shift.

‘The winter may not seem it, but it can be a blessing. A few souls might brave the storms, but to drive an army through it is beyond foolish.’ Thorin narrowed his eyes, his features taking on the thoughtful intelligence Bilbo had begun to associate with ruling a kingdom. ‘We have time to ready the mountain and arm ourselves against attack. My main concern is supplies. We cannot outlast a siege if we have little enough food to begin with. The land is too poor to support us, and the weather cuts off any meaningful trade.’

‘You think it will come to that?’ Bilbo could picture it: them trapped within Erebor’s cavernous walls while an army perched upon their doorstep, waiting until starvation drove them to surrender or death claimed them for its own.

‘I can’t be sure. For all its bitterness, winter is not the season I fear. Spring will bring the armies, if they’re to come at all. They’ll want to strike as soon as the way clears, before we have time to gather food and strength.’ Thorin shook his head as if casting away a shroud of dark thoughts. ‘As much as I would like to devote my energies to surviving the next few months, a king who does not look ahead is doomed to fail.’

Bilbo’s dizziness had eased, chased off by his distraction, but the half-formed ideas that clouded his mind refused to take shape. In brighter spirits and on better days, perhaps he could give Thorin something to work with, but today he was useless, brought low by his wounds.

‘We’re almost there, Master – Bilbo.’ Thorin squeezed his hands, and he peeled open his eyes, barely aware that he had closed them. True enough, the world had gone dark, growing colder still in the shadow of the Lonely Mountain. The stomp of boots and clatter of carts began to echo over the shattered paving near Erebor’s gates, and the wind became a lashing, whipping creature, circling the peak like a pack of wolves.

‘How are we going to get in?’ he asked, wondering whether he dared to sit up and squint around him. ‘You knocked out the bridge. Not to mention what you did to the door…’

‘Dwarves are quick builders; Gloin was telling me about the repairs already underway. The mountain may not be the beauty it once was, but it will open to us.’ Thorin frowned as excited voices rose nearby, travelling through the cold air. His hands slipped from Bilbo’s grasp as he tried to prop himself up on one elbow for a better look, only to be held back by the warning growl of a familiar voice.

‘Enough of that.’

At first, Bilbo couldn’t see Dwalin, not until he grabbed onto the side of the cart and hauled himself in, speaking all the while. ‘Oin’s already spitting mad. You’ll only make it worse. The carts we saw before are Dain’s supplies, just as we thought. They had a bit of trouble, but they’re only the lead of the convoy. More are on the way.’

‘What of the ambush? What happened?’

Dwalin grunted, answering Thorin’s questions with the steady practice of a soldier used to giving his reports. ‘It would’ve been worse if not for the elf. She raised the alarm quick enough so we could
protect the wounded and mount an attack. There were a few injuries, including our burglar.’ He nodded to Bilbo, his stern features softening. ‘Most of those were arrow shot. Still, none lie dead among the dwarves or men. They fought well.’

Thorin scrubbed a hand over his face, and some of the strain around his eyes seeped away. ‘What about the orcs? Was it another war party?’

‘Stragglers.’ Dwalin shook his head. ‘No strategy. They were hoping to find us easy targets.’ His slow grin was more than a little feral. Back before he’d left the Shire, Bilbo would have found it a frightening sight. These days, he realised it meant Dwalin was pleased to have risen to the challenge and protected them from further harm.

Well, mostly.

‘Oin says you’re all to go straight to the healing rooms. There are beds waiting which all four of you need to put to good use.’ His brow furrowed, and if he were not clinging to the cart, Bilbo suspected he would have folded his arms to emphasise his point. ‘And no, Thorin. You can’t walk. Not yet. If I let you on yer feet now, it’ll only set you back.’

‘But –’

‘No. I’ll carry you myself if I have to, and I won’t bother worrying about yer dignity.’

Bilbo smiled, knowing Dwalin would stand by his word. He would always do his best to protect Thorin and his sister-sons from the dangers of the world, even when it meant saving them from themselves. It was good to have the reassurance, especially when they had been so keen to throw themselves back into battle, despite their wounds.

The shadow of a giant threshold passed over their heads, and Bilbo recognised the vast arch that the dwarves had worked so hard to barricade. There was no sign of the blockage now, and sturdy doors hung on strong hinges, ready to pull shut against the ravages of the outside world.

It seemed magical, the things the dwarves could rip down and build up in the space of a few hours. Still, they had centuries to learn their skills, and plenty of opportunity to put it into practice. They would continue to make improvements over the months to come, but for now the foundation of a mighty doorway stood strong and proud.

The convoy slowed to a halt, and the few horses pulling the carts stamped their hooves and snorted in annoyance at their burden. Almost immediately, Bilbo recognised the raised voices of the rest of the Company, each blending into the other as they yelled out instructions. The boxes and crates around them began to shift, unloaded by eager hands. A moment later, Oin was there, along with several dwarves carrying litters for the wounded.

‘Can you stand, Bilbo?’ the healer asked, his horn jammed in his ear. ‘Be honest, now. It’ll do no one any good if you keel over after a few steps.’

With great care, he pushed himself upright. Every muscle braced for dizziness and nausea, but they stayed mercifully at bay. He didn’t feel up to fighting any more orcs today, that was for certain, but he could manage a short walk. ‘How far is it?’

‘A hundred paces and down a few stairs. Nothing tight or twisty.’ He looked over his shoulder, peering around until he spotted someone in the crowd. ‘Ori! Get over here. Stay at Bilbo’s side. Make sure he doesn’t take a fall.’

Within seconds, Ori was standing at the open gate of the cart, his young face pinched with friendly
concern as Bilbo inched across the planks. ‘Are you sure you don’t need to be carried?’ he asked, supporting Bilbo as he eased himself down to the cold stone and stood on shaking legs. ‘You look a bit pale.’

‘I’m fine.’ he pressed his lips together, willing his words to be true. ‘At least compared to most of the others. If I have to stop, I’ll tell you. Do you – do you know the way?’ Moving his head hurt, so he turned his body, staring around the hall in which they stood. Even as crowded as this, it still seemed huge, with pillars like tree trunks supporting the distant roof.

‘I think so,’ Ori said with a smile, setting off at an unhurried pace that took them along the edge of the room. ‘This isn’t the way we came into the mountain, but it’s the way we left it – on that charge.’ He went pale at the mention of the battle, but ploughed on regardless. ‘The others will get the supplies stored and people settled. All the injured are to go to Oin’s healing rooms. There’s plenty of space for them there.’ He caught sight of the incredulous look on Bilbo’s face and grinned. ‘Dwarves think a great deal of healing. We have to, considering we end up in so many battles. Oin’s had helpers scrubbing it for hours.’

He took Bilbo by the elbow, guiding him into a wide passageway lit by occasional braziers. Gone was the dust from the dragon’s dominion, swept and scrubbed away by determined hands to reveal the stone beneath. The marbled rock was smooth under his bare feet, and Bilbo spared a moment to think of the craftsman who had carved it to such perfection. It boggled his mind that this place was once a solid mountain. Now it was more like a hive, full of rooms and spaces waiting to be reclaimed.

Ori kept up a constant stream of quiet conversation, looking back once in a while to check on Oin and the dwarves bearing the litters. Bilbo could hear Kili speaking and Fili’s laughter in response, but their words were lost amidst the echoes.

‘Of course it’s so very bare these days,’ Ori explained, ‘but Balin and Dwalin were telling me about the rugs and tapestries that used to be all over the place. They softened the sounds and made it feel like home.’ His expression was wistful, and Bilbo knew Ori would be picturing Erebor at the peak of its glory. As a young dwarf, he’d never seen the kingdom. He only had the stories of others to rely on, much like Bilbo himself.

‘Do you think it will be like that again?’ he asked, pressing his palm to the wall as he navigated his way down a set of shallow, straight steps. They were carefully carved to allow for the stumbling of the old and infirm, and he could see the brackets that had once pinned a handrail in place. ‘As glorious as it used to be?’

Ori shook his head, the pair of beads in his braids clattering before he grinned at Bilbo’s amazement. ‘It will be better.’ He stepped forward, leaving Bilbo at the bottom step as he pushed open the double doors in front of them. Their hinges groaned, but the room beyond was something to behold.

Shutters in the high roof let in the daylight, the ropes and pulleys to aid in their movement old but sturdy. The flagstone floor gleamed to the best of its ability, and white stone surfaces, some stacked on piles of rubble, lay scrubbed and bare. Every few paces stood a cot. Some had their legs lashed with rope to support their ailing frames, but after the harshness of the camp, Bilbo knew they would be a blessing to the wounded.

‘Turn left, Master Baggins!’ Oin called out from the top of the stairs. ‘There’s a small room off to the side. Take the bed closest to the door and wait for me there. I’ll be with you in a minute.’

Slowly, Bilbo did as he was told, taking a moment to marvel at what he saw. He could almost believe they were back in Rivendell! Was this what the whole place had been like, once? Flooded
with light thanks to the dwarves’ ingenuity, rather than cloaked in the dragon’s darkness?

The room Oin had mentioned lay separated by a door with no handle. It opened at a simple push, easier for someone with full hands to shove aside. Immediately, Bilbo knew it was something special – a place for the rulers of Erebor. It was big enough to hold four or five patients, and offered plenty of room for the healers to move around about their duties. More shutters let in the light, and unlike the main sanatorium, the benches here were already stocked with supplies: herbs and water, bandages and more.

Bilbo eased himself down to the bed Oin had told him to use, his feet swinging an inch from the floor as he took in the relative splendour. Someone had carved runes near the door and inlaid them with metal, and a similar frieze of geometric design covered the wall near the ceiling. A large hearth stood at the far end of the room, a peat fire already burning in the grate. It fragranced the air with a warm, earthy smell that reminded Bilbo of the Shire beneath the summer sun.

‘In here, lads. That’s right.’ Oin moved out of the way, letting the dwarves lower his patients to their beds. Swiftly, he set about making them comfortable, checking their bandages before turning to Bilbo.

‘Those clothes need to come off, lad, and the mithril too. Can you manage by yourself, or do you need help?’

Bilbo went to move his arm and winced at the answering pain. ‘I don’t think I can get them over my head,’ he mumbled, feeling like a helpless faunt when Oin gave him a kind smile.

‘All right. Coat first, then tunic.’

Bilbo cringed at the thought of being bare-chested in front of the dwarves. Even when bathing during their journey, he’d preferred it to be a solitary experience, rather than joining in their naked tomfoolery. Hobbits were built very differently, and while a round belly may be prized in the Shire, the people of Erebor would see it as a sign of either age, gluttony or laziness.

Oin raised an eyebrow, waiting for the moment that Bilbo eased his petulant grip on his coat. He didn’t say anything about Bilbo’s hesitation, which would have been doubly humiliating, and carefully helped him ease both cloth and metal past his injured ear and aching head.

The air was cool despite the fire, and Bilbo shivered, murmuring his thanks when Oin handed him a blanket. ‘Put it over your left shoulder and across your chest. That way I can get to your injuries.’ He kept his prodding gentle, but it still stung, and Bilbo caught Thorin’s sympathetic look over the healer’s shoulder. No doubt he’d had enough of Oin’s treatment to last a lifetime, and he still had plenty ahead of him. With any luck, Bilbo wouldn’t be here nearly as long.

‘You were right,’ Oin said, stepping back and reaching for a steaming bowl of water. ‘You won’t need stitches, but I’ll put a poultice on it, just to draw out anything nasty.’ He bathed the wound at the peak of Bilbo’s shoulder, talking all the while. ‘The angle was wrong. More vertical and it would have gone deeper. This way it just slipped into the flesh a little ways.’

‘And took a chunk of my ear with it.’ Bilbo reached up to touch it, scowling when Oin slapped his hand away. ‘I want to know how bad it is.’

‘Get the filth on your fingers in it and it’ll be a lot worse,’ Oin muttered ominously. ‘It’s nothing too unsightly. A nick about the width of your little fingernail halfway up. Cosmetic damage, that’s all.’ He hobbled away and began throwing things in a bowl, letting them steep in warm water before soaking the cloth in it and pressing it to Bilbo’s shoulder. It made him hiss in discomfort, but
gradually the pain eased to a strange heat that seemed to seep down his back.

‘We’ll leave that on while you sleep.’ Oin bound it in place with practice, taking care not to move Bilbo’s arm too much. ‘I’ll clean you up a bit more, then you should get your head down.’

‘Shouldn’t I stay awake?’ he asked, trying not to let on how tempting a few hours of peaceful dreams sounded.

‘There’s someone here to rouse you now and then – make sure you’ve not slipped into your own mind. Sleep’s a good healer – gives your wounds a chance to scab.’ Oin swept a damp cloth through Bilbo’s hair, parting the curls and nodding happily to himself. ‘No swelling, and you were able to walk here unaided. I’d say you’ll mend soon enough. Now lie down.’

Relieved, Bilbo did as he was told, trying not to sag into the good mattress and soft pillow. After so long without a proper bed, it felt like bliss beneath his weary frame, and his eyes were already drooping when Oin pulled the furs up around his shoulders. It felt warm and safe, different enough from his bed in the Shire to avoid confusion, but as comfortable as any he’d used.

Slowly, the noises of the healing room took on an echoing quality. The crackle of the fire dimmed in and out, and the steady murmur of Fili and Kili as they spoke to Oin was a comforting drone. The last thing he heard as he slipped into sleep was Thorin’s voice, tender and deep.

‘Good night, Bilbo.’
Thorin watched Bilbo’s face slacken, his lashes drifting shut as he was tempted down into a doze. A faint smile bowed his lips before ebbing under the thrall of sleep, and his hands loosened their grip on the blankets that covered him. His next breath took on the rasping edge of a snore, and Thorin fought to hide a grin at the familiar sound. He’d heard it often enough through their journey, far more genteel a noise than any dwarf could manage.

‘He’s all right?’ he asked Oin, who cast him a shrewd, knowing look.

‘Aye. A bit shaken, but that’s to be expected. He’ll live. ‘Tis not much more than a scratch.’

Thorin breathed a sigh of relief, letting go of his concern. Bilbo had not been his usual, eloquent self when they lay side by side in the cart. More than once, he’d winced in pain, and Thorin was torn between gratitude for having time to themselves and fear that there was more to Bilbo’s injuries than met the eye.

The memory of their conversation rose anew – brief snatches of whispered words and the warmth of Bilbo’s hand in his own. There had been no guile between them, no necessary silences for the sake of politics or sentiments neither of them meant to express. For the first time in far too long, he had been able to speak his mind and measure the true depths of the hobbit’s forgiveness.

“It’s ‘Bilbo’, Thorin.”

Such familiarity was a balm, soothing the ragged edges of his remorse. With a few, simple words Bilbo had given him the chance to move forward. He would not be allowed to wallow in his regrets, which would only grow with the attention. Instead, they were left to diminish as Thorin found himself facing a future he never thought he would see. Erebor was his to rebuild, and he would not be doing it alone.

He shifted, easing himself onto his side so that he could watch the hobbit sleep. His body was sore, jarred by the cart ride and his foolish attempt to join the battle. He had gained his feet for only a moment before Bilbo knocked him to the floor. Now he felt more battered and bruised than ever, no longer cleaved by pain, but cloaked in it instead, sullen and aching.

Oin would give him something for it if he asked, but more than anything Thorin wanted to spend his days with a clear head. He could not see how his people fared, but he would be sure his mind was sharp when the Company arrived to discuss the needs of their fledgling, mismatched colony.

He had wronged more people than Bilbo that day. There had been broken promises to the men, harsh words to the wizard, and cowardly demands to the dwarves who had followed him without question. Making amends from a sick bed was no easy task, but by Mahal, he would do whatever he could to see it through.

A sigh interrupted his brooding, and he looked up as Bilbo turned over in his sleep. The blankets trailed lower over his back, revealing bare skin and the subtle line of his spine. It drew Thorin’s eye, and he found himself drinking in the sight, his throat dry and his mind feasting upon the clues such a scrap of flesh could offer him.

When he’d first entered the Shire, his opinion of hobbits had been less than complimentary. Round and small, they lived a gentle life, and it showed in the soft, well-fed lines of their bodies. Bilbo had been no exception. Although perhaps not as rotund as some of his neighbours, he had not looked as
if he’d ever wanted for a meal.

It made him laugh, now, to think of Bilbo’s horror on those first few days. Life on the road was hard, and food was not something to be squandered in greed. More than once, he had complained about how few meals they took in a day, and before long his stomach had joined in, groaning loud enough for all to hear.

He could not recall the time that Bilbo took matters into his own hands, merely that one day the complaining stopped. He stole nothing from their stores but instead foraged through their surroundings, careful not to cause delays as he snatched swollen apples hanging from branches and began to hoard nuts like a squirrel preparing for winter.

Still, those efforts had not prevented that comfortable layer of fat from fading, and the hobbit left in its wake looked lean in a way that spoke of true hunger. It hardened his smooth, happy features, dimming his smile and creasing his brow. He had not complained since those first few weeks, but now Thorin looked, he wished he had. When it came to food, it seemed hobbits needed more than most. He should have realised as much from the sheer amount Bilbo ate whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Yet those rare moments of plenty were past. There would be no feasting in Erebor’s halls for some time. Even with Dain’s supplies, Thorin doubted there would be enough to go around. Bombur would have an inventory for him before long. The cook could work miracles, turning scraps into something nourishing, but no one could create a meal from thin air.

‘We need to feed him more,’ Oin whispered as he stopped at Thorin’s bedside with clean bandages in his hands. ‘Or at least ensure he gets his fair share.’

Thorin grunted in agreement, knowing Bilbo would give up his food for someone more needy in a heartbeat, even if his stomach roared in disapproval. ‘Can you make sure the Company are told?’

‘They already know. We’re watching him; don’t you worry.’

‘I asked Gandalf in the healer’s tent – about hobbits and their food,’ Kili hissed from the bed opposite, doing his best not to wake Bilbo while still making himself heard. ‘They don’t do well in lean times. There was a bad winter, back when Bilbo was small. They ran out of supplies and the wolves came down from the hills. Some, the old and very young, starved, and then when spring melted the snow, many more got sick with wasting fevers.’ He picked at the furs before adding, ‘It’s how Bilbo’s father died.’

Thorin frowned, considering Kili’s words with growing dread. ‘Does a hobbit’s hunger make them more prone to sickness?’ he asked. ‘More so than other races?’

Kili shrugged, swearing as the movement aggravated his wounds. ‘Gandalf wasn’t sure. All he knew was that the Shire seemed almost empty that year.’

‘Illness is something we’d all do well to fear,’ Oin grumbled. ‘Packed in close like this and with little to eat, maladies will spread like wildfire.’ He began removing Thorin’s bandages, working quickly. ‘I’ve asked Bofur to look at some of the water channels about the place – check they’re not blocked. If we can get warm, flowing water to parts of the mountain, it will help keep people clean. That’s our best chance.’

‘Is there anything else we can do?’ Thorin asked, looking to the old healer for advice. Oin had been studying herbs for many years, and while some of his notions seemed strange to the extreme, Thorin had never known them to fail. ‘We will all need our health to make it to the spring.’
’Bifur’s examining the latrine near the armoury. It’s big, and drops all waste into a dunny heap outside the mountain.’ Oin wrinkled his nose. ‘Best place for it. The dragon’s foulness is bad enough. We needn’t add any of our own.’

’Is there any?’ Fili asked. He lay to Kili’s right, still flat on his back at Oin’s demand. ‘Foulness from the dragon, I mean? It’s just… all we found was the gold. I expected there to be more –’

’Shit?’ Kili supplied, digging his elbow into the mattress so he could shift further up his pillows. ‘What did it even eat? Can’t see something like that living off rats for long.’

’It slept.’ Thorin winced as Oin removed the last bandage and began to gently press at his wound, checking for fluid and festering. ‘Like a beast in winter, but that does not mean it didn’t leave behind a different kind of filth.’

’A poison of the mind,’ the healer mused, thinking out loud as he patted across Thorin’s stomach. ‘Speaking of latrines, have you felt any urges to pass more than water? Any pain or tightness in your belly?’

Thorin shook his head, relieved that Bilbo was asleep and oblivious to his indignity. His nephews could snigger and mock all they wished, but they would soon find themselves answering very similar questions. Healers everywhere, once a grave injury reached a certain point of recovery, became obsessed with chamber pots and their contents.

’We have had little to eat: water and broth,’ he pointed out, not bothering to keep the edge of disapproval from his voice. It made for unsatisfying fare, now that they were recovering, and Thorin longed for something he could sink his teeth into.

’For a good reason,’ Oin retorted, pressing hard at the flesh just above Thorin’s smalls. ‘There’s been no telling what that blade did to your tubes.’ He wrinkled his nose, sniffing critically before he began rewrapping the wound. ‘Still, it might be time to get things moving again. I’ll let Bombur know you’re ready for more substantial food.’

He stepped away, and Thorin tuned out the complaining of his nephews as the healer treated them with the same blunt practicality. It was a necessary evil, and he was more than happy to let them suffer some embarrassment for the sake of their health.

Shifting on his pillows, he allowed his mind to drift, orbiting around Kili’s revelation. He had wondered, more than once, about the families of hobbits. From the little he’d seen in the Shire, he could tell they were a tight-knit community. Everyone seemed to be someone’s cousin, and everyone knew each other’s business.

Except Bilbo.

Thorin thought back, remembering the gardens full of children and elders, all sharing the same homes. Yet Bilbo’s place had been empty: comfortable, but somehow lacking. The only images on the walls were of hobbits Thorin assumed had passed away. There were no current relations remembered with fondness. In fact, Bilbo barely mentioned any, and those he did speak of sounded more like vultures than kin.

Perhaps he was not an outcast in the truest sense of the word, but Thorin could not convince himself that Bilbo had been happy in his old home. Not when he’d seen the hobbit come into himself on the journey, slowly stepping out from a shell of good manners and polite smiles to become a fierce, brave creature in his own right.
What would happen to all that, if Bilbo returned to the Shire?

His heart panged at the thought, tightening in panic, and Thorin swallowed hard. Bilbo could not go back there, to that small place where each day was like the next and his neighbours knew nothing of his greatness. He would fade, becoming a shadow of himself, and all the light and strength that Thorin had seen on their long journey would be utterly lost.

But how could he convince him to stay?

Perhaps if Erebor had been at the peak of its splendour, it would have been easy. The mountain would have been capable of offering all the comforts of the Shire and more. There would be food to spare, rich clothes and tapestries, fine carvings and all that made life good. Yet his home was a ruin of its former self. What appeal could it have to a hobbit, far more used to green earth and sunlit days than the long, cold, dark of the north?

The gleam of the mithril caught his eye, and Thorin found himself admiring its craftsmanship and beauty. In truth, he had already given Bilbo one of the most valuable things in the mountain. The pale, strong metal was so rare as to be priceless. It should have been jealously guarded, yet in the throes of dragon sickness, Thorin could recall thinking it a worthy price to keep Bilbo at his side.

‘You will tell him, won’t you?’

He blinked, looking across the room at Fili, who now lay propped on his pillows. Oin had adjusted the bandage around his head so that both eyes were uncovered, and the bruise on his face was beginning to turn a sickening shade of green. He squinted as if he were trying to keep Thorin in focus, but the stubborn thrust of his jaw was as evident as ever.

‘Tell him what?’ On a better day, he would have been ashamed to feign his ignorance. The look Fili shot in his direction made him feel pathetic, and he sighed, rubbing a hand over his face and hissing as his rough skin caught on the scab across his eye.

Of course, he had known that none of the Company would miss the significance of what he had given Bilbo. To the hobbit, it was just a fine gift: something to keep the smallest member of their group safe on the battlefield. Everyone else had watched a king lost to gold sickness give away the most precious item in the hoard. They got the message: even in his madness, Bilbo meant more to Thorin than any riches.

Perhaps the mithril shirt had not been a betrothal gift, but it had been the promise of something more. A promise Bilbo neither understood nor acknowledged. Oh, he kept it with him, rarely taking it off, but Thorin suspected that was because the other dwarves told him to wear it. Maybe they said it was to keep him safe, but they knew better.

Thorin’s gift to Bilbo was more than a piece of armour. It was a question, and one the hobbit had yet to answer.

‘He doesn’t know what it means.’ Fili wriggled his toes, watching the furs move before he glanced towards his brother and pulled a face, silently urging Kili to join in. ‘Mum would have a fit if she knew.’

‘Your mother would laugh herself sick at my expense,’ Thorin grumbled, having no doubt that Dis would find the whole situation amusing for decades. She always teased him for his awkwardness when it came to such matters.

In his youth, he had been too busy learning the arts of rule, and after the dragon, there had never
been any time for the coy games lovers played. There had been… distractions… but when faced with a potential connection of significance, Thorin was lost. He did not have the knack of subtlety when it came to matters of the heart. He either hid his feelings so well that even his kin remained oblivious, or he grew clumsy and ruined everything with hasty declarations.

Much like the one embodied by the mithril shirt.

‘If you don’t tell him, someone else will,’ Kili said, crossing his arms over his chest. ‘There’s plenty of gossip. It’s only a matter of time before someone lets something slip.’

‘More than they already have, anyway.’

A trickle of ice ran down Thorin’s spine and he sat up, his pain ignored as he stared at his nephews. He expected to find their eyes agleam with mischief, but neither of them so much as smiled. ‘What do you mean?’

Kili shrugged, scooping his loose hair back behind his shoulder. ‘At first it was just whispers, idle questions, but –’

‘You know how these things work. They take on a life of their own half the time.’ Fili sighed as he hesitated, probably questioning his own judgement over telling Thorin the whole story. At last, he seemed to realise there was not much choice. ‘Those in the camp who do not know him call Bilbo the King’s Hobbit.’

‘Not to his face,’ Kili hastened to add, ‘but it’s how they refer to him when they’re talking among themselves.’

‘And it’s not just one or two dwarves. It’s everyone. The elvish soldiers were doing it before they left, and the men are just as bad.’ Fili peered at Bilbo, checking he was still asleep. ‘There’s no cruelty to it. They say what they see.’

Thorin felt his cheeks heat at the thought of being the subject of such speculation. Back when he’d pressed the mithril into Bilbo’s hands, his mind had been linear and possessive. He had thought nothing of the future, nor the potential pitfalls that may await them. He had not known that, within a matter of days, he would have shattered everything almost beyond repair with his greed and insanity.

‘Does Bilbo know?’ he asked, frowning as his nephews shared a look. ‘Did someone tell him?’

Kili gained a sudden, intense interest in the corner of the room where the wall met the ceiling, studiously avoiding his uncle’s gaze. Fili sagged back into his pillows and shut his eyes as if he were too tired to continue, stubborn and silent.

‘Aye, someone told him. Not what the mithril means, but about the rumours.’ Oin grunted where he sat at a nearby bench, grinding something to powder. His gnarled knuckles were bleached white in the torchlight as he worked, and the pestle clanked against the mortar as he set it aside. ‘A good thing they did, too. If you were looking for a way to make your demands heard and fancied taking a hostage, he’s an obvious choice.’ The healer groaned as he rose to his feet, his old bones protesting. ‘Now he knows to watch his back, and I don’t just mean from the men. Dain’s lot are an unknown quantity. Hobbits trust easy – too easy.’

A shudder of unease worked its way across Thorin’s skin, and he clenched his teeth as the full implications of Oin’s words sank in. Political unrest was not new to him. He’d fought against dissenters enough times in the past, but the idea of Bilbo becoming a tool in their negotiations chilled him to the bone. Perhaps being called the King’s Hobbit strengthened Bilbo’s influence, but it also
made him a target.

In giving him the mithril shirt, Thorin had shown the world both his greatest strength and his biggest weakness. He had made his regard for Bilbo plain for all to see, and then left him unprotected from the attacks that might come his way.

‘I need to speak to Dwalin and Balin,’ he commanded, dropping his voice to a harsh whisper when Bilbo grumbled and turned over in his sleep. ‘As soon as they can be spared.’

Oin opened the door, passing on the instructions to the guards outside before beginning his rounds. Thorin could hear him murmuring quiet words of reassurance to the other wounded and bustling about his business, instructing the team of healers in their tasks. However, he paid the noise little mind. He was too caught up in what Oin had said, lost in the sea of his own ignorance.

The Company had done their best to keep him informed, but reports could only offer so much. Unrest caused a feeling in the air, like an approaching storm. He could not listen to the winds of change from his sick bed, but he knew many of his friends would keep a weather eye when he could not.

Now he needed to know what they had seen.

He did not have long to wait before Dwalin strode into the room, as battle-ready as ever. His gimlet gaze rested on the guards, no doubt finding fault before he stepped across the threshold, followed by Balin. The older brother took one look at Thorin’s face and promptly closed the door behind him, glancing towards Bilbo’s sleeping form before standing at the foot of Thorin’s bed.

Dwalin heaved a sigh: a great gusty sound. ‘Told you.’

‘Aye, that you did.’ Balin scratched at his beard before raising his hands in mock surrender. ‘To tell you the truth, I’m surprised he didn’t find out sooner.’

‘Find out what?’ Thorin growled, doing his best to muster a glare for two of his most trusted friends.

Balin gave him a bland look, shaking his head. ‘That Master Baggins might be in danger. We did not want to worry anyone unduly. Even now, there is no direct threat against Bilbo or any of the Company, nor you or your sister-sons. We were taking precautions, nothing more.’

‘I know you.’ Thorin braced himself, clumsily adjusting his pillows and sitting up to lean back against the wall, the better to face this problem head-on. ‘Both of you. You’ve spent years in court and at my side. You know there is a given value of risk in the current climate of Erebor, and yet it is Bilbo’s safety that worries you the most.’

‘Obviously,’ Dwalin growled, gesturing to the sleeping hobbit with a meaty hand. ‘I'll not deny his ability nor his bravery, but anyone with eyes can see he is the most vulnerable of the Company.’

‘We weren’t the only ones to notice,’ Balin added. ‘Bard put aside his differences to speak with me a few days ago. He fears for the hobbit’s safety, and he could not give me assurances that it was only dwarves who pose a threat. There are plenty of discontent men within our halls, as well.’

Thorin clenched his hands, all too aware of the potential viper’s nest they could find inside the mountain. The volatility of their situation was one that would be a challenge to control, and the last thing they needed was war from within their ranks.

‘And what is being done?’ he demanded. ‘How are we working to keep unrest to a minimum?’ He ignored the knowing look Dwalin shot in his direction and the warm smile that swelled Balin’s
cheeks. They both knew he had to phrase his concerns in terms of his kingdom, even in their trusted presence, but they would also hear the question he really meant to ask:

How were they keeping Bilbo safe?

Dwalin puffed out his chest, folding his arms across the broad expanse as he spoke. ‘We’re including all races in the guard, and making sure each rotation has both dwarves and men. That way they can keep an eye on each other as well as the kingdom. Inclusion’s the key.’

Thorin stared at his old friend, who had run the guard with an iron fist back in the day. He had been picky to the extreme, demanding dwarvish perfection. Now it seemed beggars could not be choosers. ‘Was that your idea?’

Balin sniggered, and the big dwarf shuffled his feet, his voice little more than a mutter. ‘The elf suggested it, and I’m buggered if I’ll say it to her face, but she’s right. A few hours in and they’re starting to see each other as soldiers first, men and dwarves second.’

He scratched his bald head, rubbing his palm over the tattoos daubing his skin as he quickly changed the subject. ‘The hobbit’s easier to mind now he’s in the mountain. Even better when he’s here with you. Traipsing all over the camp he could have found all kinds of trouble, and we might never have known it.’

His simple words painted a graphic picture, and Thorin’s stomach turned at the idea of what could have happened. Under the open sky, lost in a crowd, it would have been easy to snatch him or stage some kind of accident. At least within Erebor they could all keep a closer eye on each other.

‘The mountain offers many places to hide,’ Balin warned. ‘We’ve made a song and dance about the dangers of old mines and high walkways. There’s no dishonesty in that, but it means the community knows to be vigilant. Anyone missing will soon be reported. We’ll know if they’ve come to harm, or have crept off to plot in peace.’ He slipped his thumbs into his belt and rocked back on his heels. ‘Ori’s taken a roll call, for everyone’s safety. We’ll be making sure all who should be present are in the main halls at dawn and dusk.’

Such a thing was standard procedure in the guilds, when dwarves could be working down dangerous pits or striking flaming metal in the forge all day. Thorin had to admit that the men’s agreement to such restrictions caught him by surprise. He sensed Bard’s level head in that particular arrangement, and offered silent thanks for the small blessing.

‘There is only so much we can do when it comes to the dissatisfaction of the men. Enough food and warmth will go a long way to easing their anger,’ he mused, knowing he would have to speak to Bard soon in order to appease their guests. ‘For them, there is no real political slant to this situation, but the dwarves might think differently.’

‘Aye, they do.’ Dwalin scowled, working his jaw as he began ticking off problems on his fingers. ‘The Company’s rule is tolerable enough, but they’re already calling for the king to take his place among them. They want clear leadership, and while most support your right to it, there are murmurings from those who do not.’

‘And what would appease them?’

‘Naught but a convening of the council,’ Balin pulled a face, ‘and even then there are some who would say that you lost the mountain when you fled it.’ He shook his head, batting his hands in the air as if trying to shoo a fly. ‘Not everyone will be happy with you on the throne, Thorin. No king has ever managed a rule untroubled by bickering factions, and the current morale is better than we
could hope for. You concentrate on matters at home. Let me worry about the rest of it when the time comes.’

‘Dain has promised to take the more troublesome dwarves with him when he returns to the Iron Hills, which he intends as soon as this storm passes and before winter truly blocks the way back.’ Dwalin leant back against the wall, propping himself up on carved stone and juggling his hands in emphasis. ‘We need balance. We’re never going to strip all threat from the mountain, not when we’re packed in tight and food’s thin on the ground, but if we can keep our heads we should be able to stamp hard on anyone with bright ideas about stirring the pot.’

Balin nodded, bracing himself on the post at the bottom of Thorin’s bed. ‘Most of us, dwarves and men alike, have the sense to see stability is what will get us through this winter. With any luck, as long as we can keep them warm and fill their bellies, the community will police themselves.’

Thorin rubbed a hand along his jaw, barely feeling the familiar rasp of his cropped beard. He wished he could have Balin’s faith in their ramshackle group of survivors, but he knew how strife crept in through the cracks. Perhaps those who wanted to cause trouble would not dare to mount an all-out assault on the throne, but there were still ways they could make everyone’s life a misery.

‘How many guards are watching the treasure room?’ he asked, seeing Dwalin narrow his eyes in thought.

‘About a dozen. We can’t spare more.’

‘Forget the gold.’ His smile felt stark – all teeth in the face of Dwalin and Balin’s surprise – but there were more important things than the riches of Erebor. ‘Have them guard the food. If anyone wants to cause unrest, they only have to foul the water or steal supplies. The mountain would be in chaos before the day was out.’

‘You’re not worried about theft?’ Balin asked, watching Thorin like a hawk.

‘Every man, woman and dwarf could walk out of here with as much gold as they could carry, and they would barely make a dent in the treasury.’ Thorin shifted on the mattress, wincing as his wounds pulled and throbbed. ‘Sustenance, or lack of it, is our weakness. Talk to Bombur, and guard the food as if it were mithril.’

‘And what about your weakness?’ Balin asked, his question sharp and to the point. ‘What about Bilbo?’

Thorin shook his head, weary to the bone. More than anything, he wished he could hold his silence and all things could continue as they had been, but he knew it was impossible. Bilbo may well be in danger, all because of him, and Thorin knew he would never forgive himself if something happened to him as a result.

‘As soon as he wakes and is well-fed, I will explain my actions in the armoury. I fully expect him to reject any offer of more than friendship, and when this comes to light even that may be beyond our reach. Once he no longer wears the mithril and people stop assuming he is connected to me, the threat will pass.’

A doubtful sound made him look up, and he watched Balin and Dwalin share a loaded glance, full of unspoken communication. The silence thickened, dragging around them as Dwalin jerked his head, the intensity of his gaze becoming a glare as he silently urged his brother to speak.

‘What is it?’ Thorin stared between them, waiting for one of them to break.
Eventually, Balin looked down, frowning at his boots. ‘Bilbo is not in danger because he wears the mithril. At least, not as much as he would be if he were without it. Why do you think we had him put it on display? While you were healing, he kept it hidden. No one but the Company were any wiser, not until Dori made sure it was there for the world to see.’

‘You – you exposed him to their speculation?’ Thorin scowled, trying to understand why the other dwarves would act with such deliberation. On the surface, it looked manipulative at best and downright cruel at worst, but he knew the dwarves loyal to him better than that. They would have their reasons.

‘His own actions made him a target long before anyone set eyes on the shine he wears,’ Dwalin said, pushing himself away from the wall as he began to pace. ‘Dain’s folk know about the Arkenstone, about who took it and what he did with it.’

Balin spread his hands to halt Thorin’s protests, his voice quiet but firm. ‘They do not know him as well as we do, and they see what he did as a disgraceful betrayal. Yet if you are seen to have let go of the past and to hold him in undeniable regard…’

Thorin closed his eyes in disbelief, seeing it clearly. ‘Their forgiveness would come easier.’

Balin nodded. ‘If he appeared now without the mithril, people would think you had cast him aside.’

‘Or worse, that he slighted you – and all of Erebor along with it.’ Dwalin shrugged, his normally stoic face as expressive as Thorin had ever seen. ‘Most of Dain’s lot haven’t known you long enough to be as loyal as the Company, but they’d not take kindly to rejection from a hobbit.’

Thorin grimaced, able to understand such a mentality with ease. He’d shared it himself, when he’d first set foot in the Shire. As much as he would like to deny it, he could not claim to have looked on the hobbits with kindness. He had thought little of their simple lives, and had considered himself superior in every way.

Yet he had only witnessed the day-to-day existence of Hobbiton’s people. He had not seen them at their best. The other dwarves in the mountain could not say the same. Despite the size of the camp, it seemed Bilbo was known wherever he went. He made friends with everyone he came across, and no one could deny his hard work for the sake of Erebor and its people.

‘They believe he is beneath me, even after all they have seen?’

‘Would it matter if they did?’ Balin asked, his smile blooming when Thorin bristled in outrage. ‘You need to start thinking like a king again. Nothing is ever black and white. Bilbo is well-liked and commands respect, more so because he does not demand it with airs or graces, crowns or robes.’

‘If he were a dwarf, no one would question him, but he isn’t. He’s a hobbit, a race most of our kind have never even seen,’ Dwalin pointed out.

‘The doubt of those not looking to cause any trouble lies in their ignorance, and the winter will give plenty of time to put their minds at rest,’ Balin promised. ‘Dwarves know dwarves, the good and the bad: loyalty and stubbornness. They don’t know about Bilbo’s kind at all. That clouds their judgement. They suspect ulterior motives.’

Thorin looked at where Bilbo slept on, oblivious. He might not like the suspicion of the other dwarves, but he could at least understand it. They were not used to the kindness of strangers. Foundations of trade made up their culture: give, take and negotiation. Somehow, he doubted it had even crossed Bilbo’s mind that his selflessness would look suspicious to the untrusting eye.
Balin was right. The situation was complex, and it reminded Thorin that the life of a king would never be simple. Everything he did, from the majestic to the mundane, would be laden with meaning and open to criticism. In truth, he was used to it. Even in exile, his choices had been under constant scrutiny. It was not himself he sought to protect from the unkindness of the court, but Bilbo.

‘What would you have me do? Hide it from him?’ he asked, meeting Dwalin’s gaze before staring at Balin. ‘Allow him to carry on as if the mithril means nothing more than the protection it should offer him?’

‘No, laddie.’ Balin’s eyes grew kind. ‘We owe him more than that.’

‘Tell him the truth.’ Dwalin straightened up, the buckles on his boots clanking as he walked to his brother’s side. ‘The whole lot, from start to finish.’

‘He needs to know the real reason you gave him the mithril, Thorin. Same as he needs to know why the Company made sure others could see it.’ Balin folded his hands in front of him, his brow twisted in a wry expression that wavered between amusement and pity. ‘I don’t envy you the task, but it’s one you cannot avoid.’

Butterflies thrashed in Thorin’s stomach, tickling his insides with ghostly wings. Hope and fear collided, becoming the same, nervous thrill as they raced through his body.

Bilbo was unlikely to look upon his feelings favourably, but his heart was not listening. It was too full with the dizzying rush of what might happen if Bilbo felt the same. If he looked at Thorin with love in his eyes, then could they have what he had wanted for so long?

A life together, sharing the joys and sorrows until the end of their days?

With great effort, he swallowed back the bubble of exhilaration that threatened to lodge itself in his throat, finding his voice as he nodded his head. ‘You’re right. He deserves to know that he has a choice.’

‘As much as you deserve an answer,’ Balin reminded him. The old dwarf looked as if he were enjoying himself, and Thorin shot him a weary glare from beneath his brows.

‘Keep me informed about the mood in the mountain. We cannot afford to be taken by surprise.’

‘Of course. You focus on getting back on your feet. The sooner the better. And Thorin?’ Balin offered a shallow bow, his eyes twinkling in the soft light of the room. ‘Naimhidi.’

The simple blessing for a new couple stirred the air, making Thorin’s heart race against his ribs. A new wave of emotion swamped him, and he struggled to keep his breathing steady. ‘Thank you, old friend.’

Balin smiled, turning away and slipping out of the door in his brother’s shadow. Fili and Kili were quiet, awake but wordless, and only Bilbo’s soft snores disturbed the peace. It was a comforting noise, and one Thorin allowed to fade from hearing as he lost himself to his thoughts.

He did not need Balin’s approval when it came to whatever he and Bilbo shared, but it was a relief to have it all the same. It was easy to be a fool in love, to falsely believe Bilbo cared for him beyond the confines of friendship, but every day someone else would put his mind at ease with quiet words and subtle implications. Fili and Kili had been as blunt as ever when they spoke of Bilbo’s devotion, and even Legolas, who had witnessed so little of their time together, had spoken with soft confidence.

Perhaps it did not provide him with the answer he truly wanted – that was Bilbo’s alone to give – but
what his friends and kin offered him without question was almost as precious. They gave him hope.
A Courtship Of Convenience

“*You have good manners for a liar – and a thief.*”

Coins shifted under Bilbo’s feet, their chime a mocking melody as he pressed his back to the pillar. He could smell Smaug’s breath and hear the roaring susurrus of his shifting scales, but it was that voice that held him captive: too terrified to breathe.

“*You think they will come to your rescue, those dwarves you call your friends? You are nothing to them.*”

‘You’re wrong!’ he squeaked, his lungs starved for air as heat pressed down against his skin, parching his lips and making his eyes sting. Around him, the treasure swam in and out of focus, and he raised a palm to his brow, wiping away the sweat.

“*Am I?*” A purr of amusement growled in Smaug’s mighty throat, and Bilbo cringed, trying to make himself small in his hiding place. “*You think they hold you in such high regard? You think they sent you into my presence because of your courage and your mighty deeds? No. You were the only one foolish enough to believe their lies. So eager for acceptance that you would do anything they asked.*”

An ache bloomed in Bilbo’s chest, stealing away the last of his denials. He wanted to speak up, to defend himself and the dwarves who had been at his side almost every step of the way. Yet the dragon’s cruelty was insidious, finding all his tiny doubts and allowing them to flourish.

Mocking laughter filled his ears, making the hairs on Bilbo’s arms shiver upright as the heat intensified. “*Foolish barrel-rider. They sent you here to DIE!*”

He gasped as fire exploded around him, blending from ruby and gold to deathly white at its heart. Sweat ran down his face as a scream caught in his throat, stifled before it could pass his lips. His muscles shook, braced for a pain that never came, and the looming shadows seemed ghastly to his eyes.

Gradually, reality interceded. No treasure gleamed and no dragon hid around every corner, waiting to catch him in a lance of flame. The bed beneath him was coarse but comfortable, and all was peaceful and still. Only his rasping breaths disturbed the tranquillity, and he pressed his lips together, trying to stifle his fear as his racing heart slowed.

He was in the healing rooms, and Smaug was dead. It was just a dream.

Shivering, he scooped up the furs that had fallen to his waist and dragged them around his shoulders. Sleep was lost to him now. He could not lie back down in a bed that had become a cage, and he steeled himself for the kiss of cold stone as he swung his legs over the edge of the mattress.

Standing up, Bilbo winced as his shoulder and neck began to ache. Oin had removed the poultice while he slept. The wound lay bare, already scabbed and no doubt bruised. Even the weight of the blanket was too much, and he placed it aside, creeping across the room to where his clothes sat folded on a chair.

He didn’t dare put on the mithril. As light as it was, the armour would only make his pain worse.
Besides, the musical sound of the metal was sure to wake up his sleeping friends. They would have kind words and questions, neither of which Bilbo felt able to face. He was unfit for company, rattled by his dreams and out of sorts. Instead, he reached for the undershirt Dori had given him, easing it over his head and trying not to whimper when it caught on the sliced edge of his ear.

Damn orcs and their damn arrows!

Rubbing his eyes, Bilbo smoothed the creases from his trousers before tiptoeing across the room. Most hobbits had a knack for moving quietly, despite their love of fine food, and he was no different. Nothing disturbed the peace until he was almost at the door.

Suddenly, a tiny sound of distress reached his ears, making him freeze in his tracks. It was little more than a whimper: terror stifled under sleep’s embrace. After a moment, it came again, and he peered around as he tried to find out who was suffering.

Now he looked closer, he could see signs of restless sleep in every bed. Kili’s blankets cocooned his body as he tossed and turned, while a frown cleaved Fili’s brow. Neither dwarf snored nor smiled, and Bilbo saw Fili’s hands tighten into fists, ready to fight whatever he faced.

Bilbo’s gaze fell on Thorin, and his heart ached at the sight that greeted him. One arm was flung over the side as if he were reaching for something, and his expression was a rictus of desperation. His throat pulsed around a strangled cry, but he did not tear himself from sleep. Maybe Oin had given him medicine to ease his pain and he could not escape its grasp, or perhaps his exhaustion was just too great. Either way, Thorin looked trapped in nightmares of his own, and Bilbo couldn’t bring himself to walk away.

Approaching the bed, he crouched at the dwarf’s side. He didn’t want to wake him. In a distressed state, there was no telling how Thorin might react, but he could not stand the idea of leaving him to suffer. Instead, he reached out, brushing along the edge of Thorin’s outstretched hand.

Strong fingers closed around his palm, sudden and brutal. Bilbo gasped, his body jerking in surprise, but it was not an attack. Thorin’s grip may be frantic, but it was understandable. He was like a drowning man clinging to the only thing keeping him afloat, and Bilbo would not deny him that comfort.

‘I’ve got you.’ His reassurance sounded pointless in the safe gloom of the healing rooms, but wherever Thorin was and wherever his mind took him, it was something that he needed to hear. ‘It’s all right. It’s all right.’

Biting his lip, Bilbo wondered what plagued Thorin’s dreams. Did he relive the battle, suffering his wounds again and again? Was it death that stalked him, plunging him into grief as Fili and Kili were lost? Or, like Bilbo, did he dream of the dragon that had invaded the mountain and made these hallowed halls his home?

He did not know how long he stayed there, his hand wrapped in Thorin’s and his knees starting to cramp, but at last, the nightmare lost its sway. The haggard despair on Thorin’s face eased, and his fingers grew limp, leaving Bilbo able to pull free and sit back on his heels.

It was no surprise that Thorin suffered while he slept. Between the long, slow strain of the quest and the ferocity of the battle, there was much to worry anyone’s mind. At least he drifted deeper, rather than startling himself into wakefulness as Bilbo had done.

Carefully, he got to his feet, rearranging Thorin’s blankets and pulling them up to his shoulders, making sure he was comfortable. Erebor may be warming up, but it would take longer than a few
hours to remove the chill of disuse from the air. Perhaps the dwarves were more used to it, but he did not think Thorin would be accustomed to the cold, especially when he was dressed in little more than the bandages around his chest.

A blush rose in Bilbo’s cheeks at the thought, and he looked away, busying himself with simple tasks. Now was not the time to consider Thorin’s state of undress. It was difficult enough ignoring the wretched dwarf’s powerful presence while he was awake. Soft in sleep and strangely vulnerable, Thorin’s appeal only grew.

Bilbo’s hands shook as he filled up cups of water, leaving them in easy reach before lighting a candle on Oin’s work surface. The flame wavered, casting capering shadows before it settled on the wick, fizzing in the cheap tallow. It didn’t do much to dispel the gloom – the lamp near the ceiling would be better – but Bilbo couldn’t reach to brighten its glow. At least if anyone woke up they wouldn’t be left struggling in the dark.

Quickly, he picked his way towards the door, pushing it open just wide enough to slip through before letting it swing shut. Well-oiled hinges did not shatter the silence, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Going somewhere?’

Dwalin chuckled as Bilbo jumped in surprise. He’d expected a room full of the sleeping wounded. Instead, he found himself face-to-face with Thorin’s guard, as well as Oin, who sat at a nearby table eating what looked like dumplings and watching Bilbo with shrewd eyes.

‘Good to see you’re awake,’ the healer muttered. ‘You’ve been under for most of the day.’

‘What time is it?’ he asked. The dim lamps suggested the sun had set long ago, but it was impossible to tell. For all he knew it could be lunchtime and he’d be none the wiser.

‘The small hours.’ Oin raised an eyebrow as Bilbo’s stomach growled, his old face spreading into a grin, ‘And your belly knows it even if you don’t. The kitchens will have something for you. Eat your fill. You’ll be needing your strength.’

Bilbo frowned at Oin’s ominous words before shifting where he stood, looking towards the steps. ‘I – I don’t know where the kitchens are. I’ve not seen much of the mountain except the treasure room.’

Dwalin muttered under his breath, glaring at Oin before he reached out and slapped the arm of the guard on the other side of the door. He’d been so quiet that Bilbo had barely noticed him, but now he stepped forward with a friendly smile and a gesture of his fingers towards Dwalin that looked decidedly rude.

‘Keep an eye on him.’ Dwalin ordered. ‘Both eyes. Bring him straight back here after he’s had some food.’

‘What? I – no, no, no. There’s no need for that. Just tell me where the kitchen is.’ Bilbo spread his hands, shaking his head as he saw Dwalin’s expression lock into a stubborn grimace. ‘Never mind. I’ll find my own way.’

Dwalin opened his mouth to argue, but Bilbo didn’t give him the chance to speak. He was already halfway up the steps, the aged stone smooth beneath his feet as he scampered towards what he considered the main floor.

Standing at the top of the stairs Bilbo bit his lip, looking along wide passageways and realising how easy it would be to get lost in such a huge, strange place. There was little light to guide his way.
Most of the braziers in the wall stood dark. A few lanterns pocked the shadows, and he scooped one up, holding it in front of him as he considered his options.

The peace pressed down on his ears, almost absolute, and Bilbo clenched his teeth. It seemed too quiet, all stray sound stifled by the stone walls around him. He was used to the open sky and the fair fields of the Shire stretching out in all directions, not this choking darkness.

Squaring his shoulders, he turned right. It wasn’t a complete guess; places like this had a certain logic to them. The armoury and guard quarters would be to the left, near the main entrance, so that the soldiers could respond to an approaching army rather than getting tangled in twisting corridors. The basic, essential rooms such as the laundry and kitchens should be more central to the mountain, but tucked away out of sight. With that in mind, Bilbo padded onwards, peering through archways into empty chambers and turning corners as he tried to find his way.

No one interrupted his search, and with every moment of solitude, Bilbo grew tense. One of the disadvantages of going straight to the healing rooms when he arrived was that he had no idea where everyone was. Shouldn’t there be lit fires and people talking, even in the depths of the night? Shouldn’t he have met some other guards by now, patrolling these endless corridors?

A whisper of noise caught his attention and he paused mid-stride, his grip tightening on the lantern as he listened. It had come from the gloom behind him, but no one cried out. Any of the Company would have already been walking at his side, chattering away as they showed him where to go. Even the men, most of whom he knew by sight if not by name, would probably have given him a greeting. Instead, whoever’s boot had scuffed the floor remained silent; he couldn’t even make out their breathing.

Slowly, he started moving again, attempting to look nonchalant as he strained his ears. Now he was looking for it, he could hear his follower. They were trying to be quiet, but the weight of their boots and the rasp of their armour gave them away. It wouldn’t be Tauriel, for Bilbo would never have heard so much as a whisper, and the men, though lacking in grace, did not stomp about like the dwarves.

Bilbo grimaced, realising that didn’t narrow it down. There were more dwarves in the mountain than any other race, and most of Dain’s lot were strangers to him. Still, even if he didn’t know them, surely they knew him. He was the only hobbit in this forsaken place. What possible reason did anyone have to be creeping along behind him?

Suddenly, Dwalin’s insistence that he take someone as a guide did not seem so ridiculous, and Bilbo swallowed hard as he considered his options. There was nowhere to hide, and the light in his hand gave him away as surely as one of Gandalf’s fireworks exploding over his head. He had to get out of sight, and he knew just how to do it.

Whipping around, he threw the lantern along the corridor. By the time the metal clanged against the stone he was already running, his fingers groping in his pocket for the solid weight of the ring. It fit snug against his skin, just as it always did, and the world dissolved into whispering veils and hisses on the edge of his hearing.

The noise made him cringe, too reminiscent of Smaug’s voice for comfort. The more he used the ring, the worse this shadow-realm became. The air, like silk at first, now dragged him down, slowing his movements and making it hard to breathe. Heat suffused him, and sweat broke out across his skin as he stumbled to a halt, propping himself against the wall and peering back the way he had come.

Whipping around, he threw the lantern along the corridor. By the time the metal clanged against the stone he was already running, his fingers groping in his pocket for the solid weight of the ring. It fit snug against his skin, just as it always did, and the world dissolved into whispering veils and hisses on the edge of his hearing.

The spark from a struck flint lit the shadows, glowing ember bright as the lantern caught again. The old metal was battered, but nothing was broken, and Bilbo recognised the dwarf who lifted it high
above his head, staring around in confusion.

His would-be escort.

Dwalin must have ordered him to follow, and Bilbo sighed, biting back his annoyance. No doubt the soldier decided he would get a tongue-lashing if he was discovered, or worse, that Bilbo would deliberately evade him, but his plan to creep along unheard had backfired.

Bilbo was almost tempted to tiptoe away and leave him there, dithering where he stood and peering into empty corners, but he could not bring himself to be quite so cruel. The dwarf was young, at least in comparison to most Bilbo knew. He was, at most, just entering the prime of his life – not much older than Fili and Kili – and he looked genuinely concerned, his eyes wide with alarm and his echoing voice contrite.

On shaking legs, Bilbo inched around a nearby doorway and into an empty storeroom, pulling off the ring with a gasp of relief. His muscles cramped as his shoulder burned, and he took a moment to get his breath back before stepping into the corridor and approaching the bobbing lantern light on silent feet.

‘Did Dwalin send you?’

The dwarf spun around to face him, his mouth open and his brow pleated in confusion. He stared at Bilbo, disbelief turning to admiration. ‘Yes. How did you –?’

‘Hobbits are good at hiding.’ It wasn’t a complete lie, but Bilbo was not about to mention that he had a magic ring. ‘We have to be, since we’re little use in a fight.’ He glanced at the battered lantern, dented from the force of his throw. If it had hit the dwarf by mistake, it could have done some serious damage. ‘Sorry about that. I thought…’ He bit his lip and shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t know what I thought.’

‘The fault is mine.’ The dwarf shook his head, pressing his empty hand to his chest and bowing respectfully. His loose brown hair fell over his shoulder, the two braids on either side swinging like pendulums, weighted by the beads at their tips. ‘I am Ronin, son of Narin and commander of Dain’s guard. I should have called out to you rather than following in the shadows.’

‘You needn’t have followed at all,’ Bilbo grumbled. ‘I don’t know why Dwalin thinks it’s necessary.’

Ronin passed him the lantern again, waiting until it was secure in Bilbo’s hand before he spoke. ‘Erebor isn’t safe, not yet. There are holes, cracks, rooms on the brink of collapse… It would be a simple thing to get lost and not return.’

Bilbo shuddered, realising how naïve he had been. He’d thought Dwalin protective to the point of paranoia, wary of people he didn’t know and suspicious to a fault. He’d never realised that the mountain itself might be the main concern. ‘Is it really so bad?’

‘Yes, from what I’ve heard.’ Ronin began walking at Bilbo’s side, guiding him without a word. ‘This level is one of the safest, though there are still plenty of dangers to trip the unwary.’ He turned a corner, beckoning Bilbo to follow as the world grew lighter and the torches more frequent. Now he could smell the faint fragrance of smoke and hear a dull murmur of voices. ‘By dawn there will be shifts of workers waiting to begin repairs, and we can start making this place a home again. Until then, no one’s permitted to wander alone: hobbit, dwarf, elf or man.’

They passed through a broad doorway, and Bilbo’s answer died on his lips. The great hall before
him was full of people. Crude tables and benches had been set up on one side, and many sat along their lengths, talking in low voices and eating from steaming bowls. Lanterns lit every possible corner, hoisted on rope to pierce the gloom of the high ceiling. Huge fires burned in open fireplaces at either end, banishing the chill. Even the floor under his feet was warmer, the forges doing their work, and Bilbo could see Erebor changing before his eyes.

No longer a hollow, hated place, but a home.

‘The engineers want to get the mirrors working,’ Ronin said, pointing upwards to a distant silver disk. ‘You can’t fix broken stone if you’re groping in the dark. Even in midwinter, the mountain will fill with light. Just as well, as I doubt we’ve the tallow or oil to keep flames burning day and night.’

Bilbo sighed, realising it was yet another issue to join the long list of shortages. He had been so consumed with thoughts of food, water and warmth that he had never thought about lighting the mountain’s caverns.

‘Ronin! Bilbo!’ Bombur’s call echoed across the hall, and Bilbo saw several members of the Company sitting at one of the benches, all waving him closer. ‘Come and eat!’

He didn’t need asking twice, and Bilbo picked his way towards them, greeting the men and dwarves he knew and smiling at the ones he did not. More than a few curious gazes turned in his direction, but he did his best to ignore them as he sat down.

Bombur set a brimming bowl in front of him and handed him a wooden fork. ‘You might want to hold onto that,’ he advised, tapping the side of his nose. ‘We don’t have many, and I know how you feel about table manners.’

‘I won’t let it out of my sight,’ Bilbo promised, thanking Tauriel as she moved up to make space. Her height meant that she stuck out like a sore thumb, but he could already see that the Company were making an effort to include her. Papers covered the surface in front of them, and she was helping Gloin work out some kind of schedule.

‘It’s a rota,’ she explained when she saw Bilbo peering at it. ‘For cooks, hunters, foragers, guards…’ Her fingers tapped down the list as she spoke.

‘And that’s just the beginning,’ Gloin muttered, tallying quickly and wrinkling his nose. ‘There’s the repairs, which require different skills and a steady hand. We need to tend the forge around the clock. The healers, for the time being, will be busy with their duties, and our numbers are not growing any greater.’

‘A start has been made,’ Balin said, calm despite the insurmountable challenges of getting Erebor back on its feet. ‘Our problems cannot be solved in one night. Especially a night like this.’

Now that Bilbo looked closer, he could see the sagging skin under the old dwarf’s eyes and the weary slump of his shoulders. The others weren’t much better; even Bofur’s broad smile seemed dim at its edges. Ori was almost falling asleep, while his older brothers sat side-by-side, their familiar bickering silent for once.

‘What’s different about tonight?’ he asked, setting his fork aside now that the dumplings were gone and tipping the bowl to get the last of the gravy.

Balin’s tired smile was kind. ‘There’s not a soul here who has not suffered in some way since Smaug flew from the mountain. Out in the camp, sleep was sparse and comfort hard to come by. There was not a moment for dreams.’
Across the hall, a child was sobbing, and Bilbo saw a hollow-eyed mother trying to console the young girl in her arms. There were others, too, tired but awake, as if they did not dare to close their eyes for fear of what they might see. They soldiered on, talking to friends and keeping themselves busy.

Tonight at least, sleep was something to be feared.

‘It will pass, as all things do,’ Balin said, and this time his smile carried more spirit. ‘No doubt dawn will make all our nightmares seem small.’

‘How are you, Bilbo?’ Ori asked, lifting his head from the table and rubbing at one eye with his knuckle. ‘I haven’t seen you since I took you to the healing rooms. Oin told us bits and pieces, but you know what he’s like.’

‘Didn’t hear half of it and didn’t care about the rest.’ Gloin chuckled, sitting up straighter and checking Bilbo over with a sharp eye. ‘Was a brave thing you did during that attack, by all accounts.’

Bilbo snorted, shaking his head. ‘It was common sense. None of them are strong enough to fight, and they reached for swords when they should have gone for shields.’ He gave his empty bowl a forlorn look, blinking in surprise when another full one was placed beneath his nose.

‘You missed lunch and dinner,’ Bombur explained. ‘You’re owed, and you’re hungry.’

‘Oh.’ He couldn’t argue with that, and he speared a dumpling on his fork, eating it with very little decorum as Ori piped up.

‘But you kept them safe until others could do the same. You and Tauriel. And you were unarmed!’

Bilbo cast a quick glance at the elf in question, who raised an eyebrow and allowed one corner of her mouth to tilt in a smile. He wondered if she was thinking the same thing: that neither of them had acted out of heroism. Nothing could have stopped him getting that shield over Thorin’s head and blocking an arrow with his shoulder in the process. He would bet anything she felt the same. She had taken up her bow to protect Kili and those he loved, not because it was brave, but because in her heart and mind, there was no other possible choice.

‘Well, um…’ Abruptly he realised one face around the table did not smile at him with a mixture of fondness and pride. Balin’s expression had crumbled, and his gaze rested at the collar of his shirt. The old dwarf looked so troubled that Bilbo risked a glance down at his clothing, checking there wasn’t a fresh stain of blood across the bland fabric.

‘Master Baggins,’ he said, leaning forward so that his voice would not travel beyond their immediate friends. He kept an eye on Ronin, who stood at a polite distance, offering him an empty smile as he tried to speak without moving his lips. ‘You are not wearing the mithril. Have you – have you spoken with Thorin?’

A heavy silence settled over the Company, and Bilbo stared from one serious face to the next, seeing a wealth of concern. Ori looked like he was holding his breath, while Bombur hovered behind Balin, worrying the edge of his apron in his big hands.

‘He was asleep when I woke. I didn’t put on the mithril because – well, I didn’t think it was important.’ He huffed as Dori gave a squeak of horror. ‘How am I supposed to know if no one will tell me? “Some things are meant to be seen” but no one’s said why.’

His voice had not risen, but there was a clear edge to every word as he glared around the table,
watching his friends share troubled glances. The past few days he had been too busy to pay much
attention to their behaviour. In truth, he had kept himself occupied, eager to forget Bofur’s claims
about being “The King’s hobbit” and to quash the treacherous longings of his own, helpless heart.

Now it was all swimming back into focus, and his blood ran cold as Balin’s words caught up with
him. ‘Why do I need to speak to Thorin? Is – is something wrong?’

Balin shrugged, shaking his head, but his reassurances never came, and Bilbo’s stomach dropped
like a stone. Really, the discomfort of his friends could only mean one thing.

Thorin knew.

He knew that Bilbo had feelings for him. The gossip that had been rife around the camp now echoed
in the mountain halls, and it had made its way to the ears of the King. Panic fluttered in Bilbo’s chest,
and the food in his stomach turned to lead as he pushed his half-empty bowl in Ori’s direction. ‘Here.
I’m not hungry.’

Ori’s fingers shook as he accepted it, his eyes wide and beseeching. He looked like he was desperate
to speak, but thankfully he held his tongue. It was bad enough that everyone knew how Bilbo felt; he
didn’t think he could bear the pity that was sure to follow.

‘Come on then, laddie.’ Balin got to his feet and climbed over the bench, pausing as Dori whispered
something that Bilbo couldn’t make out. It sounded urgent, but he didn’t have the headspace to
puzzle it through. Mortification already burned under his skin, and the wound in his shoulder
pounded in time with his heart.

What was he going to say? How was he going to explain? It was tempting to brush it off as the
idiocy of the camp, but the evidence was stacked against him. It wasn’t only strangers who had made
their own conclusions; the Company was just as bad. Had one of them warned Thorin, hoping to
head off any real embarrassment to the throne before it came to pass? Or had he found out through
the idle gossip of the healing rooms?

Perhaps, Bilbo thought, it was his own fool self that had given him away. Gloin had said he was
brave for protecting Thorin during the skirmish. Now Bilbo wondered if that undeniable instinct had
been his downfall. Why did Thorin need to overhear rumours when he had the evidence of his own
eyes? He was no longer lost to the fever of his wounds or the enchantment of the elves, and for all
his efforts, Bilbo had not managed to hide his regard.

His knees shook as he departed the comfort of the dining hall. Ronin followed at a discreet distance,
ever watchful. He carried one lantern while Balin held another, leaving Bilbo to wring his empty
hands as his thoughts ran in fretful circles.

Balin drew a breath, falling back to walk close to Bilbo’s side until they bumped elbows. He cleared
his throat, passing the lamp from one hand to the other before stroking his beard. Bilbo had never
seen Balin looking so unsure of anything, and anxiety wound every muscle tight as each step took
them closer to Thorin.

‘He’s a good king.’ Balin huffed, muttering something under his breath before he continued. ‘A
good dwarf. He will always try to do what’s best for others with rarely a thought for himself.’ He
shrugged, apparently at a loss. ‘He is kind and generous, but above all else he is burdened with a
sense of duty. One that, at times, can give him no peace, and peace is what he sorely needs.’

Bilbo frowned, trying to understand the old dwarf’s meaning. ‘What are you saying?’
Balin closed his eyes, letting out a deep sigh. ‘I fear I’ve already said too much. Just... do not speak rashly, nor judge him too harsh. That is all I ask.’

The dwarf picked up his pace, trotting down the steps and into the healing rooms before Bilbo could manage to choke a baffled reply. Balin’s answer had only added to his confusion, and he hovered at the top of the stairs, staring at the stone beneath his feet as he tried to puzzle it through.

‘Shall we?’ Ronin asked, his voice quiet as he gestured down towards Oin’s domain.

‘I’d rather not.’ Bilbo sighed, lost in a morass of unanswered questions. He didn’t know what he was about to face, but it seemed his courage had once again deserted him. He would rather spend the rest of his life not knowing and living with the fantasy than have all his dreams dashed by Thorin’s rejection.

Oh, he would be kind about it, unlike some of the brash tweens in Bilbo’s youth, but he was not about to fool himself that such a conversation did not await him. He had tried, on the short trip back, to think of why else Thorin might wish to speak with him, but his panicked mind came up blank.

He realised that Ronin was still beside him, waiting for him to make his move. If he fled, scurrying off to hide in a dark corner of the mountain like that creature Gollum in its cave, then he had no doubt the guard would follow him. His only option was to face Thorin, whether he wanted to or not.

Squaring his shoulders, he picked his way down to the healing rooms, blinking in surprise at the difference. The place had come alive in his absence. One of Bombur’s cooks had provided food, and those who were able sat at the table, carefully eating their fill. Among them, out of breath and wincing, were Kili and Fili, half-dressed as if they had been turfed from their beds. Both seemed pale with the effort, but steady under Oin’s watchful eye, and they gave Bilbo happy smiles he couldn’t quite return.

‘He’s waiting for you.’

Balin stood beside the open door to the royal healing room, and Bilbo realised why the princes were up and about. For the first time in longer than he cared to remember, he and Thorin would be alone together. Normally, that realisation would cause a hot thrill of excitement, but today it only made him feel worse. At least that meant there would be no audience to his humiliation other than the dwarf involved. Somehow, that did not bring him much comfort.

He moved with a confidence he didn’t feel, striding forward because if he didn’t, he would turn tail and run. The door closed behind him with a thump in its frame, and Bilbo came to a halt, forcing himself to look up from the floor and meet Thorin’s gaze.

Gone was the dwarf lost in the depths of his nightmares, and so was the serenity of the peaceful sleep that had followed. Now, Thorin looked wide-awake and sharp with it. He sat up in bed, a tunic covering his bandaged chest. He may not quite have healed enough to stand, but Bilbo suspected he would try it anyway, if he felt it necessary.

Two braids wove among the loose mane of his hair – the first Bilbo could ever remember him wearing. It was a subtle change, but one he found fascinating. He wanted to run his fingers along them, to feel the pattern beneath his skin, and he clenched his hands at his side to stop himself from reaching out.

‘You wanted to see me?’ he asked, looking to his right and seeing the mithril where he had left it, folded on a chair between the beds. It gleamed in the candlelight, mocking, and he spared a moment to wish that he was anywhere but here.
‘Please, sit.’ Thorin gestured to the other bed, and when Bilbo hesitated, a flicker of uncertainty crossed his features. Lines he had thought were caused by lingering pain deepened, and Bilbo realised that he was not the only one struggling to calm his anxiety. Thorin hid it far better than he, but the signs were there for anyone who took the time to look. Guiltily, he drank in the stiffness of Thorin’s frame and the half-hidden clench of his fists, strangely reassured to see him so unsettled.

Bilbo eased himself down onto the mattress, feeling the straw stuffing sink under his weight. He perched on the edge of the cot like a bird about to take flight, hoping Thorin didn’t notice the way his body had begun to tremble. Fighting orcs and spiders had seemed terrifying at the time, but this was a different kind of fear, and there was nothing he could do to defend himself from it.

‘There has been talk among the people in the mountain.’

With those few words, every trace of remaining comfort vanished from Bilbo’s body. He felt as if he were carved from stone, frozen in place and unable to escape. Thorin did not ease into the conversation, but dropped them both into its depths, and Bilbo screwed up his eyes as he waited for the axe to fall.

‘They consider you tied to me,’ Thorin murmured, his voice rough and low, ‘and I believe I am to blame.’

‘What?’ Bilbo’s head snapped up as he stared. Of everything he had expected, that was not it. He could see the slant of Thorin’s expression – a grimace that matched the awkward twist of Bilbo’s own mouth and the first faint blush of what looked like genuine embarrassment. He had witnessed many moods paint their mark across Thorin’s face in the past, from anger to respect to a softness he did not dare to try and name, but never had he seen him so flustered.

Silence flourished between them, punctuated only by the soft hiss of the peat burning in the grate. Beyond the door, Bilbo could make out the distant sounds of dozens of people working their way through their breakfast, but it seemed like another world.

Thorin released a pent up breath, letting it out in a steady stream and closing his eyes. He seemed to take a moment to gather himself, and Bilbo saw his shoulders straighten under his tunic. He showed courage where Bilbo could not, and he found himself pinned beneath the piercing force of Thorin’s gaze.

‘When I gave you the mithril shirt, your safety was not my main concern. I – I sought to keep you at my side, and not just during the battle we feared we would have to face.’ He shifted, fidgeting for a moment before forcing himself still. Ill-concealed reluctance filled every inch of his frame, and Bilbo could only marvel as he pushed through it, his voice softer now.

‘In the eyes of many, it would be considered a courting gift.’

A wave of shock rolled through him, wiping his fizzing thoughts clean away. His heart lifted, beating hard in the base of his throat, and his body felt feather-light. Thorin wanted him! He had stood there in the shadows of the mountain and offered Bilbo the chance of everything!

Except…

Reality interceded, crashing into him and leaving him stunned. The Thorin who had given him the mithril shirt and all that went with it was not the one who sat before him today. That dwarf had been lost to dragon sickness, borne away from all rational action. He had not made his offer while he was of sound mind, and Balin’s warnings about duty came back to him, echoing in his head.
Thorin would keep his word, would honour a courtship he probably never meant to initiate, all for Bilbo’s sake.

For one selfish moment, he considered holding him to it, but it was a fleeting, foolish notion. Some hollow lie of affection was not what he wanted, and he would not allow Thorin to bind himself to a hobbit from the Shire in the name of duty. Neither of them would find real happiness in such an arrangement, and their newly repaired friendship, healing still, would be torn apart forever.

He could not hear anything over the rush of blood in his ears and the pounding in his head. Oh, how he wished it could be different, but that was not the way of this world.

‘I can’t,’ he whispered, propping his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands. ‘I can’t.’

Silence folded around them anew, and Bilbo could not bring himself to look up and read the relief he knew would paint Thorin’s features. His chest felt tight, as if rocks had settled in his lungs and filled his throat with gravel, and his voice choked to nothing as he tried to find the breath to speak.

Finally, a light touch on his knee forced him to lift his head, blinking his burning eyes as he watched the dwarf opposite him. Thorin had moved to mirror his position, sitting on the edge of the bed despite the pain it must cause, but there was no hint of discomfort in his expression. In fact, he was a blank slate. There was not a trace of emotion to be found in his features, and only the roughness of his voice suggested he was not as indifferent as he seemed.

‘The choice is yours, Bilbo, and I would not deprive you of it.’ He said it as if he were trying to carve the truth into his bones, forever remembered. ‘There is more that you need to know. In the eyes of dwarvish custom, your acceptance of the mithril means that you were considering the courtship.’

‘But I – I didn’t –’

Thorin lifted a hand, gently cutting off Bilbo’s stammered excuses. ‘I know that you were unaware of its significance. The blame lies with me. In my madness, I did not think it necessary or relevant to explain.’ His jaw worked as he seemed to mull over his words, and Bilbo wondered how many were thrown aside, unspoken, before Thorin pressed on. ‘If no one but the Company were aware of this, it would be a trifling matter, easy to dismiss if that were your wish.’

‘But?’

‘But.’ Thorin withdrew his hand, clasping his fingers in front of him until his knuckles bleached white. Bilbo could see his fingernails digging into his skin as if he were holding himself back, but that tiny sign of distress did not penetrate his reeling mind. ‘Others have seen it, and they have read its meaning.’

Bilbo pressed the heel of his right hand to his eye as he tried to get his thoughts straight. ‘How do they know it wasn’t given to me out of friendship or… or something?’ he asked. ‘I don’t understand why the shirt is so important.’

Thorin gave a wry smile, all dark, mirthless humour. ‘Mithril is one of the rarest metals in Middle Earth. Enough to cover the head of a pin is more valuable than the largest diamond in Erebor’s hoard. Dwarvish customs can be mercenary, even in matters of the heart. The value of the gifts we give are of equal importance to the sentiment behind them. Such a thing does not speak of mere friendship.’

A rueful edge to Thorin’s voice made Bilbo pause, and for the first time the sickening spin of his thoughts became something he could understand. His body still shook, trembling with pent up nerves
and shattered fragments of hope, but now at least he could see what was right in front of him.

Perhaps if Thorin had been distant and dismissive, that would have been the end of it. Instead, he remained where he was, so close that their knees almost brushed. His hair fell in a dark curtain over his shoulder, one narrow braid striking a sharp line in the air as it swung free. The tunic he wore was open at the collar, revealing the exposed flesh of his throat. He’d seen Thorin a bit like this before, back outside the mountain when Bilbo had spoken of the Arkenstone and Thorin had hung on his every word.

There was more to that expression than a sense of obligation, and hesitantly, Bilbo began to question his assumptions. It was easier, in many ways, to think that the dragon sickness had pushed Thorin beyond rational thought – that what he said and did during those dark days carried no meaning – but perhaps that wasn’t true. The madness had driven Thorin to act in ways that went against the dwarf’s nature, but that did not mean that the notion of courtship had grown from nothing. Maybe it had simply allowed seeds already planted on their journey to flourish, twisted and corrupt, but there all the same?

The urge to ask rose in his throat, but the words sat heavy on his tongue, unspeakable. He couldn’t bring himself to do it, not when he knew that he would have to answer in kind. If Thorin denied it, Bilbo would be left exposed and forced, by honour if nothing else, to acknowledge his own feelings. He would have to admit that the chatter about him being the King’s hobbit had begun long before anyone noticed the mithril. His own actions had sparked all that, and then Thorin would know the whole sorry mess was his fault.

Well, mostly.

‘Dori’s the one who said the mithril had to be seen. Why – why would he do that? He must have known I had no clue what it meant.’

‘It was not as careless as it seems,’ Thorin explained. ‘The politics within the camp are far from stable, and it did not take long for the Company to realise you were more vulnerable than most. Word spread about your role in the loss of the Arkenstone. It was not something most dwarves took kindly. By showing everyone the mithril, they were showing the world that you were protected, not just by the armour, but by your status.’

Bilbo hadn’t even thought about the Arkenstone. Of course it would become common knowledge that he had effectively stolen it and handed it over to the men of Laketown. From an outsider’s point of view, there was no way to make that look good.

‘And now?’ he asked. ‘Aren’t things better in the mountain?’

Slowly, Thorin shook his head. ‘My kin and I no longer lie at death’s door. If we had not survived the battle, you and the Company would likely have been saved from any inconvenience by the upheaval that followed. Now…’

‘I’m right in the middle of it.’ Bilbo let out a breath, realising Ronin had only been giving him half the story when he’d spoken of the dangers within the mountain. ‘Someone that can be used against you.’

‘That would be true whether you wore the mithril or not,’ Thorin admitted, and the tiny wisp of warmth in Bilbo’s chest grew a little stronger. ‘Even without it, you would not fade from significance. In fact, removing it now might do more harm than good. You would remain a potential target for anyone attempting to cause difficulty within Erebor, and others would think either that you rejected me, or that I deemed you unworthy. I fear neither would bode well for you.’
Thorin shifted, leaning forward, and Bilbo saw him wince as his wounds protested. Strong hands reached out before he pulled them back, clenching them on top of his knees. He looked as if there were more he wanted to say, but instead he held his silence, allowing Bilbo time to think.

His mind raced, scattered in a dozen different directions. Part of him still marinated in a strange cocktail of elation and grief, torn between the realisation that Thorin had asked to court him, and the knowledge that the madness had probably driven him to such action. He longed to believe that something genuine lay at the heart of that offer, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to do so.

Then there was the issue of his safety. Whether he wore the mithril or not, there was danger to be had. Perhaps the Company had been trying to protect him from the anger of dwarves in general, but they had made him a target for anyone attempting to stir up political unrest. More to the point, they had put him in a difficult situation. He had two choices, but neither seemed to be for the best.

“What would you do?”

He looked up at Thorin just in time to see a mass of emotion flash across his face, gone too quick for him to read. It was a wealth of information after the stoic mask of the past few minutes, and he could see Thorin was grappling with his thoughts.

‘Keep the mithril, at least until the spring. You cannot leave these lands until the thaw. If you return the shirt to me now, you will be a target for almost everyone within Erebor.’ Thorin sighed, running his hand through his hair. ‘It will be easier to ensure your safety if popular opinion is in your favour, rather than against you.’

‘If I keep it,’ he said slowly, ‘people will think we’re courting.’ He held his breath, searching hungrily for some glimmer of tell-tale emotion in Thorin’s face and seeing nothing. The mask was back, sliding into place as if it had never left, and Bilbo clenched his teeth in frustration.

‘It would be an arrangement of convenience.’ Indifference filled Thorin’s voice, a little too convincing, and Bilbo grimaced as his doubts reared up anew. Perhaps he was fooling himself and seeing hope where there was none to be had.

‘I’d know that, and so would you, but everyone else would think it was real.’

‘A necessary deception.’ Thorin straightened where he sat, and now his eyes bored into Bilbo, as intense as the midsummer sun. ‘Over the winter, and with Mahal’s blessing, people will be comfortable and well fed. Unrest will ease once we are established within the mountain, and the sting of perceived wrongs will be reduced.’

‘Wrongs like stealing the Arkenstone, you mean?’ Bilbo sighed, noticing how uncomfortable Thorin looked, not just physically but emotionally. This was not a conversation either of them enjoyed, but nor could they avoid it. All they could do was plough on, and the more Bilbo thought about it, the more he realised that this false courtship could be used to his advantage.

Hobbits may be a simple folk, but they weren’t stupid, and his instincts were telling him there was more to all this than met the eye. For every whispering doubt that said Thorin was merely doing his duty and keeping him safe, there were memories of soft smiles and warm glances that seemed to speak of something more.

Perhaps if he had never taken the Arkenstone – if their friendship had never been stretched to breaking point by rage and recrimination – then honesty would be easier for them. Maybe they would be able to speak with open hearts and minds, but that was beyond them now.
No, if he wanted to find out how much of Thorin’s offer had been born of his true feelings, then Bilbo knew that patience was key.

Thorin cleared his throat, apparently taking Bilbo’s continuing silence for hesitance. ‘Dwarves are not the most public of lovers. Displays of affection would not…’ He paused, drawing a deep breath before pressing on. ‘I would have no expectations. You have my word.’

Bilbo sighed as he got to his feet, unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed by Thorin’s promise. It would be hard enough walking the rope of this deception without passion muddying the waters, but he couldn’t deny a thrill at the notion of shared kisses and hot skin against his own.

Pushing that tantalising image aside, he picked up the mithril, examining the weave of the metal and its decorative shine. When he’d first accepted it, he’d seen its worth as a piece of armour – something to save him from death on the battlefield. That alone had been a valuable gift.

Now he knew the truth of the matter

If he had been in full possession of the facts, would he still have accepted the offering? Would he have allowed Thorin, lost in his greed, to stake such a claim?

With a shake of his head, he cast the thought aside. There was no point wondering about the past. He had to focus on the choice before him, and in his mind at least, the answer was obvious.

The links slide like cool water across his skin as the mithril settled on his shoulders. It sparked a dull, thudding pain as its meagre weight rested on the bruise that daubed his flesh, but it was worth it to see the warm glow in Thorin’s eyes.

‘You’ll wear it?’ he asked, his voice thick with disbelief.

Bilbo wet his lips, taking a deep breath as he allowed himself to consider it one last time. If he had his way, Thorin would have given his gift with a clear head, and Bilbo would have accepted it with delight. There would have been no doubt of its meaning, but that was not to be. For now, all he could do was cling to the hope that perhaps, one day, their courtship of convenience would grow into something more.

‘I’ll wear it.’
That Simple

‘I’ll wear it.’

Thorin exhaled, the tension leaving his shoulders with the steady rush of his pent up breath. His muscles thrummed, pulled tight beneath the effort of his restraint. The temptation to reach out for Bilbo was a living thing that resided under his skin and curled in his fingertips, but he would not allow it free reign. How could he, when the memory of Bilbo with his head in his hands was so fresh in his mind?

For the smallest of moments, when he had spoken of courtship, he thought he had seen joy like no other in Bilbo’s eyes. Nothing that he had noticed in the hobbit’s expression on their journey could compare to it, but all too quickly, horror eclipsed the light of his happiness. Had Thorin imagined it? Had his foolish mind painted what he wanted to see on Bilbo’s face before reality broke through, or was that delight – gone between one heartbeat and the next – as real as he hoped?

To ask felt like too much: an unbearable strain on their recovering friendship. Rejection seemed like the only possibility. How could Bilbo look upon him with affection after all he had done? How could he trust a dwarf who had offered courtship and then promised death in so little time?

No, he did not dare speak of the softness that flourished in his heart whenever Bilbo smiled, nor the heat that caught him unawares, low and tempting, when his gaze fell on the lines of that compact body. He would not give voice to the urge to hold him close, nor to live the rest of his life seeing to Bilbo’s happiness.

He could only take advantage of this opportunity. Today, it was a courtship in name only: an agreeable arrangement to keep Bilbo safe. However, the long, dark winter lay ahead of them; months of ice and firelight awaited. There would be time for quiet conversations and comfortable moments. They could relearn the roads of their friendship and – perhaps – forge new trails into the unknown territory of something more.

And if all they had once spring unfurled over the land was the companionship they had once shared, then it would still be time well spent.

‘So what now?’ Bilbo asked, wincing as he plucked at the collar of the mithril. ‘Do we have to make an announcement, or…?’ He shrugged, and there was no denying the obvious pain that flashed across his features. Thorin was on his feet before he stopped to think about it, teeth clenched against the protests of his body as he limped the few paces to Bilbo’s side.

‘May I?’ He paused, his weight shifted over to his good foot and one hand stretched out towards the silver shirt, beseeching. Bilbo did not hesitate; he tilted his head, exposing the vulnerable column of his throat so that Thorin could get a better look at the damage.

‘It’s nothing. Just a bruise.’

Thorin eased the metal aside, hissing in sympathy at the dark stain that spread up the side of Bilbo’s neck and out of sight over the curve of his shoulder. The hole the arrow had made in his flesh looked clean, but Thorin suspected it needed a dressing to help protect the scab from the chafe of Bilbo’s clothes.

The injury may be small, but it reminded him of how Bilbo had leapt to his aid. Perhaps he had not intended to throw himself into the line of fire during the skirmish, but the result was still the same.
Thorin had been spared a wound, while Bilbo was left to bear it for him.

‘Oin will be able to make you more comfortable,’ he promised, easing the mithril back into place. He had not noticed, when Bilbo first put it on, how crudely it fit across his shoulders. The metal dragged and hung loose where it should lie smooth. He would have to talk to Dori about some adjustments. Poor fitting armour was as good as useless; the injury to Bilbo’s shoulder was proof of that.

‘In different circumstances, I’d tell you not to wear it until you are healed, but that is out of the question. If you were seen without it, the dwarves among us would believe our arrangement to be broken.’

Bilbo cleared his throat, looking contrite. ‘That might explain why Balin was so horrified when I went to breakfast.’

The memory of waking to find the mithril folded on the chair between their beds and Bilbo gone hit Thorin like a punch in the gut. Panicked, he’d wondered if Bilbo had been awake after all – if he’d heard what Dwalin and Balin had to say and had made his choice accordingly. Had he been stronger, he would have torn out of the healing rooms there and then, caught in the urge to find Bilbo and explain. Instead, he’d been doomed to lie here, listening to Dwalin’s reassurances that the hobbit merely sought out breakfast and would be back before long.

Balin probably had similar fears when he’d found Bilbo. He knew his friend too well to believe he’d make a scene, but no doubt the old dwarf had suspected that the lack of mithril meant Bilbo had made his decision – rejecting Thorin’s offer outright. ‘If anyone other than the Company noticed, then we’ll tell them the truth. Your shoulder pained you too much to wear it. As long as you’re seen with the shirt again next time you venture out, it will silence any naysayers.’

‘You’d think they’d have more important things to worry about than what I’m wearing every day,’ Bilbo groused, frowning up at him before shaking his head. ‘You never answered my question. What next?’

‘Do hobbits not know these things?’ Thorin teased gently, chuckling when Bilbo shot him a dark look.

‘I know plenty, thank you very much,’ he muttered before glancing down at the floor. ‘Things are different here. This isn’t the Shire.’

‘No, it’s not.’ Thorin stepped back, easing himself down onto his bed as his body made its limitations known. A few minutes on his feet was all he could bear, and he suspected he would pay for his recklessness dearly in the hours to come.

Bilbo sighed, all trace of annoyance seeping from the lines around his eyes as he propped pillows behind Thorin’s back and handed him a glass of water. He didn’t berate him for his efforts, as Oin would, but waited patiently before taking the empty cup from Thorin’s hands.

‘Dwarves do not make announcements when we begin courtship. At least, not with words.’ He looked pointedly at the mithril, pleased when Bilbo followed his meaning. ‘My kind pay a great deal of attention to each other’s appearance. Our armour, clothes and the ornaments in our hair can say much about our allegiances and status. It is in our nature to notice such things.’

Bilbo’s hand went to the single braid near his ear and the crude beads that adorned its length. In his youth, Thorin would have sneered at such decoration, with neither gemstones nor metalwork to embellish the plain wooden surface. Yet now he wore his with equal pride, knowing that their value lay in what they symbolised.
‘I suppose that makes sense. Gentle-hobbits put a lot of stock in the quality of their cloth.’ Bilbo looked ruefully down at his own clothes which, while better than the cast offs from Laketown, were still a far cry from the fine tailoring he’d worn in the Shire. The hobbit Thorin had met back then would have been appalled to be dressed so outlandishly, but Bilbo seemed amused to find himself in such a position.

‘What about the Company?’ Bilbo glanced towards the door, his brow furrowed. ‘What do we tell them? Surely they need to know it’s not a proper courtship?’

Thorin hesitated, unsure. The notion of deceiving dwarves he considered comrades and friends held little appeal, but if the Company knew the truth, it would only take one slip of the tongue to ruin the secret. ‘I’ll explain our situation to Balin, but the others…’ He watched Bilbo’s face fall and hastened onwards. ‘In my absence, the dwarves in the mountain look to the Company for guidance. What they say, how they behave… Where they lead, others will follow.’

‘So they have to believe it’s real.’ Bilbo cuff ed a hand through his hair, his rich curls tumbling around his ears. Doubt plagued his features, dimming the light in his eyes and twisting his mouth. The sight made Thorin’s heart stutter, suddenly afraid that Bilbo was about to change his mind – to cast off the mithril and risk the consequences.

As would be his right.

Swallowing, Thorin forced himself to speak, uttering the only reassurance he could think of. ‘If you decide against this path, now or later, I will do everything I can to help you. I do not want you to think that I am forcing you into this.’

‘You’re not.’ Bilbo sat down, perching on the edge of Thorin’s bed without a second thought. That ease, at least, was a blessing. Bilbo did not flinch or scurry from him anymore, but lingered happily within arm’s reach. ‘There’s enough confusion in these halls without me saying the courtship’s nothing but a misunderstanding. I just wish –’

Thorin watched, captivated by the line of Bilbo’s throat as he tipped back his head, letting out a long sigh as the peace unfurled around them. If he were speaking to anyone else, Thorin would have demanded an answer, but he was used to Bilbo’s pensive moments. He had missed them, these past few weeks. It was good to see him still and thoughtful, not caught up in a whirlwind of activity or mired in worry, but free to be the hobbit Thorin knew and admired.

‘I wish we didn’t have to lie to our friends, that’s all.’

Heartfelt promises bubbled in Thorin’s chest, and he pursed his lips to hold them back. It would be all too easy to say far more than either of them were ready to hear. Caution ruled his head, but his heart was another matter, and he had to stifle the impulse to reach for Bilbo’s hand. To act rashly now could be to ruin everything, and that was not a risk he was willing to take.

‘When the time comes for the truth, they will understand why it was necessary.’

A knock interrupted before Bilbo could reply, and they both looked towards the threshold. Now Thorin listened, the clamour of breakfast had faded to a steady, background hum. The shutters in the roof, open a fraction to keep the air fresh, let in narrow beams of dawn’s first glow, and the fire burned low in the hearth.

‘Come in.’ Thorin smiled as Bilbo got to his feet, noting that there was no haste to his movement. He did not dash away, guilty or discomfited, and his greeting was only a little shaky as Balin slipped through the door.
‘My apologies for the intrusion, but Gandalf has asked to see you, Master Baggins.’ His gaze alighted on the mithril, and the scatter of worried creases around his eyes faded from view.

Behind Bilbo’s back, Thorin made a hasty, cutting motion, determined to stem any congratulations before they spilled forth. The rest of the Company may have their suspicions about how Thorin felt, but only Balin could speak with any authority on the matter. Bilbo would write off the delighted prattle of his sister-sons as over-enthusiasm and the joy of the others as happy but misguided. Yet if Balin said anything, the hobbit was likely to ask questions Thorin had not the courage to answer.

Balin frowned but got the message, hastily wiping away his confusion as he gestured to the door. ‘The wizard is in the treasury.’

‘Thanks. I – I suppose I’d better go and see what he wants.’ Bilbo ducked his head to Balin before offering Thorin one last, lingering smile and slipping from the room. A brief snatch of voices greeted his departure: hopeful questions and Bilbo’s quick excuses. Then the door swung shut, blocking out the details and leaving him alone with one of his oldest and most trusted friends.

Silence fell, but it was not the comfortable comradery of days gone by. Instead, Thorin was pinned by Balin’s sharp gaze, forced to watch the gradual shadow of disappointment draw down across that familiar face.

‘You didn’t tell him.’ Balin jammed one hand on his hip and lifted the other to his brow. ‘After all that, you didn’t tell him.’

‘Do you really think so little of me?’ Thorin asked, amused by the glare he received. ‘He knows what the mithril means.’

Balin narrowed his eyes. ‘Does he now?’

The urge to squirm was overwhelming, and Thorin looked away, knowing that Balin’s doubt had its foundations. ‘He knows that, by wearing it, he is telling the rest of the mountain that we are courting, and we have agreed to maintain that pretence. It seemed like the safest option. When the thaw comes…’ He shrugged. ‘It will be easier to break an agreement when he is not forced to stay in Erebor to bear the consequences.’

Balin sighed, a long, gusty sound that ended with a groan as he sank onto Oin’s chair. His hands hung between his knees and he bowed his head, his snowy beard blanketing his chest. When he looked up, his dark eyes were full of pity. ‘And what of the rest of it? Your heart won’t hold its silence forever, Thorin. Sooner or later, he’ll know you didn’t offer that mithril out of madness. He’ll know how you feel. This – keeping it from him – there are some who might say you’re using false pretences to get what you want.’

‘And would you be one of them?’ Thorin demanded, all trace of humour fled. It was a good point. He had furnished Bilbo with all the facts about his safety and well-being, but had said nothing of emotion. In a certain light, that was a less than favourable reflection on his character. ‘Nothing I said to him was untrue. You know that.’

‘Lies by omission are still lies.’ Balin spoke kindly, as if he were still a dwarfling learning the ways of the world, rather than old enough to know better. ‘However, you would not make the choice to hide how you felt without good reason.’

The expectant pause dragged on, and Thorin sighed, tipping his head back into the pillows and allowing the painful stretch of his wound to distract him. That was preferable, in so many ways, to Balin’s endless wisdom and patience.
‘You did not see him,’ he said at last, glancing towards the door to make sure they were not overheard. ‘I do not know what he felt at the mention of courtship, but horror played its part. How could I speak of affection, knowing that to do so might drive him down a dangerous road?’

‘The mithril…’

‘It’s not about the mithril. The choice to wear it or cast it aside will always be in Bilbo’s hands.’ He closed his eyes, drawing a deep breath before he explained. ‘If I say the offer of courtship was real, then what am I saying about what happened up on the battlements? One cannot be given meaning and the other denied. Neither recommends me.’

Balin’s silence was the only confirmation he needed, and Thorin grimaced as he met the old dwarf’s gaze. ‘Bilbo and I are working to repair our friendship, but it is still a fragile thing. You must see that such an admission would break it for good.’

‘Or strengthen it all the more,’ Balin muttered, pressing his hands to his knees and grunting as he got to his feet. ‘So this is your decision? You and Bilbo will pretend to court until the spring, until he leaves Erebor forever and returns home?’

Thorin clenched his fists, his heart giving a painful thump at the thought of Bilbo departing these lands for good. ‘If it comes to that, then yes.’

That got Balin’s attention, igniting that knowing, happy light in his eyes. ‘You have a plan to prevent it?’

‘A hope, perhaps. I cannot ask for more than that.’

‘Aye, you could be right.’ Balin shrugged at Thorin’s questioning glance, his smile turning wistful. ‘Hobbits are not like dwarves. We’re not ones for deception; we speak our minds and have done with it. Bilbo makes a mask out of manners. It happened less, late in the journey. He said what he meant and dared us to argue, but now…’

Balin sauntered over to Oin’s desk, plucking at herbs and tapping at bottles. It brought back memories of sitting in on meetings with his grandfather, and how Balin, in his younger days, would pace a room when giving bad news.

‘What do you know?’

‘That’s the problem. I don’t know. A few days ago, his devotion seemed as obvious to me as the nose on Dwalin’s face. Yet this morning when I told him you needed to speak with him, he went as white as fresh snow, though what he feared I cannot say.’ Balin drummed his fingers on the desk. ‘I’ll help you with your deception, for both your sakes, but Thorin, you must promise me one thing.’

‘What?’

‘Do not let him leave Erebor without telling him how you feel. Don’t let him return to the Shire ignorant of what he’s leaving behind. He deserves that choice as much as any.’

The notion filled Thorin’s chest with butterflies. It was easy to imagine it coming to that: a declaration and a farewell all at once. He hoped time did not rush away from him, that the short days and long nights chose to linger, but should the Valar work against him, he would see to it Bilbo knew everything.

‘You have my word.’
Balin stood with his hands clasped in front of him, his back as straight as his old frame would allow. ‘Then tell me what needs to be done.’

A great burden lifted from Thorin’s shoulders as he outlined all that he’d told Bilbo. Balin nodded along, his gaze unfocussed as he committed his king’s orders to memory, analysing each one with a mind wise to the ways of politics and the court.

‘I agree on all but one point,’ he said when Thorin fell silent. ‘Let me tell Nori the truth of the matter. That way, he can warn us of any doubt or further bad sentiment in time to act on it.’ He pursed his lips, tugging at his beard. ‘The role of the others will not change, regardless of Bilbo’s attachment to you, but Nori is different. Not only can he read the mood of the mountain, but with the right word in the right ear, he can guide it in a favourable direction.’

‘The more people who know, the more likely it is that the falsehood will become general knowledge,’ Thorin warned. He did not want to contemplate what might happen if that came to pass. It would be fuel for anyone hoping to discredit not just himself, but Bilbo as well.

‘That may be true,’ Balin said, ‘but I wouldn’t offer such advice if I didn’t think it was necessary.’

Thorin sighed, swallowing tightly as he acknowledged Balin’s point. The old dwarf had never steered him wrong in the past, and that was not likely to change. ‘Very well. Just make sure your words do not reach other, less friendly ears.’

‘I was born and raised to know discretion,’ Balin reminded him. ‘Not a talent many dwarves can boast.’ He tapped the side of his nose and winked, his smile back in full bloom beneath his beard. ‘Now, we’d best let those sister-sons of yours into their beds.’

‘They are well?’

‘Aye, better than Oin expected, but they’ve a ways to go yet before they can face the challenges Erebor has to offer.’ Balin’s eyes twinkled before he turned away, opening the door and standing motionless until the hubbub on the other side fell to silence.

Balin said nothing, but it seemed words were unnecessary. Those who waited in the room beyond must have been able to read the news from his face. Kili’s whoop of delight was audible from where Thorin lay, and voices rose up in relief and happiness. Dwalin stuck his head around the door and gave Thorin a wink, grunting in annoyance as Kili elbowed him aside.

His younger nephew was supporting Fili across the room, straining like a horse against its harness in his eagerness to get inside. His youthful face glowed with joy, reminding him of Dis. She never made any effort to conceal her delight, and her pleasure had always been contagious. Now her son stood by Thorin’s bed, practically floating as he shifted from foot to foot.

‘You’re really courting Bilbo! He knows what the mithril means? And he’s accepted it?’

‘Is that so hard to believe?’ Thorin asked, making sure no trace of a wince found its way onto his expression. It was easy enough to speak of deceiving his kin for the greater good, but it was far harder to lie outright in the face of Kili’s unrestrained enthusiasm.

‘No! Well, not really. I mean –’

Fili kicked his brother in the ankle, shaking his head in disbelief. He was quieter and more serious, possibly because his injuries still plagued him, but that had always been his way. He was never as spontaneous as Kili, nor as reckless. His caution and growing wisdom would make him a fine king one day, and the look he gave Thorin was both hopeful and shrewd.
After a few seconds, he reached into his loose tunic, pulling at the cord around his neck and tugging it free. ‘You’ll be needing these, then.’ He handed it over, dropping a plain pouch into Thorin’s hand. ‘Mum gave them to me before we left. She said you never know who you might find along the road.’

Cautiously, Thorin accepted the small bundle, the leather soft and worn from its travels across Middle Earth. The hide still carried the warmth of Fili’s skin, and Thorin blinked in surprise as he peered inside and saw two courting beads nestled within it. Tiny chips of sapphire and emerald shone in the meek morning light, and when he tipped them out, he could see the patterns engraved in the metal were as crisp and clear as they had been the day they were made.

The Durin line had done plenty of courting in their time, and more than one set of beads had graced their legacy. Thorin had thought them all lost amidst the flames of Smaug’s invasion, and that alone made the two that rested in his palm that much more precious.

‘Where did she…?’ He trailed off, curling his fingers around the tiny treasures before slipping them with great care back into the pouch. Where his sister had found them, he didn’t know. There had been little time to save anything from the mountain, and they were not the beads Dis herself had worn. Those had been new, poor but special for being hers and hers alone.

Part of Thorin wished that things between he and Bilbo were more simple – that he could offer him one of the beads with an open heart and all his emotions on display. Still, it was wishful thinking, and the small, cynical part of his mind had to acknowledge that Durin heirlooms in Bilbo’s hair would add validity to their imaginary courtship.

‘Thank you, Fili,’ he said, meaning every word. ‘Did you carry them all this way?’

‘And almost lost them, once or twice,’ Kili added, grinning wickedly at his brother’s glare before he helped Fili limp back towards his bed. Of the three of them, Kili was by far the most healed. Tauriel’s tender assistance had given him a head start, and now he moved more freely than either his brother or his uncle.

‘All right?’ he asked Fili as he eased him down to the mattress. ‘Would you rather sit up, or lie down?’

‘Sit. Breakfast made my belly ache.’

‘Oin said that was normal,’ Kili explained before Thorin could ask, rubbing his own stomach with a rueful wince. ‘After no food at all, and then nothing but broth, dumplings are a lot to handle. Even plain ones.’

‘Speaking of which,’ Oin said from the doorway, where he stood with a steaming bowl in his hand, ‘Eat slow. Chew each mouthful. You’re not on the road anymore, and there’s no rush.’ He handed the meal to Thorin, who savoured the aroma. It was bland, lacking much in the way of herbs or spices, but his mouth still watered at the scent.

Oin produced a spoon from his pocket and turned away as Thorin focussed on the mundane task of feeding himself. Opposite, he could hear Fili and Kili talking to one another, their voices soft but audible. Both appeared delighted at the idea of having Bilbo as part of their family. They had been among the first of the Company to take a liking to the hobbit, including him in their good-natured teasing and taking an interest in his un-dwarvish ways. It made guilt twinge in Thorin’s chest, but he was careful not to let it show as Kili gave a puzzled frown.

‘So, Bilbo will be Consort?’
Thorin paused, a piece of dumpling halfway to his mouth as the image of Bilbo in a crown bloomed across his mind. He had not allowed himself to think so far ahead, but now that Kili’s words brought the vision to life, he was enraptured.

All his long years, he had thought he would rule alone. Even as a king in exile, he had doubted there would ever be another to share his burden. Now, he could not imagine it being anyone other than Bilbo. He could see it in his mind’s eye: two thrones where one had once stood, and matching crowns to adorn the heads of those who sat upon them.

‘I – I don’t know.’ Fili’s voice broke apart the daydream, and Thorin blinked, realising both his nephews were watching him. Of course, in their lifetime, the only one to rule Erebor had been the dragon, and though they both knew their recent history, there had not been the time nor need to teach them much of who came before Thror.

‘If the King or Queen has a partner, their title is Consort, and it is often at the ruler’s discretion how much power they hold,’ Thorin explained. ‘Some rule side by side, as equals, but most choose to reign alone. It reduces infighting over the throne once it becomes vacant.’

‘But Bilbo –’

‘Is not my betrothed.’ He said it as softly as he could, a gentle reminder to both his nephews and his own heart. ‘And may yet change his mind about the courtship.’

Kili pulled a face, screwing up his nose and scowling in distress. ‘Not if you do it right,’ he protested. ‘You just – you need to show him that there’s more for him here, with us, than there ever was back in the Shire.’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘Yes,’ Fili insisted from where he sat, ‘it is.’ He gave Thorin a firm glare, and he wished he still had the certainty of youth where nothing under the sun seemed impossible. ‘Maybe it won’t be easy, with Erebor being like it is, but it’s only complicated if you make it that way.’

Thorin stared into the thin pool of gravy at the bottom of his bowl, knowing it was already too late to take Fili’s advice. The situation between himself and Bilbo had been a briar patch of uncertainty even before they had come to an agreement. Now it was one layer of deception laid upon the other, with no going back.

‘Do you even know how hobbits court?’ Kili asked, genuinely curious. ‘It’s no good trying to charm Bilbo the dwarven way if he has no idea what you’re doing.’

‘More than that, does he know what the others will expect of him?’ Fili added, sitting up straighter with a look of growing concern. ‘All the little rules, what we can and cannot do – all the stuff we’re taught from childhood – he’s got none of that.’

Thorin set his bowl aside, his stomach tying itself in knots as his nephew’s words sank in. They may not have been raised in a royal court, but they knew what Erebor would expect. They did not have much of a kingdom, but the people within the mountain would still demand that Thorin behaved like a king, and any lover of his choosing would always be watched and judged.

He swore to himself, pitching back his furs and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. His foot began to burn as soon as it touched the floor, and he braced his hand against the wall as he limped across the room. Everything hurt, and his body, still in dire need of rest, did not make the short journey easy, but this could not wait.
‘Where are you going?’ Kili demanded, already trying to get to his side. ‘Uncle…’

He shoved open the door, indifferent to the sweat that popped along his brow as he scanned the room for a member of the Company. Oin for once, was nowhere in sight. A blessing, perhaps, as he would force Thorin back into bed without listening to his excuses. Instead, he saw Bofur sitting at the table, his head bowed over some papers as he spoke with Ori, who scribbled hasty notes.

The two guards on either side of his door gave him a dubious look. Dwalin must have left on some errand, and he recognised neither soldier who replaced him. It looked like they were trying to work up the courage to tell him to get back to bed, but a quelling glare made sure they held their silence. With great effort, he stiffened his spine, bracing himself as he hobbled towards the bench where Bofur and Ori worked.

‘Oin will skin you and nail your hide to the door,’ Bofur said, not looking up from what he was doing as Thorin finally reached the crude, wooden table, slumping down on the seat with a wheeze of relief. He felt as if he had run across half of Middle Earth, out of breath and aching at every joint.

‘I need to speak to Bilbo,’ he managed, murmuring his thanks as Ori straightened up and handed him a cup of water, blessedly cool. ‘It cannot wait.’

‘Keen, are you?’ Bofur’s grin could have split his face in two, and Thorin sighed, wishing it were only a lover’s eagerness that drove him.

‘Concerned,’ he corrected. ‘Bilbo knows nothing of the rules of dwarvish culture. If he were a guest here, it would be of little consequence, but as my – my choice, he will be under constant scrutiny. He has never had need to learn our ways, and I didn’t think to explain.’

Bofur huffed a laugh, shaking his head. ‘Balin’s already three steps ahead of you. He’s probably with Bilbo now. Better done sooner than later, before someone puts him to the test.’

‘Besides, you never know,’ Ori added shyly. ‘It might not all be as strange to Bilbo as we think.’

Thorin sighed, grateful for Ori’s optimism, even if it seemed misplaced. He should have done his duty and at least thought of the potential pitfalls Bilbo may face. Instead, he’d been caught up in the glow of possibility, a fool in love, and it was Bilbo who would suffer as a result.

Thorin ran his tongue over his teeth, chafing against the restraint of his injuries, unable to push his body to take action but unwilling to leave his job in the hands of others. Not that he had any choice in the matter. The walk across the healing rooms had been challenging enough. The distance to the treasury may as well have been a world away. He would never make it to Bilbo’s side without falling into a state of collapse: a display of weakness he could not afford.

‘Then I’ll wait for him here.’

Neither Bofur nor Ori tried to dissuade him; they knew their words would fall on deaf ears and hard glares would meet their efforts. Instead, they welcomed him with the quiet camaraderie they had shared on the road. The silence was comfortable, punctuated only by the sounds of the injured.

Subtly, Thorin took in the scene of the main healing rooms. A woman leant over the edge of her cot to hold the hand of the dwarf next to her, who fretted in a fever. She spoke to him softly, her words strong but kind, and every time the dwarf managed a coherent answer, her smile became a gleaming grin. A few beds away, a dwarf was reading from a very tattered book. Its spine was as cracked as his voice, but he kept going, and the men around him listened, rapt and grateful for the distraction.

The coil of dread that had taken up permanent residence in Thorin’s gut lessened at the sight, and he
found himself breathing easier. Friendships, it seemed, were already finding root here, and with any luck, such things would not be restricted to the healing rooms. It was all too easy to focus on fears of unrest at a time like this, but the evidence of kinder sentiments was visible to all.

Suddenly, he became aware that he was staring, and he tore his eyes away, allowing his gaze to fall on the papers before him. He knew his Company came to him with only the essentials, sifting through numbers and complaints to bring the most urgent to his attention. Now he found himself reaching out for the raw information in front of him, picking up one document after the other as he sought to distract himself from his boredom and pain.

The first was a list of armour and weaponry, cloaks and garments. Dain’s lot had brought their own, and there was enough to spare for the Company, but for the men there was nothing of the appropriate size. What was too wide for the children was too short for the adults, and it seemed Dori was already altering what he could, providing suitable gear for their hunters and foragers.

Another was a list of fuel supplies, including a hasty evaluation of the nearby peat bog. Wood and coal once fuelled Erebor, but the dragon had razed the former, and the mountain no longer had coal seams to call its own. In the past, the fuel had come from the Iron Hills, but now winter shut the way. Peat was a good alternative, but the land only had so much to offer, and they needed plenty to warm the cold stone, let alone run the forges.

Finally, he found a list of food, far too scant for his liking, and he dragged a hand through his hair as he read Bombur’s neat scrawl and the short missive at the bottom. If they ate sparingly, and nothing happened to their supplies, there was enough stored to last them a month.

‘It’s bad whichever way you look at it,’ Bofur murmured, all trace of his smile now gone, ‘but we’ve got some ideas. Bombur hasn’t counted whatever we can hunt or forage, and there’ll be game for a while yet.’

‘Fuel’s harder,’ Ori added. ‘We’ve already got dwarves outside, braving the storm and digging up the peat so we can make sure it’s dry. We’re doing what we can to ration candles and lamp oil. There’s just –’ He shrugged. ‘Not enough.’

Thorin nodded. He had known how it would be. Ideally, he would have reclaimed this place with an army at his back and wagons loaded down with everything they would need. Trade routes would be open, ready to supply them in exchange for the plentiful gold that filled their halls. Instead, they were left to fight for every scrap, ill prepared for the winter they faced.

‘Shame the dragon fell in the lake, really,’ Ori murmured. ‘I wouldn’t want to eat it, but it would have had fat we could burn.’

‘Mahal knows what fumes we would have brought into the mountain,’ Thorin groused. ‘What of the underground passage to Dale? Is it passable?’

Bofur shook his head. ‘Blocked by a cave in, but we can get it open again.’

‘Do it.’ Thorin glanced upwards towards the shutters, where he could see a narrow sliver of cloud-laden sky. ‘Dale had caverns nearby where they used to store all manner of goods. Most will not have survived the passing years, but it is worth scavenging whatever remains. Make sure Bard is informed. The claim the men have on anything in Dale may be tenuous, but we cannot ignore it.’

‘We’ll get his permission,’ Bofur promised. ‘He can’t say no, not when whatever’s there might help his people, as well as our own.’
'Will there be enough?' Ori asked, and Thorin didn’t miss the tremulous edge in the young dwarf’s voice. ‘Are we – are we going to make it?’

A flash of pity seized Thorin’s heart to see such uncertainty in Ori’s eyes, but he could not blame him for his doubt. The Company knew, better than anyone, the dire nature of their situation. It made him think of when his people fled the dragon, beginning their long march across the land. Every new death was another blow, and every day was a battle for survival.

Now, others were relying on him, and he could picture their faces with ease. The men, gaunt and hollow-eyed, lost amidst the sea of stubborn, determined dwarves. Tauriel, the elf who had nothing but the ruined mountain to call her home, and Bilbo, so far from everything he knew.

Yet despite their desperation, everyone possessed a greater courage than Thorin could have hoped for. Each one would rise to the challenges the world threw at them, united in their desire to mend this shattered land into a place they could call their own. None would give up easily, least of all their king.

‘There will be enough.’ he said softly, meaning every word, ‘and if there is not, then we will not rest until the mountain is well-supplied. We cannot allow hunger to grow within these walls, nor ice to bite into the stone.’

He straightened his back, narrowing his eyes against the twinge of pain in his belly as he reached for more papers, determined to furnish himself with every glimmer of information they had to hand.

The fight they faced could not be won with bow and sword. It was a battle of the mind, pitting the power of intelligence and dedication against the unrelenting cruelty of the elements, and Thorin had every intention of winning.
Bilbo stood at the top of the steps, the stone frigid beneath his feet as he stared out across the treasure room. The lantern in his hand barely pierced the darkness, which lay thick in Smaug’s absence. No longer did a belly full of flame lend its eerie glow to the riches spread out before him, yet something sinister remained. He could feel it like a breeze running its fingers through his hair, foetid and cold.

‘Stay here.’

Ronin grimaced, but did not disobey Bilbo’s order. He stood at ease, relaxed but battle-ready, his stare flitting from one shadow to the next as Bilbo made his way down towards the gold.

Gandalf sat below him, his long frame folded onto the steps as he stared out across the aureate sea. His staff was lit, its crystalline glow sharp to Bilbo’s eyes, and he kept his gaze fixed on the beacon.

Every footfall was a danger. The coins lay, slick and shifting, even this far from the dragon’s bed. Gems littered his path, their shine obscene, and the occasional precious object cast strange shadows in his wake.

‘The gold cannot wait,’ Gandalf murmured, almost too soft to hear as Bilbo approached and sat at his side. The brim of the wizard’s hat sent deep shadows across his face, and there was no jolly glow of a pipe’s bowl to alleviate the darkness. ‘Until I saw it for myself I could not be sure, but its poison is too great for the mountain to bear.’

Bilbo looked ahead of him, and even though this was not his first time in this gargantuan room, he still struggled to comprehend the size of the wealth it contained. Mountains of treasure rose all around them, clinging like moss to the huge stone pillars and spilling in drunken, wavering valleys.

‘What can we do?’ he asked, knowing better than to question Gandalf’s judgement. The wizard had walked Middle Earth for centuries and had seen evil in many forms. Besides, how could he deny his words when he could feel it for himself, like some great creature breathing down his neck? ‘Is there – is there some magic, or something?’

‘No. No spell I know can lift the stain left by Smaug upon this place. The stone of the mountain resists it –’

‘But the gold doesn’t.’ Bilbo set the lantern down at his feet, staring at the flickering flame contained within the dirty glass. The wealth around him caught and reflected the light, turning it sallow, but Bilbo paid it no mind. His heart had sunk to his stomach, sick and slow as he realised that his fears about Erebor’s hoard were real.

‘Fire will cleanse it.’ Gandalf said at length, tipping his head back to look up at the distant ceiling. ‘Not the foulness of the dragon’s breath, but the clean flame of the forge.’

Bilbo looked into that old face, where the weight of the ages carved its lines across his skin. ‘So we need to melt it?’ he asked, following the wizard’s gaze and staring into the gloom above them. In his mind’s eye he could still see the great stretch of Smaug’s wings and the glowing bellows of his chest, but he shook the vision away. Things were bad enough without him imagining monsters where there were none.

‘Yes.’

Silence descended, and Bilbo shivered as a breath of air stirred around his feet. His hands tightened
over the edge of the step on which he sat before he trailed his fingers back over its surface, tracing the cracks in the stone as his mind raced. ‘It would take years… Lifetimes.’ He looked up at Gandalf, watching the wizard’s solemn nod. ‘We don’t have that long, do we?’

‘No. Already the evil seeps from this room like a foul stench on the air, eager to ensnare all in its path.’ Gandalf sighed, but when he turned to Bilbo the corners of his pale eyes crinkled, and some of his seriousness eased away beneath the kindness of his smile. ‘Oh, fret not, Bilbo. There are ways and means. The trick will be to convince Thorin it’s necessary. There is much to occupy his mind of late – as I am sure you are aware.’

Warm amusement filled Gandalf’s voice as he cast a meaningful glance at the mithril shirt, and Bilbo felt the tips of his ears burn. ‘I – it’s –’ he stammered, shrugging his shoulders and wincing as his wound renewed its bite. There’d been no time to talk to Oin as he all but fled the questions of the Company. He could not bring himself to lie to their faces, not when his agreement with Thorin was still raw and fresh. Now he found himself facing Gandalf’s endless understanding, and the gleam of humour in his eyes only grew as Bilbo struggled to explain.

‘You knew, didn’t you?’ he hissed, seeing straight past the feigned innocence. ‘You knew what the shirt meant and you didn’t tell me.’

‘I suspected.’ Gandalf reached into his pocket, taking out his pipe and stuffing the bowl with every sign of contentment. All the dark warnings from a moment ago had fled, replaced instead with the smiling old man Bilbo had known since he was a faunt. ‘For a dwarf lost to dragon sickness to willingly surrender something so valuable…’

‘It – it wasn’t like that. He was sick – mad – not himself at all.’ Bilbo gripped the cracked stone beneath him, pressing his nails under its edges and feeling it flake as his stomach filled with breathlessness and butterflies. ‘It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘Doesn’t it?’ Gandalf asked mildly, fixing Bilbo with a shrewd look that he answered in kind.

‘Does it?’

The wizard smiled, puffing on his pipe as he reached out to pat him on his injured shoulder. Bilbo cringed, but rather than sparks of pain, Gandalf’s touch left a mellow warmth. When it faded, the discomfort was gone, and his tentative fingers found not a fresh wound but an old scab, hearty and tough.

‘One less thing for us to worry about.’ He gave Bilbo a wink before pressing the base of the staff to the ground and hauling himself to his feet. ‘Come, now. Let’s talk to Thorin and see what may be done. The treasure has already given the people here a sleepless night, and one is more than enough.’

‘The nightmares?’ Bilbo asked, standing up and brushing off the seat of his trousers. The dust that fell from the cloth was bright yellow, and he stared at his gleaming palms. ‘They’re caused by the gold?’ He held out his hands for Gandalf to inspect, and the wizard grunted.

‘Indeed. The dragon haunts this place. He is in the very air we breathe. While the hoard remains, he lives on: a presence no one can deny.’

‘But – but if even the dust is tainted… Gandalf, there’s no way we can get it all. It’s gone into the fabric of the mountain. Every crack and crevice.’ He put his foot down on the broken step in emphasis, gasping in surprise when the stone came away, its mortar crumbling as half of the slab hit the floor with a resounding crack.
The noise jolted Ronin from his watchful ease, and his armour clattered as he hurried towards them, slithering on the gold. Within moments, he reached Bilbo’s side, his eyes wide with alarm. ‘Are you hurt, Master Baggins?’ he asked, his hand falling from the sword when he realised it was masonry, rather than a living threat, that created the racket.

‘Yes, I’m fine. It just – fell.’ He gave a hopeless shrug, frowning down at the broken stair. ‘I thought these steps were carved from the mountain?’

‘To the best of my knowledge, they are.’

‘Then why is this one hollow?’ He cast a quick glance at Gandalf, seeing an innocent curiosity that he knew far too well to believe. Damned wizards. He would bet all the silver in Bag End that he had sat here on purpose, knowing that something of interest lay beneath.

With a tentative hand, Bilbo reached down, recoiling in shock when his fingertips brushed something soft. His first thought was that it was the pelt of some animal, but there was no reek of death, nor did it shift or breathe. Instead, he realised it was a cloth, coloured in tones of black and grey to blend in with shadow and stone.

Carefully, he felt the outline of the bundle, realising that it went all the way along the step and under the rock on which Gandalf had perched. Yet it was not just a wad of rag, stuffed there to support the masonry’s weakness. The fabric was too fine, soft and lush to the touch, with only one or two mouldering edges.

‘Here, help me with this.’ He handed the lantern to Ronin before gripping the cloth, scraping his knuckles on the grit that lay in the niche. The package was heavier than he expected, and something long and thin shifted, putting Bilbo in mind of bones within a shroud. He hoped he wasn’t disturbing some dead dwarf’s resting place, but that didn’t seem likely. Why would anyone bury their kin here?

‘That’s the royal seal,’ Ronin said, sounding perplexed as he pointed to a large, metal disk. It had been dropped, molten, over the cords that wrapped the cloth, singeing the fabric before the sigil was stamped in place.

‘Indeed, but this -’ Gandalf indicated a rune, barely visible. ‘This mark has not been seen for centuries.’

Bilbo looked up, considering the wizard through narrowed eyes. His fingers still curled in the material, ready to pull it free from the clutching gloom, but now he wondered if he should let things be.

‘Do you know what it is?’ he asked. ‘Is it poisoned like everything else?’

‘No.’ The wizard shook his head. ‘This was not part of the dragon’s nest. He knew nothing of it, and therefore neither his greed nor his malice has touched it. As for what lies within, why don’t you open it and find out?’

Bilbo rolled his eyes, barely giving it a second thought. ‘It’s not mine. The seal’s royal, which means it doesn’t matter who found it. This, whatever it is, belongs to Thorin.’

‘Then perhaps you’d better take it to him?’

Gandalf gave an indulgent smile, and Bilbo grumbled about the ways of wizards. Gandalf may have been a good friend of his mother’s, but there were times when he was still unbearably infuriating! He had a feeling that nothing about this discovery was by chance.
‘Fine,’ he muttered, licking his lips and pulling the object free. He grimaced as the true weight of it made itself known. ‘It’s not exactly light.’

‘No, I imagine not. Can you carry it alone?’

‘Do I have any choice?’ Bilbo sighed, manhandling the awkward burden. It was as long as he was tall, and heavier at one end. Bearing it upright was out the question; he’d topple over backwards in moments. The only way he could manage it was to hold it across his body, clutched to his chest and sticking out on either side of him. ‘I’ve got it. It’s fine.’ In fact, now he’d balanced the unwieldy shape, it was surprisingly easy to lift, and he peered at the floor, picking his way through the debris as he climbed the steps towards the door.

Just as he reached the top, Balin hurried up to him, his stride quick and purposeful. ‘Master Baggins, there you are. I need a word with you, if I –’ He stopped mid-sentence, staring at the wrapped item in Bilbo’s arms first with curiosity, and then in stunned disbelief. He had never seen Balin struck quite so speechless, frozen solid where he stood, his eyes wide and his mouth slack.

A shaking hand reached out, the fingertips stroking over the seal which was as big as Bilbo’s palm. ‘Is that –? No, it – it can’t be. Where did you find this?’

Bilbo shot a dirty look in Gandalf’s direction. ‘Hidden in the treasury. Is it – is it bad?’ He frowned, unable to work out if excitement or dread laced Balin’s surprise. The old dwarf seemed blind-sided, overwhelmed and almost gasping for breath. ‘Should I put it back?’

‘Put it back?’ Balin repeated, incredulous. ‘No, laddie.’ He blinked, gathering his wits with what looked like great effort before he fell in at Bilbo’s side. ‘Come with me.’

He led the way, not down the corridors Bilbo had used to get to the treasure room, but through the centre of the mountain, cutting through the main halls. At this time of the morning, people still gathered, eating and talking among their kin and friends. Most spared little more than a glance in their direction, but before long more and more took note, craning their necks for a better view.

At first, it was the older dwarves squinting his way, but before long a hushed tide of whispers began to rise around them, rustling like a flock of starlings. Soon, even the men were frowning at him in confusion, and Bilbo did his best to look neither left nor right. Whether they were staring at him or what he carried, he couldn’t be sure, but the weight of so many eyes upon him was unnerving.

Before all this began, he would have hunched his shoulders and bowed his head, desperate to escape. Now, though, he held himself straight and tall, all too aware of the importance of his appearance. As far as everyone else knew, Thorin had made him an offer of courtship, and no respectable lover of the King would be cowed by the stares of strangers.

A sigh escaped him as they left the great room, and Bilbo shifted, the sweat between his shoulder blades starting to itch. The cooler corridor was a blessed relief, as was the relative solitude. Only two guards, a man and a dwarf, framed the entrance to the healing rooms, and neither barred the path of their strange little procession.

‘Clear the table,’ Balin ordered, reaching around Bofur to scoop up parchment, stacking it haphazardly at one end. ‘That’s it. Quickly now.’

‘Balin, what are you doing?’

Thorin’s voice warmed Bilbo from head to toe, strong despite the pallor of his skin. Judging by the way Oin was banging about, radiating disapproval, it looked like Thorin had defied the healer’s
orders. He should be in bed, but instead he sat on the bench, his face pale and his back ramrod straight.

He did not stare at the thing in Bilbo’s arms, as Balin had. In fact, he paid it little mind. His attention was fixed on Bilbo’s face, his eyes soft and warm. Even as he watched, some of the strain in Thorin’s expression seemed to fade away, and he could not help but smile in return.

Balin made a quiet sound of equal parts amusement and frustration, and his voice was almost indulgent as he explained. ‘If you’ll lower your gaze just a touch, you’ll realise that Master Baggins has found something you might need to see.’

‘Actually, it wasn’t –’ The sharp tap of Gandalf’s staff against his bare calf cut him off, the rough wood scraping against his skin in warning. It was tempting to carry on anyway and let the wizard take the credit, but Bilbo subsided, shaking his head and approaching the table to lay down his find.

‘Never mind. I don’t know what it is, but this was hidden inside one of the steps in the treasury.’

‘To my eye it looked like it had been carved specially,’ Ronin added, giving a courteous bow. ‘The stone was hollowed out to make room for… whatever this is.’

Ori made a breathless sound of awe, tracing the image of the seal without touching it. ‘This is ancient, dating right back to Khazad-dûm.’

‘Moria,’ Gandalf murmured, for Bilbo’s benefit. ‘The first and greatest kingdom of the dwarves.’

‘Dori would know more than me, but that looks like a Darnth’unkad,’ Ori added. ‘A special cloth that could survive the passage of time. We lost the art of making them long ago.’

Bilbo blinked, staring at the nondescript weave before him. Other than the metal disc, there was no decoration, and the mottled colour looked more dirty than anything else. ‘What were they used for?’

‘Hiding our greatest treasures.’ Thorin stared along the length of the bundle, a frown creasing his brow. ‘I thought them all lost, left behind in the dark.’

‘To my eye, it seems one at least was saved. Brought here and hidden, probably during the first founding.’ Balin shifted his weight, glancing over his shoulder as Nori clattered down the steps and strode towards them, his expression thick with puzzled intrigue.

‘So that’s what all the fuss is about: a royal relic. Question is, which one?’

‘Does it matter?’ Bilbo asked, wincing at his own ignorance. ‘One your ancestors saw fit to save.’

‘The only one they had to hand, more like,’ Nori replied. ‘When Khazad-dûm fell, most of the good stuff was already locked away. There wasn’t much time to pack, if you catch my meaning.’

‘I had no idea you paid such attention to your history teachings,’ Balin said dryly.

‘Only the best bits,’ Nori grinned. ‘Rumour has it, though, that there was one item always at the king’s side, down through the centuries. It was still in his grasp when they fled.’

‘Damâm Barku. The Blood Axe.’ Balin’s voice was more reverent than Bilbo had ever heard.

The silence that fell over the room was thick with respect, and Bilbo noticed that even some of the injured were trying to sit up in their beds, hoping to get a look. He didn’t know what made this axe – if indeed that’s what it was – so special, but something told him that Gandalf knew precisely how much such a piece of their past meant to these dwarves.
Men had similar things, like the legendary sword Narsil, shattered but still revered. Often, such weapons did good deeds, or were carried by great heroes. Perhaps the Blood Axe was one such item.

‘It is said that it was the weapon of the first dwarf lord,’ Gandalf began.

‘Durin the Deathless,’ Ori interrupted. ‘The axe was passed down from one king to the next through the ages. It’s thousands of years old.’ His eyes were bright as he stared, and it didn’t escape Bilbo’s notice that no one had made any move to open the cloth. Each dwarf, it seemed, was too caught up in the notion of what could lie within the folds to see if they were right.

He picked up one of Oin’s sharp knives, offering it to Thorin handle first. ‘Maybe we should check it’s what we think it is, before we get ahead of ourselves.’

Slowly, Thorin accepted the blade, and Bilbo could not help but notice the slight shake to his hands as he sliced the cord free. The tight wrapping fell slack, and with great care, he pulled back the fabric to reveal its secrets.

The lamp light glowed off the long handle, the metal gleaming black like polished jet. A geometric pattern of metal bands glimmered along its length – gold in one light, blood red in another – before fanning outwards in jagged lines across the uncompromising blade. To Bilbo’s eye, it seemed to be made of one piece. There were no visible rivets, nor crude lashing to hold anything in place. In fact, the entire thing was immaculate. It looked as if it were fresh from the armoury and as sharp as the day it was forged.

‘Get Dain,’ Thorin ordered, unblinking as Ronin jumped to obey his command. ‘He needs to see this. So do Fili and Kili, if they can be roused.’

‘Is it the Blood Axe?’ Bilbo asked, gratified when he received no incredulous looks. Instead, the dwarves around him nodded, still struck speechless by the sight before them.

It was Gandalf who took pity on him, bending closer to explain. ‘The axe was considered a symbol of the king, and without it, the dwarf on the throne could never reign with the same success as their forefathers.’

‘Is this all back to who has the right to rule?’ Bilbo asked, hoping that wasn’t the case. He hadn’t pried the Arkenstone from Thorin’s grasp only to replace it with something else.

‘No. The loss of the axe, along with the other relics, was a blow to all dwarves across Middle Earth. They considered it the starting point of a string of foul fortune. They felt the Valar’s favour had fled.’

‘Bless my beard.’ Dain’s normally booming voice was little more than a hoarse whisper, his clumping footsteps faltering as he climbed down the stairs and staggered to a halt at Thorin’s side. Fili and Kili stood nearby, holding each other upright as they peered over their uncle’s shoulder.

‘I thought it was just a story,’ Kili murmured. ‘I didn’t know it was real!’

‘You said it wasn’t lost after all, but hidden?’ Fili asked, looking to Bilbo for confirmation and frowning when he nodded.

‘It didn’t get under that step by accident. Someone put it there, probably when Erebor was still being built.’ He shrugged, looking at Ronin, who nodded his agreement.

‘But why? Why hide something so important?’
'We don’t know much about it,’ Ori answered, smiling apologetically at Fili. ‘A lot of the documents make implications about it being left behind, but if it’s here that’s clearly not true.’

‘Could be someone stole it,’ Nori suggested. ‘It’s easily done in chaos like that. Maybe they hid it to fence later and didn’t get the chance to go back.’

‘And how would they ever sell it?’ Dwalin growled from where he stood by the door to the royal healing room, never leaving his post but still keeping an eagle eye on everything. ‘Any dwarf alive is going to know it on sight.’

‘But would a man, or an elf?’

‘Maybe not, but they’d not give a good price for it either. It’s just an axe to them, nothing more.’

‘Perhaps,’ Gandalf said, his voice heavy with more than mere speculation, ‘it was hidden for safekeeping. The loss of the first kingdom brought much political strife, tearing the dwarven world into fragments. It could well be that it was tucked out of sight to stop it falling into the wrong hands.’

Bilbo looked at Thorin, and their gazes locked as they shared the same thought. Gandalf was old, with names and reputations in every culture across Middle Earth. For all they knew, the wizard had been around when the axe was hidden; it could even have been his idea in the first place.

‘And now it is found,’ Balin said, ‘at a time when some might call the hold of Durin’s line over Erebor into question.’ His eyes gleamed with respect as he looked at the wizard, and Bilbo saw him give a single nod of understanding, as if he knew what Gandalf was up to.

‘Found by the King’s Hobbit no less,’ Dain boomed, a chortle rising from his barrel-like chest as Bilbo tried not to blush at the nickname. ‘Nicely done.’

Gandalf caught Bilbo’s eye and winked as all around them the dwarves broke out into delighted conversation. He could hear Balin urging Nori to start spreading rumours. No doubt the cunning dwarf would give it his own spin, planting the seeds of legend. Ori had grabbed a scrap of paper and was already making sketches and taking notes, peering at the axe without ever touching it, while Ronin recounted all he knew of its discovery to Bofur.

Only Thorin remained silent, staring at the weapon as if he could not believe his eyes. More than once, his fingers reached out as if to touch it, but he drew them back, curled in tight against his palm.

‘Go on,’ Dain urged. ‘Pick up the blasted thing!’

‘You don’t want if for yourself?” Thorin asked. ‘To have this in the Iron Hills…’

Dain made a rough, explosive sound: half snort, half laugh. ‘Oh, no. You leave me and my lands out of it. I’ve good men and good mines. I’ve no need for any more glory than that, but this place…’ He spread his arms wide, indicating the mountain that climbed far above their heads. ‘No offence, Thorin lad, but you need all the help you can get.’ He clapped Thorin on the shoulder, and Bilbo didn’t miss the wince the blow inspired. ‘Besides, Erebor has been its home for more years than any of us care to count. I’ll not be the one to remove it. It’s miracle enough it was ever found.’

Bilbo managed an awkward smile as Dain gave him a small bow. He wanted to stammer excuses and deflect the attention, but that was not how dwarves did things. Perhaps he would never have it in him to crow of his accomplishments, but he’d not insult his friends by belittling such an important discovery.

‘I’m glad I could help,’ he said, watching Thorin’s hand hover a bare inch from the axe. His fingers
followed the pattern etched into the haft, reverent and graceful, before his grasp finally closed around it.

He bore the weight with ease, lifting and turning it so that the light caressed every line and curve. Even to Bilbo’s untrained eye, it looked as if it were made for Thorin’s hand, neither too big nor small for his fist. If Thorin was standing, the top of the blade would reach a little above his shoulder. As it was, it loomed over him, and Thorin stared up at it, the awe on his face slowly dimming to acceptance.

‘I assume this was not the reason Gandalf called you to the treasury,’ he murmured at last, meeting Bilbo’s gaze. The softness held there belied the formality of his words, and Bilbo straightened in his seat. ‘Was there another matter you wished to discuss?’

He shot a quick look at Gandalf, who only offered a single nod of encouragement. Clearly, it was going to be up to him to explain, and he took a breath, choosing blunt honesty over tact. ‘It’s the gold.’

Thorin’s nostrils flared as he sighed, and to Bilbo at least, his weariness was as plain as day. He was exhausted, strained to breaking point by the weight of his duty and his own damn stubbornness. He half-expected Thorin to dismiss Gandalf’s concerns out of hand – to say, again, that the treasury could wait – but to his relief he did no such thing.

‘Tell me.’

‘The dragon slept in that treasure for years. I saw him move through it like a fish through water. He touched everything with evil.’ Bilbo placed his hands on the table, knotting them together as he tried to remember Gandalf’s vague warnings. ‘It doesn’t matter if people aren’t in the treasury itself, they’re still suffering. At the moment, it’s just nightmares…’

He felt a ripple go through the room. It was a silent acknowledgement from everyone listening that Gandalf’s theory held value. Terror stalked them all as they slept; Bilbo had seen it with his own eyes.

‘Dreams which are bad enough in their own right.’ Gandalf’s staff rasped against the floor as he shifted his weight. ‘Yet they are not the worst of it. With each day that passes, the poison will spread until it cloaks every waking moment with greed and tyranny. Some will succumb quicker than others, but if nothing is done – and soon – then the gold will always rule these halls.’

‘How long do we have?’ Thorin asked, his jaw tight and his eyes fierce.

‘It has already begun.’ Gandalf sighed. ‘If we do not take action, the people of Erebor will tear each other apart before Midwinter.’

‘So soon?’ Bofur’s voice was thick with horror. ‘From just a few bad dreams?’

‘It won’t stop there. The dragon’s evil will inspire discord faster than any of you can quash it. You could provide everything anyone could ask for, and still the hatred would grow. Now, with the mountain such as it is, there is little to stop the spread of such maleficence.’

Thorin’s shoulders sagged, and Bilbo reached across the table without thinking, covering Thorin’s hand with his own. ‘Gandalf said it could be cleansed if we melt it down in the forges. The evil just, burns off, or something.’ He looked up at the wizard for confirmation, getting nothing more than a nod.

‘And how can we spare the manpower?’ Thorin turned his hand over, grasping Bilbo’s fingers in his
palms. ‘Every able-bodied man and dwarf is busy looking for the food we need to survive, scrounging what we can from the land or making the mountain safe. We only have a single working forge, and even if the rest could be repaired, lit and fuelled, it would take years.’

Bilbo chewed his lip, his voice turning rough as he glared at Gandalf. ‘You said there were ways. What did you mean?’

The bench creaked as Gandalf sat beside him, his back straight and proud despite his great age. He did not have to say a word; he had the full attention of everyone in the room by the sheer force of his presence. ‘The very act of working to destroy Smaug’s influence will, itself, bring about some relief. People will be more resilient to its touch and less likely to fall into hate and despondency. The worst thing would be to do nothing!’

‘But there’s just so much of it.’ Bofur shook his head, grappling with the notion of trying to process the gold. ‘There’s coin in there that’s not been touched for centuries!’

‘Then it is time it saw the light of day.’ Gandalf’s firm voice brooked no argument. ‘If I could place a seal on the treasury doors and be done with it, I would, but the power within that hall is too great to be contained.’

An idea bloomed through Bilbo’s mind, startling and vivid, and he sucked in a breath. ‘What if it wasn’t in the treasury?’ He glanced at Thorin before tipping back his head to get a better look at Gandalf’s face. ‘What if we could move it? Break it up? Would – would that work?’

Gandalf paused, his pale eyes distant as he turned the notion over in his mind. His lips moved soundlessly and his brow cleaved into a deep frown. ‘I believe it might. The power of the hoard is strong because it is all in one place. A single coin would do no damage. Even a cart full to the brim would not have the strength to sway the weakest of minds, but the piles within Erebor’s halls are a force to be reckoned with. No magic could tame it. Break it up and that may no longer be the case.’

‘We’ve got the space.’ Bilbo looked to Bofur, who nodded in agreement. ‘If we separate out the treasure and lock it away in empty rooms, we can protect the mountain and buy ourselves some time.’

He looked at the faces of those around him, taking in the strain that lined every expression. Everyone had been doing their bit to try and ensure the survival of Erebor over winter, and dealing with the gold was yet another problem to add to the heap, but what choice did they have? If Gandalf was to be believed then all the food in the world wouldn’t help if the dragon’s poison took root.

‘Find Gloin,’ Thorin ordered. ‘Tell him that the repair of the forges has become high priority. If Gandalf is right, then they will be in use day and night for many months to come.’

Dain grunted where he stood, shifting aside to let Balin go as he ran a finger over one of the tusks laced into his beard. ‘You’ll need labour. I was going to remove more than two hundred dwarves from your mountain on the morrow, but perhaps –’

‘That’d be a bad idea.’ Bofur took off his hat, wringing it in his grasp. ‘It’s a generous offer, my lord, but while it means more workers, it also means more mouths to feed, and there’s only so much the land can give us. If your people stay, there’ll not be enough food to see us to Midwinter, let alone the spring.’

Bilbo cleared his throat, giving Thorin’s hand an apologetic squeeze before he added, ‘We also need to choose who works in the treasury carefully. Some are more susceptible to the gold’s call than others.’
Silence greeted his statement, and he winced at the edge of a snarl in Dain’s reply. ‘Who would you trust, then, Master Hobbit, to rescue Erebor from its riches?’

Bilbo swallowed, trying not to feel as if he were using Thorin’s weakness as a weapon. The hand in his grasp was warm and dry, and he drew strength from the contact as Thorin gave him a single, encouraging nod. ‘It didn’t bother me so much. I don’t – I don’t really care about gold, and there are others... Let me talk to Bard?’

‘Men are just as greedy as dwarves, you mark my words,’ Dain groused.

‘Not all of them. There are some in every race who can resist its call. We just need to find out which ones.’ Already, a short list was growing in his head. He had seen how the Company behaved, how those seeking glory and riches had lost themselves in a daze. Only three had seemed immune, more concerned with other matters. Dwalin had feared for his friend and king, but Bilbo knew that he couldn’t be spared. The same went for Balin, who had surveyed Erebor’s wealth with the wisdom of the old. That left one other who Bilbo knew he could put to good use.

‘Ori? I’ll need your help.’

He smiled as the young dwarf looked up from his sketching, wide-eyed. His pencil trembled over the page, but his open face was more curious than intimidated. ‘Me?’

‘We need someone to map where we put the gold and keep track of what we’ve re-forged.’ Bilbo glanced around the dwarves. ‘Unless someone has a better idea?’

To his surprise, it was Fili who spoke up. ‘Striking new coin takes time and effort we can’t spare. Why not cast it into ingots? That way there’ll be no confusing cleansed gold with the old hoard, and...’ He tilted his head to the side, giving an awkward shrug. ‘It’s harder to steal. Walking out of the mountain with a pocket full of coin is no challenge, but bars of it are more difficult to hide.’

‘Well done, Fili.’ Thorin’s subtle praise was still enough to bring a gleam of pleasure to his nephew’s eye. ‘We can strike off coin as and when we need it, but there is more to the treasure hall than the gold.’ The axe gleamed at his side, emphasising his point. ‘The dragon clawed anything he deemed precious into his nest: weapons, crowns, ornaments... Their worth is greater than the metal and stone from which they are made. Would you ask us to melt down our heritage as well?’

Gandalf met Thorin’s eye, unblinking. ‘And if I did?’ He shook his head, waving away Thorin’s answer before he could give it. ‘The coin is the most plentiful, and the most susceptible. It is a blank slate on which the dragon’s evil can leave its mark. The crafted treasures are different. Like the Blood Axe, many of them have names and histories – purpose and meaning. They should not need fire to cleanse them. They need only be remembered.’

Bilbo blinked, shaking his head as he tried to understand. ‘You’re saying that because they were about more than just money, the things the dwarves made were spared?’

Gandalf harrumphed. ‘Smaug’s evil is not likely to have eaten into them as it has the coin. It will lie upon them like mud, but they needn’t be destroyed and remade to remove it. At least, I hope not.’

Silence met his statement, but Bilbo knew better than to question it. He had to trust that the wizard knew best.

‘Not everything is as legendary as this,’ Thorin warned, gesturing with the weapon in his grasp. ‘Some pieces have little to their name, and even that will be forgotten.’

‘Actually,’ Ori raised his hand like a child in a classroom, ‘I was looking in the library. It’s in a
terrible state, but most of the old ledgers are still intact. They’re well looked after. I suppose we always did put a lot of stock in trade.’ He stared down at the table as he continued. ‘There were lists of items we made, including details about why they were commissioned. That’s – that’s a start, isn’t it?’

Bilbo noticed the satisfied twinkle in Gandalf’s eye. ‘Indeed it is.’ He got to his feet, grunting as if his old bones protested before he jerked his staff towards the door. ‘Firstly, we should do as Bilbo suggested and separate the hoard. With its influence divided and reduced, and with Tauriel’s assistance, I will be able to contain its foulness. That should be enough to help us on our way.’

‘Wait.’ Thorin’s hand tightened on Bilbo’s, preventing him from getting to his feet with just a hint of pressure. ‘Bofur, go with Gandalf and speak to Bard; explain the situation. Bilbo will join you shortly.’ He looked towards his cousin, the stoop of his shoulders speaking of his weariness even if his words showed none of it. ‘Dain, continue your plans to leave the mountain, but talk to Balin. There is much the Iron Hills can offer Erebor, and if your wagons can bear it, we’ll provide payment up front.’

‘With tainted gold?’ Dain asked, his voice heavy with dark humour.

‘You heard the wizard; spread thin it’s no danger. Arrange a fee with Balin, fair price for weapons, tools and basics, like cooking pots. If you don’t want to risk the gold as it is, we’ll strike fresh coin for you come the spring.’

‘Before you choose, talk to Gandalf,’ Bilbo suggested, alarmed at his own temerity. Before he left the Shire, he would never have thought so much of himself as to offer a dwarven lord advice, but now all that seemed far behind him. ‘He’ll be able to say what you can take without drawing unwanted attention on the road. Bandits might not be your only problem if the dragon’s influence calls to other unsavoury creatures.’

Dain watched him, his head tilted to the side as he considered Bilbo. Before, he had looked at him with a kind of amused indulgence tinted with respect. Now, his gaze was far more measured, and Bilbo wondered what he saw.

At last he nodded, apparently satisfied. ‘Very well, Master Baggins, I’ll take your suggestion, and I hope in return you’ll accept my congratulations on your courtship. I’d long ago lost hope of Thorin finding anyone who could keep him in line.’ He chuckled, his eyes sparkling as Thorin scowled and Bilbo hid a grin and a blush. ‘He’ll do you good, cousin. I’ll leave Ronin, and the best, steadiest dwarves I’ve got. Dwalin has a list of any I think might see their chance to cause trouble, but I doubt they’re of real concern. It’s the men you want to watch.’

‘I’d see you off myself, but –’ Thorin sighed, bowing his head, and his next words were so quiet only Bilbo and Dain could hear. ‘I fear I do not have the strength.’

‘Say no more.’ Dain rested a hand on Thorin’s shoulder, and Bilbo was struck by their easy familiarity. Perhaps it was because Dain ruled his own mountain and knew, like no one else, what Thorin had to face. ‘I’ll send a raven as soon as we are safely home, and I expect you to honour me with your usual curt correspondence. Now get to bed, before your healer does himself a mischief in his anger.’

Oin let out a rough growl of agreement, already holding the door open to the royal room as Thorin eased his fingers from Bilbo’s grasp and got slowly to his feet. The hand around the Blood Axe clenched, the knuckles white as he used the mighty weapon to bear his weight, saving his injured foot from the task. Every move was painful to watch, and even Oin’s disapproval lost some of its force in the face of such obvious misery.
Bilbo hurried around the table, tempted to reach out and offer support. If there was no one to witness his assistance, he wouldn’t have bothered waiting for an invitation, but there were plenty of eyes watching them. Even in front of the small audience of wounded, he doubted Thorin would want to show any more weakness than necessary. Instead, Bilbo made sure he was right next to him, so Thorin could lean on him if he chose.

Slowly, they inched towards the waiting bed. Every step was a labour, but before long Thorin sank onto his mattress, pale and cold with pain. As soon as the door closed, sealing them inside, he let out a tight hiss of discomfort, allowing his body to sag, spent by its efforts. The axe was still in his hand, laid out beside him: an unlikely bed-mate. As gently as he could, Bilbo took it away, propping it against the wall before standing aside to let Oin pass.

‘See to the princes, laddie,’ the healer ordered. ‘Get them settled. This one needs my attention.’ Oin grumbled as he worked, checking Thorin’s wounds and berating him for his wilful insistence on being out of bed. Bilbo listened, sharing a rueful smile with Kili as they allowed the tide of words to wash over them.

‘You’re not as strong as you might think. Your body needs time to mend, Thorin. All this – you’re just slowing yourself down.’

‘I do not have that luxury,’ Thorin managed, inhaling sharply through his nose as Oin peeled back bandages and checked stitches. ‘You must see that.’

Oin grunted, too frustrated to argue as he continued about his work, moving to Thorin’s foot and cursing in exasperation and pity. He worked in silence, and by the time Bilbo had made sure Fili and Kili were comfortable, fluffing pillows and providing water, his ministrations were complete. Clean bandages covered the worst of the wounds, and Thorin’s foot was propped up on a bundle, elevating it off his mattress.

‘Drink this,’ Oin ordered, putting a cup in his hands. Bilbo could smell it from where he stood, bitter and vile. ‘All of it, and no complaining.’

‘Why were you out of bed anyway?’ Bilbo asked. ‘I’m sure Bofur and Ori could have brought their reports to you?’

‘Ah, that was our fault,’ Kili confessed, wincing as Bilbo cast him a sharp look. ‘We – uh – we might have implied Uncle had forgotten to tell you a few things. Important things.’

A bolt of unease raced down Bilbo’s spine, and the squirming of nerves in his belly intensified. He would have to be a fool to think this had nothing to do with his and Thorin’s false courtship. So far, he had avoided talking of it much with any of the Company, but it seemed he was out of luck. There would be no avoiding it any more.

Dain’s congratulations had been hard enough, genuine, but bittersweet in Bilbo’s mind. He felt like a thief, taking such kindness in return for the lie he and Thorin concocted. The problem was that he enjoyed it. He hoarded every word, wishing they were real, and that only made his guilt worse.

He licked his lips, trying to control his expression and push aside the tight anxiety that had wrapped its claws around his ribs. ‘What do you mean?’ he managed, congratulating himself on keeping his voice level. ‘What things?’

He turned to Thorin, who still cradled the cup Oin had giving him. He drunk awkwardly, every sip accompanied by a wince of distaste as he forced down the noxious brew. Already, his eyelids were drooping, and by the time he let his head fall to the pillow, Bilbo could see that the medicine had
done its work.

One hand reached out towards him, and he took it without thinking, smiling to himself as Thorin tried to frame words of reassurance. None found voice, and after a moment, Bilbo shushed him. ‘It’s all right. If it’s too important to wait until tomorrow, I’m sure Fili and Kili can fill me in.’ He looked askance at the princes, who both nodded.

‘It’s nothing bad,’ Kili promised. ‘Our courtships are simple, private things, even when it comes to kings.’

‘Uncle was more worried about the little customs you wouldn’t know.’ Fili’s eyes gleamed. ‘Things that, to us, are just good manners, but you might not consider.’

Kili waved him closer, patting the space at the bottom of the cot. ‘Come. Sit. We’ll tell you everything we know. Can’t have you disgracing yourself in front of the whole of Erebor, can we?’

‘Not that you’re likely to.’ Fili frowned at his brother. ‘Honestly, Bilbo, it’s more about helping you fit in. People know you’re not from here, and they’ll expect you to make mistakes. That’s all right.’

‘But it’s better if no one has cause to complain about me or my behaviour.’ He nodded, remembering his own conclusions as he walked across the main hall with the Blood Axe in his arms. Whether their courtship was real or not, his actions, appearance and very existence would reflect on Thorin. ‘Won’t you get in trouble? I thought dwarves were rather secretive about sharing their world with strangers?’

‘You’re not a stranger!’ Kili’s appalled expression was genuine, and Bilbo smothered a smile. ‘You’re a friend, and whether they like it or not, it’s thanks to you we got Erebor back in the first place. You’re a hero, Bilbo, and you’re courting our king.’

‘Kili’s right.’ Fili grunted, propping himself up against his pillows. ‘Besides, you’ve spent months on the road with us. We’ve probably taught you things without meaning to, by example if nothing else. Maybe people will complain, but they won’t have a leg to stand on.’

Bilbo sighed, hating the fact that there were those who would make trouble just for the sake of it, but there’d be more difficulty still if he caused offence through his own blind ignorance. ‘Go on, then, tell me what I need to know.’

With matching grins, Fili and Kili did as he asked, filling his ears with their simple advice. Bilbo had feared that there would be complicated rituals of courtship, but every nugget of information was a blend of dwarfish oddity and straightforward logic. With each word he realised how much dwarves gleaned from what they saw – not just clothes and jewellery, as Thorin had said – but how they spoke to one another, or who walked through a doorway first, where they stood and how they touched. The customs were plentiful, no doubt taught from a very young age, and Bilbo’s head soon began to spin.

Around them, the sun streamed through the high shutters, their beams charting the passage of time across the floor. Oin worked quietly, occasionally interceding with words of wisdom, but Bilbo barely noticed. He was too busy concentrating, desperate to take in every nuance and learn them for his own. Thorin had thought this information was important enough to stir from his bed, braving pain and illness to tell him of their ways, and Bilbo could see why.

It would be so easy to remain ignorant – to wander through Erebor causing confusion and offence. Like Fili had said, if he were just a visitor, such things would be forgiven, but he was far more than a guest within the mountain halls. He was a foreigner courting their king, and though no one had said it out loud, Bilbo knew he would be under unforgiving scrutiny. Every misdeed and mistake would
be picked over like crows cleaning a carcass, and anyone who set themselves against Thorin’s rule would be quick to use Bilbo’s unsuitability as a weapon against him.

He did not intend to give them the chance. Whatever it took, whatever he had to learn, he would see it done.
Thorin scowled at the ceiling, watching the wintry dawn paint the stone in pearly tones. It had been four days since he had ventured from his bed, pushing his injuries beyond their limits and suffering as a result. He knew he had only himself to blame for his current confinement, but that didn’t mean his helplessness did not stick like a chunk of meat in his craw.

Oin had been liberal with a tincture that aided sleep, plunging him into darkness. When he awoke, it was always to a keening bladder and ravenous hunger. He was only permitted to leave his cot to make use of the chamber pot, and even then, Oin hovered in immediate attendance, oblivious to Thorin’s embarrassment.

Visitors were banned for all except two hours of the day, when he took hasty reports from harassed members of the Company and, on one occasion, Bard. Other than that, his kingdom ran without him. Even Fili and Kili were allowed up and about, first for short trips into the outer healing rooms, and then up the stairs and into the main hall.

They told him all about it, of course, Kili almost breathless with excitement and Fili thoughtfully filling in the details he knew his Uncle would desire. Yet their chatter just made him jealous, chafing against his bed-rest and annoyed by Oin’s interference.

His only respite was Bilbo, who even Oin did not have the heart to bar from the room. He was out all day, overseeing the transport of the gold and soothing the ruffled feathers of all those involved.

It was only in the morning and evening – when Bilbo rose from the nearby bed or returned to sleep – that Thorin was able to speak with him. Even then, their conversations revolved around the comings and goings of the mountain. There was neither time nor privacy for anything more personal, not that he knew what he would say if they had such an opportunity.

More than once, in the middle of soft and serious conversations when Bilbo’s loyalty to Erebor was as its most plain, he’d had to remind himself that their courtship wasn’t real. His head knew it well enough, but the rest of him was having trouble with the concept. His mood fell sullen whenever Bilbo was apart from him, and his tongue tasted words of love he could not give voice.

He looked over at the bed next to him, where Bilbo slept peacefully. He worked hard all hours of the day; no one could fault him on his dedication. If what Balin said was true, it wasn’t just that he toiled in the treasury from daybreak until darkness. He also made a point of being in the hall at mealtimes, meeting and talking to as many new people as he could, listening to their troubles and attempting to find solutions.

What more could Thorin ask? He knew, deep down in his bones, that without Bilbo none of this would have been possible. At every turn, he proved himself invaluable. He just hoped that the naysayers lurking in their midst took note. Erebor did not need the kings of old. They had ruled in different times. Now, the kingdom called for fresh ideas, and Bilbo rose to the challenge.

If only he could do the same.

He sighed, the wistful sound stirring the quiet air, and Bilbo wrinkled his nose, nestling deeper in his furs. It would be time to drive him from his bed soon, and though he knew Bilbo was reluctant to rise, he couldn’t help but envy his hobbit the freedom of being allowed out.

‘No good pouting like that,’ Oin muttered from where he worked at a nearby bench. ‘It’s your own
‘So you’ve said, more than once.’ Thorin turned to scowl at him. ‘Have I not been punished enough?’

Oin tutted, standing up and shaking his head. ‘Think what you like, my lad, but this isn’t a punishment. The kingdom needs you on your feet, and so you shall be, but the more you rest, the quicker that day will come.’

‘I will wither and fade, flat on my back.’ He frowned as Oin laughed at him. The old healer didn’t even try and cover his guffaws, shaking his head as he ambled over to the bedside. He propped Thorin against his pillows before placing a cup in his hands. ‘Drink that before breakfast, and then we’ll see what’s what.’

He sniffed at the offering, relieved by the faintly floral aroma. This was one of Tauriel’s concoctions. She visited the healing rooms more and more, emboldened by the fact nobody threw her out. She and Kili chattered about innocuous things, keeping a respectable distance in his presence, but they could not fool him. Their attraction pulled at them, their bodies moving without thought until they were side-by-side and hand-in-hand, oblivious but content.

She also came bearing gifts: sweet teas that helped healing and eased Thorin’s restlessness, and a book about the Blood Axe that she and Ori had found in the library for Fili. It was still propped on his sister-son’s sleeping chest, moving in steady time to the soft swell of his breathing.

‘That smells good,’ Bilbo murmured, his slumber roughened voice sending a shiver of delight down Thorin’s spine. He almost choked on his tea, but managed to stifle his spluttering as he composed himself.

‘I thought you were asleep.’

Bilbo huffed and gave a little moan, burying his face in his pillow and wriggling his body deeper into the rush mattress. ‘I was,’ he admitted, ignorant of the weight of Thorin’s hungry stare, ‘but I shouldn’t be.’ He pressed his hands flat and pushed himself upright, his hair a disordered mess and his undershirt gaping at the collar.

Thorin stared into the bottom of his half-empty mug, trying his best not to think of the narrowed distance a shared bed would offer and the sleepy warmth of Bilbo’s body pressed along his side. The little noises he made on waking were pure pleasure to Thorin’s ears, and it was all too easy to imagine those moans turning to gasps beneath his touch.

‘You all right?’ Bilbo asked, standing up and stretching his arms above his head, wincing as his shoulders popped before squinting in Thorin’s direction. ‘You’re not coming down with a fever are you? You’re a bit flushed.’

Thorin gave Bilbo a sharp look, wondering if his query was as innocent as it appeared. Had he imagined the subtle hint of a teasing edge to Bilbo’s words, or was the sleepy sparkle in his eyes at Thorin’s expense?

His voice seemed to have abandoned him, and it was a moment before he could reply, the words thin and a little strained. ‘I am well, thank you.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that,’ Oin interrupted, jerking his head towards the screen tucked off in one corner of the room. ‘There’s a bowl of hot water waiting, Master Baggins. You should make use of it before the boys wake up.’
With a nod, Bilbo wandered over, disappearing from sight to tend to his morning routine. Baths were still an impossibility, although Thorin knew that Bifur was working on it at Oin’s request. To some, such a luxury might seem decadent in a time of need, but Oin was militant about cleanliness. The healer lived in desperate fear of a spreading sickness, and many of his helpers had been sent out in the snow to scrounge what herbs they could, just in case.

For now, the people of the mountain made do, following Oin’s bidding to wash their hands after using the latrine and before eating. Small channels of flowing water had always been available, before the dragon, for that very purpose. Now many of them came to life once more, adding the gurgling laughter of tiny, steaming cascades to Erebor’s silence.

‘Right. Let’s take a look at you.’ Oin’s questions were more thorough than ever before, asking about every ounce of discomfort. He checked the wound in Thorin’s belly, examining the new skin and the stitches that still assisted with the healing. Ligatures designed to help fluid drain had been removed a couple of days ago, and Oin nodded in contentment as he gently felt around the injury.

‘Good, good. The tissue underneath has strengthened. We’ll be able to take the last of those stitches out before long. We’re done with the bandages, I believe. Now let’s see that foot of yours.’

Thorin grimaced, glaring at where his leg was still propped up on a bundle of cloth. Oin had insisted on keeping it above the level of his head as much as possible, the better to aid the swelling. His toes were perpetually cold, although he had to admit the throbbing that had consumed his thoughts a few days ago was a thing of the past. A bandage covered the worst of the injury, where Azog’s blade had cleaved straight through, but the bruise seeped like spilt ink from beneath the binding, fading from purple to sickening green.

Oin’s rough hands were cautious not to cause more pain, and he humphed to himself as he examined the damage. ‘Tricky things, feet. All bone and tendon. Can you bend your toes?’

Thorin clenched his teeth as he fought stiff joints and gnawing pain, but his efforts met with a nod of satisfaction. ‘It will mend?’

‘Aye, given time. It’ll probably ache something fierce in the chill, but the sooner we get you moving on it, however gently, the better.’ Oin smiled when Thorin stared at him, barely daring to believe his ears.

‘You mean I can get up?’

‘I’ve been told it would do the mountain good if you showed yourself at the midday meal.’ Oin sniffed, as if he thought such a move was too risky to be worth the effort. ‘An hour, mind, and no more. Start off slow, Thorin, or you’ll only end up back where you started.’

A smile spread across his face, and he tried to tame it beneath his usual glower. He felt like a child let out of his lessons early, blessed with an unexpected change in routine, but even as he went to fling aside his furs, Oin began to shake his head. ‘You just said –’

‘Up and about for lunch, which is hours from now,’ the old healer reminded him. ‘That’s if you’re strong enough once Dori is through with you. Take some rest while you can. Let the boys get up and out of our hair before you rouse yourself.’ Oin turned towards where the princes slept, clapping his hands to wake them. Fili groaned and pulled his pillow over his head, while Kili clutched at his blankets, wide-eyed.

‘Is that any way to treat the wounded?’ he asked, glaring at Oin.
‘Wounded? Hah. You’re well enough to cause trouble, so you’re well enough to rise. Up. Up!’ Despite his loud words, he was still gentle as he helped them both to their feet, checking them over with a knowing gaze as they ambled around, moving with the tender caution of the newly healed. They dressed without help, though Thorin noticed Fili appeared to be having trouble with his vision and Kili’s arm did not move as freely as it once had.

As soon as they were in tunic and britches, Oin descended on them both, grimacing at Kili before offering Fili a small, black scrap. ‘Cover your eye, lad. It’s weak still, and if you strain it too much you’ll have nothing but a headache to thank you for your troubles.’

Grudgingly, Fili did as he was told, tying the patch with Kili’s help. ‘How do I look?’

‘Stupid,’ Kili teased, laughing when his brother flicked him a rude gesture.

‘You look like your grandfather.’ Thorin smiled as Fili’s expression brightened. ‘Thrain lost an eye in battle as a youth. He probably wasn’t much older than you at the time.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Your mother used to beg him to take the patch off so she could see. It fascinated her.’ The memory of the scarred, empty socket was not one Thorin relished. His father had been a good dwarf, trying his best to modulate the rule of a king increasingly lost to gold lust. However, he had taken a great deal of pride in his war wounds, and loved to make others squirm with gory tales of his exploits.

‘Sounds like mum.’ Kili sat on the edge of his bed, putting on his boots and restraining whimpers of discomfort. ‘She always did keep her head around stuff like that.’

‘She would have been a fine healer.’ Oin added from where he’d returned to his seat. ‘If she didn’t have better things to be doing with her time.’

‘Have you written to her? Let her know you’re all right?’ Thorin looked up as Bilbo emerged from behind the screen, fully dressed and towelling off his face. He could see the secretive shine of the mithril at the open neck of his tunic, subtle, but still plain enough for the keen eyes of the dwarves.

Bilbo raised an eyebrow, and Thorin blinked, clearing his throat as he realised he was staring. ‘Balin did, I believe.’

‘Don’t you think she’d rather hear from you?’ He cut a quick glance towards Kili and Fili, who both had the decency to shuffle their feet. ‘Ask Ori for some paper and a pen. He’ll ferret some out from somewhere. Your mother deserves a letter from her sons.’ He glared at Thorin. ‘And her brother.’

Thorin winced, not relishing the idea of the tongue-lashing that he was sure to get in response. He had taken her boys into battle, and they would bear the scars for the rest of their lives. In her eyes at least, that would be too steep a price to pay for their lost home. Her sympathy for him would be more grudging. She often thought his injuries were more the result of his stupidity than any noble cause. It didn’t help that, more often than not, she was right in that respect.

‘I –’ His excuses trailed away in the face of Bilbo’s expectant expression, and he managed a rueful nod. ‘Later. I’ll get to it later.’

‘You’d better,’ the hobbit shot him a warning glare, its force somewhat weakened by his playful smile. ‘I’ll be back before long to make sure you do. Do you need me to bring you anything?’
‘Just your company.’ Thorin’s honest reply slipped from his tongue, making Bilbo blush and his sister-sons exclaim in mock disgust from the doorway. ‘If you can spare it.’

‘Of course I can.’ Bilbo’s smile wobbled a bit, and Thorin realised he probably wondered if his eagerness was all an act for the sake of their audience. It was a comfortable, catchall excuse, but it had no place between them here. The only thing that brightened Thorin’s day was Bilbo’s visits, and he meant what he said.

He craved Bilbo’s presence: his need sat like a knot at the base of his throat, tightening to a noose whenever Bilbo left him. In times gone by, such a dependency would have rankled, stinging his pride. Now he could only urge Bilbo to return, guilty for depriving Erebor of his time but greedy all the same.

‘I’ll see you later.’

His soft voice trailed behind him as he followed Fili and Kili out of the room, and Thorin listened as his nephews’ good-natured ribbing faded from earshot. The air seemed colder without them, despite the fire burning in the grate. He tried to ignore the loneliness as he ate the meal Oin brought him: porridge, dried meat and flat bread. It filled his hungry belly, giving him the strength he needed to face the interminable hours of Bilbo’s absence.

Oin scrounged some paper for him, mostly clean and only a little creased, offering Thorin a wooden block to press against as he wrote a brief missive to his sister. They were well, the dragon was gone and Erebor was theirs once more. There was not much else he dared to tell her. Face-to-face was always the best way to speak to Dis, even if it meant dodging the occasional smack of annoyance.

Eventually, he also gave her an idea of the troubles they faced with regards supplies, along with his oath that they would see it through the winter. Part of him wished to let her live with the illusion that they were safe, but she always saw through his lies. She was no fool, and besides, Dain would tell her if Thorin did not.

Folding it and sealing it with a drip of wax and a firm thumbprint, he gave it to Oin, who tucked it in his tunic with a promise to get it to Ravenhill. ‘Some of the older children are running messages,’ he said by way of idle talk. ‘Quick and trustworthy, but too old for the treasure room.’

Thorin nodded. He had already heard from Bard how few of the men had been easy in the company of the tainted gold. Only half a dozen adults seemed able to bear it, matched by the same number of Dain’s dwarves. Bilbo made a point to learn their names and spoke of them as if they were friends, admiring their strength and dedication as they transported Erebor’s wealth, storing it deep in the mountain to be shut away behind Gandalf’s magic.

The human children were another matter. There were plenty of them – more than forty, at Bard’s count – and the gold did not bother them in the slightest. They were able to play among the slopes without feeling besmirched by its malevolence.

Many were too small to do the heavy lifting, but Bilbo had been quick to have them sorting the coins from everything else, setting apart crowns, weapons and trinkets for later investigation. The clever hobbit had made it into a game, and by all accounts, the children were more content amidst the gleaming hoard than clinging to their mothers’ skirts.

Even better, most of the women who would have been busy minding the young ones were free to help with other work. Some chose to hunt, while others gave Bombur some much-needed assistance in the kitchens or helped Dori with adjusting clothes and making kit for those who ventured outside. Everywhere, men and dwarves were working hard, bending their minds and strength to the task.
Thorin could not find any of them wanting in effort.

‘Right,’ Oin said as he returned from doing his rounds in the outer rooms, carrying a large bowl of steaming water and a clean rag. ‘I’d like to get you bathed, or near enough, if you think you can manage it. We can’t afford to wet your wounds, but the rest of you could no doubt use it. Do you want to try yourself behind the screen, or do you need my help?’

The healer was trusting him to answer honestly, and Thorin considered the question. He felt rank from being stuck in bed so long, dragged under first by fever, and then by Oin’s sleeping draughts, which had left his body stiff and slothful. ‘I’ll try by myself and call out if I need you.’

Oin nodded in approval, disappearing to set down the bowl before returning to Thorin’s side. ‘Nice and easy now,’ he warned, bracing Thorin’s elbow and bearing his weight against his old frame. ‘Try and walk normally if you can.’

Soft rugs covered the stone floor, so there was nothing sharp against his feet, but they still ached like fresh bruises at the unexpected pressure. Weakness seized every limb, but each step drove it back, and by the time Oin eased him onto the low seat and placed the rag in his hand, he almost felt like himself again.

‘Can you undress?’ Oin asked, smiling as Thorin nodded. ‘Shout if you need me, lad. Steer clear of your injuries, and dry off well.’ With that, he vanished, leaving Thorin in the small, private space. A clean chamber pot sat nearby, but it was the bowl of water that held his interest, and he eased off his clothes before he set to work.

It was a relief to wipe the patina of grime and dried sweat from his skin, and he allowed himself to relish the process. It had been too long since he last felt in charge of his own body: a master of his flesh, rather than its slave. The simple act of cleaning himself made him feel whole and strong again, as if he were carving a line in the stone and leaving behind the horrors that had befallen him since the battle.

By the time he had finished, he felt capable of almost anything, tired from the effort but pleased with the result. He set the rag aside, knowing that one or two bits of his back had escaped his attentions, but he was clean enough for now.

Someone had polished a spotted copper plate to a shine and propped it beside the lamp, allowing Thorin to see his reflection. He grimaced, rubbing his fingers over his cheekbones, more gaunt than before. There was more silver in his hair and beard, or so it seemed, and the crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes etched themselves deep, their downward slant suggesting more frowns than laughter.

The door to the healing room swung open, catching his attention. He straightened up, a frisson of alarm trailing down his back. The guards would not have let anyone untrusted across the threshold, but Thorin felt doubly vulnerable, being both naked and unarmed.

‘Your Majesty?’ Dori’s familiar voice put his mind at ease, and he smiled at the title. He had given the Company permission to ignore such protocol in private, but it seemed the well-mannered dwarf could not bring himself to be easy with such familiarity.

‘Yes?’

‘I have clean clothes for you whenever you’re ready. If I drape them over the top of the screen, can you reach?’
Thorin eyed the height, knowing he would have to stand, but it would not be too much of a trial. It was an effort he could bear. ‘Thank you. That will be fine.’

‘These are underclothes,’ Dori explained, and Thorin retrieved the pale swathe, desperately relieved for the simple luxury. The fabric was soft and well worn, but freshly cleaned. It smelled of soapstone, and despite its age, Thorin could see the sturdy intricacy of the weave. It was no peasant’s garment, and he wondered just how deep into the mountain Dori had rummaged to clothe those that needed it. ‘If you step out once you’re decent, Your Majesty, I’ll need to check the fit of the rest.’

Slipping into the underclothes took longer than he would have liked, and by the time he limped from behind the screen, Dori had lain out several items on the freshly made beds. ‘Oin said you were still to be abed as much as the kingdom would allow, so most of these are embellished outer layers. Easy to take on and off for sleep or messy work. I’ve already provided similar for Fili and Kili.’

He had little time to offer his gratitude as Dori began helping him in and out of garments, checking seams and hems, discarding some as too poor a fit but nodding happily at others. ‘Robes are impossible to find, and some might consider them improper before the official coronation,’ he mused, speaking almost to himself. ‘However, some distinction of rank is still expected, especially among the dwarves. Then there is the chill to consider…’

Thorin settled back on his bed, watching the dwarf as he bustled around. Dori’s skills as a weaver were well known and much admired. His talent with needle and thread were something to be cherished in Erebor, but the dwarf’s knowledge went beyond that.

In a time such as this Thorin may not have a crown he would willingly wear upon his brow, but thanks to Dori, no one would forget he was king. The clothes he had been given were modest by most standards, but the quality spoke for itself, and already Dori worked with some gleaming metal filaments, quickly stitching stars of Durin at collars and cuffs.

‘Layers,’ he said with meaning, helping Thorin into a loose-fitting blue tunic and deftly lacing it to fit his frame. ‘If fuel weren’t a problem, we could heat the mountain to our pleasure and dress to match it, but we cannot afford to be so careless. The men of Laketown are used to harsh conditions, but the chill of stone is different. It creeps in and never wants to leave.’

The weight of more cloth settled on his shoulders, and he did not protest as the padded black jerkin trapped his body heat next to his skin. Between that, the under-hose and the black hide trousers that clad his legs, Thorin felt better dressed than he had in years. He was used to patched and mustering fabric, or leathers worn to a shine by movement and the weather. Considering their circumstances, Dori had outdone himself.

‘We’ve no outerwear for you yet, but Oin seemed sure you’d have no reason to leave the mountain…? ’ He trailed off, making it a question, and Thorin grinned as he realised Dori was waiting for him to counteract the healer’s command.

‘Oin is right. Neither my sister-sons nor I will be joining any hunting parties for a time. Please make sure those that do are equipped with all they need, if you’ve not already.’

‘It’s been easier said than done,’ Dori admitted, ‘but no one will go cold if I can help it. We found the old tannery, and with it a large quantity of hides ready for use. Most were good for nothing, but we were able to save a few. They’ve made the world of difference.’ He stepped forward, and Thorin saw something clutched in his grasp.

Clearly, Dori and Oin had been speaking to one another, well aware that Thorin’s injured foot could not take the strain of heavy boots. They’d come up with a lightweight alternative, no different from
others at first glance, but made out of soft, fur-lined hide. Their thin-soles would not drag and weigh him down, and their dark colour made them unremarkable.

‘Lace them loose so they don’t press on the injury, and remember, these are not work boots. They are for walking and sitting in, not scrambling over rubble.’ Dori cleared his throat, seeming to remember that he was speaking to a king rather than scolding a child. ‘Nor will they fare well in a forge, Your Majesty.’

‘Thank you.’ Thorin straightened his shoulders, giving a respectful nod of gratitude. ‘Is there anything more I should know?’

Dori ran his fingers along one of the intricate braids that wove through his hair before reaching into his pocket and removing a small bundle of cloth. ‘Master Baggins was kind enough to pass me these not an hour ago. Since there has been no coronation, a crown would be presumptuous, but these…’

The three beads flashed against the plain weave, their colours almost shocking to the eye. The precious stones, two sapphires and one diamond, had been cut and mounted in mithril clasps. No single bead was bigger than even his smallest fingernail, yet they shone as if Mahal himself had captured the sun and stars within their depths.

‘It’s not the whole set. There were six, according to the records.’

‘They are not the beads my grandfather wore.’ Thorin still remembered them, gems the size of duck eggs woven into Thror’s beard for formal occasions, their flash and shine almost obscene. Even as a child, he recalled thinking they were gaudy and obvious, robbing the old dwarf of his dignity.

‘No, they are far older than his rule. Ori thinks they are three of the six commissioned when Erebor was founded.’

Thorin looked at him sharply, and now he understood why Dori’s hands shook. If Ori was right, then the beads were centuries old, worn by the first to bear the name Thrain. ‘Are you sure?’

‘About as sure as we can be.’ Dori cleared his throat, covering them up again before placing them reverently on the table at Thorin’s bedside, along with a bristle brush and comb. ‘They need to be worn, at least until the coronation, whenever that may be.’

‘We have more important things to occupy our minds than ceremony,’ Thorin murmured. ‘I would rather see my people fed and clothed than waste precious supplies on a feast we can ill afford.’

Dori nodded, as if he expected nothing different. ‘For most dwarves here, the beads will be enough.’

‘And those who say otherwise would not be satisfied with my rule if I wore all the treasures of Erebor.’ Thorin sighed, knowing that was not a problem he could overcome with ease. Besides, there were more immediate concerns. He knew he could not lift his arms to smooth the tangles from his own hair, let alone master the intricate work to weave the patterns required.

Yet it was an intimate thing, steeped in tradition and ceremony. It was not something he could ask of Dori, Oin or any of the Company. Even his nephews, though they were his kin, were far from ideal, being so many years his junior. By all rights, it should have been his mother, but the dragon had taken her from him long ago. Dis would have done a fine job of it, but she was half the world away and there was no other of his blood he could call upon.

Dori cleared his throat, shifting where he stood before he tugged at one earlobe, speaking in the cautious voice of once who was not sure he had made the right choice. ‘I took the liberty of teaching Master Baggins a few braiding techniques, including those required by the royal family. Normally,
he would not be privy to our ways, but as he is courting you…”

Thorin cast Dori a look from under his brow, catching the tiniest glimmer of a smile on the dwarf’s lips. Of course, he had taken it upon himself to ensure that Bilbo knew what to do. In the eyes of dwarvish culture, he was the only other acceptable candidate for the task. It mattered not that he was a hobbit; he was Thorin’s choice. That over-ruled every possible protest the dwarves of Erebor could make.

Except that the idea of Bilbo helping him with his hair was almost more than he could stand. To many dwarves, a lover’s assistance with such matters bordered on the erotic, and he struggled not to flush. To have the hobbit’s fingers in his hair, his nails against his scalp and his quick, deft touch… There were many who would see such an act as akin to foreplay.

A frisson of jealousy exploded down his spine, swamping him. Angry heat raced across his skin, coalescing beneath his ribs as he glared, his logical mind overwhelmed by a flood of raw emotion. ‘And how, exactly, did he practice? Who was lucky enough to enjoy his attentions while he learned our ways?’

Dori raised an eyebrow, and his polite response carried a sharp edge. ‘We used a hank of hair from a horse’s tail, the same as we do with dwarflings when it comes their time to learn. Even if we had not, Bilbo has learnt his lessons of etiquette far too well to agree to — to —’ He waved a hand, apparently too flustered to repeat Thorin’s accusation. ‘He is courting, Your Majesty. Anything else would be improper.’

He sighed, shame following hot on the heels of his flash of temper. He knew that all the dwarves of the Company had been doing their best, attempting to educate Bilbo on the rules of dwarvish culture that they had known since they were young. None of them would even consider committing such an act of indecency.

‘The only one of us who has ever put a braid in Master Bilbo’s hair is Ori, and that was the design worn by the Company. It was not an — an attempt to —’ Dori grew more flustered, now visibly distressed, and Thorin raised a hand, shaking his bowed head as he fought to get the visceral, raw edges of his anger under control.

‘I apologise. I did not mean to imply — Ori did Bilbo and myself a service when he offered Bilbo the bead and braid of the Company.’ He scowled, disgusted with himself. Any claim he had to Bilbo was in the eyes of others only; he had no right to his jealousy. By their own mutual agreement, their arrangement was a falsehood, and here he was, acting like a dwarf genuinely bound to another.

Balin was right. His own damn heart would betray him if he did not take greater care. He was becoming possessive of a fantasy, and that way lay only madness. He needed to handle this situation with great care, or he would lose any chance of winning Bilbo’s affection.

He could feel Dori watching him, those pale eyes sharp and thoughtful. He did not accept the apology outright, but instead spoke once more, his voice soothing. ‘I’ll have Gandalf check those beads, make sure they’re not tainted by the dragon. I should have done so before bringing them into your presence.’

‘This has nothing to do with the gold sickness,’ Thorin growled. He would not allow himself to accept Dori’s flimsy excuse, no matter how much he was tempted. His isolation in the healing rooms meant he was not able to witness Bilbo navigating his way through life in the mountain. He could not see with his own eyes how he spoke with others, or how they in turn behaved towards him.

There was no way to reassure himself that all was well except to believe what the Company told
him, and that was no longer good enough. He needed to be out there, part of the daily struggle, rather than an observer.

‘Please ask Bilbo to attend me as soon as he can be spared. I have lain here long enough.’

‘Healing is not idleness, Your Majesty,’ Dori pointed out, retrieving the beads he had brought and slipping them into his jerkin. No doubt he intended to check them with Gandalf, despite Thorin’s protests to the contrary. ‘Is there anything else?’

Thorin shook his head, clenching his jaw as Dori departed, leaving him alone in the healing room. Not even Oin disturbed his peace, and he fought the urge to pace the length of the rug-covered floor. Restlessness consumed him, and he tapped his fingers on his knee, trying to calm the desperate itch to march out of the door and find Bilbo for himself.

He was no stranger to this feeling, though it had been many years since he had found himself under its sway. As he matured, his natural tendencies towards possessiveness in love became easier to control. He could dismiss his fears as paranoia and offer his trust freely, but this was different.

What he and Bilbo had was complex and painfully tenuous. There was no real agreement between them, nothing on which Thorin could pin his hopes except a thousand shared glances and breathless moments. He had hoped an arranged courtship would give him time to woo Bilbo properly, but instead there had not even been privacy enough for them to place their courting beads.

Well, today, that would change.

A tap on the door made him suck in a breath, and he forced his voice steady as he bade his visitor to enter. The smile on his lips at the sight of Bilbo was a genuine one, and the worry that had tightened its vines around his ribs eased its grip. The hobbit was here, and from the looks of his flushed face and bright eyes, he’d run all the way from the treasury.

‘Dori said you wanted to see me?’

Thorin swallowed, gathering himself as he gestured to the comb nearby. ‘I need your help. The braids I require… My injuries restrict me from putting them in myself.’

Bilbo nodded with such confidence that Thorin wondered just how much Dori had told him. Yes, he had explained the patterns, the deft twist of hair and the slide of beads, but had he bothered outlining the significance of such behaviour to Bilbo, or had he chosen to hold his silence?

For a moment, Thorin’s words stalled in his throat, but he knew he couldn’t let Bilbo proceed without telling him the truth. He had to know that even if the act of braiding was little more than a chore in the hobbit’s eyes, it was far more significant to the dwarves.

‘Before you begin, you must be aware that hair is – dwarves consider –’ He winced, finding himself almost speechless, thick tongued and helpless as Bilbo picked up the comb. ‘This is not something we share readily with others.’

‘Kin and courting, with a few exceptions.’ Bilbo nodded, and the next breath he took shook as it passed his lips. ‘Dori was too embarrassed to really mention it, though he did his best. Bofur filled me in, explained that it – well it’s very personal and private and, um, sometimes has something to do with what dwarves do in bed together.’

Thorin was not sure who was redder in the face. They stared at each other, and he tried not to be enchanted by the fact that the tips of Bilbo’s ears had also darkened to a deep pink peeking through russet curls. ‘If it makes you uncomfortable,’ he croaked, ‘I can ask Fili or Kili, but…’
‘But it’s better if it’s me.’ Bilbo cleared his throat, busying himself with grabbing a nearby chair and setting it down, studiously avoiding Thorin’s gaze. ‘If people found out that I hadn’t helped you even though we’re courting, they’d start asking questions.’ He looked up from under his lashes before gesturing with the comb. ‘Can you sit in the chair? It will make things easier.’

Thorin nodded, grateful for the reprieve. He had considered suggesting such an arrangement himself. It was one thing to have Bilbo so close, his body warm and soft. Being in bed while this took place would be too great a temptation.

Obligingly, he perched in the chair, his hands knotted into fists and pressed against his thighs. His spine may as well have been iron, rigid and unbending as he waited for Bilbo to begin.

He expected him to be perfunctory – embarrassed perhaps, or at least eager for distance – but as always, it seemed Bilbo set out to prove him wrong. He worked with unfaltering diligence, easing away the gnarls that marked the hours of Thorin’s bed rest. There was no pulling in frustration at a stubborn knot, nor any sighs of exasperation. Bilbo merely persevered, and after a few minutes, the gentle tease of the comb through his hair became a meditative presence, calming his body and mind.

‘Let me know if I hurt you,’ Bilbo urged, his voice soft and his fingers deft as he moved through Thorin’s tresses. ‘It’s been a while since I had to brush anyone’s hair but my own.’

A glimmer of jealousy tried to flare anew in the pit of Thorin’s belly, but he ruthlessly crushed it to ash. The ways of hobbits were different from his own, and he was eager to know more about Bilbo’s life before their paths crossed.

‘Tell me?’

Some of the tension seeped from the room, and Thorin could sense Bilbo’s smile. ‘Hobbit children are more open to adventure than the adults,’ he began. ‘They invariably return from their wanderings looking as if they’ve been barging through hedgerows.’ He paused, picking at a stubborn knot before proceeding. ‘They’d come back covered in seeds and bristles, and it was considered the duty of any full-grown hobbit to put them to rights on sight.’

‘Even though they were not your own?’

Bilbo chuckled. ‘Most were cousins of some kind or another, and I had a reputation for having greater patience than their parents. Before long word got ‘round, and they came to me. Though it was probably more for the cake I had in my pantry than my skills with a comb.’

‘Do you miss them?’

There was silence then, and Thorin’s breath halted in his chest as he waited for an answer. Bilbo’s hands never stopped their careful ministrations, but they were slower now, more cautious than ever as he considered Thorin’s question.

‘Not as much as I thought I would.’

The quiet admission slid over Thorin like fine silk, and he closed his eyes in guilty relief. He should not revel in the weakness of Bilbo’s connections to his remaining kin, but in truth, it was one less thing to call him home to the Shire.

‘Really, when I think about it, the only thing I miss is Bag End, and even then…’ The rustle of fabric and the soft chime of mithril stirred the air as Bilbo shrugged. ‘It’s missing what I had I suppose, not when we met, but years before. My father built the smial for my mother. It was theirs. Their home.’
'And yours.'

'Yes, yes of course. For a while.' Bilbo did not elaborate, and Thorin refused to press such a sensitive subject. He knew all too well that the notion of home could be a foggy matter. He had lived in the Blue Mountains for decades, and yet Erebor had pulled on his blood and bones until he was helpless to resist. It was the place of his birth and his rightful kingdom, but deep down that was not what he sought to reclaim.

There had been a better time than any other here, before the dragon came. Even under King Thror’s gold-obsessed rule, it had been a world of fond memory, when his family did not lie shattered at his feet. Coming here would never get them back, but there was hope to build something anew with his sister-sons.

And Bilbo.

A sharp pain sparked as the comb caught in a tangle, and he chuckled at Bilbo’s apologies, shaking his head. ‘Think nothing of it. I don’t envy you the task of sorting out the mess it has become.’

‘It’s not that bad, actually. A hobbit would need to cut out the knots, but I suppose yours is made of sterner stuff.’ He slid the comb down in long, uninterrupted strokes before reaching for a brush and repeating the motion, working in sections through Thorin’s thick mane.

Bliss suffused him, creeping down Thorin’s neck and across his shoulders before flowing to rest, low and hot, in his belly. It did not cling to him with an urgent bite, but glowed, an ember of promise, and a quiet hum of pleasure rumbled in his chest.

Bilbo’s hands didn’t so much as falter, and the flicker of alarm Thorin felt at his own abandon dimmed to nothing. Inch by inch, he permitted himself to enjoy it. Perhaps it was not the seduction he secretly longed for, but it was still something shared between himself and the hobbit he considered a close friend. It was an act of trust, on both their parts, and Thorin would not allow any lingering guilt to sully it.

His eyes had slid almost closed, his lashes fluttering as the room turned to haze: its details irrelevant. All that mattered was the gentle scratch of the brush and the weight of Bilbo’s hand, smoothing down the hairs in its wake. There were no calluses to scrape or catch. Even now, after months in battle and on the road, it seemed Bilbo’s skin remained soft, as was befitting a gentle-hobbit.

At last, he came to the braid Fili had placed in Thorin’s hair days before, the one bearing the plain beads of the Company. He worked with care, unravelling it and checking for knots before weaving it once more. He was not as quick as Fili, pausing now and then as if examining his efforts, and Thorin could not resist peeking at him from beneath lowered lashes.

His face was pinched with concentration, his hazel eyes fixed on the dance of his fingers as he bit his bottom lip, puckering the plump flesh. A shallow frown etched three lines between his brow, deepening as he fastened the beads in place.

When he finished, he stepped back, giving his own work a critical glare. He did not notice he was being watched until he looked up, and a faint flush stained his skin. Thorin expected him to bluster and retreat. Instead, one hand went to Bilbo’s hip and he raised an eyebrow in challenge, wearing the colour in his cheeks like war paint. ‘What is it?’

‘I was admiring your focus.’

Bilbo gave a good-natured huff. ‘Not all of us have had years of practice, and it’s not as easy as you
dwarves make it look. Still, that one’s done.’ He cleared his throat, reaching inside his pocket and pulling free a familiar cloth. Thorin recognised it instantly as the one that wrapped up the treasured beads. Surely, there had not been time between Dori’s departure and Bilbo’s arrival for the wizard to check them?

‘I had Gandalf look them over before I gave them to Dori.’ Bilbo spoke as if he could read Thorin’s mind. ‘There is a smear of darkness to them, but he believes it will fade now they’re free from the hoard. Do you – do you still want to use them?’ He turned to face Thorin, his head cocked to one side. ‘Gandalf said their pull is very weak. They shouldn’t even touch your thoughts, let alone cloud them.’

For the first time since Bilbo entered the room, Thorin scowled, eyeing the heirlooms that, only a short while ago, had brought him such pleasure. They were a part of his heritage, one of the symbols of his line, and even they had not escaped the dragon’s filthy curse.

He longed to wear them, to save them from the clutches of whatever wraiths of evil painted their beautiful forms, but fear whispered at the edges of his mind. The memory of Smaug’s voice inside his skull was still fresh, and he could almost hear the creature’s purr of satisfaction.

‘You will watch me?’ He looked up at Bilbo, catching his eye. ‘When the dragon last took me, when the gold caught me in its thrall, I did not even realise it had happened. By the time I came to my senses and fought my way free, it was almost too late.’

Bilbo closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath before dropping to Thorin’s level. He went down on one knee, placing his right hand firmly over Thorin’s fists where they were clenched in his lap. ‘I’ll watch you,’ he promised. ‘If I think the sickness is taking you, I’ll cut the beads out of your hair myself, and damn any scandal that follows it.’

Thorin smiled, imagining the uproar if Bilbo truly were driven to such measures. To cut the braids from any dwarf was a great insult, yet he did not doubt a word of it. Bilbo would brave all wrath if he thought it would spare Thorin the loss of his mind once more.

‘Thank you.’

Bilbo nodded, getting back to his feet in a fluid motion that Thorin’s aching body envied. He fumbled in his pockets, pulling free a scrap of paper, as well as a fine, slim needle. Of course, the regal beads were far more delicate than those Bifur had made for the Company, and Bilbo would not be able to weave them in with his fingers alone.

‘Ori found a reference in one of the ledgers to these.’ He gestured to the gleaming stones and peered at the parchment, as if trying to make out difficult handwriting. ‘They have names. Of course three are missing, but we’re pretty sure that these are Amsham, Amnasu and Amral.’

The Khuzdul was clumsy on Bilbo’s tongue, his voice too mellow for its harsh, clipped consonants and curt vowels. Years ago, back when Erebor was whole, it would have been a shock to hear the words of his people from the lips of a non-dwarf. In truth, there were many who would still see even Bilbo’s scant knowledge as an abomination, and it seemed the hobbit knew it.

‘I – I don’t know what they mean,’ he said hastily, perhaps reading Thorin’s thoughtfulness as anger. ‘Ori didn’t teach me anything, it’s just…’ He gestured helplessly to the walls around them and the kingdom above their heads. ‘Dwarvish is everywhere here. No one can really shut it out.’

Thorin took a deep breath, reaching for the paper in Bilbo’s hands. It was written in Westron, not the runes of his people, which partly explained Bilbo’s butchered efforts. What he was about to do
would probably have the Dwarf Lords of the other kingdoms after his head, but he would risk their wrath if it meant allowing Bilbo to share more fully in this moment.

‘Amshâm means duty.’ He held up one of the sapphire beads, cut with a flat face to reflect azure light. ‘Amnâsu is loyalty.’ The second stone gleamed like an ocean, hints of green buried in a blue so dark it was black. The diamond was different, and he tipped it to the light, allowing rainbows to shatter around them. ‘Amrâl: love.’

He took Bilbo’s hand, unfurling his fingers and putting the beads in his palm. ‘They are named after the tenants of a good, fair rule, in the hope that the wearer will remember them at all times. It’s a tradition we have carried on through all crowning beads and clasps we own, but if Ori’s got it right, then these are the first that graced Erebor’s halls.’

‘And now they’re yours.’ Bilbo smiled, staring at the gems in his hand, not entranced by greed but by wonder. After a moment, he seemed to shake himself awake, setting them aside and reaching for the comb and needle. ‘Let’s just hope I can get these braids right.’

He set to work, dividing hair at Thorin’s temple. He maintained a good, steady tension to allow the braid to knit tight and firm without becoming rigid, the better to curve it downwards and back up towards the crown of Thorin’s head. Done properly, it would not need removing and redoing for a while. The coarse nature of dwarven hair meant it did not unravel with ease, and Thorin allowed himself to savour the indulgence of Bilbo so close. Who knew when he would next get the opportunity?

The heat that glowed in his belly grew stronger as Bilbo’s breath tickled his ear, the hobbit leaning in as he focused on his task. He smelled of hard work: dust and stone, sweat and toil, with a touch of something sweet beneath. It was not an unpleasant fragrance, not by any means, and Thorin allowed himself a deep breath through his nose.

His throat went dry as a wave of thrilling dizziness washed through him, leaving him light-headed. Thank Mahal he was sitting down and fully clothed; it made the most obvious evidence of his arousal easier to hide. Yet despite his best efforts, he could not help the heat building under his skin, and when Bilbo’s finger touched his ear, he forced himself not to twitch.

Bilbo murmured an apology, reaching for the first bead. ‘Dori said it didn’t matter how they were arranged, just so long as you wore them. Do you have any preference?’

‘Whatever you think is best.’ Thorin’s rough voice husked between them and he cleared his throat, unable to meet Bilbo’s gaze. Would it be confused, or knowing? Warm with reflected feeling or cool with indifference? ‘I trust your judgement.’

Bilbo nodded, his fingers gentle in Thorin’s hair as he began to braid, close and confident. His body hummed with Bilbo’s proximity, and Thorin clenched his teeth against such exquisite torture. It would be so easy to reach out and pull him down into his lap, to kiss that quick mouth and trap those clever fingers in the grasp of his own, but he could not. Instead he could only endure, his teeth gritted and every inch of his being alive with awareness and desire.

At last, Bilbo stepped back, checking the symmetry of his efforts. ‘It’s not perfect, but it’s better than I thought it would be.’ He trotted behind the screen that hid the chamber pot and returned with the copper plate that Thorin had stared into earlier. ‘Did I do it right?’

Thorin studied his reflection, blinking in surprise. A braid drew back from each temple, curving down towards his shoulders before climbing once more to combine at the back of his head. The sapphire beads shone bright, one on each side above his ears, while he could feel the weight of the
diamond connecting the two braids together.

He had been prepared to be gracious over Bilbo’s first efforts, but there was no need. The influence of Dori’s teaching was evident in the delicacy of each twist. To Thorin’s eye, there was no mis-step in the patterns, and the tension was fair and even-handed.

‘I doubt there is anyone in this mountain who could have done a better job of it,’ he replied, smiling as Bilbo flushed with pleasure at the compliment. ‘I would think you had been doing this for years.’

‘I had a good teacher.’ Bilbo shrugged, reaching out to tweak something into place with a familiarity that made Thorin’s heart swell. ‘And some practice, though I could probably do with more.’

‘Perhaps I can help you with that.’ Thorin reached out, stretching forward to recover the pouch Fili had given him days ago and pressing it into Bilbo’s palm.

Curiously, the hobbit untied the cord holding it closed and tipped its contents into the cup of his hand. The two courting beads tumbled together, and Bilbo’s expression became one of blatant admiration. They were very different to the ones already in Thorin’s hair. The silver was heavier and the jewels more plentiful.

‘I am King and I am Company,’ Thorin touched the beads that represented both roles, illustrating his words, ‘but there is nothing yet to tell the world I am courting.’

Understanding bloomed across Bilbo’s face, sharp and knowing, and Thorin’s body thrilled at the notion of what could lie ahead. As enticing as it had been, Bilbo weaving the royal gems into Thorin’s hair was a matter of the realm. Courting beads were a matter of the heart.

‘I take it you know how it is done?’

Bilbo nodded. ‘Courting braids were the first thing Dori showed me.’

Thorin smiled, knowing Dori’s romantic heart and not doubting it for a second. ‘It is customary that dwarves who have chosen to court weave one another’s braids, but if you would rather not…’ He trailed off, trying not to let his anticipation for Bilbo’s reply show. He had offered him a way out, a manner in which they could maintain their distance and personal space. Would Bilbo take it, stepping back, or would he choose to linger?

He watched the emotions flicker over Bilbo’s face, as fast as the spin of a wheel before he appeared to make up his mind. He curled his fingers around the beads and moved to stand at Thorin’s left-hand side. ‘Like I said,’ he explained quietly, ‘I need the practice, and while I’m getting better at braiding other people’s hair, I’m still rubbish at doing my own.’

Elation exploded through Thorin’s chest, filling him with a rush of light. He had hoped that Bilbo would make such a choice. It may not confirm much – may speak of friendship, rather than something more – but Thorin still relished Bilbo’s eagerness to remain at his side.

‘Is – is that all right?’

Thorin did not trust his voice to answer; he could only nod his head as the comfortable atmosphere of the healing room changed, turning thick and slow like fine honey.

Bilbo selected a ribbon of hair to work with. Tradition dictated it be on the left side, forward of the ear, and he did not deviate. Fingers that had been steady now trembled at the edge of Thorin’s vision, and the silence that enfolded them felt like the approach of a summer storm: breathless and heavy.
They spoke not a word until Bilbo put the bead in place at the braid’s end, as was fitting an official courtship. Its weight swung against Thorin’s shoulder, more meaningful than any other that adorned him, and he stroked his fingers along the pattern, feeling the familiar, blocky weave he had learned so long ago.

When he looked up, he realised Bilbo was kneeling in front of him, comb and bead in hand. His head was on level with Thorin’s chest, and though he knew Bilbo did it to spare the strain on Thorin’s wounds, some dark, lusting part of him took great pleasure from seeing the hobbit on his knees, not subservient, but expectant.

‘I have not done this for many years,’ he managed, his voice like gravel. ‘Not since I was learning as you have done. I hope my efforts do not put you to shame.’

Bilbo smiled, turning his head to give Thorin better access and tipping his chin upwards in challenge. He did not say a word, waiting until Thorin finally reached out and took the comb from him.

He could see what Bilbo meant: hobbit hair was very different from that on dwarven heads, fine and luxurious, but far from cooperative. The occasional wayward strand tried to wrap around his fingers, and it took all of his resolve to focus on his task. He had never touched Bilbo like this before: they were both still clothed, yet there was something naked about the situation, more intimate than the embrace on the Carrock or anything that had come since.

Swallowing hard, Thorin looked around, spotting one of Oin’s oils nearby. Reaching out, he dabbed a bit on his fingers, glossing the skin and smoothing the section he needed to braid. ‘Let me know if I pull too tight,’ he urged, soft and low, waiting for Bilbo’s agreement before he began.

His knuckles were stiff at first, unused to this dance, but soon enough it all came flooding back to him. He had never appreciated such a chore as a child. Braids were tiresome, and learning their importance cut into time better spent elsewhere. As an adult, he had treated the ceremony with the seriousness it deserved, but it was still a duty, rather than a pleasure.

This was worlds different.

Thorin found himself absorbed, not just by the comfortable repetition of his actions, but by the colour beneath his fingertips. Dwarven hair came in all shades, but never was it so mixed as it was on Bilbo: not just gold or red or brown, but a blend of all three, like sunshine, shadow and firelight.

Bilbo relaxed into his touch, his shoulders sagging and a faint smile whispering across his lips. His eyes closed, and his hands curled into loose fists on his knees, quiet and content beneath Thorin’s attentions.

All too soon, the braid was done, running down the short length of Bilbo’s hair. He offered up the bead, his hand opening like a flower, and Thorin wove it into place, leaving it to rest on level with Bilbo’s cheek.

‘There.’

Thorin’s breath caught as their gazes locked. He had not realised how close they had become, swaying towards one another as he worked. Now, there was no more than a hand’s width between them, and the very air seemed to hum like a plucked harp string. Bilbo’s face was turned upwards,
Thorin’s own heart, driven into a giddy beat by the sudden potential of the moment.

It was as if they both stood on some kind of brink, neither able to speak or look away as time slowed to a standstill: insignificant.

Suddenly, the silence shattered, torn to pieces by the loud toll of one of Erebor’s great bells. Thorin blinked, disoriented even as Bilbo swayed back, his fingers fluttering to the new braid. A moment later, the hobbit was on his feet, tidying away the brush and comb before pinning a smile to his face.

‘That’s the noon day bell. It’s time to go. Are you ready?’

Thorin drew a deep breath, allowing his eyes to slip closed so he could better cling to the memory of what they had shared. Already it felt like a dream beyond his reach, and he was determined not to let it slip away. He would not write it off as a figment of his imagination. How could he, when his entire being thrilled at the heat he had seen in Bilbo’s gaze?

For now, his kingdom called, but he vowed to himself that he would pursue the tremulous desire he had seen in Bilbo’s eyes. He would spend every spare moment his duties allowed making sure it flourished, until every time Bilbo met his gaze, his love was there to see: bold and unabashed.

What he wanted was within his reach, and he intended to seize it.

‘I’m ready.’
He was in a dream: Bilbo was sure of it. The world was all fog and breathlessness, his head light and his feet practically floating from the floor. His heart thrummed in the base of his throat, a songbird given flight, and every inch of him prickled with awareness of Thorin’s presence.

Gone was the ailing dwarf, bound low and bitter by his wounds. Now Thorin strode at a commanding, unhurried pace through the halls of his realm. To anyone who looked upon him, they would see nothing but the powerful, rightful ruler of this place. The Blood Axe shone in his fist, the base of the shaft tapping on the stone with each step. His clothes were clean, neat and dyed in beautiful blues, and the beads near his brow seemed more regal to Bilbo’s eyes than any crown.

A shivering breath escaped his lips as he tried to ground himself in the here and now. He had understood, in the abstract, what Bofur had told him about the intimacy of braiding, but he hadn’t thought much of it until he experienced it for himself.

His hands remembered the weight of Thorin’s hair, strong and coarse, but as smooth as silk once it was brushed. Bilbo had tried to keep his emotional distance, but Thorin’s trust called out to be answered in kind. More than once, he had allowed his fingers to rest on the staunch lines of Thorin’s neck, brushing against his fluttering pulse or the large shells of his ears, touching him in ways that had nothing to do with the cursory business of healing.

It had been like peeling back layers, revealing a side of Thorin he had rarely seen. Gone was the majestic air he projected, even when injured, and the scowl that seemed to reside in the wings of his expression had faded from view. Every shield he built to protect himself from the rigours of the world fell away, leaving Bilbo breathless at the sight.

Yet even that was nothing to how he’d felt when he’d knelt at Thorin’s feet as capable fingers twisted his hair into the braid that would mark him as Thorin’s chosen. Oh, how he longed for it to be real! Every inch of him ached, and by the time Thorin had finished, he’d been like butter in the palm of his hand, pliant and half-drunk with the desire for more.

Only the chime of the noonday bell had prevented him from throwing all caution to the wind. His lips buzzed with an imagined kiss, and Bilbo pressed them together, desperately trying to dispel the fantasy. Why was it that all it took was one long look from Thorin for all his good intentions and logical reasoning to fly out of the window?

It had been easier when he was stuck in bed, vulnerable and pained. Bilbo fooled himself that he was just a friend in need, and his ridiculous, hungry heart had changed its tune, focussing on comfort and care. Now all he could think about was Thorin’s strong fingers in his hair and his heavy presence pushing at the boundaries of Bilbo’s personal space. In the course of little more than an hour, all his shaky self-control had collapsed to dust.

At least he was not alone in his reaction. It was only now, in the cool corridors of the mountain, that the flush on Thorin’s cheeks had faded. Duty banished the heat from his eyes and the tenderness from his touch, but Bilbo knew what he had seen. It was no figment of his imagination.

But what could he do about it?

‘Master Baggins?’

Bilbo blinked, realising with surprise that they had come to a halt. He had been so engrossed in his
thoughts he’d not noticed the change, his body obeying in the absence of a focused mind. Now he realised they were loitering in one of the corridors near the eating hall. Lanterns cast long shadows on the wall, and Dori stood in front of him, shaking out a jacket. Even in the uncertain light, Bilbo could see the richness of the dye, and he swallowed back the automatic protests that tried to escape him.

‘For formal occasions only,’ Dori warned with a smile. ‘It’s seen better days, but it’ll do for now.’ Rather than pitching it around Bilbo’s shoulders, as he would have done on their journey, he turned to Thorin, surrendering the garment and taking the offered Blood Axe in return.

Before his lessons in Dwarvish etiquette, Bilbo would have been puzzled, but now his mind brimmed with the significance of the gesture. It was Thorin’s place, as Bilbo’s chosen, to help him into new items of clothing the first time he wore them. In addition, Thorin’s easy relinquishment of the axe spoke volumes of his trust of Dori. Symbolic it may be, but it was still a weapon, and one that could cleave a man in two.

It was tempting to protest that he could dress himself, but Bilbo knew it would be both rude and hopeless. Instead, he turned his back, letting Thorin drape the heavy cloth over his shoulders and help him get his arms into the sleeves. The brush of skin against his nape made his breath catch, and he forced down the needy tremor that tried to shiver its way across his flesh. Out of the corner of his eye he realised Dori had politely retreated to look along the corridor, feigning intense interest in the brickwork.

With great effort, Bilbo drew away from Thorin’s touch. He didn’t go far, a bare inch or two, and when he turned around they were practically toe-to-toe, almost pressed against each other and neither one willing to move.

‘Thank you,’ he breathed, knowing he sounded like some smitten tween from the Shire and not giving a damn about it.

‘You’re welcome.’ Thorin reached out, tracing something at Bilbo’s collar and teasing over the hollow at the base of his throat. ‘They suit you.’ He smiled at Bilbo’s confusion before taking his hand, holding it up so he could see the delicate stars stitched on the line of his cuffs.

‘They match.’ Bilbo grinned, noting that Thorin stiffened as he gestured to the emblem on his sleeve, touching Thorin’s wrist as he did so. ‘New clothes for us both.’ He raised an eyebrow, tipping his head to the side and looking up into those sharp blue eyes. ‘Shouldn’t I have helped you into them? That’s the way it goes, isn’t it?’

He knew the answer to his question – Balin had made it clear that all the demands and etiquette of Dwarven customs went both ways, through courtship and beyond – but it was worth feigning uncertainty for the look on Thorin’s face. His eyes turned glassy, lost to a fugue of imagination, and those thin lips parted wordlessly as a deep flush graced his cheeks.

It was not hard to guess what Thorin was thinking. The experience with the beads had been intense, almost overwhelming for them both. If Bilbo had been involved in helping Thorin dress… Well, he had a pretty good idea where that could have ended. If he could barely keep his hands to himself while braiding Thorin’s hair, then what hope did he have when he was healthy and half-naked?

Thorin sucked in a breath like a swimmer breaching the surface of a lake, finally finding enough sense to speak. ‘Yes,’ he croaked, pausing to swallow before continuing in a steadier voice. ‘However, there are exceptions. The sick and injured cannot be denied clothing or care based on tradition, and it is acceptable for those in the royal line to be attended by friends, rather than whoever they are courting.’ Thorin’s smile darkened, slanting towards a grimace. ‘Since I am both wounded
and king, it was possible to spare you the chore of helping me into my new clothes this morning.’

‘It wouldn’t be a chore.’

Bilbo tried not to blush, knowing that he’d probably said too much, too soon, but he’d never been very good at the coy games of lovers. Hiding how he felt went against his nature, as these past few weeks had shown. Besides, after what they had shared back in the healing room, how could Thorin still have any doubt? He wished he could read whatever was rolling around in that thick head of his, but instead he was left trying to guess.

He expected questions, or perhaps the return of that flirtatious, knowing smile he had grown to love so much. However, before Thorin could draw breath, Balin’s voice interrupted them, ringing along the corridor.

‘There you are. I was beginning to wonder if you’d been waylaid!’

Dori gave a quiet groan, and Bilbo cringed as he realised the fussy dwarf had probably been an avid, if subtle, audience to what he and Thorin had said. Worse, as soon as Balin stopped in front of them his broad smile slipped from his face, replaced with one of genuine worry. ‘Am I interrupting something?’

‘No!’ They spoke in unison, and Bilbo shot an amused glance at Thorin, who rolled his eyes and huffed out a tired laugh. ‘No, old friend. We did not mean to keep you waiting.’

‘Thank you for the coat, Dori,’ Bilbo added, finding comfort in rubbing his fingertips over the stars at his cuff. ‘I’m guessing this is an official occasion?’

‘It is and it isn’t.’ Balin sighed, gesturing with his hands as he attempted to explain. ‘In normal circumstances, this would be a day of celebration, feasts and revelry, but as it is we’re best off taking another path.’

‘You’re on display,’ Dori added. ‘Both of you. There to be seen by those who need the reassurance’

‘But not to stand out. No thrones, no head tables, no holding of court.’ Balin drew himself up, his pointed gaze fierce. ‘Dwalin’s doing what he can for security, but don’t let your guard down.’

‘Is it really that bad?’ Bilbo asked. Despite various warnings of potential unrest, he’d not heard anything more than vague rumours. Everyone he spoke to had their problems, but they seemed happy enough with their lot.

‘We can’t afford to be complacent. Thorin has been safe in the healing rooms, easy to guard. This could be the opportunity someone’s been waiting for.’ Balin gestured behind them, and Bilbo noticed two soldiers, a dwarf and man. They had followed at a polite distance, and now stood with their backs pressed against the wall, the better to see along the hallway. ‘There’s guards aplenty, but don’t rely on them to save your skin.’

‘As if I ever would,’ Thorin murmured, reaching out his hand and accepting the Blood Axe back from Dori. ‘Let’s get this over with, before Oin decides I’ve been out of bed too long.’

Balin tucked his thumbs into his belt, taking a deep breath and looking them both up and down. ‘Yes, yes. You’ll both do nicely. The beads in particular are the perfect touch.’ He winked at Bilbo before beckoning them to follow. ‘This way.’

Thorin held out his arm, and Bilbo slipped his hand through the crook of his elbow, matching
Thorin’s stride. If it weren’t for his foot, Bilbo would have to hurry to keep up, but as it was they kept a sedate pace, following Balin in silence until the corridor opened out into the cavernous space of the eating hall.

Every eye turned in their direction, and Bilbo struggled not to fold beneath the pressure. He held his spine stiff, tense and wary until Thorin moved closer. It was not much, but it was enough to bring him comfort, and Bilbo let out a shaking breath as he surveyed the sea of faces.

Everyone stood behind their seats, cups of water in hand and their plates full before them as they waited in silence. The peace only shattered when Balin stepped forward, his voice raised to the powerful, commanding timbre he must have employed in the old days of Erebor’s court.

‘King Thorin!’

The reply shook the mountain itself: a rousing roar of approval that seemed to rise from every corner. Cups lifted in praise as dwarves and men alike shouted their response, letting the echoes carry like thunder.

‘King Thorin!’

Bilbo looked around, trying to pick out any disgruntled figures, but all he could see was hope and relief. The people of the mountain had been waiting for their king to join them, and now it seemed they took his return as a good omen of things to come.

‘Please, eat!’ Thorin smiled, tipping his head in thanks for the warm welcome. ‘You have waited for me long enough.’

A wry chuckle murmured through the crowd, quickly followed by the scrape of benches and the clatter of plates. On the surface, it seemed like a celebration, despite the lack of fine fare, and Bilbo looked around as Thorin led him to one of the tables. It was not central to the room, but near the north wall, which at least shut off one angle of attack. Some of the Company were already there, along with Bard and Gandalf, as well as twenty or so others. Bilbo knew more than half of them by name, and he smiled as a woman shuffled up to give them both space.

‘It is good to see you up and about, King Thorin,’ Gandalf murmured, the title rolling off his tongue with ease. It was an acknowledgement of Thorin’s place on the throne, and one that meant a great deal coming from a wizard known across the kingdoms of Middle Earth. ‘Your people have missed you.’

Thorin inclined his head. ‘It is a relief to walk among them. I’ve been sorely shut off from their needs.’

Gandalf sipped the stew in his bowl, offering an appreciative hum. ‘They require the same things they did on our arrival in Erebor: food, warmth and safety. Your Company are doing an admirable job of providing all three.’

Bilbo watched Thorin purse his lips, no doubt biting back doubts of how long any of their supplies would last. It would be too easy for someone to overhear and twist their words, spreading panic. They’d all do well to watch what they said, and Bilbo resolved to spend more time listening than actually joining in the conversation. He had no wish to start a riot by expressing some thoughtless concern.

He waited until Thorin had taken his first mouthful before dipping his own spoon into the thick gravy, raising it to his lips and trying not to groan in relief as the hot food settled in his belly. The
long journey should have driven most of the hunger out of him; instead, it had grown to a constant ache he had to ignore. Food was far too sparse for his usual generous meal times, and he was resolved not to complain, not when there were starving children and mothers struggling to feed their babes.

‘I look forward to the days when we can move beyond thoughts of survival and begin to turn Erebor into a home once more.’ Thorin took a small piece of flat bread from the basket nearby, breaking it in half and putting a share on Bilbo’s plate. He did it without ceremony, and now that Bilbo looked, he could see Thorin was surreptitiously checking the meals of those around him, making sure everyone had their fair portion.

‘Indeed.’ Amusement ran thick in Gandalf’s voice, and Bilbo shot him a dark look, knowing what had sparked the wizard’s mirth. Hobbit courtship was a simple matter, with both flowers and food playing a great part of it. Hobbits were not prone to sharing, and such behaviour was seen as the most brazen declaration of affection back home in the Shire. Except that Thorin knew nothing of such things, and Bilbo did not dare believe it was anything more than a friendly gesture.

‘I am sure that day will come sooner than you think. Bard was telling me only a moment ago of the success of the hunting parties.’

The man in question paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth, offering Gandalf a hint of a scowl at his blatant mediation. However, he did not argue, and Bilbo’s heart lifted when Bard explained.

‘The weather is against us, but there’s game to be had. Mistress Tauriel has helped us find the best spots, and we’ve deer, pheasant and rabbit to be salted, smoked and stored.’ He quickly gulped another mouthful of his meal, chasing it down with some water, and this time when he looked up, his gaze was certain. He met Thorin’s eye as an equal, honesty painting his features. ‘I split the hunting team in half and sent one lot to the lake. A few nets survived the dragon’s rampage, and we intend to put them to good use before the ice makes it impossible.’

‘And once it does?’

‘We can cut holes and send down baited lines. You’ll catch bigger fish that way, but fewer of them. All told it’s not meat we lack, but flour and grain.’

Thorin grunted in understanding. ‘We can live on meat if we must, but I see your point. Has anyone spoken to you of the passage to Dale?’

Bard scraped a piece of flat bread around his bowl, scooping up every last trace of the gravy and eating it with gusto. ‘I have men helping Masters Bofur and Bifur in clearing the way. Though I don’t know what you’ll discover of any use in the old town.’

‘We’ll find out in a day or two.’ Bofur smiled, nudging the dwarf next to him, who had been dining in silence. ‘Tholi here dug up some maps. The ink’s not very clear, but we can see enough to know that there are grain stores as well as the caves.’

Tholi nodded, the beads of motherhood in her beard catching the light. ‘There are two towards the south of the city, Your Majesty.’ She bowed her head deep with respect, pausing in her meal and folding her hands in front of her. Delicate rings shone on most of her fingers, but Bilbo could see calluses that came from hard work. He knew well enough by now that all dwarves, male and female alike, took pride in their toil, and the rough skin was as much a badge of honour as anything else. ‘With Lord Bard’s permission, we’ll uncover those first and see what state they’re in.’

Bard pulled a face at the title, but didn’t argue. ‘Do you have much hope that they’ll be intact? Can
grain really keep for so many years?’

‘In the right conditions, yes. It depends how the granaries were built. The map suggests they were sunk into the earth. If they were stone-lined, then damp and rot would be kept at bay as long as the lids were sealed.’ Tholi rolled her shoulders in a shrug. ‘Until we find and open them, I’m afraid we won’t know –’

A sudden, sharp crack boomed through the mountain, cutting Tholi off and silencing every voice in the hall. Thorin’s hand flew to Bilbo’s shoulder, ready to push him to the floor out of range of a weapon. Around him, it seemed every dwarf had reached for their axe and every man for his sword, yet no one attacked. They simply sat there, waiting, trying to comprehend the odd rushing noise that filled the air, alien to the ear.

‘Water?’ Bofur whispered, frowning in confusion.

‘No. It sounds more like –’

‘Gold,’ Thorin supplied before Bilbo could finish. ‘Something must have happened in the treasury.’

As soon as Thorin spoke, Bilbo knew he was right. It was the same, chiming susurrus that had accompanied Smaug’s every move, audible even though the gold was many rooms away and the dragon was turning to bones at the bottom of the lake.

Wasn’t he?

Bilbo shook off the wraiths of doubt, telling himself not to be stupid as he grabbed Thorin’s arm, preventing him from getting to his feet. ‘No, you stay here. I’ll go and have a look.’ He barrelled on before Thorin could protest, beckoning Dwalin close. ‘It could just be something shifting in the hoard and starting off a cascade, but it could also be a trap – an effort to lure Thorin away from here and back to the treasury.’

‘All the more reason you should not investigate,’ Thorin murmured, careful to keep his voice low despite the fact everyone in the hall was listening. ‘It could just as easily be someone hoping to get you alone.’

‘Which I won’t be. I’ll take Ronin, as well as all the dwarves who’ve been helping me. We’ve been putting in terraces – using boards to hold up the piles so we can work safely – they’ll know better than me what’s gone wrong.’

Dwalin gave a critical sniff, looking Bilbo up and down before nodding his head. ‘He’s right,’ he said to Thorin with a shrug. ‘No use you charging off back down to that cursed hall for no good reason. Besides, he’s the one wearing the mithril. Better protected than anyone else in this damned place.’

‘I’ll accompany Bilbo,’ Gandalf offered, unfolding from his seat like a great, grey bird, his robes flapping as he stepped over the bench. ‘Just in case.’

Thorin looked mutinous, his scowl a storm across his face as his jaw worked, chewing on unspoken words. At last, he pointed towards a number of guards who stood along the walls, beckoning them close. ‘I know you have yet to be fed, and I thank you for your dedication. Please accompany Master Baggins and his team to the treasury and remain there until they are through with their work.’ He raised his voice further, allowing it to carry clear and true. ‘Everyone else is to stay here, for their own safety, until we can discover what has happened.’

The room erupted into buzzing conversation: speculation ran wild, and Bilbo saw Nori ghost off, no
doubt to keep a mindful ear on the gossip. With one last, reassuring look in Thorin’s direction, he got to his feet, pulling away from the hand that still rested on his shoulder and making his departure.

Ronin was at his side as always, a quick march allowing him to match Bilbo’s hurried steps. The others, dwarves Bilbo knew well, crowded around him, and he wondered if it was deliberate that he ended up in the centre of a huddle, unconsciously protected. Two guards overtook them to move on point, while the rest brought up the rear with Gandalf.

No one spoke until they reached the treasury, bundling through the doorway to stand at the top of the steps, peering out across the glittering vista. They’d lit the place as best they could, eager not to waste fuel but desperate to push back the shadows as they worked. There was just enough that they could make out the distant walls and the stepped terraces that held the huge piles in check so they could sort through it without risking a collapse.

‘Up there!’ Coln, a young miner from the Iron Hills, pointed towards the main peak. The neatly flattened bank had given way in a drunken topple, slipping to the south. ‘Grindl, look! That’s taken out at least three terraces.’

Grindl, an old structural engineer who had worked for Dain for more than a century, shielded his eyes with one hand. ‘Aye, the lad’s right. The north face holds steady with no sign of weakness, but something’s given up on t’other side.’

‘We need to get closer.’ Bilbo took a step forward, only to stop as two hands grabbed him. Gandalf’s sank onto his shoulder like a lead weight, while someone else gripped the back of his coat. Turning in surprise, he saw that Ronin’s fingers were clenched in the cloth.

‘Forgive the impropriety, Master Baggins,’ He released him immediately and gave a quick bow, ‘but you cannot move across the piles. There’s no way to tell what might cause another collapse.’

‘Go around the sides.’ Coln pointed to the platforms and hallways that ringed the chamber, acting like walkways. ‘This used to be the throne room, and most of the old galleries are still passable. We can get a better look at it that way.’

‘Soldiers, scout ahead,’ Gandalf ordered. ‘Cry out if anything catches your eye.’ His hand had not left Bilbo’s shoulder, and those gnarled fingers tightened in a quick squeeze of reassurance. ‘I cannot detect any magic beyond the fume of the gold. Go with care, Bilbo.’

He nodded, dipping into his pocket and feeling the familiar shape of the ring. He carried it with him always, these days, and despite his dislike of the strange shadow world, he was ready to slip it on at a moment’s notice. He had left Sting behind in the healing rooms. Small as it was, the sword was an extra weight when he was helping haul the gold. Now he longed for the blade in his hand. He might not be much of a fighter, but it was better than nothing!

Their sound of their footsteps echoed through arched openings as they went, bouncing back and forth. Stealth was impossible. Perhaps if Bilbo had been on his own he could have crept across the distance, no louder than a breeze, but that was not the way of the dwarves. Still, the shadows remained still and silent, and there were no shouts from the guards up ahead to warn of any danger.

By the time they could approach the spill, all the soldiers had met up once more, happy to confirm that the treasury seemed empty. ‘There’s plenty of places to hide,’ Ronin warned the group. ‘Keep your eyes open.’ He turned to Coln and Grindl, who were both conducting a hasty conversation with their colleagues. ‘Do what you must, but stay sharp.’

‘Head to the side-struts,’ Grindl ordered, pointing to opposite sides of the hoard where large, wooden
beams sank down into the pile. Feel your way along as best you can. We need to know what broke and why.’

Before long, Gandalf and Bilbo were left standing alone but for Ronin and two other guards, unable to do anything but watch. The dwarves worked in perfect unison, calling out numbers and giving warning of unstable terrain. Despite days of hard work, the hoard seemed as big as ever, and Bilbo’s eyes drifted, trying to map the expanse of the cascade.

He wasn’t sure what caught his eye. Perhaps it was the lack of shine amongst so much, but his gaze picked out something small. It looked like nothing at first, but the more he stared, the harder his heart began to beat. ‘Wait.’ He shook his head, ripping himself free of Gandalf’s grasp and jumping down onto the lower slopes of the mound. ‘Wait!’

‘Bilbo!’ Fear tightened Gandalf’s voice, but he ignored it, skidding to a halt and falling to his knees, digging his hands into the gold and starting to shove it aside.

‘Everyone here, now!’ Coins skittered beneath his fingers, ringing like bells as he flung them aside. A blade, half-buried, cut into his palm. The pain sang, but it didn’t matter. He couldn’t stop, not when what was sticking out of the heap was not a piece of cloth, but a hand, its fingers lax and curled.

It took only a moment for the rest of them to join him, their confusion giving way to horror. Grindl called out orders, demanding planks and rope the better to hold back the crushing weight and try and free whatever unfortunate soul lay trapped. Some rushed to obey him while others scrambled to help Bilbo, scooping the gold with their hands.

‘Someone get Oin,’ Bilbo ordered. He didn’t look up to see if anyone obeyed him. The sprinting steps of a departing guard suggested they had done as he asked, and he focused on his rescue efforts, desperate for some sign of life.

After what felt like far too long, he touched skin, sweeping aside a spill of coins to reveal the face of an older dwarf. His brow was hard and grizzled, and bruises were already blooming across his cheeks and jaw. Blood matted in his hair, and he didn’t even groan in pain. Bilbo’s hand shook as he placed it near the dwarf’s nose and mouth, but at last he detected an unsteady whisper of air.

‘He’s alive!’

‘Then let’s keep him that way,’ Oin wheezed, hobbling up to Bilbo’s side with a bag in his grasp. ‘How long until you can have him free?’

‘A few more minutes,’ Coln promised, helping Grindl put the treasure they were moving aside into any spare bucket or barrel they could find. ‘We daren’t dig too deep in case we start another landslide.’

‘Do what you can, and hurry.’ Oin peeled open an eyelid, sweeping his hand back and forth so a shadow passed over the dwarf’s eyes before prodding gently through his hair. ‘Nasty bump here. Hmmm.’ Absently, he handed Bilbo a clean bandage, gesturing to his wounded palm. ‘Cover that. I’ll look at it later.’

Bilbo stopped, wrapping the cloth around the cut and clumsily tying it in place before continuing his efforts. Inch-by-inch, they cleared the treasure from the dwarf, revealing shoulders, arms and chest, before finally freeing his legs and boots. Oin was there in an instant, checking bones for breaks and noting every bruise.
Two guards clattered towards them, bearing a stretcher, its canvas swaying with each step. Oin nodded his approval as they set it down on the ground. ‘Careful. He’s taken a fair beating,’ the healer warned, standing back to let younger, stronger dwarves bear the load.

Slowly, Bilbo got to his feet, noticing the crimp in his spine and the ache in his hands. There’d been no time for his own discomfort, and even now it seemed insignificant compared to that of the poor dwarf they had rescued.

‘Find Ori,’ he ordered one of the soldiers. ‘He should still be in the eating hall. He takes roll call at every meal. See if anyone was missing. We need to work out who he is.’

‘What about us?’ Coln asked, standing back to let the guard pass. ‘Want us to keep searching and see what we find?’

Bilbo nodded, glancing up at the treacherous peak of the dragon’s bed. ‘Do what you can. The more we know, the better. I’ll be in the healing rooms if you need me.’ He moved to follow Oin before turning back, meeting the eyes of the dwarves who had been of such help to him over the past few days. ‘Don’t let anyone else in here, not until we’re sure it’s safe.’

He turned away, cradling his injured hand against his chest. He could feel Ronin behind him, an ever-present shadow, and heard him ordering half of the soldiers to stay with the other dwarves. The rest came with them, following their footsteps in a dogged march.

Bilbo chewed his lip. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected to find, but a half-dead dwarf under the pile of gold had not featured in his imaginings. It bothered him that he had no name to put to the beaten, bloodied face, and then there was the question of what he was doing there. Why would the dwarf be in the treasury when everyone else was eating?

A dozen potential scenarios flashed through Bilbo’s mind, each more grim than the last, and he sighed as he shoved his thoughts ruthlessly aside. There would be time for accusations aplenty when they knew more. For now, all he could do was wait.

The healing rooms were bustling as Bilbo trotted down the stairs. He sank onto one of the benches, the better to stay out of Oin’s way as he watched the chaotic activity. Healers rushed around the fallen dwarf’s bedside, calling for bandages and water, as well as ice and tinctures for the bruising. It was like something from a nightmare, and Bilbo felt for the dwarf caught at its heart, mercifully oblivious to his pain.

‘Bilbo?’

A warm hand settled on his shoulder, and he didn’t need to lift his head to know it was Thorin. He had sensed his approach like a ray of sunlight emerging through the clouds, and now he basked in his proximity, letting the knots in his shoulders unravel in relief. ‘Is everyone still in the hall?’

‘No. Balin and Nori decided it would be best to maintain the routine of the mountain. It prevents panic. Only the children have not returned to work, and nor will they, until we know the treasury is safe.’

The bench creaked as Thorin sank down at his side, reaching for Bilbo’s injured hand and examining the clumsy knot in the bandage. ‘What happened?’

‘I nicked myself on a sword trying to dig him out. It’s nothing.’

Thorin grunted, unpicking Bilbo’s haphazard work and unravelling it to reveal the skin beneath. The touch of air made it burn, and Bilbo grimaced. It wasn’t a deep slice, and the flow of blood had
slowly eased, but it still hurt.

Thorin’s hands were large around his own, cradling his fingers and taking great care not to disturb
the injury. It was a tender moment, but even as he met Thorin’s eyes, Bilbo could sense what they
had shared earlier that day slipping away from them. Already it felt like another world. Reality
pressed in from all sides, slowly crushing Bilbo’s hopes beneath its weight.

‘Mistress Tauriel,’ Thorin said. ‘Could you take a look at this?’

Bilbo blinked, surprised by Thorin’s no nonsense request for help from the elf. It was only a short
time ago he would have turned down any assistance out of spite. Now it seemed he respected her
enough to seek her aid without question, and Bilbo’s heart warmed with pride. He knew it could not
be easy to set aside centuries of prejudice, but it meant a lot that Thorin was making the effort.

‘May I?’ Tauriel asked softly, smiling when Bilbo nodded and held out his hand for her to inspect.
She tucked her long hair into the collar of her tunic so that it would not drape in the wound before
leaning close, tipping Bilbo’s palm to the light. ‘The sword was in the dragon’s hoard?’

‘It might have been a dagger. I didn’t really look.’

She nodded, reaching out and picking a pot of pungent salve off a nearby bench. She held it up to a
candle flame, checking its colour before smearing a thin layer across the cut. It stung like the blazes,
and she murmured an apology as Bilbo tensed, gritting his teeth. Before long, though, the sensation
faded, and a numb tingling followed in its wake.

‘Can you do this?’ Tauriel clawed her fingers, and Bilbo mimicked the gesture, noticing that no new
blood flowed. ‘Good, you’ve not damaged anything too severely. Let that paste dry, and reapply it
every time you wash your hands.’ She reached for a spoon, scooping some out into a smaller pot and
pressing on the lid before passing it to Bilbo. ‘It will keep it clean and quicken the healing.’

She looked up as Oin leaned over her shoulder, taking a few seconds to judge her work before he
gave a nod. ‘Bind it if you’re planning to scrabble through the gold again, but otherwise, do as she
says. It’s a shallow thing and the air will do it good.’

‘And what about him?’ Bilbo gestured to the dwarf who lay on the bed, his brow wrapped in
bandages and ice packed against various bruises. ‘Any idea what happened?’

Oin rubbed a finger down his nose before offering a sigh. ‘He’s plenty bruised, probably with a few
fractured ribs and a couple of broken fingers. The blow to his head is the worst, though. Deep.
Something hit him hard, though I daren’t say what. There’s objects enough in that treasure room
that could cause such a thing.’

‘His name is Storn.’

Bilbo looked up, surprised to see Tholi, the dwarf who’d spoken with such quiet confidence about
Dale’s grain stores. Bofur stood to her right, looking more solemn than Bilbo had ever seen, while
Ori hovered to her left with a scroll of names clutched in his hands.

‘He was accounted for at roll call: one of Bofur’s team from working in the tunnel,’ Ori explained.

‘He’s a carpenter, really, but can turn his mind to most things.’ Tholi sucked in a breath, her forehead
pinching in a deep frown. ‘He had no reason to be in the treasury.

Her words hung in the air like fog, and Bilbo pursed his lips, knowing all too well how easy it could
be to jump to conclusions. ‘What can you tell us about him? He must have friends? Family?’
Bofur nodded, his hat wobbling on his head. ‘No kin, but he’s well-liked. I’ll ask around, see who he sat next to at the meal and why he left.

Someone cleared their throat, and Bilbo saw Grindl waiting at the bottom of the steps, his lined face grim and his hands full of a piece of wood: one of the boards they’d used to terrace the gold. It was broken in two, cleaved neat as anything, and judging from Grindl’s expression, it was no accident.

‘That’s our problem,’ he grumbled, setting the evidence on the table and sketching a quick, deep bow in Thorin’s direction. ‘Sabotage, Your Majesty. They took out the top board, and the weight of the gold tumbling down knocked out three more. We found this.’ He pulled a chisel out of his pocket, its flat blade dull and in poor repair.

To Bilbo, the tool looked like any other, but he could see it had gouged great fragments free from the planks that held back the hoard, weakening them to the point they split asunder.

Thorin took it from Grindl, shaking his head in confusion as he turned it over in his hands. ‘This is a masonry chisel. The blade is too broad to be suitable for use on wood.’

‘Wouldn’t a carpenter know better than that?’ Bilbo asked. ‘You did say that was his trade?’

Tholi nodded, but her mouth twisted behind her beard. ‘He was digging out the tunnels with us. That looks like one of our chisels. Maybe he just used what he had to hand?’

‘But why?’ Thorin looked around the room, his brow drawn into a deep scowl as he turned the chisel over in his hands. ‘Why sabotage the terrace boards while the treasure hall was empty and he was the only one likely to suffer? He is an older dwarf, well-versed in his craft. He would know to read the wood and damage it just enough to give way at a crucial moment. Not to mention he’d no doubt use the right tools for the job.’

‘It doesn’t make sense,’ Oin said, folding his arms. ‘Besides, there’s his injuries to consider.’ He gestured to the fingers he had carefully wrapped in splints. ‘They’re not crushed, but bent backwards. The swelling in his wrists suggests strain to the muscles there. If I had to guess, I’d say he held up at least one hand to ward off the cascade.’

‘He was buried under it,’ Bilbo mused, his thoughts spinning as he reconsidered his memories. ‘You terraced that peak yourself, Grindl. It was a flat bed of gold, and anyone hoping to chisel down through the wood had to be standing on top of it. Surely if Storn had been responsible, he wouldn’t have ended up at the bottom of the heap?’

‘All the bruises are to the front of him. Everything, except the big wound on the back of his head, suggests he was facing the hoard when it happened.’ Oin gestured to the quiet form on the bed. ‘Injuries tell a story, and I’m reading parts of this one loud and clear. I don’t think this dwarf is your culprit.’

Bilbo met Thorin’s gaze, knowing the same question was forefront in both their minds: If Storn didn’t do it, then who did?
The fire burned low in the grate, doing little to dispel the creeping chill. Thorin sat over a makeshift desk, his shoulders hunched and the reports of his Company spread before him. One in particular held his attention, and he absorbed Nori’s spidery scrawl with single-minded focus, carefully unlocking their pre-agreed cipher.

Whether it was Nori’s paranoia or common sense that led him to write in code, Thorin wasn’t sure, but he did not begrudge the dwarf his ways. It was part of what made him a valuable, if unorthodox, member of Thorin’s ramshackle court. He was good at ferreting out information and reading a crowd, and that was just what they needed.

Unfortunately, his missive didn’t tell Thorin anything new. It had been almost a week since the incident in the treasury, and still they were no closer to finding the truth. Storn lay as if asleep, wasting away as Oin dripped broth and water between his lips. His bruises had bloomed and his pulse remained strong, but the blow to his head had emptied his mind, leaving him nothing but a shell. Even Tauriel had tried working the magic of the elves, but he was not like Fili, simply lost; he was gone altogether, and he took his secrets with him.

Leaning back in his chair, Thorin put a hand over his eyes, struggling anew with the surge of fear that had assailed him that day. They had all been so sure that any sort of attack would be directed at him; even Balin had been convinced that was the greatest risk. Instead, Bilbo had found himself a target.

Why else would the culprit weaken the boards in the treasury, unless they were hoping to bury those who worked on the glistening slopes? Bilbo was there even now, toiling away, and Thorin’s heart twanged with dread. Every time the door opened, he feared someone was racing to bring him bad news, and he struggled to suck in a breath around the knot of terror that tightened in his chest.

Yet peace settled through Erebor once more. The food remained safe, the water ran clear, and the guards reported no sign of unrest. Even Nori, for all his digging, could find nothing of note. The mood of the mountain was vigilant but cheerful. They’d covered up the story of sabotage as best they could, using Storn’s unfortunate accident to deter people from wandering. It seemed to have worked. Dwarves and men alike were mindful of themselves and one another, and those few who strayed were soon found, innocently lost within the twisting halls.

Still, he could not find his ease. It was as if he had heard the first pebble shift on the mountainside and now waited for the landslide that would steal him away in thunder and darkness. Perhaps Bilbo was wrong; perhaps Storn had been the saboteur and had misjudged his efforts and suffered as a result. Maybe his mischief lay with him, bedridden and harmless, but Thorin could not bring himself to believe it.

It could have been Bilbo trapped beneath the toppled hoard, his small body crushed and bleeding, and no matter how hard he tried, Thorin could not shake that notion.

With a sigh, he propped his elbows on the table and buried his head in his hands, pressing against his eyes until flashes of light and colour dappled his vision. These useless imaginings were no good to him – a weakness he could not allow to grow. Bilbo was safe and well, protected by Ronin’s watch. Besides, the hobbit was neither as foolhardy nor as reckless as a dwarf. He’d not dash needlessly into
trouble. He had to have faith in Bilbo’s ability to look after himself…

Perhaps he’d check on him, just to be sure.

Straightening up, Thorin reached for Damám Barku. He had grown accustomed to the weight of the Blood Axe in his palm. Its strong form supported him, sparing his injured foot, but more than that, it made him feel as if he had found his rightful place. He had worn a crown on his brow during his sickness, but it was a parody of splendour. The beautiful weapon was something else entirely, spanning back not to his grandfather and his rotten rule, but centuries before. It was a constant reminder to Thorin of all that he should be: one that, even now, he felt he needed.

Stiffness seized him as he got to his feet, and he grimaced at the discomfort, flexing his toes inside the light boots. He had sat too long. Immobility was his enemy now, as Oin liked to remind him. The injured muscles of his body were healing, and prone to cramp. After so long bedridden, Oin urged him to stroll the halls as often as he could in safety. On the one hand, he relished the freedom, but on the other, the pain had him longing for respite.

Heaving a sigh, he cast a quick glance at his reflection, checking his beard and hair were neat and his face unmarked by ink or grime. He told himself it was because, as king, he owed it to his realm to be presentable, but deep down he knew he would not have spared it a thought if it were not Bilbo he intended to visit.

There had been little time for quiet moments between them since he had first emerged from the healing rooms. His duties were a heavy mantel to bear, calling to him at all hours. Bilbo, in turn, devoted himself to the treasury with extra fervour, attacking the hoard as if it were a personal bane. Perhaps the incident with Storn had lit some passion in him to be rid of the gold for good, or maybe something else underpinned Bilbo’s dedication. Either way, the result was that he was often gone when Thorin awoke and already slept when he returned to the royal room at night.

In those rare few moments when they were both awake and in one another’s presence, they were, by necessity, surrounded by guards, friends, kin or all three. At first, Thorin had borne it, telling himself that they would find a time for solitude. Yet as each day passed, he realised such a gift would not fall into his lap. If he wanted such a thing, then he would have to make it for himself.

‘I’m going to the treasury,’ he said as he stepped out of the door, scowling as Dwalin’s mouth curved in a grim smile. The guard opposite, a broad, squat man with a broken nose, sighed and flicked a silver coin in Dwalin’s direction. It disappeared into his meaty fist with a flash, and Thorin realised he had just won his old friend some kind of a bet.

‘About time,’ Dwalin grumbled, falling in at Thorin’s side. One hand rested on the axe at his hip, ready to draw it at a moment’s notice. ‘Thought you’d give in days ago.’

Other guards followed behind; Thorin recognised them all. Dwalin had been particular about his choice to protect not only Thorin, but Fili, Kili and Bilbo. Unlike the other soldiers throughout Erebor, they did not rotate in their duties. Instead, they dedicated themselves to the task of the royal household’s protection, and having the same faces around reduced the likelihood of an assassin infiltrating the inner circle.

‘Sorry to disappoint you,’ Thorin retorted in a dry voice. ‘Is there anything I need to know?’

Dwalin tugged on his earlobe before shaking his head. ‘All’s well, or as well as it can be. Unless you’ve heard any different?’ His eyes took on a shrewd slant, reading Thorin like an open book. They had too many shared years between them, on and off the battlefield, for him to miss the lines of strain and concern etched into Thorin’s face.
‘Nothing substantial. Just –’ He gestured weakly with his left hand, trying to encapsulate all the shadowy fears that had dogged his footsteps since the day they had found Storn. ‘A feeling. Something is brewing, and I fear Bilbo may be more central to it than any of us imagined.’

‘Aye.’ Dwalin nodded. ‘When I told you he could become a target, I didn’t expect it like this. I thought they’d use him to get to you, but this… It seems more sinister.’

Thorin swallowed, unnerved by Dwalin’s honesty. ‘Was it a mistake, courting him? Did I – has it just made things worse?’

‘Don’t be daft.’ Dwalin huffed, shaking his head. ‘What could we do for him if he weren’t yours? Guards on a hobbit would make everyone look twice, but soldiers for the one the king courts? No one questions it.’

‘Yet still, he’s in danger.’

‘And what of yourself?’ Dwalin asked, dropping his voice and pinning Thorin with a steely gaze. ‘Maybe no one’s gone for you, but there’s more than unrest to worry about. You’ve not entered the treasury since the sickness fled. Are you sure it’s wise to seek Bilbo out, rather than summoning him?’

‘Would he come?’ The words slipped out: another doubt taking shape, and Thorin clenched his teeth as Dwalin stared at him as if he were a simpleton. ‘I barely see him from one day to the next, he is so bent on his task. If he were a dwarf, I would fear him obsessed! As it is, I cannot shake the notion that he is avoiding me.’

Dwalin sighed, his shoulders heaving in dramatic effect as he looked up at the ceiling. ‘Mahal, I’d forgotten what a fool you are in love! Lose your heart and all common sense seems to follow it.’

Thorin bit his tongue, tempted to point out that his old friend had done his fair share of pining in the past. He could remember a time Dwalin was lost deep in his cups, lamenting the unobtainable nature of one lover or another. ‘You think I’m wrong?’

‘Aye, you’re wrong,’ Dwalin nudged him none-to-gently with his elbow. ‘See for yourself. Bet his face lights up the moment you step through the door.’

Thorin frowned, wishing he could have his friend’s faith. It wasn’t that he thought Bilbo fickle, but it was possible that Storn’s fate had opened his eyes to the realities of courting a king. Maybe he had seen, at last, the true dangers of their situation and sought to distance himself.

The idea sat in the pit of his stomach, rock heavy, and Thorin forced his thoughts away from their miserable meanderings. It was easy to let his imagination take off, bringing up one dread scenario after another, but he was more a fool than even Dwalin believed if he thought he knew Bilbo’s mind. The time to talk to him was long overdue, and he intended to rectify that as soon as may be.

Fervour filled Erebor’s halls. Men and dwarves alike had grown used to the lantern-pocked darkness, and the main corridors were thick with people.

One of the hunting teams had camped on the lake’s shore while the weather allowed it, and now they returned laden with fish. Bombur was directing them all to a storeroom, his round face pleased with the haul and the prospect of the hearty meat stews it would allow.

A flash of light from the main hall gave rise to shouts of surprise and triumph. The glow did not die away, but instead cast back the shadows, lifting the curtain of darkness from the walls. Thorin glanced up, seeing the dwarves hard at work. They hung from ropes looped over the support beams,
and the smoked glass in front of their eyes gleamed as they made adjustments. With every small
tweak, more sunlight filled the room from one edge to the other.

‘Took them long enough,’ Dwalin grumbled, following Thorin’s gaze. ‘Said it would only take a
day when they first got here.’

‘It was in a worse state of repair than they believed. With no way to make replacements for the
broken mirrors, they’ve had to scavenge from other assemblies throughout the mountain.’ Thorin
pinched the bridge of his nose, chasing off the headache that threatened whenever a new problem
came to the fore. ‘They have enough parts to get the two main arrays functioning again, but the rest
will have to wait until the thaw, if not longer.’

‘Two’ll do.’ Dwalin sniffed. ‘Save on fuel.’

Thorin nodded, pulling himself away from the pearly, sharp glow that had been unleashed into the
mountain. It allowed no secrets, and in its unforgiving halo the true disrepair of his kingdom became
clear. Dust and cobwebs were the least of their worries. Chipped stonework and subtle cracks lay
bare to the eye, and Thorin could already hear Gloin ordering his team to begin a more thorough
inspection.

Turning his back, he followed Dwalin along the corridors. Despite his reluctance to return to the hall
of gold that had once caught him so firmly under its thrall, his pace did not falter. How could it,
when he knew Bilbo would be waiting? Instead, his stride grew longer, and Dwalin did not even
bother to hide his amusement as a lustrous shine began to paint the walls and ceiling with reflected
light.

‘Sure you don’t want me to get him to meet you out here?’

Thorin paused, considering Dwalin’s question, but he had never been one to turn away from a
challenge. He remembered Bilbo’s vow to watch him for signs of the gold sickness, and he knew he
would not be alone. Every eye in that room would be upon him, ready to remove him if necessary.
Besides, he could not hide from Erebor’s wealth forever.

His grandfather had lost himself to greed long before the dragon tore their world apart. That same
weakness flowed in Thorin’s blood, and cleansing the gold would do nothing to abate it. He alone
could overcome it, and he would not make progress if he ran from temptation.

‘I’m sure.’

The first step through the door felt like treading off a precipice, and Thorin braced himself for the
same fog that had arisen through his mind when they had chased the dragon from the hoard. He
waited for the corners of his awareness to turn dim and wraithlike, but his head remained as clear as a
bell, focused and present as he scanned the room for his hobbit.

It was a world different from when he had last set foot in here. Gone were the organic, rolling
foothills of treasure. Now they were stepped and terraced, subdivided with precision engineering. A
ramp had been built to the top to help with the climb, and a series of pulleys and winches were in
constant motion, hauling sacks of gold down to the ground. Once there, they were loaded into carts
that ran along a makeshift line of rails. Where they led, Thorin could only guess, but he imagined
they would carve a path to the area where Gandalf sealed away the tainted riches.

A child’s laughter caught his ear, and he craned his neck, realising he was only seeing half of the
operation. Further in were a couple of shallow wooden pens and a great deal of crates and buckets.
Boys and girls worked diligently, first plucking large objects such as crowns free from the slew and
putting them to one side before grabbing handfuls of coin and separating the gemstones that hid among them.

It looked like time-consuming manual labour, but there was no sign of complaint on their faces. They gasped over swords and shields, rings and cuffs alike, warm and happy in the lamplight that surrounded them.

Thorin’s gaze fell on a desk nearby, and his heart lifted as he saw Bilbo and Ori bent over a book together. Something gleamed in Bilbo’s hand, and he realised they were trying to identify one of the treasures before putting it aside for storage.

Yet his stare was not for the ruby in the bowl of Bilbo’s palm. The spun gold of his hair and the dusky topaz hues in the shadow of his throat were the treasure Thorin sought. His years and the experiences they had shared lined his face, but he was still the most precious thing Thorin had ever seen. His entire body hummed at the sight of him, brought to life and captivated.

The weight of his gaze made Bilbo look up, and his smile could have lit the entire kingdom. His eyes danced with happiness, more brilliant than the gems at his feet, and he set the ruby down on Ori’s book, murmuring an apology before he trotted over, all eagerness and delight.

A smug noise of satisfaction caught in Dwalin’s throat before he stepped back, giving them a fraction of privacy. He had to admit it, his old friend was right. There was not a trace of reluctance in Bilbo’s face, only surprise and pleasure at the unexpected interruption.

‘Thorin, I didn’t think – is anything wrong?’ Concern clouded his expression, and Thorin hastened to reassure him.

‘No, everything’s fine,’ he promised, smiling as Bilbo took his hand and pulled him towards one of the nearby steps, dragging him down to sit beside him without ceremony. That was part of what he enjoyed about Bilbo’s company. Everyone in the mountain, even those who had known him for years, still never quite forgot he was king. To Bilbo, he was Thorin first and foremost, and he hoped he always would be.

‘I came to check on you,’ he confessed. ‘It seems we’ve shared barely more than a handful of words this past week.’

‘I know.’ Bilbo sighed, propping his elbows on the step behind him and leaning back as if he were sprawled on some hillside enjoying the sunshine. ‘I keep missing you. Every time I walk into a room you’ve just left.’ He wrinkled his nose. ‘I was starting to think you were avoiding me.’

Something slackened in Thorin’s chest, breaking away beneath a flood of relief. That they had shared the same unspoken fears made him feel less like a love-struck fool, lonely in his feelings. Bilbo had noted his absence. He had not wanted for company. Others were always talking about him to Thorin, honing the edges of his jealousy: they got to spend time with him when he did not. Yet despite friends aplenty within Erebor, Bilbo still felt the sour bite of their separation.

‘I apologise.’Thorin laid the Blood Axe down beside him, propping his elbow on his knee and resting his chin in his palm, his gaze arrested by the simple way Bilbo seemed to give himself over to the moment. ‘I assure you that was not the case. My duties –’

‘I know.’ Bilbo sat forward, the better to look Thorin in the eye. ‘Everyone wants your time, and there’s much to be done. It’s just my silly imaginings.’

‘Ones I share.’ Thorin looked off towards the hoard, sensing Bilbo’s attentive astonishment. ‘I’ve
seen so little of you, and talked to you even less. I was beginning to fear you preferred to keep your distance.’

A huff of laughter jolted Bilbo’s chest, and he shook his head in disbelief. ‘What a pair we make. I saw you were busy and thought my time was best spent here, trying to shift all this. We’re sorting through enough to feed the forge and furnace, but there’s just so much of it.’ He gestured to the gold, a mountain all its own, bowing to the engineering of the dwarves who sought to tame it. ‘Sometimes I feel we’re getting nowhere.’

‘And yet I can sit here and think nothing of it.’ Thorin inched closer, so that Bilbo’s shoulder brushed against his arm. ‘When I first set foot in this room, all that filled my head was the treasure and the Arkenstone. Now it’s almost irrelevant.’

‘That’s more down to you than anything we’re doing.’ Bilbo smiled, his belief like a beacon. ‘You’re focused on everything your kingdom needs, and you know that the gold is not the answer. You fell under its thrall once, but you’re too strong to do it again.’

He wished he could look on himself with so much faith. Bilbo spoke with such certainty, but all Thorin could think of was the way the whispering presence of the treasure faded with every passing hour. Walking in here, he had seen nothing of it because he had devoted all his attention to finding Bilbo. Now, there was a prickling awareness at the back of his mind, pressing down like a weight, not as overwhelming as it had been the day they reclaimed the mountain, but there all the same.

‘I think you give yourself too little credit, and me too much.’ He laughed as Bilbo tutted in disagreement. ‘It may seem like an endless task, but already people can feel the progress you’ve made. Erebor can breathe again, and we all sleep better at night thanks to your efforts and Gandalf’s spells.’

A shadow passed over Bilbo’s face, stealing his smile and stifling his joy. His brow folded into a frown, and the open palm that rested on his knee clenched into a fist, his knuckles like blades beneath his skin. ‘And what about Storn? I don’t think he has anything to thank me for, do you?’

Thorin paused, noting the quiet sadness in Bilbo’s voice and knowing that, in part, he had been right. Bilbo had taken what had happened to heart. ‘Have you found anything else to tell us who might have been responsible?’

‘No. Grindl showed me where they found the chisel. It was at least a few hundred paces from Storn. I suppose it could have been carried there when he dropped it, but…’

‘But you don’t think it was his fingers on the handle?’

‘Neither do you.’ Bilbo leaned against him, and he could feel the small shift of every breath. ‘The gold’s bad enough, polluted with the dragon’s cruelty. It’s already hurt people, and now this. Storn might never get better, and for what?’

Thorin moved his hand, wrapping it carefully around Bilbo’s shoulders, so much more slender than a dwarf’s. Even through the mithril and the clothes, he could feel the sharp wings of shoulder blades that should have been hidden beneath a comfortable layer of flesh. Helplessness was a bitter taste across his tongue, and he wished he could give Bilbo everything he wanted, from seven square meals a day to some peace of mind.

‘The guilt for Storn’s pain lies with whoever sabotaged the supports. You cannot hold yourself responsible,’ Thorin murmured.
'But if not for me…'

'If not for you, we would have none of this. No mountain, no kingdom, no treasure and no victory.' He tightened his embrace, gratified when Bilbo leaned in to the plane of his body. ‘You cannot blame yourself for this.’

‘But you can?’ Bilbo looked up at him from the corner of his eye, his gaze knowing. ‘You spend all hours reading reports from Nori and the others, trying to work out who might be responsible. Can you honestly tell me it’s only the safety of the kingdom that drives you?’

Thorin sighed, closing his eyes. ‘As much as I feel for Storn, he is not my main concern. I fear for you.’ His voice dropped, low and wretched at the admission, but for once there were no quick words of comfort. Bilbo did not brush aside his worries, but instead met them head on, his lips set in a grim line and his body tense.

‘It’s not just me who could have been hurt by what happened. Everyone here knows that. We check the supports every hour for signs of tampering and weakness, and again at dawn and after each meal. Perhaps if we’d done that from the beginning…’ He shrugged, and a raw welt of sympathy bloomed in Thorin’s chest. He knew what it was to second-guess yourself, to pretend that one action alone could rewrite history. How many times had he lost himself to fantasies of saving Erebor from Smaug’s destruction?

Yet dwelling in regret did not solve the problems of the present.

‘Bilbo.’ He removed his arm, spinning around so that he could kneel in front of the hobbit’s dejected form. It put them on the same level, and Thorin ducked his head, meeting Bilbo’s downcast gaze.

‘Bifur took a look at the sabotaged planks. The wounds inflicted by the chisel were still leaking sap. Whoever damaged those boards did it during the meal. Perhaps if guards were standing sentry, things would have been different.’

Bilbo scowled, and despite the seriousness of their conversation, Thorin was pleased to see some of his fire. ‘Oh no you don’t. I see where you’re going with this. You were the one who ordered that people guard the food, rather than the gold, and it was the right choice.’ He wagged a finger in Thorin’s face. ‘If I’m not allowed to blame myself, then neither are you.’

He sighed, visibly deflating before kicking at a coin near his bare foot. It skipped away, twinkling as it did so. ‘I suppose you’re right. Maybe none of us could have stopped whatever happened to Storn, but I still wish things were different.’

Before Thorin could reply, the booming sound of one of the great horns rang through the mountain, its deep tones filling every room and corridor. Bilbo looked around in alarm, but Thorin listened to the three repeating notes with care, remembering them from years ago.

‘A storm is coming,’ he explained, smiling as Bilbo sighed in relief. ‘Oin’s been grumbling about it for days. So far, the weather has been kind, but I fear our good fortune is at an end.’

‘Is everyone in?’ Bilbo asked, climbing to his feet and dusting off his trousers. Gold flecks fell from him in shimmering veils, and Thorin realised his clothes were equally adorned.

‘If they’re not, they’ll know to turn home.’ He grimaced, realising his brief respite with Bilbo had reached its end. All the tension he had been carrying had ebbed, its tangled knots no longer catching him in their grasp, but it was not enough. He longed to linger here, listening to whatever Bilbo had to say. He wanted to share the hours of the day and night, but duty called, and he could not refuse to answer. ‘I had best find Balin. No doubt there is plenty that needs my attention.’
He tried not to puff up his chest with pleasure and pride at the hobbit’s unmasked dejection. Instead, he rose, wrapping his hand around Bilbo’s shoulder and giving it an urgent squeeze. ‘I will be taking my evening meal in the healing rooms,’ he explained. Already, he ate in private as much as he attended the public halls, and such a decision would not cause any alarm. ‘Join me?’

The lines on Bilbo’s face grew shallow as his frown disappeared. Regret still shadowed his eyes, but it lost some of its strength at the hope of seeing him again. ‘I’d love to.’ Bilbo reached up, covering Thorin’s hand with his own in a typical dwarven gesture of promise. ‘I’ll see you then.’

Pulling away seemed like an impossible task. The contents of the treasury had once ensnared his mind in chains of gold and silver, but it was silken thread, warm and sensuous, that entangled him now. Bilbo had him under his spell, and it was one Thorin hoped to never break.

‘Go,’ Bilbo laughed, managing a shuffling step back, ‘Before Balin comes looking and berates me for stealing you from your duties. I’ll see you tonight.’

He nodded, allowing his hand to fall. ‘Stay safe, Bilbo.’

The hobbit drew a deep breath, holding it in between pursed lips before ducking his head. ‘You too.’

Clenching his teeth, Thorin forced himself to turn away. Parting from Bilbo felt like being torn from something essential. He ached with it, and it took all his strength just to walk from the room.

Dwalin joined him before he reached the threshold, and a glimpse of snowy white hair told him that Balin waited beyond the doorway. The old adviser had a piece of parchment in his hand and his battered spectacles perched on the end of his nose. His pencil moved across lines of text, jotting down whatever came to mind, but he looked up the moment he heard Thorin’s footsteps.

‘Tell me,’ Thorin ordered, knowing that Balin would not take insult at the lack of pleasantries. They had known each other too long to stand on small talk.

‘Until now, westerly winds have favoured us with good weather for this time of year, but change is on its way. The Mahakhkhadikûn blows, and with it come the storms.’ Balin gestured towards the main hall, bidding Thorin to follow him as Dwalin took up the rear, watching their backs as always. ‘I am afraid it may be a while before our hunting parties can venture out again.’

‘There is other work to occupy them, as long as our stores will last.’

‘That’s the question.’ Balin removed his glasses and rubbed at one eye. ‘Bombur’s the best judge of it. He’s waiting for you, as is the rest of the Company.’ The old dwarf glanced over his shoulder, checking that his brother was out of earshot before he dropped his voice, leaning close so Thorin could hear him. ‘And how fare things with Master Baggins?’

Thorin allowed his scowl to deepen. His bad humour only made Balin shake his head in amusement. ‘That well, eh?’ Something must have caught his attention, because his mirth soon faded, and a growing cloud of concern shadowed his features. ‘Lad, you know if there’s anything I can do to help, you need only ask.’

‘Thank you. It’s…’ He trailed off, biting back familiar protests about complicated situations. Balin had heard it all before. Besides, his old friend’s words had been like a kick in the gut, reminding him once again that, to Bilbo at least, their courtship was a false one. How soon he forgot!

He realised Balin was waiting for him to finish his sentence, yet he could only wave a dismissive hand. ‘What we need is time and solitude, and now I am healed we have neither.’
Balin tilted his head in consideration, and Thorin wondered what ideas raced through the old dwarf’s mind. As king he may be the one to rule the mountain, but he knew it was Balin who kept it running like a well-oiled machine, even in the worst of times. ‘Funny you should say that. There’s been talk. Nothing bad,’ he said as Thorin bristled. ‘It’s not passed anyone’s notice that you and Bilbo work all hours. The people praise your dedication, but they would not begrudge you time to attend more, ah, personal concerns.’

His smile was both teasing and affectionate, and Thorin tried to douse the heat in his cheeks. He could guess what the citizens of Erebor probably expected. As far as they all knew, the wooing had been done and Bilbo was his. If only it were that easy.

‘What do you suggest?’

‘So far, we have lacked the routine of a proper court. There has been no schedule in which to meet with your advisers nor hear complaints. Perhaps it is time for change.’ Balin fiddled with the paper in his hands, his lips moving soundlessly as he thought it over. ‘Leave it with me. I’ll see what can be done.’

He beckoned Thorin to follow him once more, leading the way towards the main hall in silence. Around them, the air was full of excitement and dread. Here, in the north, storms were a serious business, and everyone was busy preparing for what was to come.

‘Any messages need to go to Ravenhill immediately!’ Gloin called out, his voice booming as he slapped his palm on a satchel. ‘It could be your last chance for a month or more!’ Several people hurried up, thrusting scraps of folded parchment at the dwarf. Even Balin pulled an envelope from his coat and tucked it in the bag.

‘For Dain, since I doubt you’ve had the time to let him know how things fare here.’

‘Thank you, old friend.’ Thorin sighed, easing past a couple of gossiping men as Gloin gave the messages to Bain. Bard’s son took off like a horse from a stable, sure-footed and fast as he hurried to deliver his burden. There would be dwarves waiting with the ravens to see the messages off safely before they closed up the shutters against the incoming snow.

Stepping through the large doors, Thorin surveyed the main hall. It remained much the same: tables clustered around the north fireplace while the sleeping area lay to the south. Bedrolls and makeshift mattresses staked out small territories, with those nearest the hearth being prime spots reserved for the injured, the old and the young, who were more vulnerable to the cold.

In the middle was another fire, bigger and more crude. It had become a place for people to congregate, maintaining friendships and forging new ones. The smoke rose in a grey pall, drifting towards the open shutters in the ceiling that let in the rapidly fading sunlight.

‘The people are well enough,’ Balin promised. ‘They’re a resilient bunch. Even the dwarves from the Iron Hills, who’ve not seen hard times for many a year, are taking their lot without complaint.’

‘Most of them,’ Thorin corrected under his breath, his gaze roving the chatting faces and wondering which among them had taken a chisel and hammer to the terracing boards in the treasury. It galled him to think that somewhere in among the people he had grown to know was one who would bring all their tentative success crashing down around their ears.

Bombur waited for them at one of the eating tables, which had been set aside as a meeting place. All of the Company bar Ori and Bilbo stood around it, as well as a few other familiar faces: dwarves and men alike who had become knowledgeable aides in all their efforts.
Bard was the last to join them, striding across the room with the kind of purpose that made people scatter before him. It amused Thorin to see so much of Girion in his descendent. Although he could not recall much beyond a stern kindness to the old Lord of Dale, the resemblance was still striking.

‘All the hunting parties are in,’ Bard began, taking a seat among the standing dwarves. The other men and women did the same, and Thorin wondered if it was a deliberate act to even out the height difference between their races. ‘The storm is not more than half an hour away, if that.’

‘Sky’s like pewter,’ Oin added, ‘and the scryings don’t look good. We should be prepared to hunker down for a fortnight or more.’

Thorin grimaced. Back before the dragon, he could remember such winters. However, long hours trapped inside a resplendent kingdom were no hardship. Now it was another matter.

‘We can sit it out,’ Bombur promised. ‘The hunt’s brought in plenty of game. It might not be a banquet, but we’ll be fed. In a perfect world, there’d be more variety. We’ve some potatoes left from Dain, but not much, and most vegetables don’t last.’

Thorin smirked, knowing that the dwarves would not be fussed by the lack of greenery, but the absence of grain was a growing problem. Even flat bread could go a long way to assuage hunger. ‘What of the passage to Dale?’

‘Well, do you want the good news or the bad news?’ Bofur asked, heaving a sigh when his only response was a stern look from Balin. ‘All right, bad news first. The grain stores were useless. Nothing in there but bare stone and mud.’

Thorin bowed his head, his faint hope dying away. ‘And the good news?’

‘This.’ Tholi put a small pot of shiny, viscous liquid on the table. ‘This is just a sample. There are huge vats of it.’

Thorin picked it up, sniffing cautiously and recognising the thick, heavy aroma. ‘Oil?’

‘It’s not the best, not after a century or more sitting unused, but it’ll burn.’ Bofur grinned. ‘We already tried. There’s wood as well, dry as a bone and ready to set alight. At my estimate, it’s enough to keep us, and at least two forges, going until the thaw.’

That stroke of fortune resonated around the table like a collective sigh of relief, and Thorin sensed their situation become a little less futile. Light and warmth went a long way to lifting the spirits when the sun barely bothered to show its face. ‘Start filling the lamps. Keep the corridors lit and the fires stoked. We’ll close as many doors and shutters as we can to trap the heat where it belongs.’

‘Actually, about that. Kili and I have been talking to the dwarves working the forges,’ Fili said, tugging a faded old plan into the middle of the table. ‘Back in King Thror’s time, we had a lot of systems in place to use the excess heat. That’s how we’ve got hot water to wash our hands and, once they’re repaired, fill the baths, but there were air vents too.’

‘Here.’ Kili pointed eagerly to the conduits that drilled through the core of the rock, deep enough not to destabilise the mountain, but adequately shallow to help spread their heat. ‘Some are working, but we think there’s been a collapse somewhere. It’s stopping the hot air rising as it should.’

‘What do you propose?’ Thorin asked, watching his nephews share a glance. He knew they had been spending time in the forges, but he had not questioned their reasons. ‘Clearing a blockage will involve shutting off the furnaces, which would lose us heat and fuel.’
‘We know. It’s not an option, not until the summer, but what about the old living quarters for the workers?’ Fili explained. ‘Scores of rooms, all empty.’

‘They don’t need fires in the grates.’ Kili’s grin was infectious as he looked around the table. ‘Not with the furnaces right there. There’s also another, smaller hall nearby. It’s further from the kitchens, but…’

‘Kitchens can be moved,’ Bombur interrupted, his large shoulders bobbing in a shrug. ‘It would be hard work, but say the word and I’ll see it done.’

‘We already had Gloin and Bifur check them over for problems, but they’re in a fairly good state. The dragon didn’t bother with that part of the mountain.’ Fili smoothed his palm over the chart in front of him before dropping his voice and meeting Thorin’s gaze. ‘I know there’s an issue with security, but crowded together like this, people can come and go without notice. Giving everyone their own space makes it easier for them to watch each other.’

Thorin nodded, seeing how his nephews’ idea came with its own advantages and problems. On the one hand, so close to the forges they could conserve fuel and take deeper shelter from the elements. Added privacy would boost morale, and giving individuals their own space would help Erebor feel like home to many.

However, it may also give those seeking to plot against the throne the seclusion they needed to bring their plans to fruition. It all depended on whether they faced a rebellious individual, or an underground movement.

‘Dwalin, what do you think?’

The old soldier leaned forward, his hulking frame shadowing the schematic as he viewed it with a strategist’s eye. One thick finger traced various routes, counting entrances and exits as he formulated a plan. ‘The area near the furnaces is shut off from everywhere else, in case something goes wrong. Strong walls and limited entry make it easy to protect. While we might not be able to watch everyone, Fili and Kili have it right. It will be far more difficult for anyone to get lost in a crowd.’

He grunted, giving a single, decisive nod. ‘Do it, but on one condition.’

‘What?’

‘There’s a set of chambers off to the west, probably belonging to the old overseer. They only have a single way in or out, and are at the very heart of the mountain: make them your staterooms when Oin’s ready to let you go.’ Dwalin folded his arms across his chest, nodding in satisfaction at his own idea.

‘Protecting you around the place is challenge enough, and one that’s not going away any time soon, but keeping you safe in a room this size is impossible with the number of guards I have.’ He gestured around the main hall in emphasis. ‘There’s too many sniping spots, too many opportunities for something to go wrong…’ He shook his head, rubbing a thumb over the cuff high on his ear. ‘The good that comes of moving down to the forges outweigh the bad.’

Thorin shifted his weight, meeting the eyes of everyone around the table before giving his agreement. ‘See it done. The hunting teams are stuck inside until the weather clears. Get them to help clean up and make repairs. Bombur, work with Gloin and whoever else you need to move the kitchen and food stores.’

‘What about the oil in Dale?’ Bard asked, turning to Bofur for an explanation. ‘How are we going to
get it into the mountain?’

‘A step ahead of you there,’ Bofur replied. ‘We moved it all into the tunnel as soon as we found it. Won’t take much to carry it home, and the passage is safe from the storm.’

Bofur’s triumphant smile faltered, crumbling into a frown as something across the hall caught his eye. He wasn’t the only one who noticed, and several other heads turned to peer at the new arrivals.

Thorin heard the clatter of armour long before he saw a pair of guards pushing their way through the crowd. Pale-faced, they stumbled to a halt, sweat glistening on their brows as they panted for air. The man was the first to straighten up, his voice little more than a wheeze as he struggled to explain.

‘It’s Ronin, sir.’ He spoke to Dwalin, but his eyes slid sideways to Thorin, wide and fearful. ‘There’s been an attack.’

‘What happened?’ Dwalin barked, his teeth gritted, but Thorin put a hand on his forearm, pulling him back as his own breathless question caught in his throat.

‘What about Master Baggins?’ A shiver of apprehension coiled around his spine. Ronin rarely left Bilbo’s side, taking his orders to guard the hobbit with the upmost seriousness. If Ronin had been hurt, then what had become of Bilbo?

The two soldiers looked as if they were wishing themselves miles away. Both stood to attention, so rigid they could have been carved of stone, but it was the dwarf who spoke, her voice tight with anger and concern. ‘We’re sorry, Your Majesty. We don’t know where he is.’

Panic rose in Thorin’s throat like gorge. His legs ached with the need for action as his hand clenched into a helpless fist, but his mind was at a loss. Where to even begin? He could barely think around the shrill fears that buzzed in his head, drowning out the world around him.

‘Tell us everything,’ Balin ordered, holding onto Thorin’s shoulder. It was a feeble weight, one he could shrug off in an instant, but Balin’s expression held him back. ‘Taking the time to find out more now could save us wasting precious minutes, Your Majesty. Let’s listen to what they have to say.’

‘We found Ronin in the east corridor,’ the dwarf replied, shifting forward as her voice hardened. ‘He’d been struck on the head, hard enough to knock him out cold.’

‘Moved too,’ the man added, ‘but we don’t know from where. There wasn’t any blood on the floor where we found him. He was in a room well off the beaten track, just dumped in the corner like so much rubbish. We stumbled on him by luck more than anything else.’

‘Was he restrained?’ Dwalin asked, scowling when the soldiers shook their heads. ‘Knocked out but not killed, and not tied up to prevent him raising the alarm when he woke?’ He sucked in a breath through his clenched teeth, the lines on his face deepening as he scowled.

The heavy sickness in Thorin’s stomach only worsened. He knew what his old friend was thinking. If Ronin had been the target, his attacker would have finished him off. Instead, he was an inconvenience, something to be removed so the culprit could get to the one he really wanted.

Bilbo.

‘Fili, Kili, take six guards and scour the corridors near where Ronin was found. Look for blood, signs of a struggle, anything.’ Thorin swallowed hard, forcing his mind away from its terrified imaginings. His sister-sons seemed worried as it was, pale and determined as they rushed off to do as they were told. ‘Dori, Nori and Bofur: go to the treasury. See if anyone knows where Bilbo might
have gone. Search everywhere along the way.’

He turned to Dwalin, who shook his head, a faint apology on his unmoving features. ‘I’m not goin’ anywhere without you.’ He folded his arms. ‘If Bilbo’s been taken, you know as well as I do someone could be using him as bait.’

‘We’ll go to the healing rooms.’ Balin raised his hand, cutting off any protests before Thorin could wrap his fear-thick tongue around them. ‘Ronin was probably the last to see Bilbo, and will no doubt tell us more as soon as he wakes. We should be there when he does.’

Thorin wanted to argue, to sprint off and tear his kingdom apart in the search, but it was no good. He didn’t even know where to begin. The cold seemed to have struck down into his bones, like someone had painted over his skin in ice and left him in its shell.

Bilbo was gone?

He had sat at his side not that long ago, talking softly of little things. Now his hobbit was missing, and while he hoped with all his being that he’d simply wandered off, something deep in Thorin’s being knew that this was nothing so innocent.

He walked in a daze, looking into every corner and doorway, searching for a glimpse of golden hair and laughing eyes. The blast of the horn echoed along the corridors anew, announcing stormfall. Winter was finding its true reign beyond the thick walls of Erebor, but Thorin could not muster a moment’s concern. He would worry about the weather when he knew Bilbo was safe. Not before.

The healing rooms loomed around him, all colour and sound in a world that had turned grey. The heat was almost oppressive, and Thorin focussed on Oin, who looked older and more worn than ever. ‘Before you ask, he’s not awoken,’ the healer said, ‘though not for want of trying on my part.’

‘How bad is it?’ Thorin asked, thinking of Storn, dead in all but reality.

‘Bad enough,’ Oin grumbled, gesturing to the sticky mass of hair at Ronin’s temple, the blood already dry, ‘but it could be worse. He’ll rouse if I have my way.’ He reached out, plucking a tiny vial from his bag and uncorking it at arm’s length. He did not thrust it beneath Ronin’s nose, but simply held it near his face, watching for any sign of change.

Dark lashes fluttered as Ronin’s nostrils flared. He moaned in disgust, and Oin quickly stopped the bottle again, setting it aside before placing a hand on Ronin’s chest. ‘Easy lad, easy. No dashing off now, or you’ll be sorry.’

‘Ronin, can you hear me?’ Thorin dropped to one knee at the bedside, watching hazy eyes flicker open. At first, they were like glass, blind and uncomprehending, but they found their focus as realisation dawned in Ronin’s pain-pinched face.

‘Baggins,’ he managed, half-rising despite Oin’s warnings before reeling back and lifting a hand to clutch at his head. ‘Master Baggins!’

‘Do you know where he is?’ Thorin demanded, desperation roughening his voice. ‘Do you know what happened? Tell me!’

Ronin’s pallor turned sickly, but Thorin saw where the iron will of the dwarf railed against the frailty of his body. It was a bonfire in his eyes, fierce and furious as he spoke through gritted teeth. ‘There’s a door to the outside, south-west of the treasury. Small, for workers and servants. He – he wanted some fresh air.’
‘And you allowed it?’

Ronin closed his eyes, regret carved deep into his face. ‘He went no further than the open doorway. He was right there.’ He reached out a hand in emphasis. ‘I could have snatched him back in at any moment, but…’ He shook his head and smothered a cry of misery at the movement. ‘I don’t know what became of him.’

Boots thumped down the steps, and Thorin looked up to see his sister-sons skid to a halt. ‘We found it, the door Ronin mentioned,’ Fili said, no doubt having overheard part of the soldier’s report, ‘but there’s a problem.’

‘It’s been wedged shut. Someone’s hammered chunks of rock into the hinges,’ Kili waved a fretful hand, shaking his head. ‘We’ve already got someone working on it, but it’ll take hours.’

‘We couldn’t hear anything on the other side. We called through, but …’ Fili shrugged, looking helplessly at his uncle. He knew well enough how thick the walls were. Even if Bilbo was right there, he probably wouldn’t be able to pick out Fili’s voice through the dense stone.

Thorin leapt up, ignoring the pain in his foot as he marched across the room. Already he had delayed too long. The storm grew more ferocious with every passing moment, and his heart shuddered in his chest to think of Bilbo trapped out there, lost, wounded or worse.

‘Wait!’ Balin blocked his path, unmoving as Thorin loomed over him. ‘How do we know this isn’t some effort to lure you from the mountain? It’s possible that whoever did this snatched Bilbo and hid him, much like Ronin, before blocking up the door and hoping we would jump to the obvious conclusion.’

The old dwarf’s face twisted with misery, torn between concern for Bilbo and his duty to the safety of his king and the realm, but Thorin was far beyond the voice of reason. He would not sit idly by and wait for news. Such indifference was not within his grasp.

‘Search every room if you believe yourself to be right,’ he ground out, shouldering Balin aside and taking the steps two at a time. ‘I’ll not waste precious moments on such hopes!’

The corridors slipped past unnoticed; lamplight and shadows charted his journey. Footsteps echoed behind him, but he paid them no mind. If his followers sought to hold him back, they would find a fight on their hands.

He marched into the entrance hall, his gaze fixed on the towering portal that barred the outside world from sight. ‘Open the doors!’ he ordered, his voice roaring up towards the distant ceiling and his breath steaming in the brumal air. ‘Do it!’

A hand fell on his shoulder, and Thorin twisted, his lips quivering over a snarl before he realised it was neither kin nor Company who reached out for him. Bard stood, his furs and boots already in place and a long, thick line of rope looped over his back. Behind him were men, women and dwarves in similar gear, all solemn and still like an army awaiting their orders.

‘Let us help you.’ Bard jerked his head towards the doors. ‘It’s snowing so hard you can barely see your hand in front of your face. If we lash ourselves together, we can search for Master Baggins in relative safety.’

‘You’ll be needing these,’ Fili said, thrusting a thick, tatty fur into Thorin’s arms, along with hide gauntlets and solid, greased boots that would keep out the ice. ‘And we’re coming with you. No arguments.’
‘Bilbo is family.’ Kili met his uncle’s eye, his chin stuck in the same stubborn line he had seen so many times before. Fili’s expression was just as determined, and any argument Thorin could make would fall on deaf ears. Logically, he knew Fili as heir should stay. To lose a king to the winter would be bad enough, but to lose them all…

Yet if he told them not to come with him they would simply sneak out, away from his watchful eye and alone but for each other. No, better they were with him and protected than left to their own devices.

‘Balin, stay here. You are in charge until I return. Dwalin, you’re with me.’

‘O’ course.’ Dwalin gave a firm nod to his brother, some unspoken communication passing between them. ‘Keep a weather eye. If this is a ruse to get us out of the mountain, it’s bloody well working.’

‘Fret not, brother mine.’ Balin sighed, resigned. ‘Leave me half your guard and I’ll make sure there’s a kingdom to come back to when you return with Master Baggins.’

He did not mention the chance of failure, for which Thorin was grateful. He could not let his mind linger on what they might find. If he did, he would crumple like wet paper: useless when Bilbo needed him most.

Pulling up his hood, Thorin looked towards Bard, giving a quick nod as the doors swung open, letting in a frigid blast that stole the breath and clutched at the heart. The wind shrieked, ghastly in its rage. The air hung thick with a lashing veil of snow and ice, and a slate grey gloom covered the land.

Clenching his teeth, Thorin strode forward, his mind firm of purpose and his body braced for the trial ahead. He would succeed; there was no other option. Winter would not take his hobbit.

Chapter End Notes

"Mahakhkhadikûn" is a dwarvish word meaning "He who is always biting". It sounded like a good name for a type of wind!
Fool of a hobbit!

Bilbo beat his fist against the bare rock, scrabbling in panic as he tried to find the seam of the door in its implacable grey face. Curse dwarves and all their secrets; even his sharp eyes couldn’t pick out the threshold he had stood in a moment before.

‘Ronin?’ His call quivered around him, steaming in the air, and he pressed his ear to the granite, straining to hear any reply. The only response was a strange sound, muffled almost to silence by the rock, as if someone were beating frantically on the other side. ‘Ronin!’ He slammed his palm into the stone, trying to match the rapid staccato, but it did him no good. The door did not swing open once more. The sanctuary of Erebor, which he had been so eager to escape a few minutes ago, was shut to him.

‘Blast!’ With a sigh, Bilbo turned, tipping back his head to look at the ominous clouds above him. As if it had been awaiting an audience, it began to snow in great fat flakes. At first, they were a delicate veil, but soon the land was hidden behind a curtain of white

All he had wanted was a few minutes under the open sky. When Thorin had told him a storm was coming, one that could see them locked away for months, the faint itch for the outside world that had lived beneath Bilbo’s skin flared into desperation. Perhaps the gold bothered him after all. Maybe its taint set in slower than it did for the dwarves, but he had longed for the caress of clean, cold air: anything to sweep aside the oily feeling of the treasury.

Now he was paying for his selfishness.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Bilbo strained his memory to try and recapture the last few moments. It had all happened so quickly. He could recall Ronin voicing his doubts, his politeness giving way to exasperation as Bilbo insisted. As a hobbit, he did not care about his pride and would have resorted to begging, but such things were frowned upon in the dwarvish world. Instead, he had turned his wishes into a command, one that Ronin couldn’t disobey, even if he wanted to.

In the end, they had reached a compromise. There was a doorway nearby, secluded and sheltered from the worst of the wind. Ronin would keep watch while he stood in its open arch. That way, he was not technically going outside, but he could still taste the air he so keenly desired.

Bilbo rubbed his fingers together, remembering the cold kiss of the door against them. He’d kept one hand to the rock – his tether – while he strained forward, breathing as deep as he could and feeling the ash of the dragon’s power slough away. Then he’d heard a meaty crunch and a heavy thud. Something strong and unyielding had shoved at him, sending him sprawling onto hard earth as the leaden boom of the portal swinging shut reverberated in his ears.

Concern churned in his belly, and he pressed the heel of his hands to his eyes, taking deep breaths as the cold began to seep through his skin, making his lungs burn and his teeth rattle. Thorin would be worried sick when he found out. If he found out. After all, Ronin was the only one who knew where he was, and Bilbo had no idea what had become of him. Did he lie injured, or was he the one who had locked him outside to face the elements alone?

The wind picked up, shrieking like a wild thing, and Bilbo curled in on himself. Forget suffering, if he stayed here he would be dead before the hour was out. That was probably what his attacker wanted all along: a bloodless assassination. Well, he was not about to stand around awaiting rescue!
He had managed goblins and spiders and the Valar knew what else on the journey. Somewhere, there would be another door and damn it all if he wasn’t going to find it!

Bending his head, he folded his arms across his body, gathering his scant clothing close. It was hot, hard work in the treasury, and Bilbo wore little more than his shirtsleeves and trousers. What he would give for a thick fur, or failing that the warm kiss of the fireside!

His bare toes were numb and swollen before he had gone more than a dozen paces, and he scowled as the snow grew deeper by the moment. He had never known hobbits to have trouble in the past. They strode about unshod year-round, but this was another matter. How long would it be until it was too deep to walk through? Would it bury him, or would the wind keep it in the air, dancing forever?

Already, the fall had thickened to a blizzard so dense he could barely see his hand in front of his face. Ravenhill was lost in the ravaging maw of the clouds, and there were no stone outcrops or trees in sight. It was as if the world had been wiped clean, set back to a blank page, and he was the only living thing upon it.

Stretching out his arm, he pressed his palm flat against the mountainside, using its bones as an anchor. It was all he had to guide him as he inched along, following the curve of the land and squinting as he searched for some way to get inside.

He rounded a corner, and the tempest hit him in all its ferocity. The wind became a solid thing, slamming into him like a wall as ice lashed his cheeks. Taking a breath was impossible, and Bilbo huddled into the rock, pressing his face to the unforgiving surface and gasping for air.

His foolishness slid into startling focus. He had not realised the true cruelty of the storm, and he choked back a fretful whine as he considered his choices. Moving on was no longer an option. Perhaps it would be better to wait by the door and hope for rescue? Maybe he could build himself some kind of shelter or den in the snow, and at least the shadow of the mountain would protect him from the worst of the gale.

A sound teased the edge of his hearing, and Bilbo’s heart lifted. Had someone already come looking for him? Was that them calling his name?

The noise came again, and his growing smile fell from his face. Relief vanished beneath a flood of fear, and he hunched down where he stood, small and motionless. That was no voice. No words drifted on the wind towards him. Instead, a guttural growl reached his ear, igniting every instinct. Panic clawed at his throat, and Bilbo inched his head to the side, the better to look the way he had come.

A wolf. Snow rimed its pelt, but it seemed to feel nothing of the elements. Amber eyes bore into him, and the fur along its spine was like the rough edge of a knife. It bared its teeth, its ears perked forward and intent as it prepared to pounce.

Bilbo fled, as mindless as any rabbit. His body acted without his brain in a fevered bid to escape. Ice flew beneath his feet, the cold forgotten as the need to survive overrode everything else. He had sense enough to pick ground where the snow still lay shallow, rather than getting bogged down in the deepening drifts, but with every moment he expected the heavy weight of the beast on his back and the clamp of its jaws around his throat.

It never came.

A rocky outcrop loomed in Bilbo’s vision, and he raced towards it, crouching in the meek shelter it could offer as he gasped for air. Sweat froze on his skin, harsh and biting. His body shook,
exhausted from its efforts but still on high alert, and his belly rolled with the greasy nausea of too much work and not enough food.

The mountain was nowhere in sight, and he spat a curse as he realised how thoroughly he had lost his bearings. Whiteness stretched all around. There was no sky or land, nor a horizon to divide the two. There was only the rock at his back and the endless winter in every direction.

A dark shape moved off to his right, and he groaned as he saw the same wolf. It had stalked him at its own pace, conserving its energy while he wasted his. Could he run again? Not far and certainly not fast. The weather sapped what little strength he had, the cold robbing him of everything, and the predator probably knew it.

His fingers curled in the snow beneath him, groping for something he could use as a weapon. He scrambled through his memories, trying to recall what could drive off a wolf, but nothing came to mind other than fire or a fearsome blade, and neither of those were within his grasp. All he had were his wits, and considering today’s actions, they weren’t much to boast about.

Climbing the rock was pointless. It was too short to put him out of the beast’s reach. The wolf could knock him off with no difficulty, and then where would he be? Laid out for it on the ground like a deer on a platter.

At least, he supposed, it did not seem to have a pack. Perhaps it was a lone creature, preferring its solitude. It did not look like it shared its meals. It was huge and heavy set, far larger than even the biggest dogs he had seen shambling along at the men’s heels. It could probably eat him in one bite, and Bilbo wet his lips as he tried to think of a way out of his predicament.

The ring!

He scrabbled in his pocket, pulling it free and shoving it on his finger. Hissing shadows enveloped his sight, but it was nothing compared to the cold that drove into his ribs. Never before had it been like this, so fierce that the blizzard in the real world seemed humid in comparison. Tears of surprise froze on his lashes, and he writhed in an effort to escape the pain. His heels drummed on insubstantial earth before his scrabbling fingers managed to wrench the ring off once more.

Bilbo lay gasping, bile rising in his throat. Every part of him hurt, cold and hot and throbbing all at once. His skin felt raw, as if he had been dragged through cut glass, and his eyes burned between his fluttering lashes.

Weak and coughing, he forced himself onto all fours, panic painting spots across his vision. The wolf was still there, unperturbed by his brief disappearance. Its nostrils flared, and Bilbo’s heart sank as he realised the ring probably didn’t hide his scent. Not that it mattered. He couldn’t put it on again. He would rather endure the snap of the wolf’s jaws around his throat than the obliterating pain of the shadow world, so much more vile than it had ever been before.

The creature hunched, muscles coiling as it readied to spring. Drool dripped from its mouth, smattering in the snow, and Bilbo breathed a weak and helpless prayer. After everything he had been through, it seemed unfair that this was how he would die: a tasty meal for some wild beast – not even a beast of evil, but a wolf like any other.

Thoughts chittered around his head, and his fingers scraped against loose gravel. As weapons went, they were futile, but perhaps it could buy him a moment’s time.

His arm felt like string, weak and useless as he flung the pebbles in a flailing arc. The smaller ones pocked the snow, but one or two clattered, raising odd, glistening sounds in their wake as they
bounced along.

Ice. Now Bilbo looked he could see the dim halo of a shoreline, barely visible beneath winter’s thickening blanket. He stood on solid ground, but the animal was inching across the frozen plane, its paws spread wide as it crept closer. Bilbo suspected the only reason he wasn’t already dead was because the wolf didn’t know what to make of him. He was not its usual prey, but he doubted he had long before it decided to try its luck.

A sudden roar rolled through the air, coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once. The very ground seemed to shake with it, and the animal flinched, its pointed head turning to stare off into the snow.

Bilbo didn’t think it was possible he could be more frightened, but a new layer of terror gilded him, pushing him through and out the other side where any risk was worth it. Blindly, he lunged downward, his fingers closing around a rock about the size of his fist. Hobbits were no great shakes with most weapons, and without a slingshot he had little hope this would work, but he was willing to try anything just to get out of here.

He raced forward, his arm swinging in a circle as he sent the flint soaring towards the wolf. If the creature had been watching him, it would have danced out of reach, but it was distracted by whatever beast it had heard. Instead, it saw nothing as the sharp stone struck it on the head, in the hollow to the side of its eye.

Bilbo had hoped the shock would make the wolf run. He did not expect it to crash to the ice like a puppet with its strings cut. Its paws twitched, claws scrabbling as it tried to find its feet, but after a breathless eternity, it let out a gusty gasp before falling still.

A few spots of blood tinted the snow, and Bilbo inched closer, craning his neck to get a better look. Its eyes were open, blind and unseeing. Those fearsome jaws hung slack, and he could just make out the point where the stone had hit: a lucky shot smashing into a vulnerable spot.

Sagging in relief, Bilbo shook himself awake. There was no time to linger here. The wolf wasn’t the only thing that stalked the world outside Erebor’s halls. He had to find the mountain and reach its sanctuary, but how? Squinting, he tried to make out anything in the murk, but it was useless. Even his footprints were gone, leaving him with no trail to follow home, and Bilbo let out a tight noise of misery and frustration.

A shape loomed at him out of the gloom, and he cried out in fear, stepping back without thinking. The ice groaned in warning, but too late Bilbo realised his mistake. Perhaps it had not been frozen long, or the wolf’s collapse had cracked it. Either way, it could not bear his weight, and he plunged into the inky waters below.

The cold seized him like a steel trap, locking his limbs and dragging him down. Shock had him sucking in a breath, but beneath the water’s surface there was no air to greet him. Liquid blazed down his throat and burned in his lungs, turning his world dark at its edges as he struggled against the pull of his clothes and the twining temptation of the weeds.

Something grasped his flailing right hand, locking around his wrist. The strength behind that grip was immense, and Bilbo shut his eyes as he was hauled upwards, coughing and spluttering in the storm-whipped air. His head ached, and his chest throbbed like a fresh bruise. Every breath made it worse, until he was hacking up fluid and bile, helpless to assist his rescuer as his body concentrated on the simple task of living.

He was dragged along the ground without apology before huge arms lifted him as if he were nothing
more than a rag doll. The fragrance of wood-smoke, fresh straw and wet fur assailed his nose; a familiar scent, but not one he’d experienced for a while. Snivelling and gasping, feeling like something halfway to death, he forced his eyes open and looked up into the face of the person carrying him to safety.

‘Beorn?’ His voice was a rasp in his throat, drowned out by the wind, but the shape-changer heard him anyway, offering him a solemn nod as he trudged through the snow.

‘You should not be out in such a storm, little hobbit.’

Bilbo sagged, wishing he had the strength in him to retort. He felt utterly spent, soaked to the skin and beyond the reach of even Beorn’s impressive heat. His mind was swimming, and he was too weary to summon a shiver.

Beorn shifted Bilbo’s weight, cradling him in his arm before stooping down and grabbing something else from the ground. It took Bilbo a moment to realise that it was the wolf’s corpse. He hadn’t noticed Beorn dragging it by its tail, but now the body lolled by the scruff of its neck from his meaty fist.

‘Why…?’

‘A fine kill,’ Beorn replied, his voice soft. If Bilbo did not know better, he would think the huge man was worried about him. ‘Such a trophy should not be left behind.’ He jostled Bilbo as his stride lengthened, loping through the thickening snow. The cloth of his shirt was rough beneath Bilbo’s cheek, and he muzzily thought how lucky Beorn was to care so little about the cold.

At last, he placed him down, not on the ground but on dry boards, tucked between huge sacks and pots crammed together. Blankets covered him one after the other, burying him under their weight.

‘Where…?’ Bilbo turned his head, trying to understand his surroundings as the floor began to move. He was on a massive sled, pulled by some manner of beast and followed by a small procession of goats and sheep, thick-haired and immune to the weather’s bite.

Beorn had arranged some kind of cover over the top, which at least gave Bilbo a makeshift roof. It kept the wind at bay, but try as he might, he couldn’t find even an ember of warmth. His body felt like rock, heavy and unresponsive. His chest still hurt as if he had been punched, and he was so very tired. He longed to close his eyes and let sleep take him, but he feared that if he surrendered, he would never wake again.

Minutes or hours passed. Bilbo could not measure them in his uncertain state. All he knew was the abrupt sound of voices ghosting on the wind. At first, they were snatches of noise and nothing more, popping at the edge of his hearing, but a moment later they resolved into a single, frantic word: his name on repeat, carried along by the storm’s refrain.

He struggled against the blankets, fretful and weak as he tried to loosen their restraint. His thoughts spun on a wobbling axis, half-delirious, but he could pick one thing out of the mire: Thorin was searching for him.

‘I have to go,’ Bilbo managed, the words falling from numb lips. ‘I need to find him.’

‘Stay.’ Beorn pushed him down without effort. ‘Let him be the one to find you.’ He reached for a horn hanging from his belt and pressed it to his mouth, filling the air with two long, brazen notes. They rang out, muffled by the snow, but soon Bilbo heard the reply: a mimicry of Beorn’s signal.

‘He shouldn’t be out here.’ Bilbo took a deep breath, only for it to catch in his chest and emerge as a
terrible, hacking cough. It shook his entire body, making aching muscles shake from the strain.

‘No more than you should,’ Beorn growled. ‘At least he is better dressed for the storm.’

Bilbo tried to argue that he hadn’t come out here on purpose, but his strength deserted him. The white world was growing more hazy, and he shut his eyes against the glare of it.

Suddenly, the sled dipped, and a hand as warm as firelight touched his brow before splaying against his cheek. ‘I thank you for finding him, Master Beorn, but we need to get him back to the mountain.’ Thorin sounded choked, as if some deep terror gripped him tight. Bilbo wished he could pull open his eyes to look at him, or move his lips to reassure him that it was all right, but such feeble efforts were beyond him. He could only lie there, on the ethereal edge of sleep and wakefulness, aware of the world but not part of it.

Someone peeled back his blankets, replacing them with a thick, soft fur. It carried body heat with it, a faint wraith that survived the clutching grasp of the wind and the damp slick of his clothes. It was like a taste of sunshine, a beguiling hint on the edge of Bilbo’s senses, but it only sharpened the cold that clung to him, and he smothered a weak sound as he began to shudder.

‘They’ve lit the beacon.’ Thorin’s voice was right next to him, marrying up the callused touch that had dropped to rest on the pulse in the hollow of his neck. ‘Return to Erebor and warn Oin what to expect.’

Bilbo didn’t know what he was talking about, but he didn’t have the wits to ask. Were they still moving, or had they stopped, prisoners of the ice? Thorin’s orders brimmed with authority, but Bilbo knew him well enough to pick out the hard, desperate edge beneath his words. That alone spoke of his fear, and Bilbo’s fingers fluttered as he tried to reach out.

A hot hand surrounded him palm, almost painful to the touch. A moment later, he was moving, scooped up in someone’s arms and resettled against the strong wall of Thorin’s chest. His heart hammered under Bilbo’s ear, quick and firm, and he could hear the rasp of every breath like a summer breeze stirring the leaves of the trees in the Shire.

‘m-okay,’ he slurred, his lips stiff.

‘You are soaked to the skin and chilled to the bone.’ Thorin’s quiet fury radiated through the air. ‘If Master Beorn had not been here…’

The thought didn’t bear contemplating, and Bilbo tried to make a comforting sound as Thorin’s hands rubbed back and forth across the top of the fur. It didn’t do much to instil warmth, but it brought them both some element of comfort, and his head began to loll against Thorin’s shoulder.

‘Keep your eyes open, Bilbo. Please.’ The hoarse whisper curled in his ear like a dream, but it was so hard to obey. Try as he might the world was slipping through his fingers, turning to fog as shadows drew across his mind. Sounds rippled around him, words losing all meaning as the smooth glide of the sled carried him down into the darkness.

Oblivion was absolute. Hours or years could have passed unmarked, and when Bilbo found some element of the waking world once more, heat was the first thing he noticed. It danced across his face, rippling like fine silk and tempting him from his slumber. A humid wall lay at his back, pressed along every inch of his spine and down his legs. It tucked in tight behind his knees in a perfect seam, and Bilbo wondered if it was possible to stay just where he was for the rest of his life.

Memory intruded: a stricken blade that swooped through his peaceful musings. He remembered the
snow, the water, the wolf and Beorn. The phantom of winter’s bite seized at his bones as a shudder ripped through him, followed by another. Pain stabbed at his hands and feet, and he fidgeted, opening his eyes to take stock.

His cot had been pulled close to the fire in the royal healing rooms. The hearth was stacked high, its light dancing across the walls, and his clothes were spread out to dry at its side. A flicker of embarrassment lashed through him as he wondered who had stripped him bare. Even his smalls were missing! Someone had wrapped his body in a thin sheet from his shoulders to his toes to offer him some small scrap of dignity, and then furs and blankets piled around him, creating his haven.

And he was not alone.

‘You’re awake.’ Thorin’s words rumbled against his back, felt in his bones as much as heard. The arm draped over his waist tightened, and Bilbo swallowed, awakening a sharp ache in his throat. ‘Thank Mahal. How do you feel?’

‘Tired,’ he croaked, wincing at the wrecked tatters of his voice as he tried to bury his flaming face in his pillow. At any other time he would have found Thorin’s closeness and his own state of undress tempting to say the least, but he could not deny the reason that they were in this position was because of his own damn stupidity. Mortification heated him in places that the fire could not yet reach, and he wished with all his might that he could fall back to sleep and pretend none of the whole sorry mess was nothing but a bad dream.

Thorin’s arm shifted, and Bilbo tried not to whine, bereft of his heat and presence, but he did not go far. Blunt fingers moved though his hair, brushing his curls away from his brow in a way that made his breath catch as he sagged into the touch. ‘What happened?’ he rasped, fighting against the urge to just let himself drift into his dreams, content in Thorin’s arms. Some distant part of his mind kept suggesting that this was beyond the bounds of propriety, but he could not bring himself to care. His day had gone from bad to worse, and he was happy to bask in the balm of Thorin’s attention.

‘That can wait. Oin should take a look at you.’

He slipped away, inching out of the bed so as not to disturb the pocket of temperate air that surrounded Bilbo’s body, but it was no use. It felt as if something was being torn from him, leaving Bilbo gasping in its wake. Thorin’s living heat was a visceral thing, a foundation stone for his well-being, and without him Bilbo found his teeth chattering in his skull, his flesh aching and his spirit raw.

Pulling his knees up to his chest, he burrowed deeper under the furs. Every time he so much as moved a new rash of shivers claimed him, and they intensified when Oin shuffled in, placing a cool, dry hand against his brow. The healer grunted to himself, but his voice was kind as he cupped Bilbo’s jaw, gently feeling along his throat and checking the clarity of his gaze.

‘It’ll take a while for him to warm up again. Hop in with him, lad; he’ll need your heat while I check him over.’

Thorin cast him a doubtful look, his eyes shadowed with uncertainty as he hovered at the foot of the bed. He looked torn, eager to oblige but held back by something Bilbo couldn’t discern.

‘Please?’ He was not ashamed to sound pathetic if it got him what he wanted, and it seemed permission was all Thorin required. He moved as if he’d been stung, stepping forward and slipping beneath the furs. Unlike Bilbo, he was still clothed, but the trousers that clad his hips were soft, and his undershirt lay open at the collar, revealing a deep vee of broad, bare chest.
Bilbo had to tear his eyes away. Cold and pained he may be, but that did not mean he was unaffected by the weight of Thorin’s body and the scent of him that clung to the pillows. He tried to squash a tremor that had nothing to do with the chill as Thorin’s arm returned to its place around his waist and his knees tucked in behind Bilbo’s, allowing heat to blaze between them.

Oin pulled out a wooden implement like a very small horn. He murmured an apology as he eased the blankets aside and tugged down the sheet so he could press one end to Bilbo’s chest and listen at the other. ‘I’ll keep it as quick as I can, lad,’ he promised. ‘Breathe deep?’

Air swelled Bilbo’s lungs, but a moment later he was coughing again: rasping barks that set his ribs on fire. It wracked him through and through, and he struggled upright, grasping the pot Oin shoved at him.

‘Better out than in,’ the healer said pityingly. ‘Swallowed half the pond from the looks of it. I’ll give you some tea to help make that cough more productive; stop anything bad taking root in your chest.’ He took the pot from Bilbo’s hands before turning his attention to his fingers. Bilbo had wondered why everything felt dull and clumsy. He had not noticed that thin strips of cloth and fur wrapped several digits.

‘Frostnip,’ Oin said by way of explanation. ‘Nothing dire that I could see, but I need to check.’ He undid his work, murmuring apologies as if he knew the strange pain he left in his wake. It was like pins and needles, but worse: little stabbing teeth of discomfort that stung and itched. The skin was a furious red in places, but there were no blisters of pallid, deadened flesh.

‘Good, good. Your toes weren’t nearly as bad, for all that your feet were bare. Do they hurt?’

‘A bit, but not as much as my hands. It’s strange; hobbits don’t normally have problems with snow.’

‘Aye, but this is Balakurdû,’ he replied. ‘More than snow. More than ice. It’s winter’s heart itself. You’re lucky it didn’t take you for its own. It’s happened before. Dwarves lost in the white only to be found when the thaw comes and frees them from their frozen tomb.’

‘I have Beorn to thank for that. He dragged me out of the pond before…’

He trailed off, realising how inevitable his own end had been, and Oin gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder before checking the tips of his ears. ‘Aye, we owe him much. Aside from his timely rescue, the sled he brought is loaded with apples and grains, and the goats that followed it are giving off milk. Bombur is practically afloat with delight.’

He managed a weak smile before Oin retreated to his workbench, focussing on making the tea he had promised. It was not quite privacy, but it was close enough. Bilbo moved slowly, his body stiff and shuddering at even the slightest change as he turned over to face Thorin. At this height, he got a very good view of the staunch lines of his collarbones and the thick hair that shadowed the skin beneath his shirt. It took some effort to lift his head from the enticing sight and meet that piercing gaze.

Thorin was a master of hidden emotions. Normally his expression could become an unassuming mask, one he had no doubt learned from a young age, but today was another matter. Deep lines furrowed his brow and a muscle in his cheek twitched. His eyes were abaze, the fires of fury still burning bright, and Bilbo could feel the hard tension that pulled his body taut.

‘I’m sorry.’ He cringed, shaking his head against the pillow. ‘It was stupid of me to set foot outside. I should never –’
‘Don’t.’ Ferocity marked his face, but Thorin’s voice was a murmur, as gentle as Bilbo had ever heard. ‘None of this mess is your fault.’

‘And how much of it do you really think is yours?’ he challenged, recognising the shadows of Thorin’s expression for what they were: guilt. ‘Tell me what happened. All of it. Including how you of all people ended up out in the snow looking for me.’

A flicker of a smile curved Thorin’s lips, amused, perhaps, by Bilbo’s determination despite his weakened state. He shuffled where he lay, tucking the furs closer around Bilbo’s body with a steady hand as he began to speak.

‘The first I knew was when a pair of soldiers found Ronin. A strong blow to his head had laid him low –’

‘Is he all right?’ Bilbo grimaced, feeling terrible for his fleeting suspicion that Ronin had been the one to shove him through the door. ‘He’s, he’s not like Storn, is he?’

‘Far more lively,’ Thorin promised. ‘Oin’s taking good care of him in the main healing room. Unfortunately, he didn’t know much beyond where he had last seen you, but it was a start. Fili and Kili were the ones who noticed that someone had hammered wedges of stone into the hinges of the door. It wouldn’t open, not without several hours work with a chisel. It was that, more than anything, which made me think you were on the other side.’

‘So you came looking for me.’ Bilbo frowned, torn between delight that Thorin had been so keen to come to his rescue and horror for all that could have befallen them.

‘I was not alone.’ Thorin curled a finger under Bilbo’s chin, guiding him upwards again. ‘Nor was I ill-prepared for the weather, unlike a certain hobbit.’ Lines of worry softened the sharpness of his gaze, and he dropped a hand to Bilbo’s fur-clad shoulder, as if trying to reassure himself that Bilbo was safe.

‘In my defence, I never intended to end up slogging through a snowstorm. I –’ He paused, grimacing as he tried to put it into words. ‘I needed to feel the sky over my head, just for a little while.’

‘And to escape the gold.’

Something like panic tightened in Bilbo’s chest. He did not want Thorin to think it was affecting him, not when his work in the treasury, though endless, made him useful and necessary. Besides, if he did not do it, then who would? Who else would put themselves at risk, and what would they do when they succumbed?

Yet his denials were stutters of nonsense: unspeakable. He could not lie to Thorin’s face, not when he could still recall the sensation of invisible grime clinging to his skin, clogging his eyes and ears until he could barely drag himself through each day.

‘How did you know?’

Thorin shifted, pulling back his arm so he could take both of Bilbo’s hands, mindful of his stinging fingers. ‘Ori mentioned that even those few people immune to the gold are starting to show the strain. The children are growing fractious, and the dwarves and men capable of helping you are becoming sullen and withdrawn.’

‘Oh.’ Bilbo worried his lip, trying to nestle deeper into his pillows as he admitted, ‘I thought it was just me.’ He closed his eyes, racking his mind for any memory that others were struggling beneath the same burden he carried. Perhaps Coln and Grindl argued more these days, sniping at one another
through the hours of their toil. Maybe the children’s laughter, so quick and willing at the start of the
day, soon faded, but he had not noticed, too caught up in his own problems. ‘I should have paid
more attention to what was happening.’

Thorin made a rough noise in his chest, halfway between a sigh and a growl. ‘Even now, the gold is
seeking to ensnare those closest to it. We should all have been more cautious when separating the
hoard.’

‘We did what we could at the time.’ Bilbo shrugged. ‘There’s been a lot on everyone’s minds, and it
only got worse after whatever happened to Storn.’

Thorin’s face grew dark once more. Quiet words had chased away his anger, but now it returned full
force. His jaw tightened beneath his beard, and Bilbo could hear his teeth grinding together, clenched
in a grimace of rage. ‘This time there can be no doubt that you were their intended target,’ he
muttered, fidgeting as if he longed to peel himself from the bed and tear the mountain apart until the
culprit was found.

Reaching out, Bilbo wrapped his fingers in the smooth weave of Thorin’s shirt. If he truly chose to
leave then he could not stop him, but his weak restraint was enough to make Thorin pause. ‘We’re
safe here, aren’t we?’ he asked, staring at the closed door. He had no doubt that there would be
guards on the other side. Dwalin would take what had happened as a personal offence and would act
accordingly, doubling patrols and sentries wherever he deemed it necessary.

‘Here, yes, but out there?’ Thorin shut his eyes, and the stark pallor of his worry came to the surface,
painting his face like chalk dust. ‘Erebor is vast, big enough to house thousands of dwarves. It is one
of our greatest halls, and there are plenty of places to hide.’

Oin limped back to the bedside, grumbling about the cold in his bones as he held out a steaming cup
for Bilbo before thinking twice. ‘Hold on a second.’ Grabbing a piece of cloth, he wrapped it around
the clay, protecting Bilbo’s sensitive skin from its heat. He waited until Bilbo propped himself up
against his pillows before surrendering it. ‘There. Drink up.’

He sipped at the brew, grateful that it tasted sweet, rather than sour. He had no idea what was in it,
but after a few minutes it began to warm him through, chasing off the last nibbling shivers. His fur
cocoon was tucked under his arms, leaving his shoulders bare, and he hummed in quiet thanks as
Thorin draped a smaller blanket over the back of his neck, shielding him from the chill.

A tap on the door made them all look up, and Oin sighed, checking who stood outside before
ushering them in. Bombur squeezed through the doorway, his large face splitting with a grin as he
saw Bilbo awake and upright. ‘Hot food and plenty of it,’ he explained, indicating the laden trays he
balanced with ease in his big hands. ‘Perfect for driving the ice from your bones.’

Bilbo blinked in amazement at the sheer number of dishes. Even by Shire standards, it was a large
meal, and he felt a twinge of guilt. He hated the idea of getting special treatment.

‘There’s plenty for everyone.’ Thorin smiled as if he had read Bilbo’s mind, rising to help Oin move
a table closer to the bedside. ‘None will go hungry.’

‘And you need to keep your strength up,’ Oin added, ‘Healer’s orders. Mahal knows it’s bad enough
battling sickness at this time of year without taking an icy swim as well.’

Bilbo gave a rueful smile. ‘Thank you, Bombur.’

‘Eat well,’ the cook replied, giving Oin a sharp glance before he cleared his throat and tipped his
head towards the door. ‘We’ll be on our way.’

Oin looked like he wanted to protest, but Bombur ushered him out before he could do much more than grumble, shutting the door firmly behind them and leaving them in peace. Bilbo didn’t know who he had to thank for the unexpected solitude, but he wasn’t about to complain, not when Thorin had taken the crude clay covers off the plates and filled the air with the mouth-watering fragrance of hot meat and potatoes.

He eased back onto the bed, a plate and fork in his hand, settling so that they sat side-by-side, joined at the shoulder, hip and knee beneath the furs. Thorin moved so naturally, without a hint of awkwardness, and Bilbo was glad that he no longer seemed to question his welcome.

Reaching for the food, he hissed in misery as the strange, sharp pain in his fingers flared in earnest. The skin felt tight and sore across his bones, and try as he might he could not find a comfortable way to grip the meal.

‘It will pass,’ Thorin promised, indicating Bilbo’s pain-pinched hands. ‘It could take a few days, but it won’t last forever.’ He retrieved the plate from Bilbo’s grasp and speared a piece of meat before holding it out for him. It smelled divine, and Bilbo pursed his lips, torn between his ravenous hunger and his uncertain indignity. Being fed by someone else made him feel like either an infant or an invalid, and while the latter may be true, it galled him that he could not feed himself.

As it was, he squared his jaw and snagged the piece of meat, trying not to moan in delight as it melted in his mouth, all succulence and flavour. Judging by the amused and faintly shocked expression on Thorin’s face, he didn’t quite succeed. He could have teased him; Bilbo was sure anyone else in the Company would have jumped at the chance, but Thorin instead bent himself to the task, providing him with one morsel after another.

Bombur had outdone himself with hearty vegetables and spiced sauces, as well as what seemed to be honey cakes golden from the ovens. There were at least three helpings, and Bilbo didn’t notice until the last plate was clean that Thorin only had a few mouthfuls for himself. All the rest found its way into Bilbo’s belly, where it heated him like a furnace.

Before long, nothing but two small cups remained, not much taller than his thumb. The liquid in them was not the water he was used to, but something that smelled reminiscent of the Old Gaffer’s moonshine. They were cool, and did not aggravate Bilbo’s fingers as much as the hot plate when he picked up the one on the left, peering into its depths.

‘A gift from Beorn,’ Thorin explained. ‘It’s being shared out in the main hall, so the people can toast him and his generosity. Fili and Kili are standing in on my behalf.’

Bilbo huffed a laugh, trying not to imagine what trouble the princes might cause. It was an uncharitable thought, anyway. He had been impressed with how well they had adapted to the harsh climes of Erebor and the royal roles thrust upon them. He had no doubt they’d do their uncle proud, especially with Balin there to guide them.

‘So you’re staying here?’ he asked, trying not to let hope thicken his voice. He did not want to deprive the mountain of its king, but he did not want this moment end, not yet. It felt natural; the two of them settled so close to one another, cosy and contented, and the idea of moving on from this time and place made him feel raw and cold anew.

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ Thorin promised. ‘Not until you’re back on your feet.’ He raised the cup to his lips, the powerful line of his throat shifting as he swallowed. Bilbo watched him, waiting for his reaction and smiling when surprise, rather than disgust, shaded Thorin’s features. ‘It tastes like
smoke and honey. Try some.’

His first sip was more cautious than Thorin’s, but the drink was still gone sooner than he’d intended. It glowed all the way down, making the events of the day somehow distant and dreamlike. Had he really been trapped outside in all that snow, and killed a wolf with nothing but a well-thrown rock, and then nearly drowned when he fell through the ice? It seemed almost impossible, and yet here he was...

‘Tell me.’ Thorin nudged Bilbo with his elbow, his long hair falling in a dark curtain as he dipped his head to meet Bilbo’s gaze. ‘Tell me what’s put that look on your face.’

‘What look?’ he murmured, pulling the furs up to his chin and noticing that they slipped off Thorin’s bare feet. It was not the first time he’d seen those naked toes, but they still amused him: the only part of a dwarf that could ever be considered dainty, at least by Hobbit standards.

A feather of heat whispered over his skin as Thorin traced the line of Bilbo’s eyebrow, his touch little more than a tease. A moment later, that hand cupped his chin, his thumb dragging across Bilbo’s lip.

‘That look. Somewhere between a grimace and a scowl.’

Bilbo wrinkled his nose, wondering where to start. How to make Thorin, who had lived with hardship for so long, understand that this was all like something out of one of his books? Not just the quest and the dragon, but all that they had been through since. It was all so grand. Everything, from the machinations of the people to the wrath of the weather made the Shire look tame in comparison. It was a simple life, back in Hobbiton, and one that seemed very far away.

‘Is it always like this in Erebor?’ He let his eyes drift shut as he snuggled into Thorin’s side, his head resting on his chest. ‘Dragons and elves, plots and storms?’

A laugh rippled beneath Thorin’s regretful sigh. He reached under the furs, stroking Bilbo’s wrist, first along the bony ridge and then at the underside, where the skin was pale and ticklish. ‘No. It’s not. It will always be a tragedy to me that you have not seen my home at its best.’

‘Tell me about it?’

He waited for Thorin to gather his thoughts, enjoying the heavy beat of his heart beneath his ear and the ebb and flow of each breath. When he began to speak, his voice was like distant summer thunder, quiet and deep. Bilbo let the noise surround him, losing himself in the memories of Thorin’s youth.

From glittering halls and mountain pools to a star-flung sky at Erebor’s peak, he could picture it all. Memory painted its masterpiece over the ruins of reality, and Bilbo lost himself in the soft cadence of Thorin’s words.

Yet so much of his stories were not about what Erebor looked like, but how it felt. It was the heat of the furnaces and the sureness of stone. It was the flavour of meat and mead, and the sharp strike of one blade against the other on the training ground. Life had been good here, once, and Bilbo was sure that Thorin would make it so again.

His lashes fluttered closed as he lost himself to the luxury of a sated appetite and the heady warmth of the healing room. He could feel his battered body becoming heavier with every moment as sleep threatened to swamp him. He tried to stay awake and give Thorin’s stories the attention they deserved, but it was a losing battle. Exhausted but content, he found himself slipping into the hazy edges of a doze.

Thorin fell silent, and Bilbo did not have the sense left to protest. The drum of his heart beat its
rhythm in Bilbo’s ear, and the solid weight of an arm rested over his shoulders, holding him close. He had never felt quite like this before, not just trusted, but cherished, and Bilbo tried to cling to that feeling even as wakefulness trickled through his fingers.

‘Sleep. You’re safe now.’ Something soft brushed against the crown of his head: a kiss, as fleeting as the touch of a butterfly’s wing, so faint it could have been a dream.

Bilbo sighed, too far gone to do anything but nestle closer and curl his hand in the cloth of Thorin’s tunic. There was much to do for both of them, from the running of the kingdom to the hunt for whoever sought to tear them apart, but for now they lingered in their oasis of calm, happy to let the world wait.
An ache had taken root in Thorin’s back, nibbling along his spine, but he could not bring himself to disturb Bilbo. He slept so peacefully, lax and trusting in Thorin’s arms. Each breath tickled the bare skin at his collar, and he found himself counting them, checking that life still shone in Bilbo’s frame.

How different things could have been.

He had seen bloody battles and personal tragedy aplenty, but he could not remember a time he had been as viscerally afraid as when they realised Bilbo was outside in the storm. The winters of Erebor were merciless, befuddling the senses as lost travellers wandered into death. So it would have been for Bilbo, if not for Beorn’s timely arrival.

Thorin closed his eyes, forcing himself to focus on the present. It was all too easy to imagine what they could have found in their desperate search, but that had not come to pass. Instead, he had this perfect moment of tranquillity, where minutes ticked by into hours with Bilbo sleeping in his embrace.

No one had disturbed them, but he knew it would not be long. Even if Oin could restrain himself from checking on his patient, many of the Company would be eager to discuss what had happened. Dwalin and his men would be scouring the mountain, trying to find clues as to who might be the culprit, but Thorin doubted their efforts would meet with success. It was too easy for the guilty to vanish into the crowd.

Balin and Nori would be more subtle, listening to rumours rather than demanding answers. Surely someone, somewhere in these halls would have the knowledge they needed to oust the one responsible? They may have failed to harm Bilbo, but it was not for want of trying. How much longer did they have before their luck ran out?

A shudder ripped through him, and Bilbo mumbled in protest, a frown pleating his brow as he stirred. Yet he did not wake, content instead to linger in a land of dreams. So far, they seemed pleasant; no cries of fear had passed his lips, and he appeared unconcerned with what could have happened to him. Truly, hobbits were the most resilient of creatures, although perhaps that was a trait unique to Bilbo, rather than shared by his kind.

The gleam of the courting bead caught Thorin’s eye, and he ran a finger over its surface. Its intricate pattern was a reassuring texture, and he tucked it back into Bilbo’s hair, out of harm’s way. Miraculously, his braids were still in place, despite his dunking in the pond, and Thorin stared at them, tracing the weaving lines with his gaze before admiring the angles of those slumbering features, so different from a dwarf’s.

From the snub of his nose to the line of his cheeks, everything about Bilbo seemed soft. Hunger may have sharpened his edges this past year, but it did not steal away the kindness in his face. Now, with his lips parted around each breath and a hint of a snore rattling in his throat, he looked painfully vulnerable.

Of course, Thorin knew he could handle himself in a fight. Bilbo’s skill in battle may be rudimentary at best, but he did not lack courage. He suspected that a hobbit wronged was a thing to be feared indeed; their tongues could be sharp if their blades were not, as Bilbo had proven more than once, yet that did not put his mind to rest.

Perhaps if the threat were more direct, it would be a different matter. If the perpetrator came at them
face-to-face, armed and dangerous, it would be easy to respond. Instead, they skulked in the shadows, always there but never within reach. Mahal, how he hated it. The blood in his veins itched with a simmering rage, and Thorin had to focus on keeping his grasp gentle so as not to disturb his hobbit. His anger was for whoever sought to do Bilbo harm: no one else.

A firm knock on the door interrupted his brooding, and he watched Balin peek around the threshold. He kept the entrance mostly shut, as if to block out prying eyes, and his expression was all apology. ‘We need you out here,’ he whispered, ‘if you can be spared?’

He offered the excuse up like a gift, and Thorin bit back the temptation to take it. He longed to stay in Bilbo’s arms, and perhaps if it were the usual duties of the kingdom, he would have done just that. However, he knew his Company wished to discuss Bilbo’s safety, and he could not sacrifice that for the sake of his own desires.

‘I’ll be right there,’ he murmured, waiting until Balin had departed with a smile and a nod before easing himself away from Bilbo’s side.

It was not an easy task. Even in sleep, the hobbit was strong, and his grip on Thorin’s tunic was tenacious. It took several minutes to unwrap his fingers from the cloth, holding his breath all the while in case Bilbo stirred.

Yet it was only when he slipped out from under the furs, letting a zephyr of cooler air seep into Bilbo’s nest, that there was any sign of wakefulness. His face collapsed into a petulant scowl, and he shuddered hard, pulling the covers tighter around his body. The frown did not ease even as Thorin made sure he was resting comfortably against the pillows, and a small, fretful noise caught in the hobbit’s throat.

‘I won’t be long,’ he promised. Perhaps Bilbo could not hear him, but he was unwilling to sneak away from the bed like a thief. ‘Sleep. I shall try to be here when you wake.’

He waited, crouching at the bedside until the annoyance faded from Bilbo’s expression, wiped clean once more. Only then did he rise, gathering his over-shirt and indoor boots from the foot of the cot before slipping out of the door.

The low, cavernous rooms of Oin’s domain stretched out before him. Many of the beds stood empty now, their occupants either recovered or dead. Only Storn and Ronin remained, the former as statue-still as ever while the latter lay against his pillows, pale and clammy, but determined.

A table had been set up near Ronin’s bedside, the better for him to take part in the conversation. Dwalin and a couple of his trusted soldiers bent over it, examining one map after the other and muttering among themselves. Ori hovered at his elbow, occasionally correcting the grizzled old dwarf while the rest of the Company stood around, silent and watchful.

The only other two in attendance were Bard and Tauriel, who both sat at the far end of the table in silence. Bard’s expression was stony as always, his hair tousled by the storm outside. His skin glowed ruddy in the warmth, and he had shed his furs, draping them over the bench at his side. In contrast, Tauriel seemed distant and untouchable, her slender hands clenched into fists in the bowl of her lap as a puzzled frown pleated her brow, speaking volumes of the mind at work within.

‘How is he?’ Balin asked, making space for Thorin. ‘When Beorn brought you in…’

Thorin didn’t need reminding. Bilbo had lost consciousness, slipping beyond his grasp as he could only watch, cursing the weather for slowing their return. It was rare he had ever felt so helpless, ill-equipped to do what was best. He had dithered, wondering whether to remove wet cloth and cold
mithril when there was nothing he could offer Bilbo in their place. Each rattling breath Bilbo took was both a blessing and a curse, and Thorin had almost wept when they finally made it back through Erebor’s gates.

‘He’s well enough. Oin acted fast.’

‘As I said,’ the healer explained, ‘with rest, food and heat, he should be set to rights before long. My only concern is his chest. There’s no telling how much ice water got down into his lungs, or if any of it lingers.’

‘And if it does?’ Thorin watched Oin draw in a deep breath, his stooped shoulders jostling in a lopsided shrug.

‘I’ll do what I can for him. Dwarves have a weakness there, for coughs and the like. Quick to turn nasty and hard to clear. Whether hobbits are the same or not, I don’t know, but either way, I’ll not rest if he needs my help.’

Thorin sighed, knowing his fear made him quicker to snap and snarl. ‘I do not doubt you, old friend,’ he said, smoothing out his voice. ‘I am content to leave Bilbo’s health in your hands. I only wish I knew the nature of the threat he seems to face.’

‘And we wish we had more to tell you,’ Balin promised, sitting down at Bard’s right, his old frame bowed. ‘The truth is, there’s very little to go on. We cannot even be sure whether it is a group with insurrection in mind, or a single person working alone.’

‘Actually, perhaps we can.’ Tauriel’s voice carried both authority and calm, and Thorin turned to meet her gaze. ‘Kili and I looked at where Ronin was found. It’s in a quiet part of the mountain, one we’ve not yet touched, but there was no dust on the floor. Whoever moved him there cleaned up after themselves.’

‘So no foot prints,’ Dwalin grumbled. ‘There could have been one or a dozen of them and we’d be none the wiser.’

‘Except for this.’ Kili picked up Ronin’s boots, tipping them up so everyone could see the back of the heel. The edge of the sole was oddly scuffed and thick with dust, but the rest of the leather looked pristine. ‘I’d say Ronin was dragged. Two dwarves or men could have carried him, but one would have struggled, especially since he was still in his armour.’

‘How did you think to look for that?’ Dwalin asked, his gruff voice failing to hide his surprise.

Kili shook his head, admiring Tauriel with blatant pride. ‘She was the one who thought to check his boots.’

‘I’ve seen it before, once or twice.’ She smiled, reminding Thorin that her ageless looks did not make her young. She had centuries of experience on her strong shoulders, and no doubt she had witnessed plenty of curious crimes in her time. ‘If I had to guess, I’d say you’re looking for someone working alone, or at least doing all the heavy lifting by themselves. They might have an accomplice – someone who acts as lookout – but I suspect there’s only one person doing the dirty work.’

‘And even then,’ Gloin mused, ‘they seem to be going out of their way not to get blood on their hands. First, they sabotage the boards in the treasury, probably hoping for an accident. Then they shut Bilbo outside when they could just as easily have bashed his head in there and then.’

He winced, seeming to realise the callousness of his words before he mumbled an apology. ‘That’s not to say they aren’t ruthless in their own way, but why go to such indirect lengths to finish
Nori sighed, pressing his palms flat to the table and looking at Thorin from beneath his brows. ‘If you ask me, it’s not about murder. That’s just a means to an end. Someone’s decided that removing Bilbo from the scene is the best way to cause a bit of chaos.’ He ran his tongue over his teeth, giving a shrug. ‘Maybe they made that decision once they realised all the food was guarded, or perhaps it’s been their plan from the start, but think of the consequences: a king in mourning and a realm in panic.’

‘It’s more than that,’ Balin added. ‘There’s not a soul in Erebor who doesn’t know Bilbo’s part in getting it back. To many, he’s a hero, though I’m sure he’d blush to hear it. Take away someone like that, and you weaken both the crown and the kingdom in one swoop.’

‘So you’re saying it’s political, not personal.’ Bard’s face twisted, his distaste apparent. ‘But to what purpose? What could anyone trapped in here with the rest of us stand to gain?’

Silence followed, and Thorin drummed his fingers on the table. Bard made a good point. At first glance, whoever was doing this seemed to be playing a dangerous game. There was no telling what the repercussions of their actions could be, or how they could get caught up in the consequences. Yet their behaviour carried a certain precision. To him, it did not seem to be about causing mayhem amidst the population. There were better ways to do that than taking out an individual, even one as popular as Bilbo. No, there was something else at work here, and for his part, he suspected an influence far beyond Erebor’s walls.

With a shake of his head, he met Nori’s gaze. ‘Until we find out who is responsible, anything we have is no more than speculation. What can we do to catch the culprit?’

‘Hard graft,’ Dwalin suggested. ‘We start asking questions. See who has alibis and who was on their own. It’s not much, but maybe it’ll lead somewhere.’

‘They must have been watching Bilbo.’ Ronin’s voice sounded cracked and miserable. ‘We didn’t tell anyone in the treasury where we were going, but they found us all the same. None of it happened by chance; they were waiting for their moment.’

Dwalin straightened, his gauntlets creaking as he folded his arms across his chest. ‘So someone was missing from their duties. Everyone in this mountain has a job to do, and whoever did this abandoned their post to spy on Bilbo in the treasury.’

‘It’s common knowledge that’s where he is,’ Nori added. ‘Day and night it’s where people go to look for him and ask his advice. Maybe we should start moving him around?’

Thorin nodded, curling his hand in front of his mouth before he gestured towards Ori. ‘If what you say is true, then we already need to rethink our plan with regards the hoard.’

‘Its effects are subtle,’ the young dwarf explained, ‘but you notice it if you look hard enough. Whatever the dragon did to the gold eats away at people, even those we thought weren’t affected.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me this?’ Dori demanded from where he sat, looking up from his stitch work to glare at his youngest brother before turning to his other sibling. ‘Did you know?’

Nori held up his hands in surrender, shaking his head as Ori heaved a sigh. ‘So far, it’s nothing terrible,’ he replied. ‘Just short tempers and things.’ He picked at his gloves, his shoulders hunched. ‘I was going to talk to Mr Bilbo about it, before…’ He trailed off, biting his lip and flicking a worried glance towards the door to the royal healing room.
‘We’ll come up with something,’ Thorin promised. ‘Talk to Gandalf. Maybe he has some idea of what we can do.’

‘Where is he anyway?’ Bofur asked. ‘I thought he’d want to make sure Bilbo was all right.’

‘Indeed I do, Master Bofur.’ The shadows near the doorway moved, and what Thorin would have sworn was nothing but darkness resolved itself into the wizard’s stooped form. He leant comfortably against the stone, as if he had been there all along. Knowing Gandalf, he probably had. ‘But I can see he is in good hands.’

‘Can you not muster even a little concern?’ Thorin asked, unable to keep the bite from his words. Gandalf’s calm never failed to put his teeth on edge.

‘Do not mistake me, King Thorin.’ Gandalf’s retort carried a hint of thunder, thickening the gloom as he drew himself up to his full height. ‘I do not underestimate the danger to Bilbo, but nor can I ignore that he is surrounded by friends, ones who would do anything for the sake of his safety.’ His frown eased and his grey eyes twinkled as he looked at the collected crowd.

‘And how do we do that when we don’t even know what the threat is?’ Dwalin groused. ‘I’ve put a guard on him day and night, and still it seems someone is intent on getting to him. What would you have us do, lock him up until the thaw?’

Thorin sighed, wishing he could believe Bilbo would agree to such a plan. It would do wonders for his peace of mind, knowing that he was safe under lock and key, but that was no way to live. Besides, he would not make Erebor a cage.

Gandalf twisted his staff in his hand so that the crystal at its tip caught the light. ‘My advice would be to tell the people what has happened.’ He raised an eyebrow in amusement at the various shouts of protest that rang around the healing room. ‘To keep them in the dark is to do them a disservice, and only makes your adversary’s job easier. Think how much harder it will be to carry out an attack when everyone is watchful for it. When every absence is questioned and every oddity challenged.’

‘Wouldn’t that make whoever is behind all this desperate?’ Ori asked, his narrow face pinched with fear. ‘I’m not sure that’s what we want.’

‘Desperate people make mistakes.’ Nori straightened up, prowling back and forth. ‘It could give us the chance to catch the bastard.’

Thorin bowed his head, his teeth aching as he clenched his jaw. They all made good arguments. He may have been busy seeing to his realm, but that did not mean he ignored how invested the people were in Erebor’s recovery. They worked hard and took a keen interest, the men eager to learn the methods and intricacies of their mountain home even as the dwarves threw themselves into its repair. They had the right to know about the troublemaker in their midst.

And yet…

‘Is there any way we can give Bilbo extra protection?’ He looked at Dwalin, who scratched at his temple and pulled a face.

‘Aye. Vary his routine and make it unpredictable; it’ll ensure whoever’s after him doesn’t have an easy job of tracking him down. More than one guard, as well.’ He glanced apologetically at Ronin. ‘If I thought I could spare them, he’d have had that before, but –’ He bowed his head, shame-faced.

‘Your resources have been stretched thin,’ Thorin pointed out. ‘You’ve done the best you could in the circumstances.’ He looked around the Company, seeing a reflection of his own helpless guilt in
every face. ‘We all have.’

‘Things will be easier now the hunting parties are in,’ Bard said. ‘It almost doubles the workforce in the mountain, and that’s labour I’m sure we can put to good use.’ He stroked a hand over the trimmed beard that shadowed his jaw, his dark eyes thoughtful. ‘I also agree with Gandalf. If everyone knows that Master Baggins is in danger, they’ll be able to keep a watchful eye for the dwarf responsible.’

‘Dwarf?’ Thorin raised an eyebrow, too ragged in heart and mind to watch his words. ‘Last I checked, no one had found anything to exclude the Men of Laketown from suspicion.’

‘Yet there are more dwarves than men in the mountain.’ Bard shrugged, his gaze cool as he met Thorin’s glare. ‘Besides, what would any of us have to gain? We’re at your mercy. We’ve nowhere else to go; no other shelter to call our own. No sane man would risk that for nothing, and we would have no political motive to harm a hobbit who has become a friend to many.’

‘And do you speak for all your kind?’ Thorin folded his arms, watching Bard’s eyes slide to the side – a miniscule acknowledgement. ‘I thought not. You cannot vouch for everyone in your care, any more than I can for the dwarves within these halls.’

‘I have lived with these people all of my days!’ Bard got to his feet, his brow furrowed and furious. ‘They are all known to me, as is all that they have lost: their homes and their families! You cannot say the same. Many of those here are strangers to you: dwarves from the Iron Hills left by Lord Dain! Who knows why they truly chose to stay?’

‘They stay out of compassion and duty!’ Thorin’s retort echoed around the room. Bard’s doubt stung, doubly so because there was a grain of truth in his every word.

‘They stay because the price is right!’

Out of the corner of his eye, Thorin saw Gandalf move, taking half-a-step forward as if he planned to intercede, but the wizard was beaten to it. All the angry words lined up on Thorin’s tongue – useless, hurtful barbs best left unsaid – died the instant a new voice joined in, quiet but precise. It cut through the tension like an arrow in flight, leaving silence in its wake.

‘That’s enough.’

Bilbo stood in the doorway to the royal healing room, one hand braced against the frame. He had pulled on an undershirt and tunic and laced them both up as far as they would go, but they still hung low around his neck. The sleeves fluttered over his hands, and the trousers that clad his hips were rolled at the ankle. Even then, they fell lower than the usual garments Bilbo wore, and it took Thorin a moment to realise it was because none of them were made for the hobbit. They were all Thorin’s, as if Bilbo had simply chucked on the first thing he found.

At another time, he would have blushed. Sharing clothes carried a great significance in dwarven culture, speaking of the kind of intimacy he could only hope for with Bilbo at this stage. It was a deliberate act, and one he suspected nobody had thought to explain to Bilbo just yet.

However, the rest of his hobbit’s appearance obliterated his moment of possessive happiness. He did not look well enough to be on his feet: pale and trembling. Tangles gathered in his hair, and shadows lay like thumbprints under his eyes. Only the set of his features held any strength, and Thorin cringed as he found himself on the receiving end of a glare. At least he wasn’t the only one. Bard got a sharp stare of his own, and had the decency to incline his head in apology.
'It doesn’t matter if a dwarf or a man is responsible. What matters is that it’s one of us.’ Bilbo wet his lips, looking as if he would collapse where he stood. ‘We’re in this together, whether we like it or not, and arguing won’t get us anywhere. For all we know that’s exactly what the trouble-maker wants.’

‘Well said.’ Balin got to his feet, gesturing for Bilbo to take his place. He held out a hand to offer support, but Bilbo declined it with a polite smile. It was a very dwarvish thing to do – not showing weakness, even among friends – and Thorin was torn between pride at Bilbo’s understanding of their culture and misery that such a charade was necessary. ‘Vanguthar: It is what it is. What matters now is putting a stop to it.’

‘And for that, we must work together.’ Bard looked at Thorin, his jaw tense but his expression honest. ‘I did not mean to imply that only a dwarf could be responsible for the danger to Master Baggins. Though I stand by what I said about numbers, you are right that there could be some among the people of Laketown selfish enough to cause problems.’

‘As there could be among the dwarves from the Iron Hills,’ Thorin acknowledged. Although the trust between he and Bard had grown, it was struggling to thrive in a barren landscape of strife and misgivings. Even now, they were quick to disagree, and he forced himself to take the peaceful road. ‘Lord Dain ensured that the worst of the firebrands went home with him, but someone could still have slipped past his net.’

‘And is Lord Dain to be trusted?’ Bard raised his hand to stop Thorin’s response so he could better explain himself. ‘I do not ask to cast suspicion. I merely know little of him beyond that he is your kin.’

Thorin paused, swallowing down his immediate reply with great effort. Bard’s question was a reasonable one. He had not grown up alongside Dain, sharing ills and woes. He had not watched as Dain did everything he could to help while still balancing the needs of his own kingdom, and nor did he know that Dain had come to Thorin’s aid during battle, not out of duty, but out of honest compassion.

‘There are many dwarf lords across Middle Earth, each with their own ideas and motives. Dain and my sister Dis are the only ones left living who I would trust with my life.’ He rubbed his thumbnail over his lip, his mind turning. ‘However, my faith does not extend to the dwarves from his halls. Just because they came from the Iron Hills does not mean their ultimate loyalty lies with Dain. They could have other interests at heart.’

He took a deep breath, looking around at each worried face. ‘All I ask is that we do not rule anyone out from our suspicions without due thought. It’s a mistake that could cost us dearly.’

‘I’ll prepare an announcement,’ Balin said, scribbling notes on a piece of paper. ‘Gandalf is right. Telling the people that there is a threat will increase their vigilance. That can work in our favour, and the mood in the mountain is strong enough to bear the extra burden.’

‘What do you mean?’ Bilbo asked. He sounded exhausted, despite his deep sleep, and Thorin saw him offer Oin a grateful smile as he pushed a hot drink into his hands.

‘Balin means that telling everyone might be bad for morale, but not so damaging that it outweighs the benefit of giving them the truth,’ Nori explained. ‘You being up and about so soon after what happened will help counteract any negative rumours. You need to be seen, if you can manage it.’

Thorin gave a growl of protest at the same time that Oin began to bluster, but nothing either of them could say seemed to have any effect. Bilbo simply waited them out before speaking his mind. ‘I’d
like to visit Beorn anyway – thank him properly. Will it be enough for people to see me walking in the halls?’

‘It’ll do fine.’ Nori looked at Oin. ‘Anything you can give him to perk him up a bit?’

Oin’s cheeks puffed in outrage, and he stamped across the healing room, rummaging among bottles and raising a symphony of clinking glass. At last, he returned, dripping a tiny amount of fluid into the bowl of a spoon before offering it to Bilbo. ‘It won’t work long, mind,’ he warned. ‘An hour at most. Be back here and in bed before then, or so help me…’

He left his threat hanging as Bilbo swallowed the elixir. His whole body shuddered in disgust, but within minutes his eyes were brighter and some colour returned to his cheeks. If he had been in the peak of health, he would probably have been dashing around the room. As it was he stopped shaking, and his smile was no longer a strained rictus.

‘Here.’ Thorin picked up the fur he had discarded when he first came into the healing room. It seemed like years ago now, time stretched thin by his worry. ‘Put this on. It’ll help keep you warm.’ Also, he added to himself, it would hide the rest of what he was wearing. Wandering the halls wrapped in a coat last worn by the king might raise a few eyebrows, but it would be far less suggestive than if everyone saw Bilbo in Thorin’s clothes and nothing else. ‘I’ll accompany you.’

Bilbo’s eyes warmed with gratitude, and he accepted Thorin’s hand as he struggled to his feet. This time, he didn’t wobble or sway, but nor did he remove his fingers from Thorin’s grasp, choosing to hold on rather than step away.

‘Balin, I’ll leave this matter with you. After seeing Beorn, Bilbo and I will come straight back here, and that’s where we’ll stay until Dwalin has had the opportunity to tighten security.’

‘Aye, that’s a sound plan.’ Dwalin beckoned a number of soldiers standing around the room before pulling an axe free from its sheath and holding it in his palm, neutral but battle-ready. ‘I’ll get to that as soon as I know you’re back here safe. For now, neither of you go anywhere without at least three guards each. That goes for you two as well.’ He pointed at Fili and Kili, who nodded in agreement, knowing better than to argue in light of all that had happened.

Dwalin turned back to Thorin, his tension making the muscles in his arms bulge as he continued, ‘I’ll watch yer back while you’re with Beorn. I doubt there’ll be another attempt so soon, but that’s not a risk I’m willing to take.’ He shrugged. ‘Besides, neither of you would know where to start looking for him.’

Thorin gestured for Dwalin to lead the way, keeping Bilbo’s hand tucked into his as their guards settled around them. They did not bunch in tight. To do so may offer more protection, but it would also make it harder for them to raise their weapons. More than one had added a shield to their armour, and the plentiful lamplight gleamed off of shining steel.

‘Do we really have no idea who’s responsible for what happened?’ Bilbo asked, keeping his voice low so only Thorin could hear. ‘None at all?’

He didn’t like the faint tremor around Bilbo’s words: a sign of his understandable fear. It was tempting to lie and offer false reassurances, just for the sake of seeing Bilbo smile again, but Thorin could not do that to him. Bilbo needed to be informed. How could he look out for his own safety if he didn’t know the danger?

Thorin sighed, trying to organise the chaotic suspicion of his thoughts. ‘There is plenty of speculation,’ he said at last, ‘but nothing we can act upon. For my part, I think Bard is right.’
Bilbo looked at him, his eyebrows arched and a crooked smile curving his lips. ‘You could have fooled me. It sounded like you were a few small steps from drawing swords.’

Thorin huffed, embarrassed now that the moment has passed. ‘Concern for your safety has left me less than diplomatic, but Bard raised one very important point: his people would have nothing to gain by making matters in Erebor worse. They need stability in order to rebuild.’

‘It’s not impossible that someone has a grudge,’ Bilbo said. ‘There are many who would say what the dragon did to Laketown was our fault, and they’d be right.’

‘Then why try to make what happened look like an accident?’ Thorin stopped, turning to meet Bilbo’s gaze. ‘Nori is right. Your demise is a means to an end for someone, and that end is not vengeance. If it was, they would not have bothered to sabotage the treasury or leave you outside in the snow. They would slit your throat and be done with it.’

He regretted the bluntness of his words as Bilbo went pale, his small body succumbing to a violent shudder that had nothing to do with the chill. The fur he wore glinted, its fine hairs turning silver as it caught the light. A moment later, he was gathering it around himself like armour, forcing his shoulders straight as he summoned his courage.

‘You say that, but why is having me out of the picture so important? I’m just –’ He waved a hand, baffled. ‘–me.’

Thorin reached out, cupping Bilbo’s fur-clad elbow and urging him along. Their guards followed, no doubt listening even as they eyed every shadow and doorway. ‘You’re not “just” anything,’ he replied. ‘Not to the people of Erebor, and not to me. If I had to put money on what this person was trying to achieve and why, they’re hoping to weaken the kingdom for the benefit of an outsider. One of the other dwarven lords, perhaps, intending to wrest it from my control.’

‘Could they do that?’ Bilbo’s eyes were huge in his face, and Thorin tried to imagine what it must be like for someone from the Shire, which occupied its own little corner of Middle Earth and never reached for more. What must his world look like to Bilbo, brimming as it was with politics and greed?

‘Not without a fight, but…’ He pursed his lips, his mind racing. He had asked the council for help retrieving Erebor, and they had refused their support, calling it nothing but a fool’s errand.

He had proven them wrong.

Word of his success would have reached them by now, and he wondered how many looked upon its riches with lust in their hearts. ‘If one of the lords can convince the others that I am unfit to rule and they all chose to march, then it would be a battle we could not hope to win.’

Bilbo frowned. ‘If they could raise an army that big, then why meddle in our affairs? Why weaken us further when we already have nothing?’ He threw his hands in the air, shaking his head. ‘Thorin, it doesn’t make sense. I don’t understand why the need to prove you unfit makes me a target!’

Butterflies thrashed in Thorin’s stomach as he stared at Bilbo, so vibrant now, thanks to Oin’s mixture. He was alive with passion and intelligence, doing his best to wrap his mind around a world that was so new and different to him.

He could not speak for the killer; he could only guess at their motives. Perhaps whoever was behind all this was hoping the grief of such a loss would madden him, or that the gold sickness would rise up and claim him again while he mourned.
Would they be right?

‘Besides,’ Bilbo continued, ‘you have heirs. Even if they could somehow get you off the throne, surely it would not fall to any of them? It would be Fili’s by right and Kili’s thereafter.’

‘Accidents happen; dynasties fail.’ Thorin shrugged, knowing his words sounded callous. ‘Most of the council are content in their ways and would not rise up against Erebor without good cause. I suspect someone is trying to give them a reason.’ He took a deep breath, feeling as if history had come full circle. ‘My father and I went to great lengths to hide how far Thror had fallen into his gold sickness, but we were running out of excuses. If the dragon had not torn into our homeland when it did, we would have had a war on our hands before the year turned. If the counsel can be convinced that my illness is a permanent affliction…’

He shook his head, shifting his hand so he could twine his fingers through Bilbo’s anew. ‘If it weren’t for you, I cannot be sure it would not return. It is always there, in the back of my mind. If something happened – if it could fight its way to the fore once more…’

Bilbo tightened his grip, his voice bracing. ‘We’ll cleanse the gold. It won’t be a problem anymore.’

Thorin closed his eyes, realising Bilbo blamed the dragon for the loss of Thorin’s senses. No doubt Smaug’s poison had made it worse, but he could not pretend that a tendency for maddening greed did not flow in his veins. The hobbit thought his work in the treasury helped; he did not understand that his simple presence, his disposition and the warm balm of his affection played a far greater role.

That was what their culprit was counting on, he was sure of it. They thought that by removing Bilbo from the picture, they could crack Thorin’s foundations and bring him tumbling down into insanity once more.

‘This way,’ Dwalin said, interrupting before he could utter another word. ‘Nori said it’s best if you’re both seen. Stay close, and remember: you’re just passing through.’

They stepped out into the main corridor, weaving through the bustle of people coming and going about their business. They were moving things further into the mountain, closer to the warmth of the furnaces. Men and dwarves shuffled along, clutching bedding and the few, precious possessions they had to call their own. They talked and laughed as they went, but steadily, Thorin heard the growing undercurrent of whispers. Casual glances became intense scrutiny. They would be taking in everything, from his own relaxed façade to Bilbo’s apparent health, just as Nori intended.

He wondered if the would-be killer was among them. Did they look at Bilbo even now, seeing yet another failure in their efforts? Were they already planning their next move, or were they still cursing Bilbo’s rescue?

The small hand in his grasp tightened, and Thorin let himself be led. It was difficult to keep his eyes ahead, rather than sweeping the faces of the crowd in search of clues or threats. He had to satisfy himself with stolen glances left and right as they dodged and wove through the chaos.

By the time they broke free, Dwalin was sweating from the challenge. He looked as if he had just run a dangerous gauntlet. Thorin knew every instinct his old friend had was on high alert, and though he was used to it after all these years, it didn’t lessen the strain. ‘That’ll have to do. People have had a good look at you. We’ll take the quiet way back.’

‘Once we’ve seen Beorn,’ Bilbo reminded him, as if he thought Dwalin would try and sneak him back before he got the chance. ‘I’m not going anywhere without saying thank you.’
‘Aye, you might not be, but he will if we don’t hurry.’

‘What?’ Bilbo looked appalled, staring at Thorin with accusing eyes. ‘He can’t go back out in that!’ He flung his left hand wide, encompassing the storm outside in the sweep of his arm.

‘Perhaps you’ll have more luck convincing him to stay than Bofur did, but I doubt it.’ Dwalin’s grin was more sympathetic than cruel as he pushed open the double doors to his right and revealed the space within. It had been a winter stable once, a place for visiting dignitaries to store their horses, with large pens for the battle rams. Like the rest of the kingdom, it had fallen on hard times, left to wither and decay, but someone had put in a hurried effort to make it habitable again.

Straw and rushes cushioned the floor, and the goats ambled through it happily, content to munch on whatever took their fancy. The sheep had settled down to sleep, and Beorn’s huge sled sat to one side, covered by an oilskin. Guarded lanterns lit the low rafters, and an old dwarf Thorin knew by the name of Mida was chortling in delight at something the shape-changer had said.

‘Your Majesty.’ She bowed a bit when she noticed him, and Thorin hid a smile at her refreshing dismissal of etiquette. She bustled about with a long hide apron over her clothes, sorting out scraps for feed and stuffing thick rags into the occasional crack in the walls. ‘I’m just settling in Master Beorn’s beasts.’

‘They are your beasts now,’ Beorn replied, stroking the blunt head of one of the goats fondly. ‘Though I would ask you to spare them the slaughter.’

Thorin nodded, remembering that no meat had graced Beorn’s table in the sanctuary of his home. ‘It will be our absolute last resort,’ he promised.

‘I’ll see them set free before it comes to that,’ Bilbo vowed, over-riding Thorin’s statement without a thought. ‘It’s the least I can offer you.’

A rough laugh rumbled in the giant man’s chest, and he hunkered down in the straw, the better to meet Bilbo’s gaze. He still looked threatening – a hulking shadow, as much bear as a man – but his eyes were kind, and a crooked smile pulled at the corner of his mouth.

‘I saved you from the ice, little one, but no more than that. You did the rest all by yourself.’

‘The rest?’ Thorin frowned, trying to understand as Beorn raised an enormous eyebrow and bared a hint of teeth.

‘I gave the wolf to your stitching one.’ He looped his fingers along his jaw, and Thorin realised he was tracing the pattern of Dori’s hair and beard. ‘He will make something fine, once he has stopped fussing over the size of it.’

Thorin blinked, trying to understand. He had noticed Beorn carrying a dead wolf, but he had not thought much of it at the time. His attention had all been for Bilbo, weak and ailing as he was. He had assumed Beorn had killed it, but of course, the only things the bear slaughtered were Wargs and Orcs.

‘You killed a wolf?’ He stared at Bilbo, struggling to frame this new notion in his mind. ‘With what?’

‘A pebble!’ Beorn guffawed as if it were the best joke he had heard in decades.

‘A rock,’ Bilbo corrected flatly, ‘and a lot of blind luck. I was just trying to make it go away.’
Dwalin caught his eye, and they shared a brief, incredulous look. Taking down game with a slingshot like Ori’s was not unheard of, but the idea of facing an Erebor wolf unarmed made Thorin’s muscles clench in imagined fear. Any wild animal was vicious when hungry, and the beast would have had no trouble tearing Bilbo to pieces!

‘Besides, that din you made distracted it.’ Bilbo jammed his hands on his hips, the fur he was wearing gaping open to reveal the clothes beneath. ‘If not for that, its teeth would have been around my throat. You saved my life, Beorn, and you’ll not go without thanks.’

Bilbo folded his arms, his chin tilting in a stubborn line. Beorn glanced towards Thorin, and the look he gave him was ripe with amusement and just a hint of pity, as though he were wishing him luck dealing with Bilbo as his partner.

He did not know how the shape-changer knew of their courting. He did not expect him to understand the beads that decorated them both. Then Beorn sniffed, his nostrils flaring, and heat tried to climb Thorin’s neck. Of course, shape-changers were rumoured to hang on to their heightened senses in both forms. He could probably smell Thorin all over Bilbo’s skin, and he drew his own conclusions.

‘Then see my beasts through the winter, and let their numbers grow in the warmth of your spring. Weave their wool and take their honey. Make this place their home. That is all the thanks I need.’

Bilbo nodded with all the seriousness of a diplomat striking an alliance. In some ways, perhaps he was, and all Thorin could do was stand back and admire him for his certainty. He did not bluster or offer excuses about limited resources and the uncertainty of the future. He gave his word, and Thorin knew him well enough to know he would tear himself apart trying to keep it.

Dwalin shifted closer, his eyes still on Bilbo and Beorn as he muttered something out of the corner of his mouth. ‘Honey? From goats?’

Thorin’s smile became a little fixed, and he glanced towards Mida, who in turn gestured to a dark shape, carefully wrapped in some kind of bindings: one of Beorn’s giant bee hives. There was no sign of the insects, but there was a low, ominous hum from within.

‘They will stay inside until the spring,’ Beorn promised as he straightened up. ‘Once the ice is gone from the ground, they will need a sheltered spot out of the wind. If they cannot weather the climes, then they will return to me when the sun shines. Consider them a gift: a different kind of gold.’

‘So you’re really going?’ Bilbo asked, sparing Thorin the need to do any more than bow his head in shell-shocked thanks. In truth, he had never expected to hear from Beorn again. He was distant enough that the politics of Erebor did not affect him, and yet there he stood, providing them with both milk and honey: a wealth they could appreciate more than any to be found in the treasury.

‘I must outpace the storm,’ he said. ‘The cold may not bother me, but the animals in my care are another matter.’

‘Well at least let us see you out.’ Bilbo waved towards the door, trotting alongside Beorn as he led the way into the entrance hall.

The air had taken on an extra bite, and Thorin’s breath caught hard in his chest. Bilbo was shivering again, despite his furs, and the soldiers shifted in place, trying to escape the creeping cold of their armour. Only Beorn seemed immune.

The doors clanked open, parting just wide enough for the shape-changer to slip through. The world
beyond was a stormy mix of grey and white, but Beorn inhaled as if he was scenting his freedom, relishing the taste of the unkind air. With a shallow nod to Thorin, he turned away, pausing one last time as Bilbo piped up again.

‘Goodbye, Beorn, and thank you.’

A meaty hand rested on Bilbo’s shoulder, but Thorin could see it was gentle, despite its size. Beorn may be a fearsome man-beast, but he seemed to have a soft spot, at least when it came to hobbits.

‘Goodbye, little one. We’ll meet again when the world is a kinder place.’

With a nod of his head, he turned away, his body silhouetted against the pearly afternoon light as he stepped out of the mountain. The snow whirled around him, blurring his outline, until what stood there was not a man at all.

The bear looked over its shoulder, fearsome to the eye. It lifted its muzzle, its great chest swelling in a bellowing roar of farewell before the winter swallowed it whole.
Ronin looked peaky, his face pale and his eyes lacking their usual humour, but he stood to attention, insisting he was fit for duty. Not that Bilbo could blame him for his eagerness. After days of confinement at Oin’s orders, he itched to be out in the mountain. Now, at last, he had that chance, but only if Ronin and a few other guards accompanied him.

‘Are you sure?’ he asked again. ‘You don’t have to, you know.’

‘Yes I do.’ Ronin straightened his back, his determination shining bright. ‘I will not let any further harm befall you.’ His jaw tensed, and Bilbo wondered if they were sharing the same memory. Nothing Ronin could have done would have prevented him from being hit on the head, though Bilbo had noticed that he and all the other guards now religiously wore their helmets, the better to protect themselves from a repeat attack.

‘It wasn’t your fault.’ He closed his eyes, knowing his protests were a hiding to nothing. Ronin took his duty seriously, and he was looking for a chance to redeem himself. Who was Bilbo to deny him? ‘All right, come on then.’

The healing rooms were almost empty, stripped bare as Oin relocated his helpers closer to the furnaces. The whole mountain was on the move, and though Erebor’s halls were far from full, it still seemed like an exodus. People had been working to scrub, clean and repair the workers’ quarters that surrounded the huge forges, nestled near their heat. Bilbo had longed to help, but Oin ignored his every request, saying that dust would aggravate the cough that rattled in his chest.

Thankfully, his friends knew better than to coddle him. Everyone brought him jobs to do – things that were important, yet minor. He’d stitched clothes, repaired books and sharpened tools, all from the comfort of the fireside. It helped keep his days full while his body recovered, and meant he wasn’t counting the hours until Thorin returned.

Bilbo had feared that, after the attack, he would drift away once more, putting distance between them. He wouldn’t put it past the stubborn dwarf to think he was doing it for Bilbo’s own good. Yet the opposite was true. Thorin made a point of returning at the same time every evening and staying in Bilbo’s company throughout the night. They had not returned to sharing a bed, much to Bilbo’s regret, but over the last few days they had established a companionable routine.

It was both brilliant and maddening. He loved having Thorin so happy and unguarded. Every little touch, accidental or otherwise, was forever engraved in his memory, and their quiet conversations shifted around them as naturally as breathing. Yet always there was a taste of promise in the air, unacknowledged but potent, and more than once Bilbo had almost seized his chance and dragged it out into the open.

All that stopped him was the weariness in Thorin’s face and the stress that, even with plenty of rest and good food, refused to leave the line of his shoulders. It only got worse the longer Bilbo’s attacker evaded capture, and Bilbo could not convince himself that confronting their changing relationship would help matters.

And so he waited, biding his time for a moment that never came and cursing himself for lacking courage.

‘Master Baggins?’
He blinked, realising Ronin and two other guards, both human, were waiting for him to emerge from his musings. All three watched him with curious concern, and he plastered a weak smile on his face before scooping up the meagre bundle of his belongings and checking he had not left anything behind.

The room looked sad and sparse now, stripped of almost everything, and Bilbo shook his head at his own melancholy as he shut the door, falling in at Ronin’s side. The other two separated, one taking the lead while the other brought up the rear, their hands on the hilts of their swords and their marching steps a steady, pounding rhythm. The clatter of their armour created enough of a din that Bilbo realised he would not be overheard, and he tapped the back of Ronin’s gauntlet, seizing his opportunity.

‘I wanted to ask you something.’ He licked his lips, speaking quickly as he kept pace. ‘Before you were hit, do you remember any… noises?’

‘Like footsteps?’ Ronin asked, already shaking his head.

Bilbo winced, wondering how to explain. ‘Or muttering, maybe. A wet, breathy kind of noise?’

Ronin’s eyes turned probing, the frown on his face both baffled and thoughtful. A dozen questions shone in his gaze, but he kept them to himself. ‘I’m sorry, Master Baggins, but I heard nothing. Not the shift of armour nor the tread of feet. Whoever did it moved quick and quiet, and they didn’t waste any time.’ No mockery stained his words as he asked, ‘Do you fear creatures in the shadows, Master Baggins?’

Bilbo thought of a twisted body, with fish-belly white skin pulled tight over jutting bone and huge, moon-mad eyes. ‘Just one.’ He did not think Gollum could have followed him all the way from the Misty Mountains. He had left him behind to rant and rave in his foetid cave, sparing him Sting’s bite even as he stole the ring, but the notion would not give him peace.

But no, he doubted Gollum would chip away at the boards holding up the tottering gold, or be willing to let him wander off into the snow to die with the ring in his pocket. Bilbo’s life was irrelevant: all that mattered was the trinket he had taken. Yet more than once, he had wondered if all of this had nothing to do with the kingdom. Perhaps, instead, it was about riddles whispered in the dark.

‘You’re not worried about that kind of thing, then?’ he asked, trying to change the topic without sounding clumsy. ‘Goblins and orcs?’

Ronin drew in a breath, his fingers tightening around his axe as if on instinct. ‘They are a fact of life. They like sheltered, underground places, as do we, and have no qualms about fighting for space within the bowels of the earth. However, we have learned, over time, where they dwell. They do not favour Erebor’s lands.’

The sudden rhythm of new footsteps impinged on Bilbo’s awareness, and a different voice joined their conversation, so familiar and warm that his heart leapt to hear it.

‘Unlike the dragons.’

Thorin mirrored Bilbo’s smile, his eyes crinkling at their corners as his guards mingled with Bilbo’s own. They never stopped or broke stride, merely fell into step as if they had been doing it every day of their lives, slicing through the busy corridors as the crowd parted before them.

‘Maybe the dragons are why the goblins stay away?’ Bilbo suggested. ‘Perhaps they know how to
pick their battles.’

‘Perhaps.’ There was an odd pinch to Thorin’s expression, and it took a moment for Bilbo to realise he seemed anxious. Not in the brooding manner that meant trouble with the kingdom; this was more personal. ‘Here, this way. I have something to show you.’

His hand found Bilbo’s, their fingers entwining as he gave him a gentle tug down the wide stairs that led towards the furnaces. Their guards kept up with ease, unconcerned, and Bilbo could only hurry on, letting Thorin pull him into the thickening crowd.

It was organised chaos. People carried bedrolls and armour, tables and benches, as well as all the necessities for Bombur’s kitchen. He heard the bleat of a goat and realised that Beorn’s animals had also been transported deeper into the halls to escape the insidious touch of ice that shrouded the land.

Already, the air was warmer, taking on a dry, baked quality that chased away the damp. It seemed to radiate through the walls themselves, and there was a constant background sound, which Bilbo soon realised was the roar of fire and the churn of molten gold. There were big, thick doorways set along the corridor, and he stared as they passed under an arch. Stone lintels the size of tree trunks had been carved from the very bedrock, and the doors were shaped in such a way that they created tight seals at all their edges.

‘Blast doors,’ Thorin explained, catching his puzzled expression. ‘If there’s an accident in the foundries we can seal off the area and prevent the spread of fire.’

‘Is it safe for us down here?’ Bilbo asked. He was sure Thorin would not put his people in danger for the sake of sparing some firewood, but for the first time since he had heard the plan to move, he had his doubts.

Thorin nodded, gesturing off to his left, where Bilbo assumed the forges lay deep within Erebor’s heart. ‘With only two in use, we’re in no danger. It would take something catastrophic when all twelve were working at full capacity for these doors to be put to use, and even then…’ He shook his head. ‘They are a good example of a thoughtful ruler being overly cautious. The only time they’re closed is during a siege, when they can keep out the most violent attacks.’

‘Has that ever happened?’

‘Not since my great grandfather’s lifetime, unless you count the dragon.’ A touch of grief shadowed Thorin’s face, and Bilbo realised that this was where they had found the last of Erebor’s dead. Those who could not escape the mountain had rushed in here to hide. Safe from the dragon’s clutches, it had been hunger and thirst that took them instead.

It was hard to marry that cold, grey tomb with the bustling life all around him now. Bright lamps lit every inch, and the atmosphere was almost celebratory. People chatted and laughed, happy to be making a home for themselves, and open doorways led to chambers already occupied by new residents.

‘Where are we going?’ He shifted his grip on the bundle in his arms, casting a questioning look at Ronin, who gave him a quick grin in return. Clearly, he knew where Thorin was taking him, and he was not about to ruin the surprise.

At last, the crowds began to thin, the bustle fading away. There were fewer rooms here, and Bilbo managed a few glimpses into what he realised were quarters for the Company, as well Bard’s family and Tauriel. They were already furnished, their bare walls made to look more like home with the scraps the mountain had to offer. Even compared to Bard’s shack in Laketown, it was not much, but
it was enough to make a world of difference.

Looking straight ahead, Bilbo saw a double doorway. It was not as grand as many higher up in the kingdom, but a man could still pass through it with ease. Unlike the others, which were plain wood, these were decorated with beaten bronze panels. They shone, their polish agleam, yet they did not look gaudy. Instead, the tempered metal looked like flames, all flashes of light and shadow, and Bilbo was so busy admiring them he didn’t notice the guards flanking either side until they pulled the doors open and cleared the way ahead.

‘What…?’ Bilbo’s question died on his lips as he realised what lay beyond. A bare stone hallway, no longer than his Smial was from front to back, stretched out before him. Thresholds pocked its length and rugs dotted the flagstone floor, softening their footsteps as Thorin ushered him inside.

Their guards did not follow, leaving them in what Bilbo knew must be safe territory. Thorin’s caution bordered on paranoia, but it was nothing compared to Dwalin’s rigorous insistence that they were watched at all times. He only allowed them anything akin to solitude if he was confident no harm could befall them.

‘Here.’ Thorin stopped in front of the only closed door in the place, taking a deep breath as if he was trying to calm his nerves. He shifted his hand in Bilbo’s grasp, moving to grip his wrist so he could press a key into his palm. ‘This is yours.’

It was a plain little thing, and Bilbo turned it over before slipping it into the lock. The tumblers moved easily, recently oiled, and the hinges swung open on a whisper, revealing the scene beyond.

Lamplight gilded the walls, making the hung tapestries glow despite their faded dyes, and when Bilbo stepped forward, the better to take it all in, sheepskin rugs kept the chill from his feet. A bed stood with its head against the wall, not a makeshift cot, but a sturdy wood frame, carved in simple, beautiful lines. The posts at its corners climbed up towards the ceiling, their cross bars draped with fabric that he could draw closed while he slept to keep out the cold.

A bowl of dried lavender scented the air, banishing the crass taint of smoke and mingling with the earthy scent of the peat embers that glowed in the grate. Yet it was what stood proud in front of the hearth that stole his breath away.

‘An armchair?’ He knew he was grinning like a fool, but he could not hide his delight. After so many miles of long roads and days of discomfort, it was a sight for sore eyes.

A fur was slung over the back, perfect for wrapping himself in when he curled up in its depths, and though the upholstery was threadbare in places, a deft hand had repaired it. For all that it was worn by the years, it was still remarkably solid. To many, it would seem a humble piece of furniture, but to Bilbo it looked better than any throne in the world.

At its side a small table sat, stacked with books. His pipe awaited him, unlit but ready, and even the air itself seemed to welcome him. This may not be the Shire, and Erebor was not Bag End, but it was the next best thing, and Bilbo could have wept for all the familiar little touches that made it look like home.

‘I – I –’ He trailed off, his thanks getting caught on the knot in his throat. ‘How did you – Did you do all this yourself?’

Thorin stood at the threshold, watching his reaction. His anxiety had vanished like mist at dawn, melting away in the face of Bilbo’s obvious pleasure and admiration. ‘I know it is not much, but I wished for you to have a home here, rather than somewhere to merely lay your head.’
'Oh, Thorin.’ He turned, noticing the writing desk for the first time. Its wood was scarred and its form basic, but it whispered to him all the same. The grain was smooth beneath his fingertips, polished and oiled to make its battered surface glow to the best of its abilities. Perhaps other hobbits would think it beneath them, but for Bilbo it was a marvellous luxury. ‘It’s wonderful. I – Thank you. I don’t know what else to say, but thank you.’

Thorin inclined his head, the beads in his hair sparkling as they caught the light. ‘You’re welcome. This space is yours and yours alone. My room is the next along, and Fili and Kili are across the corridor.’

‘What about the rest of this place?’ Bilbo knew there had been more than four doorways, and he followed as Thorin beckoned to him, pointing out a small dining area for the Company, as well as a larger chamber filled with several rickety tables and a lot of paperwork.

He couldn’t help but notice that none of the other areas contained the same comfortable touches as his. They were sparse places, with the bare minimum of furniture and little else. Well, perhaps he could do something about that, now that he was allowed up and about again.

‘These rooms will be ours until we can occupy the royal wing once more, which may be quite some time.’

Bilbo glanced away, wondering if Thorin meant for his words to contain an unspoken question. The odds were good that the royal wing would remain empty until after the thaw, by which point Bilbo could well be back in the Shire. That option still lingered before him, a choice he had refused to look at too closely. He had never been so torn about anything. Normally, he knew his own heart and mind, but this time he felt as if he were spread thin, stretched between the memory of one home and the possibility of another.

‘They’re brilliant,’ Bilbo assured him, hoping it would be enough. He could not tell Thorin whether he planned to stay in Erebor, not yet. A great deal of that depended on what happened this winter. ‘As much as I like Oin, and as comfortable as the healing rooms are, it’s wonderful to have a space to call my own.’

‘Then I shall leave you to enjoy it.’

‘Will you be back?’ Bilbo asked, unable to hide the eagerness in his voice.

‘At the evening meal,’ Thorin promised, a glimmer of mirth sparkling in his eyes. ‘Unless Balin sets me free from my duties sooner. Either way, I’ll return as soon as the kingdom allows.’ He stepped forward, into the room rather than out of it, and Bilbo’s pulse leapt. He felt like a deer caught in the hunter’s sights, oddly thrilled by his own captivation. Thorin reached out, brushing his fingers down the courting braid that still wove through his hair, and Bilbo swayed into his touch.

‘Rest, please?’ he asked, smiling as Bilbo mustered a shadow of a scowl. ‘You know if your health worsens Oin’ll never let you go.’

‘I’m fine.’ Bilbo breathed out, swallowing hard before he gestured to the armchair. ‘I plan to curl up with a good book, and –’ He reached up, grasping Thorin’s hand in quick promise. ‘I’ll be here when you return.’

The intensity of Thorin’s gaze pinned him in place, searching, and Bilbo hoped he found whatever answers he sought. For one, exquisite second, Bilbo thought he was going to kiss him. The air turned slow and thick; all the great buzz and bustle of Erebor may as well have been in another realm. There was only Thorin, filling his world.
Then something shifted in those blue eyes, and the moment was over before it had begun. Whatever notion had touched Thorin’s mind with its dark wings made him step back, stretching the distance between them. ‘I look forward to it. Take care, Bilbo.’

He was gone before Bilbo could manage a reply, and he choked off a growl of frustration, running his hands through his hair and wincing when his fingers caught in his braid. He slumped down in his chair, allowing it to support his body even as his mind began to wander.

This whole situation would be the death of him. This – this was not how hobbits did things. As a people, his kind were not known for delaying their gratification. Their affairs were often simple and passionate. Politics rarely came into it, but Thorin was no hobbit, and this – this was no normal courtship.

Valar curse it; it wasn’t even real!

Except Bilbo knew that wasn’t true, at least on his part. If he hadn’t felt something for Thorin, he doubted he would ever have agreed to his haphazard plan in the first place. He’d have set things right with the mithril and born the consequences, whatever they may be. Instead, he’d hoped that a false courtship would give him time to see if the glimmer of affection in Thorin’s eyes could grow into more.

And oh, it had.

Where there had only been sparks, there was a bonfire lit just for him. It lay beneath every tender action and selfless thought. He was sitting in the middle of a room he was sure Thorin had cleaned and put together himself, all for Bilbo. It was not merely a place for him to sleep, but something organised with him in mind. It mimicked his home in the Shire wherever possible, providing him with all the little comforts he still missed, even now.

He reached for his pipe and the small box beside it, removing a more modest portion of leaf than usual. Their supplies were short, after all, and he had to make it last. Oin would berate him endlessly, thinking of his cough, but for once, Bilbo decided to ignore the healer’s orders. He had some thinking to do.

Reaching forward, he lit a splint of wood and held it to the pipe bowl, puffing to get it going. Spice and musk rolled across his tongue, warming his mouth and throat as a smile curved his lips. It was a dwarvish blend, more blunt and powerful than the subtleties of Longbottom Leaf. It took him back, not to Hobbiton, but to nights under the stars, where thrones and kingdoms were their goal, rather than their reality.

Drawing his knees up to his chest, Bilbo stared into the fire. Its heat was not as crucial as it was higher in the mountain, but it leant a hominess to his small sanctuary. Besides, watching the tiny flames dance helped his mind to wander, circling the notion of him and Thorin, all that they were and all that they could be.

He did not think he was imagining any of the clues. That kiss pressed to the crown of his head after he was rescued may have felt like a dream, but it seemed too deeply etched in his memory to be a fantasy. For whatever reason, he and Thorin were dancing along the same line of almost, yet never quite crossing it.

He knew his own reasons: selfish, petty things such as cowardice and uncertainty. He had not had problems asking others for what he wanted in the past, but Thorin was a different matter. It wasn’t that he was a dwarf, or even a king, he just seemed somehow more important than anyone else Bilbo had asked into his bed.
Perhaps it was because he knew, deep down, that this was the only courtship he had ever experienced that had the possibility to become something permanent. He had never given any real thought to settling down. It felt unnecessary, back at Bag End. He had everything he wanted, and he valued his solitude too much to share his space.

Months on the road had changed all that, and for the first time in his life, he wondered what it would be like to spend all his days with another, and not just anyone, but a king! That would be no easy task in itself. If their courtship ended in a union, as everyone already seemed to think it should, where would that leave him? To tie himself to Thorin would be to tie himself to the kingdom, and the very notion filled him with a tumultuous cocktail of resignation and dread.

Shaking his head, Bilbo chided himself. Talk about putting the cart before the horse! It was too easy to buy into the fantasy he and Thorin had spun around themselves. That future may never come to pass, and yet it was still there: a wavering mirage that he could not ignore. Did he dare to offer himself to Thorin in earnest – his love and companionship both in bed and out of it – if some part of him feared the expectations of throne and crown that lay at journey’s end?

Could he love Thorin for the winter, and then possibly leave when spring awoke the land?

‘Damn it all.’ Bilbo blew out a stream of smoke, watching the blue-white haze spread and disperse. His father would have said he didn’t know whether he was coming or going, too caught up in what-ifs and possibilities to see a way forward. His mother would simply have looked at him with her kind, patient eyes and told him to listen to his heart.

It had been that memory of her advice that pushed him out of the door all that time ago, and despite their troubles, he didn’t have regrets. It had been worth it, in the end.

The last embers in the bowl of his pipe dimmed to nothing but ash, and Bilbo heaved a regretful sigh, spluttering around his cough as he set it aside. Yes, he knew why he did not simply speak up and ask for what he wanted, but did those same excuses hold Thorin back, or was there something else?

How did they manage to get into such a pickle?

A knock interrupted his meandering mind, making Bilbo blink towards the threshold. Thorin had shut it behind him, and he doubted he had returned so soon.

‘Who is it?’ he called, getting to his feet and smiling as the reply came through the wood.

‘Fili and Kili!’

The door revealed their beaming faces, and Bilbo stepped aside to let them both in, noting their surprise and appreciation at the comforts of his small space. ‘Have a seat,’ he urged, pointing to the armchair and laughing as Fili claimed it for himself, leaving his brother to perch on the arm. ‘What can I help you with?’

‘We wanted to see for ourselves that you were really all right.’ Kili cocked his head, checking Bilbo over with thoughtful eyes. ‘Uncle said you were, but he’s hardly let anyone near you since you came back from saying goodbye to Beorn.’

‘He hasn’t told us much, either,’ Fili added. ‘Just that you were resting.’

‘Which I was, on Oin’s orders.’ Bilbo stood to the side of the fireplace, leaning against the wall and enjoying the heat that radiated through the stone. He would have to get another chair or two in here. One was all well and good when it was just him, but if he intended to entertain his friends, he needed more seating space. ‘What did I miss?’
Fili grinned as if he appreciated Bilbo’s frustration. ‘Not much. Most people have been busy getting us moved down here, but Gandalf and Tauriel have been dealing with another problem.’

‘Here.’ Kili held out his hand, a narrow piece of cord spilling from his fingers. The leather was old, but serviceable, and a small golden disc hung from it, etched with what looked like some kind of rune. ‘It’s a charm to help with the treasury. Everyone’s got one, even us.’ He pulled his own out from under his tunic to show it off, butter-yellow in the firelight.

‘What does it do?’ Bilbo asked, tilting it this way and that to get a better look. Other than the rune, it was completely plain, and no bigger than a very thin coin.

‘It’s made from the new gold, the stuff we’ve melted down and recast.’ Fili stroked his beard, pulling one leg up to rest his ankle on his other knee. ‘Gandalf tried to explain, but he didn’t make much sense. Something about them being like a light to chase off the shadows, because they’ve already been cleansed. At least I think that’s what he said.’

‘And do they work?’

Fili and Kili shared a glance, shrugging their shoulders in almost perfect unison. ‘They seem to. Even the people who were under the gold’s spell as soon as they walked through the treasury doors seem able to bear it as long as they’re wearing these.’ Kili reached up, rubbing his thumb over the tiny pendant. ‘No one works in there for longer than three hours, and there are enough of us in the mountain now that nobody has to spend time amongst the hoard for two days in a row.’

Bilbo nodded, an invisible weight lifting from his shoulders. He had worried for Coln and the others, especially the children of the men. He should have known Thorin would take the matter to heart. ‘So when am I returning to work?’ he asked, looking up with a scowl as Fili smothered a laugh. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘I don’t know when you’ll be allowed back in.’ Fili held up a hand, trying to pacify him. ‘And don’t blame me. I had nothing to do with it, and neither did Uncle.’

‘If you want someone to shout at, I suggest you start with Oin. He’s made it clear that you’re not to do anything strenuous before he says so.’

Bilbo muttered something under his breath. He should be grateful for Oin’s dedication to his well-being, but constant observation was starting to chafe. Except for the lingering traces of his cough, he was all better.

‘It’s for a good reason,’ Kili pointed out, his smile falling serious. ‘We saw you in Beorn’s sled. It was us who ran back to the mountain to tell Oin to prepare for someone almost frozen to death.’

‘You didn’t see yourself.’ Fili paled at the memory, his lips pressed into a thin line and his eyes sharp. ‘If you had, you probably wouldn’t begrudge Oin his caution.’

Bilbo sighed, his face falling into a moue of apology. ‘You know I didn’t do it on purpose.’

‘Of course not, but you can forgive the rest of us for coddling you a bit.’

‘Especially since we have no more idea who is behind this than we did the day it happened.’ Kili’s heel kicked at the side of the armchair as he folded his arms and scowled.

Bilbo thought as much. He was sure he would be one of the first to hear of it if Dwalin had made an arrest.
Fili sighed. ‘At least now everyone in the mountain knows what’s going on. More watchful eyes can’t be a bad thing, even if it has set the rumour mill spinning.’

‘Anything I should know about?’ Bilbo asked, half-dreading the answer. Back in the Shire, gossip was vicious, and he doubted Erebor would be any different.

Kili shrugged. ‘Mostly it’s just wild speculation about who is behind it. More than one person thinks it’s an Elvish plot, but we’ve been doing what we can to shut that down.’

‘The things Tauriel’s done to help us make that easier,’ Fili added, reaching out to give his brother’s shoulder a squeeze. ‘There’s been a bit of sniping between races, but mostly, people are seeing past that and looking at individuals instead. So far, no one’s come up with much. Either whoever did it is very good at hiding their involvement, or they’ve got friends covering for them.’

Bilbo grimaced, not liking those options. If only he’d seen something of his attacker! Trust him to have his back turned at the wrong damn moment!

‘Let Dwalin and the others worry about that for now.’ Fili stood up, nudging Kili with his elbow. The younger brother’s darkness fled, replaced instead with an expression similar to the one Thorin had worn only a short while ago, torn between excitement and worry. ‘We have something for you.’

He reached into his jerkin, pulling a small bundle of cloth from the pocket and holding it out to Bilbo. ‘It’s tradition, when a family member courts, to make a gift for their intended.’ Kili’s grin took years off his face, returning him to the youthful dwarf who had first turned up at Bilbo’s door, so many miles ago. ‘It’s not much, but…’

Bilbo’s breath caught as he shifted the fabric, revealing the glimmering gold and silver within. Beautiful curlicues of metal twined, vine-like, around each other, while the voids in between formed clever, geometric shapes. It looked like something from two worlds, nature and artifice, and so delicate that it felt no heavier than a feather in his hand.

‘You made this?’ Maybe older dwarves would have found his astonishment insulting, but Fili and Kili both shuffled their feet, flushing with pleasure at his enthusiasm. ‘When did you even get the time?’

‘An hour, here and there.’ Fili reached out, turning it over so Bilbo could see the way it curved, and abruptly he realised what he was looking at, not a hair clasp, as he had first wondered, but something similar to what Dwalin wore on his ears, though a hundred times more fine. ‘It’s also made of re-forged metals. Mostly gold, but with some silver woven in. Do you know how to wear it?’

‘No.’ Bilbo surrendered it back to Fili, who showed him how to flex the metal open. There were blunt serrations along one edge, the better to allow it to grip the cartilage of his ear. ‘Does it matter which side?’ he asked, smiling when Kili shook his head. ‘In that case, put it over this. It has healed enough that it won’t hurt.’

He pushed his hair out of the way, revealing the flesh that had been damaged by an orc’s arrow. The injury was a small one, and he had been trying not to fuss over the scar left behind, but it was wonderful to cover something so unsightly with such a stunning piece of jewellery.

Fili did as he was told, smiling all the while. Bilbo expected it to feel uncomfortable, but he barely noticed it beyond a faint pressure that soon faded from his senses.

The moment Fili stepped back, he raised his hand, feeling the way the cuff climbed from the bottom of his ear almost up to the pointed tip, hugging his skin as if the metal had been drawn on him, rather
than made by Fili and Kili’s talented hands. ‘How did you get it to fit so well?’ he asked as Kili held up a mirror so he could see his reflection.

‘Tauriel helped.’ A blush dusted Kili’s cheeks. ‘Elf ears are sharper than yours, but they’re a far better guide than ours would have been!’ He tugged at his earlobe in emphasis. ‘Do you like it?’

Bilbo could barely find the words to express himself. He knew that Thorin’s people could make exquisite things. He had seen evidence enough of that when sorting through the hoard. However, it was one thing to witness the heirlooms of their race, crafted by dwarves long dead, but it was quite another to hold something freshly forged, and all for him.

‘It’s wonderful!’ He ran his fingers over it, admiring the polished texture. There was not a single rough edge or flaw, and the obvious pleasure Fili and Kili both took from his reaction only made the gift better. ‘Thank you.

‘You’re welcome.’ Kili looked towards the door, grimacing as one of the bells chimed through the kingdom, indicating the hour. ‘We’d love to stay, but Bombur is expecting our help in the kitchens.’

‘And no, you can’t come with us,’ Fili added, his smile apologetic and knowing. ‘It’s not worth risking Oin’s foul temper.’

‘Make the most of your time off, Bilbo,’ Kili urged. ‘You’ll be back working soon enough. We’ll see you at the evening meal!’

The princes ducked out of the doorway, and Bilbo followed them to the threshold, watching until they returned safely to the company of their guards. It was only then that he retreated, his thoughts inevitably turning to the wealth of kindness he had been shown. First Thorin had offered this blissful slice of space, and then his nephews joined in with a treasure of their own.

He ran his tongue over his teeth, wincing at the tendrils of guilt that tried to take root in his belly. Would Fili and Kili still have given him something so fine if they knew the uncertain truth of the courtship, or would they have held back? He had no answer to that, and he rubbed his hand over his chin, trying to settle the unease that coiled in his gut.

Hobbits did gifts very differently to dwarves. They were more about giving than receiving, often putting huge thought into their offerings. Yet Bilbo had never taken such pleasure in his neighbours’ presents. It was the things he was given here, from friends he had made along the hard, winding road, that warmed his heart and touched his spirit.

How could he show them his regard? His happiness and gratitude? There was more to all this than courtship. Fili and Kili had not crafted something so spectacular with only tradition in mind; he knew them better than that. And Thorin’s gifts were the epitome of thoughtfulness, filling Bilbo’s needs without him ever giving them voice. Mere words of thanks seemed inadequate.

Bilbo took a deep breath, nodding his head as he made his decision. Perhaps he could not make them jewellery or fine cloth: that was not a hobbit’s way. Shire-folk were about comfort and safety, warm beds and full bellies. He knew a lot of people in the mountain credited him with the return of their kingdom, but Bilbo recognised their exaggeration. He had not been the only one to wrest Erebor from the dragon’s claws. Besides, he had never come here thinking to return Thorin to his throne.

He had followed him on this madcap quest to help him win back his home, and there was far more to that than strong walls and mountain halls. That sense of belonging, of finding your place, came in the little things. Dwarves may pretend to be hard folk, but Bilbo knew better. He read the truth in the stories Thorin told of their struggles in exile. They enjoyed the comforts of a good life as much as
anyone else. Maybe he could not give them the luxuries they once had, but he could at least make the rooms Thorin and his nephews chose for themselves as homey as his own.

With a nod of his head, he stepped out of his door, noting that even the corridor was sparse. The rugs on the floor were all that made the place welcoming. Well, he would have to see what he could do about that, too. At best, he had a handful of hours in which to work, and he could not do it alone. If nothing else, he had no idea where to begin looking for tapestries and furniture, and hauling such big pieces around was beyond his strength. He needed a volunteer or two, and he knew just where to look.

Departing the Overseer's chambers, he smiled to see Dwalin and Ronin both pause in the middle of a terse discussion. It didn't appear to be a fight, more a case of mutual frustration, and Bilbo raised his eyebrows as Dwalin shot him a glare. 'Is there a problem?'

‘Not unless Oin catches you.’ Dwalin’s teeth flashed in a quick, mirthless grin that was almost a grimace. 'Here, you need this.' He shoved a long twist of leather into Bilbo’s hands, and he realised it was a belt. Sting’s length hung in a scabbard at the hip, and he knew without looking that the blade would be freshly sharpened and more lethal than ever. ‘Wear it everywhere, and keep it at your bedside when you sleep.’

Dwalin’s expression suggested any arguments would only result in a more stubborn rebuttal, and a quick glance at Ronin told Bilbo he would find no support from that corner. Without a word, he did as Dwalin said, fastening the belt at his waist and shifting the scabbard so it hung comfortably, rather than sticking into his leg.

‘Not sure what good it'll do,’ he pointed out, moving closer so passers-by wouldn’t overhear him. ‘You know as well as I do that I don’t have a clue what to do with it.’

‘Aye, and if I had the time to spare, I’d have you on the training ground every hour of the day.’ Dwalin ran his palm across his scalp, shaking his head and narrowing his eyes. ‘For now, it’s the appearance of the thing. You have guards, mithril, and a sword. Go nowhere without all three. Do I make myself clear?’

A year ago, Bilbo would have bristled at anyone speaking to him in such a tone, but time and familiarity made him see Dwalin’s words for what they were. Everyone showed they cared in different ways. Bombur fed people until they couldn’t move, and Bofur told jokes until those around him were in fits of laughter. For Dwalin, it was all about making sure those he considered his friends were safe.

‘I’ll do my best,’ Bilbo promised. ‘I’m looking for Bofur and Dori. Any idea where they might be?’

‘The storage rooms by the docks,’ Dwalin replied, giving a puzzled frown as Bilbo’s face spread in a grin. ‘Oin said you were to rest, not spend your day rooting around in dust and cobwebs.’

‘What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.’ Bilbo craned his neck, checking for any sight of the healer before looking back at Dwalin. ‘Which way?’

With a sigh, Dwalin jerked his thumb to the right. ‘Ronin knows how to find them. Don’t be long, mind. If Oin comes here and finds you gone, do not expect me to cover for you.’

‘I thought you’d be with Thorin?’ Bilbo asked, a flash of alarm racing through him that only dwindled when Dwalin’s eyes glimmered, no longer stern but amused, as if he approved of Bilbo’s concern.
‘He’s safe in a meeting, doors closed and well-guarded. I’ll be back at his side as soon as I’m done.’ Dwalin nodded at Ronin, trusting and confident as Bilbo’s guards congregated nearby. ‘Keep your eye on him,’ he ordered, speaking about Bilbo as if he wasn’t there. ‘And remember what we discussed.’

Bilbo raised an eyebrow as Ronin motioned him along the corridor, and he hurried to match the dwarf’s long stride. ‘Anything I should know about?”

With a grimace, he raised one hand to his head, touching the helmet that lay over the bruises staining his skin. ‘No, Master Baggins.’

A huff caught in Bilbo’s chest, chasing his cough up into his throat. He paused as he hacked and spluttered, all too aware that his retinue had done the same. Yet they were not impassive, stoic sentries. More than one looked at him with genuine concern, and a petite woman Bilbo knew as Marla pressed a handkerchief into his hand.

‘Thank you,’ he wheezed, leaning against the wall and tipping back his head, waiting until his breath no longer hitched before he straightened up. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘Are you all right? Is there any blood?’ Ronin shuffled his feet when Bilbo gave him an enquiring look. ‘Dwalin is not the only one who felt it necessary to tell me how to keep an eye on you.’

‘Let me guess, Oin wants to know the moment I get worse.’ He tsked, knowing he should be grateful that so many people cared for his well-being. In truth, though, he was starting to feel smothered, and he strode onwards, more purposeful than before. ‘It’s nothing. Just a sniffle. It’ll pass soon enough.’

Ronin’s silence was judgement in itself, and Bilbo diverted his attention from the unwieldy presence of his escort to the mountain surrounding him.

It was different, down here. Higher up, towards ground level, Erebor was all about grandeur and refinement. The embellished architecture and vast scale existed to make an impression, but here, functionality reigned supreme. Huge halls gave way to warrens of wide corridors and workrooms. Sweeping stairways cut down into the throat of the world, lit by lanterns that danced happily in their niches. Carvings decorated every lintel, more subtle than their counterparts in the public parts of kingdom, but no less beautiful.

The dust and filth of the dragon’s occupation had been cast out, and Bilbo admired the smooth stone floor, polished by the passage of the centuries. They passed Bombur’s reclaimed kitchens, and he caught a glimpse of Fili and Kili, both smeared with flour and glossed with sweat as they slaved over the ovens.

He had no time to bid them hello as the corridor began to slope, and the dry air took on a damp edge. The hallway was emptier now, and he and his companions walked on in endless silence, until Bilbo was beginning to wonder just how far they had gone. Almost the moment he decided to ask, the quality of light changed, and the narrow walls opened outwards into a massive cavern.

Lanterns could not illuminate so much space, so instead there were oil torches, their huge flames leaping into the air as reflections danced across the rippling water. At its heart, the pool was as black as ink, but at its edges Bilbo could see shelves that let people stand in the shallows. A number of stone jetties, disused for far too long, stuck out like the bleached bones of some great animal.

The place could have been ominous if not for all the activity. Smoky fires twinkled on the dry land, their fumes chasing the lice from furs and clothes. Men, women and dwarves worked to clean what
they could, beating the dust from tapestries and soaking cloth in the water. There was plenty of chatter in the air, and Bilbo blinked in amazement, still trying to comprehend what he was looking at.

‘Bilbo!’ Bofur’s scowl vanished beneath a wave of relief, and he dumped the armful of fabric he’d been holding as he picked his way over broken furniture and discarded hangings. ‘What are you doing down here?’

He shook his head, struck mute and staring, trying to take it all in. He had known Erebor was big, but he had never imagined that there was a whole waterway beneath its craggy peak. Sluices at one end allowed the large, deep basin to drain should the level get too high, and two sets of huge gates sat in the east and south walls, locked and bound against the world.

Where they led, he had no idea, but they were well lit even now. Iron rails charted a path over the ground, rusted with disuse but still functional, and the occasional cart trundled along it, laden with goods.

‘What – what is this place?’

‘The docks,’ Ronin said, his puzzlement giving way to amusement as he took in Bilbo’s expression. ‘Most of Erebor’s incoming trade comes over land, but the exports – not just gold and gems, but quarried stone and the like – were carried to Dale on barges.’ He gestured to one of the large doors. ‘There’s a flight of locks beyond, to get it up to level with the underground canal.’

‘They were building another when the dragon came,’ Dori added, and Bilbo followed the jerk of his thumb to the east. ‘It cut all the way to the Iron Hills, but it was never finished. More’s the pity.’

‘Those are drains,’ Bofur said, following Bilbo’s gaze to the strange baffles and terraces that filled the west wall, retreating back into the high shadows near the ceiling. ‘The public baths are on the other side, and all the water running through the channels in the mountain ends up here. In full swing, it’s a permanent waterfall that passes through the dock, leaving through the sluices to run down into the lake.’

‘The only thing that doesn’t flow this way is the latrines,’ Dori added. ‘We control it so it neither floods nor scorches the waters of the lake. Or at least, we used to.’ His expression took on a mournful slant as he stared at the bare, parched stone, and Bilbo wondered how long it had been since this room danced with the sound of a cascade.

‘But we’re using water now, aren’t we?’

‘Nothing the minor outflows can’t handle. Nothing like Erebor got through in its heyday.’ Bofur shook his head, letting out a sigh before turning back to Bilbo. ‘So, what do you need?’

‘I thought Oin had left instructions for you to rest?’ Dori added, politely hiding a smile as Bilbo shook off his amazement and mustered a faint glare.

‘I am resting, mostly.’ He cleared his throat, looking away from the docks and focussing instead on the task at hand. ‘I’d like furniture, hangings, that kind of thing, and I was told this was the place to find them.’

A troubled frown rumpled Dori’s face, and he folded the fabric he held, hanging it over his arm. ‘Is your room not to your liking, Master Baggins?’

Bilbo blinked, realising that while Thorin had probably done the hard work himself, there was a fair chance the whole Company were aware what their king had been doing for him.
‘It’s perfect,’ he promised, meaning every word. ‘This is for Thorin and the boys. I thought I’d see if there was anything that could be spared.’

‘I should have known.’ Bofur clapped him on the back, chortling to himself as Dori let out a subtle sigh of relief. More than a few of their helpers were hiding smiles, apparently pleased by Bilbo’s second-hand praise. ‘Come on, I’ll show you what we’ve found.’

‘Most of it is in a dreadful state.’ Dori gestured around him, shaking his head. ‘The centuries have been less than kind.’

‘And this lot was already in storage before the dragon got here.’ Bofur took off his hat, wiping his knuckles across his brow and leaving a streak of grime. ‘It’s not like anyone had time to pack up before that blasted creature made itself a nest.’

Bilbo nodded, seeing with new eyes how precious his own few home comforts were. People had already been raiding the living quarters they could reach for makeshift beds and other scraps, but there was very little that had not been eaten by moth or fallen victim to the rot. What lay around them was the rejects of a thriving society, once considered too damaged or worn to be on display. Now they were treasures all their own, made precious by lowered expectations.

‘So what do we need?’ Dori asked, rolling up his sleeves and setting his hands on his hips. ‘It won’t be easy, but I’ll do my best.’

Narrowing his eyes, Bilbo tried to think. ‘Tapestries and rugs, things to cover the walls and floor. Better bedding, if there is any, as well as comfortable chairs. Just…’ He shrugged, trying to put into words the little touches he needed. ‘…stuff, really, to make it look more like home.’

Bofur nodded, as if it was not a strange and somewhat frivolous request, considering their dire situation. ‘Come on then. There’s plenty to pick over.’

They worked together, exploring the storerooms that riddled the corridors near the docks. Dori had not been exaggerating when he said most of it was past its best, but there were still some treasures to be found. A lovely oak desk, its finish stained with age but otherwise good, stood at the very back of one of chambers, skulking in the shadows, along with a beautifully carved sword rack that would do very well for Fili.

‘What do dwarves prefer in terms of decoration?’ Bilbo asked, blowing the dust off an ornate wooden box, empty, but eye-catching. ‘Other than gold and jewels?’

‘Weaponry for some,’ Dori said, with a hint of distaste, picking up an old tapestry and shaking it out. ‘Fine weaving for others. It depends on the dwarf.’

That didn’t help Bilbo much, and he dithered, frustrated. Thorin knew exactly what he would like, but then he had been inside Bag End. Although he knew Thorin, and knew him well, Bilbo was keenly aware that he had never seen a living space Thorin had crafted to his own tastes. It put him at a disadvantage, and he found himself guessing, nodding or shaking his head at various things Dori and Bofur showed him and hoping for the best.

‘You didn’t seem surprised to see me,’ he said, after more than an hour of rummaging. They’d gathered a good haul of potential items, all placed in a large litter that could be carried by a couple of his guards. ‘Did someone warn you I was coming?’

‘Not exactly.’ Bofur sneezed, cuffing his nose with the back of his hand and grinning. ‘Thorin put together rooms for you, so you’d do it for him.’
‘A hobbit courting custom,’ Dori added, sounding deeply satisfied at the notion, ‘or so it’s been said.’

Bilbo blinked, straightening up from his efforts as Thorin’s gift to him slid into sudden, sharper focus. Of course! How could he not have seen it before? He had told Thorin often enough that his father had built Bag End for his mother, though it was a wedding present, rather than something given in courtship. He had not realised his words had such an impact. He had certainly not expected him to give even a passing nod to anything associated with hobbit customs, and yet there they were.

Perhaps Thorin had done it for show: a nice, subtle piece of propaganda to sell the notion that his courtship with Bilbo was real? Except he had not made a performance out of it. People knew, but only those that Thorin had asked for help, and if the rumour mill was churning through that particular bit of gossip, then Bilbo hadn’t heard a whisper of it.

‘It is,’ he said after a moment, a rueful smile curving his lips. ‘Though custom is not quite the right word. Most hobbits do things their own way. Food and flowers are the only common themes, and reciprocating is… well it’s more of a dwarf thing. It seems somehow… expected?’

Dori nodded, elbowing Bofur aside as he began to ferret through the last few bits and pieces for anything of worth that they had missed. ‘Between the courting couple, giving a gift in return is important. It’s about showing agreement, and consent, and common interest.’

‘Dwarves aren’t much with actual words,’ Bofur added, and this time his cheeky wink was enough to set the tips of Bilbo’s ears aflame. ‘We’re better with our hands, if you know what I mean.’

Dori tutted, but it was a good-natured sound of exasperation rather than genuine ire as he flapped a hand in Bofur’s direction. ‘Gifts from family, though, they do not require something in return.’ His gaze softened, falling with obvious admiration on the long cuff that trailed up the edge of Bilbo’s ear. ‘They’re more about showing approval.’

‘As if that was ever in question.’ Bofur chuckled before turning to examine their finds. ‘I think there’s furniture enough here. What else was it, rugs and tapestries? That’s more Dori’s area than mine.’

‘This way.’ The older dwarf beckoned to Bilbo, leaving Bofur with parting instructions to get all the items they had chosen back to the chambers that would be their home. ‘I’ll send Bilbo along as soon as may be.’

‘And try not to run into anyone,’ Bilbo called out, shrugging when Bofur raised an eyebrow. ‘I’d like it to be a surprise, if I can manage it.’

‘Don’t dally, then. Choosing what you want’s only half the work!’ Bofur threw a farewell wave over his shoulder, and Bilbo found himself swept along by Dori. He was all business as he strode out to the dockside and entered the fray of people cleaning up the fabrics they had unearthed.

‘Here.’ Dori guided him to some benches, where tottering piles of dry, folded cloth awaited him. ‘Tapestries.’ He rested a hand on the stack to the left. ‘The rest is bedding. Take what you fancy.’

Bilbo puffed up his cheeks, blowing out a breath as he realised that he had no idea what to choose. Bedding was simple enough, as one was much like the other, but the hangings were another matter. The mix Dori had saved so far was eclectic; there were all sorts of different images woven into the cloth. The ones Thorin had chosen for him tended to depict natural heraldry, like stags and eagles, as well as colourful geometric patterns, but Bilbo knew there was more to these than the hues of the thread and the quality of the stitch-work.
‘Anything I should avoid?’ he asked, feeling hopeless. It was like trying to muddle his way through a foreign language, half-desperate not to cause offence.

Dori glanced over at him, his preoccupied frown turning indulgent. He set aside his hasty repairs and looked over the few Bilbo had selected. ‘Not this one.’ He indicated a creation of black and silver, striking, but a touch sinister. ‘It’s the heraldry of Thror, and perhaps not what the king would want hanging in his chambers.’

‘No, of course not.’ Bilbo dropped it, trying to hide his instinctive distaste for the grandfather driven to madness by his own greed. ‘Did – did Thorin have his own? Or is it not done until a dwarf is crowned?’

‘Oh, he had plenty, but not much survives. This, though, is another matter.’ Dori unfolded some dark blue cloth, and Bilbo’s breath caught as he realised there were tiny filaments of metal twisted into the weave, making it sparkle like the night sky. On it, the broad sprawl of a bare-branched tree fanned outwards, and seven stars ranged above the boughs in an arc. ‘It’s the symbol of his parents’ twined lines. The stars of Durin, and the oak of the Broadbeam clan: Lady Kiri’s kin. It hung in the royal chambers in Thorin’s youth.’

‘Perfect!’ Bilbo grinned, seizing it gratefully. This was just the kind of thing he was looking for, and he couldn’t stop his delight as Dori helped him pick out more to decorate the bare walls of Thorin’s private space.

By the time they were finished, Bilbo’s arms were full to overflowing, and rough, hardy cloth draped around his shoulders like robes as he struggled to carry the hangings. Dori offered to help, but he politely declined. The other dwarves had done their part. Now it was his turn.

He had work to do.
The warm nest of his bed trapped Thorin in its grasp, cocooning him in fine fur and comfortable sheets. The pillow beneath his head was so soft it seemed to be made of little more than air, and the straw-stuffed mattress had moulded itself to his shape over these past couple of weeks, becoming wholly his own.

He snuffled, wishing he could bury his face and linger here. The morning bell had tolled a good ten minutes ago, and yet he could not bring himself to rise. He would rather stay wrapped in comfort and the tantalising tatters of his dreams.

No longer did images of the dragon taint his sleeping imagination. Its voice was not the one that purred in his ear. A far better picture painted the canvas of his mind: a warm, yielding body beneath his own, auburn curls and bare skin adorned with nothing more than the occasional glimmer of precious metal and shining jewels.

Thorin groaned, aware of part of him that was far from sleepy or sated. Hard flesh curved up towards his belly, heavy and demanding, as it seemed to do so often these days. If he didn’t know better, he would think he was still in his youth – a victim to every twist and turn of his passions. Instead, he was a grown dwarf, old enough to carry a wise head on his shoulders and thoroughly captivated by a certain hobbit of his acquaintance.

It was not the first time sensual dreams had encroached upon his mind, not by a long shot. He’d woken up more than once from camping under the stars, dry-mouthed, wanting and resentful of his own desire. That had faded now, the hard twist of anger unfurling into a different kind of heat, delicate but strong.

With a sigh, he reached out, turning up the wick of the lamp by his bed to flood the room with its glow. The ember flared into a strong, steady flame, spreading across the tapestries and igniting the metals woven into their patterns.

It had been more than a fortnight since Bilbo had decorated his chamber. There had been plenty of time to get used to the new furnishings, but still Thorin found himself taking in Bilbo’s efforts appreciatively.

Several wing-backed chairs stood arranged around the fire, their tough leather upholstery made more welcoming with draped furs and cushions. Rugs dotted the stone floor, and the hangings on every wall were well-chosen. Each of them reminded Thorin of the time before the dragon came. Objects that had been ephemera in his old life now took on a new facet of meaning, precious where they had once been mundane.

However, it was the desk that he really admired. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, much finer than the crude, wobbly things he’d been using since their arrival. Its legs were sturdy, and a number of different pigeonholes made it simple to separate various reports, rather than forever be rummaging through piles. Even better, it had a lock and key, so he could shut his documents away when he wasn’t working.

There was nothing more he could ask for in his room, except for Bilbo in his bed.

It was all too easy to imagine him curled up within arm’s reach, sated and pliant in the perfect oasis of heat they had made together. It did not matter that it was only a fantasy. He could picture everything, from the blissful curve of Bilbo’s lips to the skim of those small, blunt hands across his
skin, sweeping up over his shoulders and down his back, charting the line of his waist and dipping ever inwards...

‘Mahal,’ Thorin whispered, shutting his eyes and forcing himself away from well-trodden paths of desire. Whether he liked it or not, he didn’t have time to play the daydreams out in full, and the demands of his arousal would have to go unanswered. He had already lain abed long enough, and he would rather not face the humiliating experience of Balin coming to drag him from his rest.

With a regretful sigh, he peeled back the furs, shivering as the cool air danced like silk ribbons across his skin, raising a rash of gooseflesh in its wake. It may be warmer down here, at the mountain’s core, but winter sank its teeth in deep. In truth, he had not so much as glanced outside to see how the land fared. Life in Erebor carried on: a world all its own.

Reaching into the old oak chest at the bottom of his bed, he retrieved clean clothes, pulling on one layer after another as if it were armour. Soft, well-worn fabric settled next to his skin, weighed down by heavy wool and thick outer layers. His injured foot was finally able to bear the burden of proper boots, and he laced them in place before turning his attention to the mirror.

It was a proper looking glass, not a polished plate, its pane miraculously intact after so long. Bilbo had been pleased with that particular find, and Thorin had to agree with him, especially as the hobbit often came into his room to check his reflection.

As if summoned by his thoughts, there was a tap on the door, and Thorin pulled it open to see Bilbo hovering on the other side, a comb in one hand and his beads in the other. He didn’t even need to ask any more, holding them out in mute request. Hobbit hair was smoother than that on Thorin’s own head, and though the braids stayed presentable for several days, they invariably slipped out before half a week had passed.

‘I tried to do it myself,’ Bilbo promised, wrinkling his nose in annoyance. ‘Why is it so much easier on someone else?’

‘Because you can see what you’re doing.’ Thorin wrapped his hands around Bilbo’s shoulders, setting him square in front of the mirror before getting to work, enjoying the feel of his tresses and the comforting repetition of his weaving. ‘It takes most dwarves months to master braiding. Years, for some of the more complicated patterns. You’ll learn.’

He smothered a wince, noting the way the air turned just a little more tense around them. It had taken him a while to attune himself to Bilbo’s body language – to see how those shoulders would stiffen and those hands clench into fists – but now it was impossible to turn a blind eye.

Every time he mentioned the future, no matter how oblique or unintentional the implication, Bilbo withdrew. It was a fleeting thing, like a cloud passing over the face of the sun, but Thorin still noticed. It was a potent reminder of the frank discussion he and Bilbo needed to have. One he had foolishly put off for far too long.

Before, it had been because he was a coward. He would rather cling to what they had than risk it all for something more. Some days that feeling still caught him in its clutches, but Thorin had come too far to turn back now. What they had grew with every shared moment. All Thorin needed was the time and means to show Bilbo his hopes for them, and he knew just how to do it.

Flowers and food. That was the way hobbits did things, as Bofur had joyfully informed him two weeks ago, and that was the way it had to be. Bilbo would see dwarven traditions as an extension of their false courtship. To him, there would always be the suspicion that it was just another performance for the benefit of the mountain, no matter what Thorin did.
So he had given Bilbo his room, furnishing it to the best of his abilities. He could not build Bilbo a home, as his father had done for his mother back in the Shire, but in his heart he hoped that Bilbo would make the connection. Perhaps he had. After all, he had returned the favour, but was that simple reciprocity, or an agreement Thorin did not have the confidence to grasp?

Using another culture’s courting customs was challenging at best. There was no one he could ask to guide his path; it was all guesswork. He could only hope that his attentions were having the desired effect. Either way, he got the feeling that the next step, whatever it may be, was his to make.

All he needed was a little more time.

Stifling a sigh, he finished off Bilbo’s braids, making sure the beads were secure before allowing his hands to fall back to his sides. The metal in Bilbo’s hair glimmered in the lamplight as he turned his head, checking his reflection from different angles, and the swathe of delicate gold that covered the edge of his ear seemed to dance, its colours like flame and starlight.

Swallowing hard, Thorin pulled his gaze away from that particular delight. He suspected his sister-sons had created such a piece to torment him. It drew attention to the delicate shape of Bilbo’s ears, and only enhanced Thorin’s desire to trace their outline with lips and teeth. Would Bilbo withdraw, or would he gasp in pleasure? Would he tilt his head to allow Thorin to trail kisses onwards, down the column of his throat, or would he flush and stammer before stepping back?

With a dwarf, he would already have been sure, able to read their bold and brazen body language without a shadow of a doubt. However, Bilbo communicated differently. Everything was half-hidden behind the stubborn veil of his manners, which were equal parts infuriating and endearing.

He blinked, realising the air around him had taken on an expectant edge. Bilbo watched him, one eyebrow raised as if he were awaiting an answer. Heat suffused Thorin’s cheeks, and he cleared his throat, mumbling an apology as amusement lit Bilbo’s gaze.

‘I was asking about Dwalin. He seems bad-tempered this morning. More so than usual.’

Thorin sighed as the sharp edges of reality intruded. With a nod, he stepped back, turning towards his desk and pulling free the pertinent reports. ‘He has never been one to take defeat with grace, particular where the safety of those in his protection is concerned.’

‘What’s this?’ Bilbo looked down at the page. ‘Isn’t it the same list of suspects he came up with a few days after the second attack?’

Thorin nodded, seeing the grimace as Bilbo realised how few had been eliminated from the investigation. ‘These are all the dwarves and men who were unaccounted for at the time Ronin was attacked and you were pushed outside the mountain. Unfortunately, the nature of the work in Erebor is such that people are coming and going. Their jobs take them all over the place, sometimes unsupervised. Dwalin doesn’t have the guards to spare for surveillance on more than thirty individuals.’

‘And we need them working, not locked up just in case.’ Bilbo wrinkled his nose and puffed a sigh. ‘It’s been almost three weeks. Maybe they’ve given up?’

Thorin’s grunt of disbelief sounded more like a growl, even to his own ears, and he could feel the weight of the scowl on his brow. Whoever was responsible continued to evade capture, and every time he was reminded of that fact, his mood took a distinct turn towards foul.

The only certainty they had was that the culprit, whoever they were, had not left the mountain. The
doors were sealed and the passage to Dale guarded. Unless they knew of some other way to slip out, then they were stuck inside the kingdom, along with everyone else.

Part of him hoped that they had fled, vanishing into the dark with their tail between their legs, but he had his doubts. Whatever the culprit’s aims, they had not yet been achieved. Would they give up and fade into obscurity, or would their nameless ambitions drive them to more desperate measures?

A touch against his brow scattered the storm clouds of his thoughts. Bilbo had reached up, smoothing the furrows of his frown with warm fingertips. It was a beautiful caress, and Thorin bowed his head, the better to enjoy the firm splay of Bilbo’s hand before it was gone.

‘It looks like Dwalin’s not the only one in a temper.’ Bilbo stepped back, turning towards the mirror and smoothing his clothes. The mithril gleamed at his parted collar, as always, covered by a thick-woven tunic and padded jacket in a warm russet shade, stitched with the stars of Durin.

‘I think you’ll find the entire Company is aggravated on your behalf.’ Thorin pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering how he could feel so tired when he had only just risen from his bed. ‘Tell me, are all hobbits as serene as you when faced with such dangers?’

Bilbo snorted, meeting Thorin’s gaze in the mirror. ‘There’s not much in the way of peril where I’m from. Intrigue, yes, but hobbits like nothing more than a scandal. It keeps them entertained for months.’

‘But nothing like this?’

‘The only thing they might try is character assassination, and they can all give as good as they get.’ Bilbo shrugged. ‘Hobbiton is not Erebor. They’re farmers and gentlefolk, content for life to continue from one day to the next. The world leaves them alone, and they’re happy that way.’

Thorin cocked his head, wondering if Bilbo realised what he had said. Being a king, even in exile, gave you the training to listen carefully to people’s words, and Bilbo no longer referred to himself as part the Shire. He did not say “we” but “they”, and he did so without a second thought. His mind may have doubts about his place in the world, but Thorin was happy to hope that his heart had decided the Lonely Mountain was where it belonged.

‘Besides,’ Bilbo continued, ‘now that everyone knows the problem, I can’t go five minutes without someone checking up on me. I’m never alone, unless I’m in here, and if anyone wants to do me harm, they’ll have to wade through I don’t know how many guards to do it.’ He turned back to look at Thorin, folding his arms. ‘I’m just worried that’s what they want.’

Thorin blinked, reaching for his belt and fastening it around his hips. Orcrist swung in its scabbard, ready to be drawn at a moment’s notice. ‘What do you mean?’

‘If everyone’s busy paying attention to me, what’s to stop someone going after Fili and Kili… or you?’ Bilbo shuffled where he stood, his previous indifference vanishing beneath a thick shadow of fear. ‘What if I’m just the distraction so they can get on with whatever they’re up to unseen?’

Thorin sighed, striding across the room to pull the Blood Axe from its place on the wall. He carried it with him every day – a reminder to himself and others of his station – but also a formidable weapon in its own right. His sister-sons were similarly armed with blades of their choosing, just in case.

‘We’re well-protected, Bilbo. Not just by our own strength but by Dwalin’s men. Solitude is not something any of us find easily, these days.’ He shook his head, waving his free hand in a vague, hopeless gesture. ‘A direct assault would be fool-hardy, least of all because it would reveal the
identity of the culprit. They’d have no means of escape if they failed.’

‘So they’ll be subtle, the same as before: poison or betrayal.’

‘Bombur has taken it upon himself to personally prepare food for the royal family, and like the sentries, the kitchen staff no longer rotate. All who help him have been vouched for by members of the Company. Dwalin’s guards are the same. Stabbing any of us in the back will not be easy.’

Bilbo sagged, chewing his lip, and Thorin strode forward, wrapping his hands around his shoulders. ‘We are all as safe as we can be,’ he said, trying to sound like he believed his own words. ‘And so we shall remain as long as we do not become complacent.’ He gave a gentle squeeze, watching for the moment when Bilbo ducked his head in agreement.

‘If you’re sure.’ He closed his eyes, pushing away his fears before mustering a smile and reaching up to take Thorin’s hand. ‘Come on, let’s get some breakfast before someone comes looking for us.’

The morning meal was a quiet affair. The small hall set aside for eating did not ring with song or bawdy laughter, but hushed conversation and the scrape of plates. The promise of sleep hung in the air, and dwarves and men alike smothered yawns as Thorin and Bilbo picked their way to their seats.

Cuts of cold meat and hot porridge waited for them, and Thorin watched Bilbo tuck in with approval. He still ate with the refined manners of a hobbit, but the enthusiasm for his food was encouraging. All Oin’s fears about his lingering cough seemed to have come to nothing, and there was no sign of any sickness shadowing Bilbo’s bright eyes. He talked to everyone, setting aside whatever concerns he carried to pull friends and strangers alike into the conversation.

Gradually, the volume of chatter rose, sustained by good food and better company. Ori wandered between the benches, taking roll and greeting people with friendly familiarity. Dwalin organised his soldiers into shifts, sending some to eat while others stood watch. He would be the last to feed himself, grabbing whatever Bombur had for him and eating it on the go.

Thorin listened more than he spoke, drinking in the cheerful atmosphere with growing satisfaction. Life was still hard within the mountain’s walls, and would probably remain so, but all around him he could see signs of progress. The thin, haunted faces of the men were rounder now, sustained by plain food and comfortable shelter. They were quicker to smile, and Balin had informed him only yesterday of the many firm friendships that had formed between the people who claimed sanctuary in their halls.

Even the dwarves seemed content, buoyed by the challenge of a kingdom to rebuild, and more than happy to do the work required. He watched as three bearing the tattoos of Dain’s realm – miners, by appearance – laughed and joked with a man and two women, teasing them for the blisters that grew from wielding chisels. Yet in the next moment, one pulled free a pot of salve and pushed it into the man’s hands, her expression kind as she made promises of easing the pain.

‘It’s something to be proud of,’ Balin murmured, his words almost lost in the cloud of his beard. He sat to Thorin’s right, his eyes sparkling as he surveyed the room. ‘All this. Not many a king could claim his people would be happy in such circumstances, but look.’

‘I only hope it lasts,’ Thorin scraped up the dregs of his porridge, noticing Bilbo’s plate was already empty. ‘Is there anything I should know?’

Balin made a face before shaking his head. ‘Nothing new. You already heard about Storn, of course.’
Thorin nodded. He had spent most of the night with Oin in his chambers, that wizened old frame huddled in one of the chairs at his fireside as the healer released his frustration and grief. ‘It’s a miracle he clung on as long as he did, and a blessing Gandalf could ease his final parting.’ He kept his voice low, but it made no difference. Bilbo had heard him, which was the very thing he was trying to avoid.

‘Oin has finished moving his healing rooms further into the mountain, though he’s not yet emerged.’ Balin gave him a meaningful look. ‘I thought you would want to have a word with him. We can do without you in the morning meeting.’

‘I’ll come too.’ Bilbo pushed his plate away, his fingers clasping tight around the edge of the table. Perhaps Thorin should have told him when he’d first stepped into his room, but he hadn’t been eager to ruin Bilbo’s peace. ‘Does anyone else know, yet?’

‘I’ll make an announcement at the end of the meal,’ Balin promised, his expression bleak. ‘Go on with you, and don’t forget to take your guards.’

Bilbo struggled upright without another word. Unless Thorin wanted to be left behind, he had no choice but to rise. Their soldiers were waiting for them at the doorway, and he checked each familiar face before nodding his agreement to their escort.

‘It happened last night?’ Bilbo asked, his quiet voice breaking the silence. He looked pale, all previous signs of happiness gone. His fingers knotted into fists, and when he met Thorin’s gaze, his eyes shone with the glimmer of tears.

‘Yes. Oin knew he was fading. He could not nourish him enough, and infection took root. Gandalf offered his reassurance that nothing more could be done, and his assistance in easing Storn’s way into Mahal’s halls.’

Emotion flickered over Bilbo’s face: a deep well of sadness and the eclipse of anger. ‘So whoever tried to hurt me is a killer now.’ His jaw worked, and he cuffed at his eyes before letting out a tight breath of fury. ‘What – what’s the punishment for that?’

‘It depends on the circumstances, but cold-blooded murder is often answered in kind.’ He saw Bilbo’s discomfort and hastened to explain. ‘Most dwarven kingdoms do not have the means to contain and provide for a non-working prisoner. Those that are too dangerous to join labour-gangs are usually put to death. Are hobbits not the same?’

Bilbo shrugged, waving one hand in dismissal. ‘I don’t know. It’s not happened. Not in my lifetime anyway.’ He scuffed his bare feet along the floor, staring at his toes, and he did not look up again until they reached the doors of Oin’s new healing room. It was shut, but not locked, and Thorin inclined his head to the soldiers, leaving all but two of them to stand watch outside as he and Bilbo entered.

Smaller than Erebor’s true sanatorium, the make-shift space seemed full to the brim with medical supplies. Herbs hung to dry from low beams, and bottles lined hastily constructed shelves. The floor and walls shone to the best of their ability, and lamps chased off the shadows.

Oin looked up as they came in, offering a twitch of his lips that was not quite a smile. Exhaustion stamped its mark across his face, and Thorin wondered if sleep had found him at all that night. He doubted it. Instead, it seemed that Oin had thrown himself into setting up the healing room, ready for anyone who needed his assistance.

Thorin had intended to offer comfort, but now he was here he did not know how to begin.
Thankfully, Bilbo had no such difficulty. He sat down opposite Oin and murmured his condolences, taking one gnarled hand in his own. Grief was not something any dwarf did well. They tended to distance themselves, becoming cold and unapproachable, but for Bilbo it seemed Oin made an exception. He bowed his head, murmuring his thanks and letting out a great gusty sigh.

‘Old Fragget, the healer who taught me, he used to say losing patients got easier as the years went on.’ Oin huffed, some of his usual irritation showing through his misery. ‘Daft begger. He was wrong.’

‘Maybe he lied to comfort you?’ Bilbo suggested, making room for Thorin to take a seat next to him. ‘I’m just sorry to hear that Storn’s gone. I know how hard you worked to keep him going.’

‘Aye.’ Oin shrugged, the lines of his face deepening. Thorin knew that look well. He’d seen it in his own reflection enough times in the past. Doubt crept in, and the mind began questioning what would have happened if he’d done things differently. Oin was in the same place, wondering on changes that could never be made.

‘You did everything you could,’ he said at last, repeating the same reassurances he had offered when Oin first gave him the news. ‘Everything.’

‘As I’ve been saying.’

Dori stepped around the corner, and Thorin blinked in surprise, realising there was a little workshop tucked out of sight. He hadn’t even realised Dori was there, but the steaming cups on the tray he carried were a welcome sight. There was enough tea for each of them, and silence held reign as he shared it out.

‘I dropped by a couple of hours ago to see if I could help,’ he explained, answering Thorin’s unvoiced question. ‘Healing rooms need a lot of work, and I didn’t think Oin should be doing it alone.’

‘Not at the cost of his sleep,’ Bilbo added pointedly. ‘Are you all finished, or is there more than needs doing?’

Oin shook his head, sipping the drink Dori had given him before shooting a sharp look in his direction. ‘The job’s done, which is just as well, since this has sleeping draft in it.’

Dori’s expression was perfectly calm as he spooned honey from a bowl and added it to his own drink. ‘Are you going to say it’s unnecessary? You know that a tired healer is no use to anyone. We need you at your best, and that means you require sleep, food and support. Everyone else’s tea is just that. There’s no nasty little extras.’

Thorin nodded, trying to pretend he hadn’t been sniffing suspiciously at his cup before taking a sip. It tasted a touch sweet and tangy on the tongue: one of Dori’s familiar favourites. ‘The other healers will be here soon. They’ll be told not to disturb you unless it’s an emergency.’

Oin frowned, but relented, the tension already beginning to leave his body as the draft took hold. ‘You should know I checked the auguries last night: clear, cold skies. The storms have passed.’

‘For good?’ Bilbo asked, glancing Thorin’s way before looking back at Oin.

‘Ha, perhaps, but don’t get too excited. The wind’s fury may be gone, but the snow lies deep and the ice is frozen hard. It’s a harsh world out there still, and will be for a while more.’ Oin rose to his feet, a yawn stretching his jaw so wide that it cracked. ‘I’d best be off to bed before I pitch into dreams right here. Dori, tell Stellen she is in charge. She’s the most capable helper I’ve got. Just pray no dire
Dori nodded, giving his promises as Oin stumbled off into another little room. All healers of Thorin’s acquaintance slept in their sanatoriums. The small space of medicine and miracles tended to be their whole life, and Oin was no exception. He would be within easy reach if anyone had true need of his expertise.

‘Will he be all right?’ Bilbo asked, draining his cup dry before setting it aside.

‘I expect so, and if he is not, we’re all here to help him through. Oin’s saved many more patients than he has lost, but it is proper that he mourns those he cannot.’

‘I’ll remain here for today, just to make sure everything runs smoothly.’ Dori collected the cups together. ‘I promised Oin I’d restock his supply of bandages anyway, and I’ve plenty of mending to be getting on with. A solid bit of sleep will go a long way to putting things right.’

‘Do you need any help?’ Bilbo asked, shrugging when Dori looked at him in surprise. ‘I would have been in the treasury, but someone suggested I stay away for a little while longer.’

‘On Gandalf’s recommendation,’ Thorin pointed out, amused by Bilbo’s false outrage. ‘And who am I to argue with a wizard?’

Bilbo gave him a look of complete disbelief as Dori chuckled, shaking his head and bending down to retrieve something from the floor. The parcel was wrapped in plain paper and tied with coarse string. ‘Since I know Your Majesty has a spare moment, thanks to Balin covering for you in the meeting, perhaps your time would be best spent together?’ He raised his elegant eyebrows. ‘Erebor’s winter may be fearsome, but it is beautiful on a fine day.’

Thorin hid a smile, marveling at Dori’s mastery of tact. Sometimes he could be as subtle as silk. According to Oin, the weather was fine, and Bilbo’s hunger for open skies and fresh air had not abated since his unfortunate trip out in the storm. Thorin still caught him glancing towards the shuttered windows with longing. It was not much, but a few minutes beneath the sun could make all the difference.

‘This is for Bilbo,’ Dori explained, placing the package in front of Thorin. ‘A gift from the Ri family.’

Thorin bowed his head in thanks, knowing that whatever the wrappings contained would be a garment of some sort; anything else could be given directly into Bilbo’s hands.

Slicing open the string, he let the paper loosen before passing it to Bilbo. He would not unveil what lay within, not this time.

The hobbit’s gasp was audible in the peaceful room as he pulled free the winter coat. The fabric was rich and heavy, newly dyed in a stunning forest green that made Bilbo’s hair glow like gold. The strong, thick cloth was beautifully embellished, and Thorin could picture Dori, Nori and Ori sitting over it, working together to sew stars, vines and acorns here and there.

Yet it was the fur lining that caught Thorin’s eye. It seemed Beorn had been right when he said Dori would make something fine from the pelt of the wolf Bilbo had slain. It would trap the heat next to his skin between its soft hairs, protecting him from the worst of the elements.

‘Dori, it’s breath-taking.’ Bilbo held it up, a smile like a sunrise across his face. ‘Thank you!’

‘You’re more than welcome. Put it on before you go outside; it should keep out the harshest edges of
Thorin got to his feet, helping Bilbo slip his arms into the sleeves. He did not know where Dori had found the cloth for it. Now he looked closer, it seemed to shimmer with some kind of woven finish he didn’t understand. Even in the Erebor of old, it was a gift of kings.

The fit across Bilbo’s shoulders was perfect, with enough allowance for the bulky clothes the winter weather required. In length, it came to mid-calf, the shorter hem meaning it wouldn’t trail in mud or moderate snow. Bilbo praised everything, from the tightness of the seams to the embroidery, the warmth of it to the colour. He was clearly delighted, and Dori glowed in response.

‘I’ll tell Nori and Ori how much you enjoyed it. Now go on. You may as well make the most of a free moment. Someone will call for you before long.’ He ushered them out of the door, giving neither one a chance to protest. Their guards followed, shadow-silent, and Thorin found himself standing in the corridor, facing a new dilemma.

‘Many of the upper rooms and balconies have not yet been repaired. They’re not safe. The only place I can take you outside without leaving the mountain itself is –’ He wet his lips, his heart thrashing, but Bilbo was one step ahead of him, reaching out to grasp his hand before mentioning the one place Thorin was most reluctant to revisit.

‘The battlements.’

He nodded, wondering how Bilbo could look so calm. The last time they had stood there, Thorin had almost thrown him off the heights. He would have dashed him apart on the rocks below, all for the sake of a stupid stone. He had been happy to forget, these past few weeks, that he had once nearly robbed Bilbo of his very existence. Now, like a creature rising from the inky waters of the deep, it breached the surface of his mind, rotten and foul.

‘Perhaps it’s a good thing?’

He looked up, incredulous, searching Bilbo’s open expression for any sign of the reluctance he knew should linger there. Bilbo had offered his forgiveness more than once, excusing Thorin’s actions as equal parts the sting of betrayal and the dragon’s madness. Now, for the first time, Thorin could almost believe he meant it. ‘You aren’t afraid?’

Bilbo hesitated, not because he was forming a lie, but to give Thorin’s question his consideration. His eyes narrowed as he turned it over in his mind, and he tipped his head to the side, as if trying to shift the angle of his thoughts. ‘Of the height? Maybe a little bit. Hobbits are small and not very used to having their feet so far from the ground, but I’m not afraid of you.’ He took a breath, his lips twisting in a self-depreciating smile. ‘I was never afraid of you.’

He pulled at his coat, his fingers weaving together the ties that would hold it closed and shroud him in its warmth. ‘However, I don’t have many memories of the battlements, other than that day, and I think I’d like to make some new ones.’ He reached back, pulling his hood up over his curls, his fingertips lingering on the fur that framed his face as he met Thorin’s gaze. ‘Will you show me?’

It was his decision; Bilbo made that clear in every angle of his bearing. Perhaps he thought he was not the only victim of what had happened that day, for all that he was the one whose life had been at risk. Maybe he knew that even now, the ghost of betrayal cut like a knife through Thorin’s stomach, filling his mouth with its sour taste. Could he really do as Bilbo suggested, and make new memories to rob the old of their bite?

Perhaps it was a foolish hope, but if Bilbo could find the courage to return to that place, then so
could he.

‘This way.’ He tweaked Bilbo’s cuff, guiding him through the wide corridors. They were smooth pathways, broad and unembellished, the better to allow the unhindered movements of the soldiers. The stones were still good quality, clean and bright without any cracks to rob them of their strength. Lamps cast a mellow golden glow through the spiral staircases. It was a stark contrast to the cool, blue light that sliced through the arrow nooks from the world outside, and Thorin watched in amusement as Bilbo peered through them, his eagerness contagious.

There were doors at various levels, leading deeper into the barracks and training grounds, all of which had yet to be restored. The one they wanted was near the top, and any conversation became impossible as they all focused on catching their breath. Erebor was a big mountain, and they had travelled from its very heart up towards its peak.

Finally, the stairs opened out into a large hall near the secondary armoury. Dwalin had already plundered the room for supplies, leaving it bare and sorry in appearance, but Thorin paid it no mind. He instead had to concentrate on keeping pace with Bilbo, who almost raced towards the wide doors like a horse eager to be free of its stable.

Two of their guards marched ahead to lift the heavy bars away from their sockets, and a broad archway of daylight appeared in the wall, so bright it stung the eyes. The air filled with the cool, crisp taste of ice, and Thorin drew a deep breath, allowing himself to drown in the memories the flavour invoked.

How many times had he run up the same stairs as a child, dodging around older, wiser dwarves in the race to be the first to see the winter kingdom? How many times had he lifted his face to the weak brush of sunlight and the rasp of cold air? He had forgotten the joy of it – his world wiped clean and filled with possibility.

Bilbo tugged his hand, and he stepped forward, the view unfurling before him in a billowing sea of white. The scars of the battle were completely hidden, locked away from sight. Every sharp edge had turned soft, and the ridges of the land rose like the prows of ships from a pearly ocean. Dazzling sunlight made spots dance in front of his eyes as he admired the blue vault of the sky, uninterrupted from one horizon to the other.

‘I’ve never seen anything like it!’ Bilbo stared around him, drinking in the sights as if mesmerised. His strides were slow, almost reverent, and Thorin spared a moment to check on their guards. Two stood on the inside of the doorway, preventing anyone from approaching. The other four spread out along the wall, their sharp eyes taking in its length for any threats.

Not that there was anything to see. The bare stone stretched in both directions, covered in a thin veil of snowflakes that twisted and danced before the surge of the wind. Its icy gasp lifted Thorin’s hair from his face, and he shivered at its touch. The mountain, high and proud at his back, kept off the worst of the gusts, and he found himself grateful for its staunch shelter.

‘I didn’t know it would be this beautiful,’ Bilbo murmured, stopping at the edge of the wall and propping his elbows on a dip in the battlements, the better to admire the world spread out before him. ‘Are we looking south?’

‘South-east.’ Thorin stopped at his side, pointing out various landmarks. Most of them, like the road they’d travelled from the battlefield, were lost beneath the cloak of ice, but some remained in sight. Dale was a smudge in the distance, the sorry remains of its broken buildings made glorious by winter’s touch. Ravenhill lay before them, connected to Erebor by corridors and colonnades so that messengers could hurry back and forth. Bilbo nodded in interest as Thorin sketched the outline of
Erebor’s boundaries, too far to see, but out there somewhere, beyond the horizon.

He picked up a handful of snow, letting out a breath of surprise as it shifted through his fingers, sparkling like sand as the wind whipped it away. ‘It’s so different!’

‘You don’t have snow in the Shire?’ Thorin asked.

‘Most winters, but its wet and sticky. Slow to settle and quick to melt. This is…’ He shook his head, rubbing his fingertips together and watching the flakes vanish into nothing against his skin. ‘It’s not what I’m used to.’

He turned, looking back towards the door and letting out a laugh of amazement. When Thorin followed his gaze, he saw the icicles, longer than Bard was tall and sharp to the eye. They clustered like dragon’s teeth on every ridge, and each one sang a different note as Bilbo stood on tiptoe to tap them with his fingers.

‘The sun has just enough strength to melt the drifts on the mountain’s peak,’ Thorin explained, ‘but the water creeps down and freezes again before nightfall, and so the icicles grow. There’s also the beacon to consider.’

‘Beacon?’ Bilbo frowned, as if the word stirred something in his memory. A moment later, his confusion cleared, turning questioning. ‘When you found me with Beorn, you mentioned a beacon. What did you mean?’

Thorin did not need to look up to know they were in the wrong place to observe the spectacle. Here, above the gate, the mountainside was too sheer and craggy to give an unobstructed view, but the wall on which they stood spiralled up to the mountain’s peak. All they had to do was walk onwards a little further, and he could let Bilbo see it with his own eyes.

‘Here. Come with me.’ He led the way, his boots scraping against the frigid rock of the ramparts as he watched the landscape change. Flat plateaus surrendered to Erebor’s distant neighbours. The peaks loomed on the horizon, snow-capped and glistening. ‘The Ered Mithrin. Where the dragons live.’

Bilbo shifted closer, his shoulder brushing Thorin’s arm. ‘You think there could be more like Smaug?’

‘I wish I could say he was the last of his kind, but I doubt it. I can only hope that no more decide to make our mountain their home.’

Ahead of them, the wall opened out into a large square, supported by a vast tower of masonry and stone. Above it, a deep cleft cut into the peak, and the dwarves of old had capitalised on the space. In fact, the sprawling, sheltered niche was filled with the terraced rooms, courtyards and balconies of the royal wing and dignitary’s quarters. Sheltered from the wind and gifted with the kiss of the high summer sun, they had been Thorin’s home for many a-year. Seeing them now, dilapidated and empty, caused a pang beneath his ribs.

Yet it was what rose above them that he wanted to show Bilbo. The peak climbed ever onwards, growing sharper and more wicked until it reached its zenith. A vast bowl was carved into the very stone itself, and a roaring tower of flame crowned the top of the Lonely Mountain. In the daylight, it was a sight to behold, and in the darkness it outshone every star, visible for miles around.

‘Many lives have been saved because the beacon was there to guide lost hunters home.’

Bilbo stared, standing on tiptoe and craning his neck to get a better look. From this angle, it was not
easy to see. It was just possible to make out the ruined columns that had long ago supported a roof to shelter the pyre. Now the only thing left was the bowl itself, and they had put it to use, feeding the fire so high that not even the snow could extinguish it. ‘They lit it the day I was lost.’

‘And it has not gone out since.’ Thorin smiled, encouraged by Bilbo’s enraptured attention. ‘We have the fuel to spare for it, and on a clear night it’s visible for leagues. It helps more people than those who live within Erebor’s halls.’

‘It must have been truly splendid when the mountain was whole.’ Bilbo sounded wistful, as if he looked back on another time through the lens of his imagination. ‘I wish I could have seen it.’

An ache bloomed beneath Thorin’s ribs, pinched and aching. It was an impossible dream. Bilbo had not been born when the dragon took roost in their home, and yet he wondered what it would have been like to meet him in his youth. Would they have known each other, as they did now, or would they each have found the other unworthy of their friendship?

‘It will be as it once was,’ he promised. It was not the first time he had made such a vow, and nor, he knew, would it be his last. Every king was born into different times. Some were sparse and cruel, while others were kind and fruitful. Some rulers saw loss of power, while it fell to others to make their kingdom anew. Such was his lot. He had not been on the throne when Erebor was lost, but he would see it regain all that had succumbed to ruin, and then grow to greater heights.

The wind rose around them, whipping snow and ice into a glimmering curtain. Flakes settled on Bilbo’s new coat, gleaming diamond-bright. The hobbit tore his gaze from the beacon and tipped his head back, staring up into the fathomless sky before closing his eyes. He looked like a supplicant at an altar, worshipping some god that Thorin could not comprehend. The smile that swelled his cheeks brimmed with subtle bliss, and the pale skin of his exposed throat glowed in the sun’s weak light.

It was love, of a sort: not of coins or jewels, warmth or comfort, but of the world around him. Even in its harsh, frozen state, Bilbo still saw plenty to admire. He lost himself to the caress of the wind, indifferent to the cold, and it seemed to Thorin that he gained strength from the far-flung land.

Only when the first shiver caught Bilbo in its clutches did Thorin move to break the moment. Part of him resisted, tempted to drink in the sight of this creature – this hobbit – who had marched into his life, but the unkind air would allow no such luxury.

‘Come,’ he said softly, sweeping out his arm to indicate the path along the top of the wall. ‘It’s time to get back inside.’

He expected Bilbo to pout or fuss, but instead he drew in one last deep breath, letting it lift his shoulders and swell his chest. He let it out in a steady stream as if it were pipe smoke to be savoured, and when he met Thorin’s gaze once more, he seemed stronger for it – more centred, as if all his wobbling uncertainty had fallen away. It made Thorin realise how much strength Bilbo found, not in the warm shelter of the mountain, but the wide world beyond its walls.

The mild-mannered, somewhat timid hobbit he had met in the Shire had changed on the roads of Middle Earth. Now it seemed all he had to do was stand beneath an open sky to fortify himself for whatever lay ahead. It was a simplicity Thorin envied, and he found himself wishing his character could be shored up with such ease.

Bilbo started walking, tucking himself close to Thorin’s side and burying his hands in his pocket. ‘Thank you. I didn’t expect to see beyond the mountain again until the spring.’

‘Erebor is a sanctuary, not a cage. I would not wish you trapped within its walls, for all that it can
Thorin cast him a look, not bothering to hide his surprise that Bilbo asked his permission. He suspected the request stemmed more from a desire to appease Thorin's anxieties than any courtesy, and he had to confess, he was tempted to refuse.

Yet he could not rob Bilbo of this. It was such a little thing, and the joy it brought him was obvious. Given time, there would be safer places in the mountain to enjoy the fresh air, but for now the ramparts would have to do. ‘As long as you have guards with you, and the weather is not fierce,’ he said at last, bumping gently into Bilbo’s shoulder. ‘I would not ask even that, but there are some things I cannot risk. A fall from here…’

He strangled off the end of his sentence, feeling sick as he staggered to a halt. Scrubbing at his face did nothing to remove the hideous imaginings that danced before his eyes, and he would have stood there all day until he was an icicle himself but for Bilbo’s fingers wrapping around his wrist.

The touch bordered on pain, sharp enough to anchor Thorin where he was, and he took a shuddering breath of the cold air, wishing it fortified him as it did Bilbo. Instead it just left him feeling drained and shaken. ‘I am afraid this part of the mountain will never bring me the delight you seem to find in it. Not anymore.’

‘Give it time. Maybe that will change.’ Bilbo’s smile was a touch melancholy, and it faded entirely as the sound of approaching footsteps reached their ears. The guards moved from their posts, contracting around them in a loose, defensive ring, their weapons drawn and ready until two gasping figures staggered to a halt at the top of the stairs.

Balin shielded his eyes against the sun, resting his hand on the wall as he struggled for breath. Bombur bent double next to him, his face crimson and sweat gleaming on his brow. They were both too breathless to speak, and Thorin and Bilbo moved as one, surging towards them with a single question on their lips.

‘What’s wrong?’

Balin shook his head, sucking in huge lungfuls of air for one taut, frantic minute before he managed to wheeze a reply. ‘The fish.’

‘Fish?’ Thorin repeated stupidly, wondering if the cold had addled his hearing. All thoughts of heights and tragedy fled his mind, and he did not protest as Bilbo left his side, helping Bombur to stand upright and retrieving the small, cloth-wrapped package from his meaty hand.

‘The fish we caught in the lake,’ Bombur choked out. ‘They’ve gone bad.’

Bilbo shot a sharp look at Thorin before unwrapping the item in his hands. On the outside, the creature looked fine, its scales glossy and its body unmarked. It was only when Bilbo parted the cut in its belly that he revealed the blackness within: a rot like oil, thick and noisome.

‘What in the Valar…?’
‘Indeed, Bilbo.’ Gandalf’s staff tapped against the stones as he reached the top of the staircase. From the looks of things, he had chosen to take the climb at a more sedate pace, and thus arrived calm and unruffled. ‘This is no natural foulness.’

‘What is it?’ Thorin leant over Bilbo’s shoulder, his stomach turning at the foetid smell. Yet it was not the odd, sharp fragrance of fish going bad, but something deeper that caught in the back of his throat and made him wheeze. ‘Poison?’

‘If it is, it’s not of the making of any man or dwarf.’ Gandalf sighed, his face strained. ‘Much like the blood of Orcs turns good earth barren, it seems the dragon’s rot has soiled the lake with its touch.’

Thorin shivered, the fog of his fears taking shape. He had wondered, in the darkness before sleep, what the beast’s corpse would do to the waters. Now it seemed he had his answer. ‘Smaug fell near Laketown. Bard and his men were sure to haul in their catches from as far away as they could get.’

‘Fish swim.’ Bilbo shrugged, looking apologetic. ‘And eat other fish. Maybe they didn’t feast on Smaug themselves, but they might have eaten the creatures that did.’

Thorin bowed his head, his back slumping under the invisible weight of his dread. ‘How many? You would not be running the height of the mountain to tell me of one rotten creature, or even a barrel of them.’ He looked up from beneath his brow, reading the bleak lines of Balin’s pale face.

‘More than half. Bard and his men are still checking.’

‘It’s not just a case of bad barrels,’ Bombur added, still wheezing. ‘There’s good fish mixed in with the rotten, and you can’t tell one from the other by looking. We’re cutting them all open now. They’ve already been salted and kept in the ice-room, but even the fresh ones will turn before long once they’re gutted.’

‘Do what you can.’ Thorin stretched out his hand towards the cook, imploring. ‘Do whatever you must to make them last.’

‘And what of the ones like that?’ Balin asked, pointing to the bundle in Bilbo’s hands.

‘Seal the barrels and bury them.’ Gandalf ordered. ‘Mark the spot. In time, the foulness will fade, cleansed by the earth, but no food should be grown where they are placed. Not for a few more summers.’

‘And the lake?’ Bilbo asked, glancing towards Thorin before squinting up at Gandalf. ‘When the ice melts, will the fish still be like this?’

The wizard hummed, the base of his staff scratching an idle pattern on the stones at his feet. ‘The spawn will have been set before the dragon fell, and by the time the waters thicken with fry, his bones should be picked clean. The new fish will not be poisoned, and even a beast as big as Smaug cannot foul the lake for long. There may not be much fishing in the spring, but by the next Durin’s Day, all will be as it was.’

Perhaps the wizard had meant his words to carry reassurance, but all Thorin heard was a story of endless, hungry days. Erebor’s lands were already poor in game thanks to the dragon’s occupation, and now the lake and its creatures were tainted. No food would grow until the soil recovered from beast and battle alike. Where did that leave them, if not starved?

‘We cannot keep this secret,’ Balin warned. ‘Not with all the kitchen staff desperately sorting the good from the bad.’
‘How long can we last?’ Thorin watched Bombur close his eyes and shake his head, his cheerful demeanour shrouded in misery.

‘Two weeks. Three, at a stretch, and there’ll be thin pickings throughout.’ He sighed. ‘I can’t cook a meal out of nothing, Your Majesty. We need more food.’

‘But from where?’ Balin waved a hand at the snow-stricken landscape. ‘Hunting in this will be a gruelling effort for little reward, and even the birds have flown south.’

‘What about Beorn’s animals?’ Bombur asked, offering a hopeless shrug when Bilbo glared at him. ‘If it’s a matter of life and death…’

‘And how long will a few goats and sheep feed two hundred of us?’ Bilbo wrapped the fish back in its coverings and thrust it into Bombur’s grasp. ‘A day or so, if that? They already eat the scraps we can’t, so it costs us nothing to keep them, and if we reach the point where they must be slain, then we’re beyond hope.’

He shook his head, folding his arms across his chest and turning to Thorin. ‘The skies are kind and the ravens can fly. Send messages to Dain and Thranduil. Ask for their help.’

‘Even if they do choose to offer supplies,’ Balin said, ‘which there’s no guarantee they will, how would they get them here? There’s a lot of land between us, and more snow than even an elf can brush aside.’

‘If it’s in their power to do so, then they’ll think of something.’ Bilbo spread his hands. ‘What other choice do we have? Would you rather starve than admit we need help?’

‘That’s what Thror would have done.’

Thorin looked at Balin, catching his meaningful gaze. It was not a warning to stick with tradition, but to break it. ‘I’ll not sit by and let my people go hungry. I only wish, Bilbo, that I had your faith in our allies. Dain, maybe – but Thranduil?’

‘He may not help out of any love for us, but his pride might work against him. If he has anything to spare and the means to get it to us, he will, if only to have us in his debt.’ Bilbo managed a hopeful smile, painfully weak in comparison to his earlier happiness, but there all the same. ‘Besides, you never know. He might act out of the goodness of his heart.’

A disbelieving huff clouded the air in front of Thorin’s face, but he nodded in agreement, already heading for the stairs that would lead them back into the mountain proper. ‘I’ll have messages ready within the hour. Balin, tell the people what has happened. Give them as precise a notion of how much food remains as possible, and let them know what we’re doing to remedy the situation.’

‘Ask them for ideas,’ Bilbo added, his bare feet almost silent on the steps compared to the clatter of boots from everyone else. ‘It’s a long shot, but there’s a lot of knowledge in both the dwarves and the men. They might be able to think of ways to make our supplies go further, or different ways of hunting that can help replenish them.’

‘Is that really wise?’ Balin asked, his old voice polite, but uncertain. ‘I agree, the population has weathered our trials without complaint, but this could be enough to tip them over into panic.’

‘Work out a rationing system, something to make sure everyone gets their fair share,’ Thorin ordered. ‘That may help calm frayed nerves. Also, let them know they are not trapped in here. If anyone wishes to try their luck beyond the mountain, they are more than welcome to do so.’
‘What about Storn’s killer?’ Bilbo asked, his gaze intent. ‘Won’t they take the chance to run?’

Thorin sighed, catching his bottom lip between his teeth before bowing his head. ‘Perhaps, but that is a risk I have to take. I doubt anyone would be foolish enough to leave the shelter of Erebor, but the people need to feel they have an element of control over their fate.’

Balin and Bofur nodded their acceptance, uncertainty written all over their faces as they turned to depart. Thorin knew it was no easy task he gave them. Yesterday, the mountain had been happy and secure, warm and well-supplied. Now, all that had changed. If only they had thought to check the fish when they were caught, rather than storing them away. If only they’d been able to gather more supplies before the snow fell in earnest. If only the damn dragon had never come and stolen his home in the first place…

‘You have made a wise choice,’ Gandalf said, his deep voice a comfort. ‘Your father would have been proud to see the ruler you have become, King Thorin. I imagine he would only wish it was not your place to reign in such harsh times.’

There was no response he could give other than a nod of his head, and he watched Gandalf turn away, his tall figure vanishing from sight as he went about his own business. At last, it was only him and Bilbo who remained, as well as their entourage of guards, and Thorin allowed the true weight of the problem to settle on his shoulders.

It almost felt like more than he could bear.

When he was younger, he had found himself able to bend. Stubborn he may be, but he had the intelligence to know when to tread a different path, and he had born his fair share of burdens without breaking beneath the strain. Now he felt brittle, liable to shatter as the problems of his realm came at him from all sides, crushing his bones and stealing his air.

A cool hand touched his face, and Thorin jumped in surprise, his eyes shooting open to take in Bilbo’s expression. They had stood close before, but those had been soft, tender moments. This was something different, not almost-intimacy, but strength. Bilbo seemed to glow with it, and dizzily, Thorin wondered if he could drink it in – press his lips to Bilbo’s mouth and taste whatever quality it was that made him so unshakable, even in the face of disaster.

Bilbo’s fingers lingered over the edge of his beard, tracing the line where dark hair gave way to the smooth skin of his cheek. Thorin could smell the perfume of winter – ice and cold – that haunted the coat he wore, as well as the faint fragrance of pipe-weed and warm skin that was all Bilbo’s own.

‘We have work to do,’ Bilbo whispered, dropping his hand and stepping back. His absence left Thorin raw, but he braced himself against it, knowing that Bilbo had intended to offer him comfort with his touch, rather than make promises of anything more. ‘Come on. You write to Dain, and I’ll put together something for Thranduil. I suspect I can be more diplomatic.’

Mute, Thorin nodded, letting Bilbo take his hand and lead the way back to their chambers, where ink and paper awaited them. He may have no idea what tomorrow would bring, whether they would be saved by the kindness of their allies or left to starve, but there was one thing he knew for certain. Whatever happened, Bilbo would be right beside him.

At least for now.
Bilbo pressed his hand to his belly, hoping no else had heard its growling complaints. It was bad enough that the dragon’s rot had destroyed more than two thirds of their food stores; he would not add to Thorin’s worries by succumbing to his hunger.

The men and dwarves seemed to take the sudden rationing in their stride. Bombur was working miracles in the kitchen, stretching each morsel as far as it would go. If the people complained, Bilbo had not heard a word of it. In fact, the mood of the mountain remained cheerful, only tinged at its corners with shadows of concern.

That was probably thanks to Thorin’s quick action. He had not kept the people of Erebor in the dark, hoping to solve the crisis before they became aware of it. Instead, everyone knew of the spoilt fish and what it could mean for their small community. The doors of the mountain were open to them if they wished to take their chances beyond the shelter of the peak, and Thorin made it clear he would do his best to support anyone who chose to leave.

No one had taken him up on that offer.

Perhaps that spoke more of the harsh climes beyond the mountain’s sanctuary than it did of their faith in his leadership, but Bilbo was willing to think positive, and read their decision as loyalty. It meant that, even now, they were all in this together, no matter what the outcome.

‘Here.’ Thorin nudged his elbow, and Bilbo looked down at the offered apple in surprise. It had seen better days, but his stomach roared in approval even as his mouth began to water. Only fear that he was taking more than his fair share stopped him from snatching it up, and Thorin read his worry like an open book. ‘It’s from my rations. No one else will go hungry, and you need it more than I.’

With a sigh, Bilbo took it, pulling a small, silver knife from its sheath on his belt. It was a gift from Bofur, Bifur and Bombur, with an inlaid wooden handle and a gleaming little blade, sharp and wicked. ‘We’ll share it,’ he explained, cutting the fruit in half and pressing the portion back into Thorin’s palm. ‘Thank you.’

On the opposite side of the table, Bilbo saw Balin and Ori stifle tired smiles, and Bofur gave a small chuckle from where he sat, poring over a document. They all sat around the Company’s dining table, safe in the overseer’s quarters. The small meal that had graced the plates twenty minutes ago had been demolished to nothing but crumbs, and now those who had not hastened off to other duties bent themselves to the task of getting the kingdom through the coming weeks.

‘Oin says the weather is set to remain cold for another month at least. There’ll be no gift of an early thaw for us this year.’ Balin wrinkled his nose, setting aside what looked like a list of provisions. ‘That means no hunting to speak of.’

‘The elf lass has been setting snares outside. The snow’s no real matter to her, but even she daren’t venture far from the mountain. The sky may be clear, but the snow’s drifting. Huge great waves of it. One wrong step and she could be lost for good.’ Bofur scribbled a note with his stubby pencil.

‘At least she wears a line around her waist now,’ Ori offered. ‘Kili threatened to follow her out if she didn’t.’
Bilbo smiled, not missing the sigh that whispered past Thorin’s lips. Although he did not protest to his nephew’s – whatever – with Tauriel, he tended to be happier if he could pretend it wasn’t happening. ‘Has she caught anything?’

‘Rabbits, mostly. It’s not much, but Bombur will take whatever he can get.’ Bofur sat back in his chair, drumming his fingers against the table as he met Bilbo’s gaze. ‘What about Bard? Did he have any ideas?’

He grimaced, shaking his head. ‘No, but not for want of thought. He asked all the men of Laketown what they would recommend, but no one had anything to offer. None of them ventured this way in search of food, even in the hardest times, for fear of the dragon, so their knowledge of the area is less than sound.’ He cleared his throat, recalling Bard’s face, more sombre than ever, and the dejected, guilty slant of his shoulders. ‘You should know the Men are taking what happened to the fish personally. They feel they are to blame.’

Thorin looked up from the report he was reading, his shoulders tense beneath the thick layers of his clothes. His fingers shook as he lifted his hands to scrub at his eyes, and when he looked at Bilbo, the haggard lines of stress that stamped his features were as clear as day. ‘Were you able to convince them otherwise?’

‘I tried my best. Not sure it worked though.’ Bilbo pursed his lips, watching as Thorin only seemed to sag further. None of this – this sitting around and fretting over something they could not help – was doing any good. They were going around in circles, and something had to give.

Meaningfully, he looked towards Balin, catching his eye before tilting his head in subtle implication towards the door.

The old dwarf was quick on the uptake, offering Bilbo a nod as he got to his feet. ‘If you’ll excuse us, Your Majesty. Ori, Bofur and I have a few things to attend to.’

A puzzled frown creased Ori’s brow, but Bofur clapped him on the shoulder before he could ask questions. ‘We do right enough. Come on, on your feet.’ He winked, bidding a quick farewell with a jaunty flick of his fingers as he ushered Ori ahead of him.

Bilbo watched them go in silent gratitude, waiting until they were out of earshot and Ori’s first, confused question was nothing but a mumble. A moment later, there was no sound but for the hiss of the lamps, and Bilbo turned, straddling the bench to get a better look at the dwarf by his side.

He looked as if he were carved from stone. His sleek beard only emphasised the tightness of his jaw, and a vein throbbed at his temple. Yet despite those outwards signs, he remained calm in all his dealings. Not once, since things had gone pear-shaped with the food, had Bilbo heard Thorin raise his voice in annoyance or accusation. He faced it all with stoic resolution, and the mountain took its cues from him.

‘Can you leave that for a bit?’ he asked, squinting at the narrow scrawl that covered the face of the sheets in front of Thorin. ‘Half an hour, nothing more.’

Thorin heaved another sigh, smoothing his fingers over the page before him. ‘I shouldn’t, but Mahal I’m sick of staring at the same facts and wishing they said something else.’

With a nod, Bilbo clambered to his feet, plucking at Thorin’s sleeve in a silent bid for him to follow. When the dwarf rose, it was a slow, creaking movement, as if his body were weighed down. Dread did that to people. Bilbo felt it himself, lingering in the corners of his heart and the pit of his stomach, but he refused to dwell on it. Fretting over the future wouldn’t keep them fed.
He led the way to his chamber, pushing open the door and gesturing Thorin into the comfort of his armchair. He noticed he had brought the documents with him, but all it took was one long, silent look from him and Thorin set them aside. ‘Tea,’ he said firmly, picking up the kettle from where it warmed by the hearth and setting it on the bar over the flames to gather steam, ‘and some pipe weed.’

‘To cure all my ills?’ Thorin teased, his eyes soft even if his lips remained stern. He leant forward, his hair swinging over his shoulder as he rubbed the back of his neck. It was a tempting sight. The skin of his nape was not as weathered as the rest of him, covered by hair and collars alike. Pale and smooth, it caught Bilbo’s attention, making his lips buzz with temptation.

‘Driving yourself to distraction won’t help anyone,’ he croaked, wresting his mind from its captivation. ‘I doubt anyone in these walls would begrudge you a few minutes’ peace. It’s clear to everyone that you’ve rarely stopped these past few days – even to sleep.’

Thorin didn’t bother to deny it; maybe he knew it was futile. The shadows branded beneath his eyes gave him away almost as much as the haggard lines across his brow. Bilbo’s stomach churned and clenched to see him so beaten down, and he wished there was something he could do, something more than pressing a pipe into his hands and setting the tea to brew.

‘Here, let me get that for you.’ He lit a splint of wood and set it to the bowl, waiting as Thorin drew in a breath and the meagre leaf glowed bright. The comforting fragrance filled his room, and he watched as Thorin exhaled through his nose. A fraction of his anxiety seemed to escape along with the smoke. It wouldn’t last, but at least Bilbo could offer him this tiny reprieve.

‘I take it there’s been no reply to the letters we sent?’ He pulled a face as Thorin shook his head, telling himself it was too soon to expect any word or aid. It was only the afternoon of the third day since he and Thorin had written missives to Thranduil and Dain. Normally, both tasks would have fallen to Thorin, but Bilbo decided it best if he took on the burden of asking the elves himself. Thorin’s pride could make him less than gracious, and while Dain would not take offence, Thranduil would, just to be difficult.

Perhaps it was a fool’s hope. Mirkwood was closer than the Iron Hills, but it was still a fair distance, and even if the plea did arrive, what could Thranduil do? The whole world seemed rimed in ice, and Bilbo found himself struggling to have faith. He kept telling himself that the elves knew things that he did not, and if they were willing to help, then they would find a way.

He just wished he could believe his own reassurances.

Stirring the teapot, he nodded in satisfaction, pouring it out into the large, earthenware cups the dwarves favoured. There was no delicate china here, not anymore, but Bilbo found he didn’t mind. There was something real and unadorned about the thick, glazed clay beneath his fingers and the honest drink inside.

He rose to give Thorin his tea, smiling when he withdrew the pipe from his mouth and offered it in trade. ‘There’s not much left,’ he said, all apology, ‘but a bit. Take it. You need it as much as I.’

‘I’m not trying to run a kingdom and feed its people.’

‘No, your job is more important.’ Thorin’s intense gaze glimmered in the firelight, and Bilbo’s breath hitched. ‘Do you think I could have got this far without you?’

‘I wasn’t much help with the dragon –’
'I'm not talking about the dragon, Bilbo. I'm talking about everything that’s come after. You’re the one who saw us safely into Erebor and ensured its people became friends, rather than mere allies forced by circumstance.’ Thorin leaned forward in the chair, his left hand tight around his tea while his right reached out to brush over the back of Bilbo’s knuckles. ‘The rest of the Company do their part, and I could not ask more of them, but you... You are always there when I need you.’

Bilbo took the pipe from between his lips, trying to ignore the sensation crawling up and down his spine. Over the past month or more, he had grown used to people giving him credit for many things, but the feeling such undeserved praise brought with it had yet to fade. It made him feel like a thief. After all, how could a mere hobbit ever do as much as everyone said he’d done?

He jerked his shoulders in a shrug, quickly deflecting Thorin’s kind words. ‘I don’t like seeing you like this. Tired and worn. How could I not try and help?’

Thorin smiled, not a weak, mirthless quirk, but something that went a long way to melting the frost of Bilbo’s concern. ‘Believe me, it would be much worse if you were not here.’ He sank back into the chair, raising his cup and taking a gulp. ‘You help me recall that there is more to life than the crown I should have upon my brow.’ He parted his lips as if to say something more, but thought better of it as he bowed his head in solemn gratitude. ‘At times like this, I need the reminder.’

‘It’s the least I can do.’ Bilbo wrinkled his nose, wishing he was as satisfied with his own efforts as Thorin seemed to be. He longed for an answer to their current dilemma, but so far, his only suggestion had been to write for aid, and that had yet to bear any fruit. Beyond that, his mind could only spin in circles, lost amidst the twin problems of a land too barren to sustain them and a winter too fierce to allow them to search for food.

There was a chink of pottery as Thorin set his empty cup down, nudging aside Bilbo’s books to make space for it. Yet he did not leap to his feet and hurry back to business, and Bilbo triumphed at the small victory. He understood Thorin’s need to do something, but there was a point where all they could do was wait and see how things panned out. They were not starving, and there was time enough for a solution to land in their laps.

The peace stretched around them, companionable and warm, and before long Thorin’s breathing grew more steady and his eyelids began to droop. Bit by bit, his body relaxed, until his head lolled against the wing of the armchair and his hands uncurled from their empty, useless fists.

Carefully, Bilbo set his cup down on the hearth, moving around the room without a sound. He didn’t need the ring on his finger to go unheard, if that’s what he chose. Now, he flitted about like a ghost, picking up a fur from the bed and spreading it over Thorin’s frame. A quick turn of the key locked the door, which at least meant they’d have some warning before being interrupted. He didn’t know Thorin’s mind, but he doubted he would enjoy being found napping in Bilbo’s chair. This way, he would have the chance to open his eyes and get to his feet before facing whoever disturbed their seclusion.

And they would be disturbed, sooner or later. If there was one thing that Bilbo had learned in his time here, it was to treasure every glimmer of privacy, and it was even worse for Thorin. There was always something needing his attention, or a decision, or his signature. Balin was working on building a routine of court and duties, but their lives seemed determined to throw any such notions out of the window.

Silently, he picked up the documents Thorin had brought with him, eyeing the neat handwriting. So far, he had not been told he couldn’t read the papers the Company shared around. In fact, more than once Balin or Ori pressed things into his hands, desperate for his opinion or approval. He didn’t understand why it mattered what he thought, but he was happy to help in any way he could.
Now, he skimmed the paragraphs, taking comfort in the familiar Westeron. Anything truly confidential was inked in Khuzdul runes and sealed to keep it safe from prying eyes. This was just a summation of their current situation, and however Bilbo read it, things looked dire.

He sighed, scratching at his temple and shaking his head. It was strange to think that, a few days ago, there had been so little to worry about. Thanks to their own hard work and a healthy dose of good fortune, they’d had food, fuel, shelter and clean water. Everything they needed to make it through to the spring. Their only concern was whoever it was who seemed to have it in for Bilbo.

Now, while that wasn’t trivial, it had become a lower priority. There had been no further attacks, and not even a whisper to help them point the finger of blame. When Thorin had announced that anyone could leave the mountain, Bilbo had wondered if Storn’s killer would flee. It seemed as good an opportunity to escape as any, and yet none had ventured out.

Perhaps they’d already gone, sneaking off down some dark, forgotten tunnel of Erebor. There had to be more than one that they’d not yet uncovered, but Ori assured him that wasn’t the case. The same number of dwarves and men were in the mountain as on the first day they had arrived, at least according to the roll-call they took every day. Unless the culprit had been hiding their presence from the very start, they would know if they had vanished. In all likelihood, they were still within Erebor, lacking either the courage or opportunity to strike again.

With a quiet groan, Bilbo sank into the chair at his desk, shaking his head to try and rattle his thoughts into order. Sometimes it felt like his mind was stuffed to the brim, overflowing with what-ifs and maybes and no answers to put them to rest. With a deep breath, he told himself there wasn’t time to dwell on the matter. They were taking every available precaution to keep him safe, and for now, that would have to do.

What mattered most was the survival of the people in the mountain, and for that, they needed food. He probably wouldn’t find anything new in Balin’s report, but he could still read it while Thorin caught some well-earned rest. Perhaps he would get lucky, and a solution to all their problems would unfurl before his very eyes.

Minutes passed, marked by nothing but the steady rhythm of his heart and the occasional whisper of paper as he turned the page. Thorin slept on, mercifully oblivious, and Bilbo wound himself in knots, trying to find his way out of the web of circumstance in which they’d become ensnared, all to no avail.

However he looked at it, there was no miracle to save them from their current predicament. The food stores in Dale were as empty as they had been the first time they checked. No extra barrels turned up in Bombur’s pantry, and no matter how many times the cook counted, the amount of available supplies didn’t change.

Worse, keeping Beorn’s animals fed was not as easy as it could be, and steadily, they gave less and less milk. If something wasn’t done soon, even that well would run dry, and there were younglings in the mountain who would suffer its loss. In desperation, they had checked in the underground docks, looking for fish that might lurk in its dark waters, but they were clear and barren. Even the mushrooms that sprouted in Erebor’s dampest regions were untouchable, too toxic to eat.

It was no wonder Thorin was driving himself to the brink in search of a solution. Without outside help, there would be no salvation, and Erebor would be a tomb once more.

An explosive knock on the door jerked Bilbo from his morose thoughts, sending his heart thrashing. He knocked over his chair as he jumped to his feet in surprise, scowling as the hinges rattled.
Thorin started awake, one hand already reaching for the Blood Axe before he had even wiped the sleep from his eyes. There was no pause in the frantic rhythm, and Bilbo started forward, calling out as he did so.

‘All right! All right!’ He unlocked the door and pulled it open, retreating in surprise when a young dwarf almost fell into the room. Dwalin was at his back, along with a few more guards, grim and dispassionate, but they said not a word as the dwarf delivered a clumsy bow, first to Bilbo then to Thorin.

‘Forgive me, Your Majesty. Master Gloin sent me to fetch you to Ravenhill right away!’ His face was flushed beneath his downy beard, and Bilbo realised he was little more than a tween, fresh-faced and painfully young.

‘Do you know why, Konri?’ Thorin asked, scooping up Bilbo’s fur coat and throwing it at him before shrugging into his own.

‘There’s something up there, something coming!’ Urgency cracked Konri’s voice, and he shifted from one foot to the other, spinning around and almost crashing into Dwalin’s chest as he tried to lead the way.

Dwalin scowled down at the youngster in annoyance, but a nod from Thorin made him stand aside. A flick of his fingers had his soldiers falling into formation, ready to provide a full escort as Konri dithered and wrung his hands. Whatever was up at Ravenhill had him spooked, and the feeling was infectious. Bilbo found himself breathing hard, hurrying to keep up with the quick march as a hundred terrible possibilities raced through his head.

‘Gloin would have sounded the alarm if it were anything truly disastrous,’ Thorin promised. ‘There are horns all over the mountain, along the walls and in the towers. One of the first things Dwalin checked was that they were all in working order.’

Despite his reassurance, he did not let it affect his merciless pace. They did not quite sprint through the corridors, but it was a close-run thing as they headed towards the colonnade that would take them to Ravenhill. Bilbo scurried along at his side, determined not to fall behind as the warmth of the glowing forges began to ebb from the stone around them.

‘Could use your eyes, lass!’ Dwalin’s voice boomed in Bilbo’s ear, and he jolted in shock before hissing a curse of annoyance. Dwalin paid him no mind, gesturing instead for Tauriel to follow them as they passed. She did so without question, obeying orders as easily as she gave them. ‘Something’s been spotted. You’ll see what’s coming long before we will.’

It was a tortuous climb, full of sharp staircases and snaking corridors. Bilbo felt as if he had walked miles, and he was thoroughly lost by the time the guards threw open the sturdy doors that barred the way to Ravenhill.

The winter wind was like a blast of ice straight to the chest, and Bilbo sucked it in, his teeth aching with the chill. The world was dazzling white, striped in shadow by the columns on either side of the walkway. Once, they had held up a roof, but most of it had succumbed to Smaug’s wrath. Walls as high as Bilbo’s shoulder kept the worst of the drifting snow at bay, but it was still treacherous, and their haste was impeded by the need to pick their way forward.

Ravenhill stuck out of the landscape like a lighthouse at sea: a tall, proud spire of stone that plateaued at its peak. If he was seeing it for the first time, Bilbo might have thought its ruins beautiful, but he could not shake his memories of when he had last climbed its heights.
If he concentrated, he could still feel the weight of Thorin’s body in his arms and sense the spill of blood across his hands. His belly rolled, hunger a far memory now, and he swallowed back a greasy slick of panicked nausea as sweat beaded his temples. His legs began to shake, and his next breath felt like it got caught in the knots in his chest, never to reach his lungs.

He tried not to wheeze, gritting his teeth and forcing himself onwards through sheer bloody-mindedness. Azog and Bolg were dead, while Thorin and his sister-sons still lived. The terrible fate that awaited them up there in the snow had passed unfulfilled. Later – later he would let himself sit somewhere quiet and shake himself apart if necessary, but he didn’t have time to be jumping at the ghosts of his own damn memories. If Thorin, who had faced death up there and barely come back in one piece, could see to his duties without even a flinch, then so could he.

The weight of someone’s gaze on him made him look up, not to find Thorin’s kind eyes, but Dwalin’s knowing face. The grizzled dwarf had not broken stride, nor did he do anything to bring attention to Bilbo’s distress. He merely moved a fraction closer, understanding softening his chiselled features even as he stood ready to catch Bilbo if he was overcome. He gave a respectful nod, as if he knew all too well the battle he fought and admired him for his efforts.

It was good to know he was not alone.

Bilbo pushed himself onwards, never more than a step behind Thorin as they made for the plateau where Gloin was waiting. The ruined fortress offered sporadic shelter, and there were plenty of loose stones to trip the unwary. Bilbo wasn’t the only one to almost fall flat on his face, and by the time they got to the top, he was drenched in cold sweat and so exhausted he couldn’t spare his previous panic a second thought.

‘What is it, old friend?’ Thorin asked, resting a hand on Gloin’s shoulder and staring out across the land. He didn’t even seem out of breath, and Bilbo shot him an envious glare as he wiped his forehead and peered around, searching for anything remarkable.

The sky today was a washed out blue, clear apart from to the north, behind them, where storms skulked over the Grey Mountains. One or two thin wisps of cloud unravelled like veils, high above their heads, but otherwise all was quiet and still.

‘There, to the west.’ Gloin lowered the spyglass he had pressed to his eye and offered it to Thorin. ‘The lenses aren’t what they used to be, but it’s better than nothing.’ He sniffed, burying his hands in the pocket of his coat and rocking back on his heels. ‘I thought it just a cloud at first. However, it’s moving against the wind and coming this way.’

‘What about the ravens?’

Gloin turned, and Bilbo followed his gaze to the pocked ruins, where large, comfortable nests seemed to fill every nook and cranny. The ravens bobbed about, playing in the snow and cawing in raucous voices. One or two spoke the occasional word of Khuzdul, crowding around Thorin’s feet and worrying the hem of his coat before jumping back and cackling like naughty children.

‘Couldn’t give a damn.’ Gloin huffed, folding his arms and shaking his head. ‘Maybe it’s my eyes seeing things, but something’s not right.’

Tauriel stepped forward from behind Bilbo, the wind catching her hair and blowing it around her face in a messy tangle before she pushed it out of the way. A scowl pinched her usually serene features, and she placed one boot up on the rampart, checking it would not crumple beneath her weight before she stood up on it.
‘Will this help?’

She nodded, taking the eyepiece with a care that bordered on reverence before peering down its length. She looked graceful, sharp in body and mind. Unlike everyone else, she did not wear a thick coat to protect her from the elements. Only a light cloak shielded her from winter’s claws.

She stood like a statue, the only sign of movement the flutter of fabric as the wind toyed with her clothes. More than once, she panned the eyepiece from left to right and back again, searching the ground beneath the strange vision, but it was several minutes before she lowered the telescope, a smile spreading on her face.

‘Master Gloin has sharp eyes,’ she praised, ‘but there is nothing to fear. Help is on its way.’

‘Help?’

Suspicion edged Thorin’s voice, and Bilbo hid a grin as he realised that the other dwarves around him were sharing doubtful looks. Even the few men among the soldiers seemed uncertain, no doubt wondering how what looked like no more than a shred of mist could offer aid.

‘May I show you?’ Tauriel asked, her expression guileless. ‘They’ll do us no harm. You have my word.’

Thorin stared at her for long moments, and Bilbo could almost hear the internal struggle. His instinctual distrust of elves remained like a seam of iron in the rock, strong and unmoving. Only his better judgement allowed him to see past it, and he drew a deep breath, retreating as he ducked his head in agreement. ‘I will take help wherever I can find it, Mistress Tauriel. Even if that means trusting in strange elvish ways.’

Tauriel glanced at Bilbo from the corner of her eye, an amused smile tugging at her mouth before she turned to face the wide world before them. Pursing her lips, she whistled – a bubbling, crooning sound that grew with every second, rising above the wind to pierce the air with its soothing notes. How she did it, Bilbo couldn’t be sure, but even as he squinted against the sun, he could see it had an effect.

What had been nothing more than a straggled line of white bunched together, twisting and coiling around itself like a rippling ribbon. It took a moment, but at last Bilbo realised what he was seeing.

‘Birds! They’re some kind of bird! Starlings do that in the Shire! Great black clouds of them.’

‘They are the Inial. Lord Thranduil’s messengers.’

‘And how do we know they do not come to declare war on us, when we are vulnerable?’ Gloin asked. Once he would have snapped it, but now he sounded almost sorry for asking, as if he couldn’t hold himself back.

Tauriel’s smile flickered, losing some of its warmth. ‘Because if he sought to fight you, he would do so without warning.’ She looked towards the flock, which grew larger by the minute, moving with more purpose than ever. ‘You asked him for aid, and he has sent what he could. Can you see? Each is carrying something.’

Bilbo stepped forward, squinting as hard as he could. To him, the birds were still indistinct, but now he realised that some burden weighed them down. They did not glide, but fluttered madly. The poor things would no doubt be exhausted when they arrived.

‘Is there anything they’ll need?’ he asked, trying to think ahead. He doubted Thranduil would be best
impressed if his birds made it to Erebor only to drop dead from the effort.

‘Fresh water to drink and a roost for the night,’ Tauriel replied. ‘I doubt they will stay longer than that. They are more used to the shelter of the trees than Erebor’s rugged land, and would rather be home than here.’

Gloin nodded, grabbing Konri to help him as he set about filling up bowl and troughs. Meanwhile, Thorin knelt down, speaking in Khuzdul to one of the ravens. His rough words made the corvid fluff its feathers and croak back. A moment later, it took flight, calling to all its kind as they headed out towards the new arrivals: swooping shadows against the clear sky.

Within minutes, they flanked the approaching birds, providing an escort to their roost. ‘They will make room for them for tonight,’ Thorin promised, ‘and see them safely back to Greenwood tomorrow.’

They stood in silence, watching until – between one blink and the next – the flock was upon them. The ravens chattered and cawed, their voices intermingling with the dulcet coos of the Inial. To Bilbo, they looked like very large doves, well fed and as white as the snow that lay across the ground. However, they didn’t have the mad, pink eyes of the pigeons in the Shire. Instead, they regarded him with steely gazes, their throats swelling as they chirruped their welcome, dropping their bundles on the clean stone at their feet.

Tauriel picked up a leaf wrapped parcel, peeling back the green shell to reveal the dry food within. Her expression was one of reluctant amusement, and Bilbo wondered what she found so funny. ‘It’s Lembas bread,’ she explained, catching his puzzled frown. ‘Elven field rations. They do not go stale, and a small bite can fill a man’s belly – or so it is said. They’re not well loved by soldiers, being so plain and coarse, but…’

‘Beggars can’t be choosers.’ Bilbo grinned, shrugging his shoulders. ‘I’d rather have a bland meal than none at all.’

‘It is more than I expected,’ Thorin admitted, picking up one of the packages to examine it for himself. He broke off a piece, snorting in annoyance when Dwalin snatched it from him and popped it in his mouth. ‘Are you that hungry?’ he demanded.

‘Could be poisoned,’ Dwalin muttered around his mouthful, unapologetic. Tauriel didn’t seem to take offence. She understood as well as the rest of them that it was his job to be suspicious. After a while, when he failed to drop dead at their feet, he grudgingly admitted it seemed safe enough. ‘Not half bad, either. Good and filling. I can see why he sent it. Moving food over land is a fool’s errand in this weather.’

‘So he used his birds instead.’ Thorin nodded, staring as the last on the Inial dropped its burden on the pile, which was wider than Bilbo was tall and came up to his waist with ease. ‘We need bags, boxes, anything that can help us carry this back down into the mountain.’

‘Will it be enough, do you think?’ Bilbo asked, not meaning to sound in any way ungrateful. Thranduil had done them a huge service with this gift. Still, there were a lot of mouths to feed, and he was not sure how far this unexpected wealth of food would stretch. ‘If we add it to what we’ve already got?’

‘Perhaps. Bombur will be a better judge. It depends if it sates dwarves as well as elves. Even if it doesn’t, we cannot ignore the service Thranduil has done us.’ Thorin smiled as Gloin huffed. ‘No matter how much we may wish otherwise.’
‘There needs to be an announcement,’ Bilbo added, ‘so that the people know to whom they owe their thanks.’ He shrugged one shoulder, raising an eyebrow as Thorin gave a reluctant nod. ‘It’s the least we can do.’

‘I know.’ Thorin lifted his head, squinting out towards the west as if he could somehow pick out Thranduil’s far off realm. When he looked back, there was something curious and soft in his gaze. ‘I can’t help but wonder if we would have been so fortunate if the letter to Thranduil was written in my hand. Somehow, I doubt he would have been as sympathetic.’

Bilbo huffed, reaching out to take a stack of boxes from Gloin and beginning the task of loading them up with their new supplies. ‘He would have helped, one way or the other. Probably.’

‘Possibly,’ Thorin murmured, bending to help Bilbo. Almost immediately, everyone else did the same. Only a few guards remained distant: unmoving sentries, ever alert for a glimmer of threat. Around them, the ravens croaked and the Inial cooed, creating a discordant harmony.

By the time they were done, all of Thranduil’s birds seemed settled. Many tucked their heads under their wings, while others pecked at the old seed Gloin offered. The ravens watched over them, beady-eyed and alert, and Bilbo smiled to himself, reminded of Dwalin’s serious gaze and somewhat beaky nose.

Thorin held out a hand to help him to his feet, and he accepted it gratefully. Despite gallivanting all over Middle Earth, he was neither as young nor as fit as he used to be, and his bones were not built to weather the cold. Even his warm clothes couldn’t stop him growing stiff if he spent too long outside. ‘Maybe Thranduil was happier to offer aid because the letter came from you, or maybe not, but it was your words on that page. Whatever you said had the desired effect.’

‘He’ll expect something in return, sooner or later.’ Bilbo bent down, picking up a sack and slinging its strap over his shoulder before scooping up one of the crates in his arms.

‘And he will get it,’ Thorin promised. ‘Within reason.’

They began the treacherous climb back towards Erebor, but this time no cloud of fearful expectation dogged their footsteps. The few guards who helped them carry the Lembas bread talked and laughed among themselves, their spirits lifting with every stride. Even Dwalin seemed cheerful, though he was as watchful as ever.

Best of all was the bounce in Thorin’s step, and the ready smile that came quick to his lips as he and Bilbo spoke in quiet voices, bumping shoulders as they headed home. It was as if years had fallen from Thorin’s face. Crow’s feet replaced deep frown lines, and he no longer moved as if there were a millstone around his neck. The transformation was as clear as day, and if Bilbo had not already been lost in love for the foolish dwarf, he would have fallen in that moment.

By the time they got to the kitchens, he was breathless, and not because of the weight he carried. Thorin’s very presence, so much more lively than he had been these past few days, made his heart thrum and his nerves flutter. Whenever he laughed, something jumped in the pit of Bilbo’s stomach, and his chest felt full of light and relief. He had not realised just how badly Thorin had bent beneath the strain of his position, but now it was gone the difference was clear.

If it happened again, he would know. Perhaps there was nothing he could do, but by the Valar, he would try his hardest to make sure exhaustion and distress never sank their claws in so deep again.

‘From the court of King Thranduil,’ Thorin announced, setting his burden down on the large workbench in front of Bombur before turning to help Bilbo. ‘It’s called Lembas bread.’
Bombur’s tired face lit up like a sunrise, and he lunged for one of the bags, unwrapping the leaves as if he were unveiling something precious. ‘I’ve only heard stories of it. I never expected to taste it for myself.’

‘I fear you may be disappointed,’ Tauriel warned, bending down to place a crate on the floor.

‘Plain food is a blank canvas,’ Bombur said charitably, ‘and if the rumours are true, there’s a lot I can do with this.’

‘Will it last out the winter?’

Bombur’s delight faltered at Thorin’s question, and he craned his neck to examine the supplies, his lips moving through silent calculations. ‘Depends on the weather, both here and elsewhere.’ He shrugged, rubbing a hand over the apron that covered his belly. ‘We’re at the mercy of the snow, but I’ll do my best.’

Thorin nodded, and Bilbo held back a sigh. Part of him hoped that Bombur would be all smiles and certainty, but he would take what he could get. For now, Thranduil had given them more than anyone expected, and it was up to them to make the most of it.

News of the fresh supplies spread through the mountain like wildfire, and Bilbo spent the rest of the day answering the same few questions as he hurried through his brief duties in the treasury and assisted elsewhere. It seemed everyone wanted to know if the rumours were true, and by the time the evening meal arrived, the whole of Erebor was abuzz.

People waited at their benches, the conversation rising like a tide, lapping at the low ceiling and filling the room from one wall to the other. The word on everyone’s lips was the Lembas bread, and Bilbo watched them all from Thorin’s side, seeing hope and disbelief war on the faces of the dwarves, while the men smiled and laughed, as if they had known all along.

At last, Thorin got to his feet, his deep voice carrying across the room and silencing the whispers. Some turned in their seats while others craned their necks for a better view, but to a man, they hung on his every word.

‘Earlier today, we received assistance to bolster our supplies: Lembas bread.’ A buzz of conversation rose like a swarm of bees taking flight, and Thorin waited for it to abate before he continued. ‘Though it may not be the most flavoursome fare, it increases our chances of making it to the better days that await us at winter’s end.’

A ragged cheer went through the crowd, and Bilbo picked up his cup at the same time Thorin reached for his. ‘Let us toast the one to who we owe our thanks: Lord Thranduil.’

The answering cheer was rousing in more ways than one, and Bilbo smiled at the grudging respect on the dwarven faces he could see. Balin had kept the announcement short and sweet, and Thorin had delivered his words without compromise. He had neither hidden nor diminished Thranduil’s assistance, as his grandfather would have done, and the dwarves around him followed his lead.

To a stranger, it may seem like the bare minimum that Thranduil deserved, but Bilbo knew there was more at work than met the eye. Fighting against a prejudice that stretched back for centuries was no simple task, but with a few words, Thorin had taken another step along that very road.

Pride glowed in Bilbo’s stomach, not just for Thorin, but for everyone else as well. From one day to the next, it was easy to believe that there was no change, but if he stood back, he could see how much they had grown. There were so many new friendships, and they brought with them different
ways of thinking that could only work in Erebor’s favour.

Another cheer arose as Bombur and his battalion of helpers emerged with the food. It was no feast, but somehow the cook made it look like one, with the best plates they had been able to scrounge and platters of cold meat and thick broth. They saved the Lembas bread until last, giving everyone a single, small piece, smeared with a thin layer of honey from Beorn’s bees.

The touch of sweetness surprised Tauriel, who insisted it was a vast improvement, and judging by the smiling faces all around, there were no complaints. People seemed bright-eyed, their appetite sated for the first time in days, and Bilbo quickly consumed his share.

It was dry, like well-baked biscuits, and beneath the honey he had to admit it was very bland, but food was food. The morsel was gone in less than a minute, and he sighed as the heavy weight of hunger in his belly shrank, but failed to disappear. Either stories of the Lembas bread were exaggerated, or it didn’t work on hobbits. Honestly, he wouldn’t be surprised. If there was one thing he’d learned on his long journey, it was that a hobbit’s appetite could put other races to shame.

He held his silence, folding his hands in front of him and trying not to look at his empty plate. After all, this was not the sharp, bitter ache of starvation. Not like the Fell Winter back when he was a faunt. He would not die or waste away for want of a meal. He would have to learn to live on less – just for a little while.

A gentle nudge at his arm made him look at Thorin, then down to the open palm held beneath the table, so that the others would not see. Part of him wished he could insist that Thorin ate the offered share of Lembas bread, but his stomach over-ruled his head, groaning loudly in approval.

‘Are you sure?’ he murmured, reading nothing but certainty in Thorin’s expression as he gave a single nod, firm but subtle all the same. Bilbo didn’t know why discretion was necessary, but he played along, trying to act natural as he polished off the offering. Slipping his hand into Thorin’s, he squeezed his palm in silent thanks. The extra piece still had not banished his hunger entirely, but it made it more bearable. For now, that was the best he could hope for.

Before long, the hall began to empty as people sought out their favourite spots by the fireside or retired to their chambers. Thorin and Balin were deep in conversation, no doubt discussing all the details of the kingdom that had evolved over the course of the day. Their voices were soft, and although Bilbo knew neither one would begrudge him his interest, for once he did not feel like taking part. The past few hours had been busy and exhausting, and he could almost hear his armchair calling his name.

Perhaps Thorin would join him later, when business was done. They had spent most evenings sharing tea and pipe alike, but sometimes the kingdom kept him up until the small hours, and tonight, Bilbo did not feel he had the strength to wait for him. He was leaden with tiredness, and when his guards fell in around him, he barely noticed that they were not alone.

He jumped as Nori touched his elbow, rubbing a hand across his face and murmuring an apology as the dwarf raised an eyebrow. ‘Tired?’

‘Something like that.’ Bilbo dredged up a smile, wishing it didn’t feel so brittle on his face. ‘Coming with me?’

‘For a little way. I wanted to warn you.’

That got Bilbo’s attention. The veil of tiredness over his eyes shifted, and his steps faltered as he stared. ‘Warn me? Warn me about what?’
Nori sighed, eyeing the guards around them before dropping his voice. ‘I haven’t forgotten that someone in this mountain has painted a target on your back. You haven’t either, if I’m any judge. Just because things have gone quiet, it doesn’t mean you’re safe. They could still be watching, and what they see is important.’

Bilbo shut his eyes, shaking his head as he tried to unravel what Nori was saying. ‘What they see?’

‘Sharing food takes on a new meaning when times are hard. The King was right to try and keep it hidden, especially when – to a dwarf – a hobbit’s hunger can look like greed.’ Nori held up a hand, cutting off Bilbo’s protest before he gave it voice. ‘I know better, and so do the Company, but many dwarves don’t. Most wouldn’t begrudge you the truth, nor see your appetite as a burden, but there are those who would use it against you.’

‘How?’ Bilbo narrowed his eyes, morbidly curious. ‘What could they do?’

Nori shrugged, shaking his head as he listed the possibilities. ‘Maybe they’ll say you’re eating more than your fair share, or that others are going hungry to feed you. Could be that people will decide you’ve blinded the king to the needs of his people with your wiles.’

‘Wiles?!’ Bilbo snorted, but the smile soon died on his lips as he noticed the depth of concern in Nori’s eyes. ‘It’s not really the gossip you’re worried about, is it?’

The dwarf hesitated, drawing in a breath as they reached the overseer’s quarters. Pausing outside, he turned, giving Bilbo his full attention as he made his point. ‘A hungry dwarf is a weak dwarf. Could be our killer will hope the same is true for hobbits, and strike while he has the chance.’ He scrubbed a hand over his face, hesitating with his fingers curled in front of his lips. It was the first sign of frustration Bilbo could remember seeing from him, and it only served to set his nerves a-jitter. ‘I’m not saying you mustn’t eat food that’s offered, but make sure it’s behind closed doors. You can’t afford to seem tired, or hungry, or sickening. Not now. Not when the world is watching.’

Bilbo grimaced, almost cleaved in two by a sudden, sharp longing for the simplicity of the Shire. At least back in Bag End, the worst thing that happened when he was ill was that people started to wonder who would get the house when he died. Here, so much more hung in the balance. Not just his own happiness and safety, but Thorin’s and, by extension, everyone else in the kingdom. He felt stripped and exposed, and though he did not blame Nori for his warning, he still could not bring himself to be thankful for it.

‘I didn’t think anyone saw.’

‘With any luck, you’re right.’ His voice took on a comforting lilt as he touched Bilbo’s elbow in reassurance. ‘Most people aren’t looking for trouble. I’m just worried about the few who are.’

‘Do you know something I don’t?’ he asked weakly, closing his eyes as Nori shook his head.

‘I wish I did, if only to give you and Thorin peace of mind.’ He gave Bilbo’s arm a quick squeeze before stepping back, his smile crooked and faint. ‘Sorry I had to bring it up, but I wouldn’t forgive myself if my suspicions turned out to be right and I’d kept my mouth shut.’

‘No, it’s fine. You’re – you’re just doing your job.’ He pinched the bridge of his nose, exhausted by it all. ‘You’ll let me know, won’t you? If you find out anything?’

Nori nodded. ‘I swear it. Goodnight, Master Baggins.’

Bilbo ducked his head as Nori departed before slipping into the quarters he shared with Thorin and the boys. He barely noticed the rugs beneath his feet or the blissful tranquillity all around him. He
walked through it all in a daze, shuffling towards his room like a hobbit twice his age.

By the time he sank into his chair, his mind was a-spin, chasing itself round in circles as he considered Nori’s words. He didn’t doubt them. Not for one second. He should have known that dwarves would hold strength and power in high regard. There was far more to the race than a tendency for war, but that was still a keystone of their culture that Bilbo couldn’t deny.

What must he look like to them? He was neither as tall nor as broad as most, and he had no real skill with a weapon of any sort. He could not grow a beard, which he had no doubt they all saw as an oddity, and he didn’t know their ways. He had never thought of hunger as a weakness. To him it was always a call to go and raid the pantry, nothing more. Yet Thorin had known, or he wouldn’t have been so discreet when offering Bilbo the Lembas bread.

With a sigh, he leant back and closed his eyes, his heart weighing heavy in his chest. He had not felt so other since those first few days on the road, when only Gandalf had looked at him with anything like understanding. To the dwarves, he had been too strange and soft, without any real merit, and it had taken him far too long to convince them otherwise.

Now it seemed he was back to square one, proving himself all over again. Except this time, it was not to an unruly Company, but a whole mountain. He had known, deep down, that they were watching his every move, but Nori’s warning had brought that fact into unrelenting focus, and he felt foolish for not seeing it sooner. As far as they knew, he was courting the king! Why wouldn’t they look and cast their own judgements on everything about him?

Reaching for his pipe, Bilbo lit it, going through the motions without a second thought. The taste of the weed on his tongue was comforting in its familiarity, and he let out a stream of smoke, watching it curl towards the ceiling as he mulled over Nori’s words.

He never had liked being the centre of attention. Back in Hobbiton, it was easy to keep to himself, but here that wasn’t an option. Not that it bothered him what other people thought, exactly, but there was more at stake than his own reputation. Whether he liked it or not, public opinion of him reflected on Thorin.

Well, he was damned if he was going to let the people Thorin ruled with such strength think less of their king just because of the hobbit he was supposedly courting. Bilbo knew he didn’t have much in the way of power in Erebor, but this – what people thought of him and the dwarf he loved – that was something he could at least try to influence.

He couldn’t change how he looked, or how his belly roared for more food than they had to spare, but he could learn what was expected of him. For too long he had bumbled from one day to the next, content to let others take charge as he went with the flow. Now he could see that his passive acceptance was not enough, not for the kingdom and not for its king.

Thorin deserved better.

Bilbo’s uncertainty crystallised into resolution at the thought. First thing tomorrow, he would get to work. Perhaps he would always be the hobbit from the Shire in the eyes of some, but whether he left in the spring or chose to make Erebor his home, he was determined to be more.

He had spent so many years being the victim of circumstance, happy to take the blows fate dealt him with barely a flinch. All that had changed the moment he set foot beyond the borders of his homeland. He and he alone had decided to walk out of the door. Now he was in a similar place, looking at the path ahead and sensing a choice.
He could let each day flow around him and blame whatever happened on destiny. Alternatively, he could arm himself for a different kind of adventure, one that might prepare him for a life at Thorin’s side.

The decision to stay or leave come the thaw still felt too big – monumental in his mind – but Nori’s words of warning had awoken a deep determination within him. His fate was in his own hands, and one way or another, it was time to take control.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks for reading everyone. The next chapter should be out December 30th. I hope that everyone has a wonderful festive season, and I'll see you all again on the brink of hte new year =D
If you want to catch up with me in the meantime, you can find me at my tumblr.
B xxx
The battered meeting table groaned beneath the weight of the books and documents on its surface. Thorin sighed, looking over it all with a jaundiced eye. He did not remember his grandfather’s reign generating quite so much paperwork, and yet here he was, with more things to sign than he had time to put his pen to the page.

‘Is all this necessary?’

Balin looked up at him, one eyebrow inching higher as something sparkled in the depths of his gaze. ‘Your Majesty?’ His unflappable calm only served to scratch at the rough edges of Thorin’s temper, and he tried not to roll his eyes like a petulant child as he gestured to the mess in front of them.

‘Do I really need to sign daily reports about the remaining amount of firewood, cloth and Mahal knows what else, or are you trying to keep me busy?’

A guilty flicker shadowed his old friend’s smile, and Balin inclined his head in a grudging nod of acknowledgment. ‘Most of this should be dealt with by the bankers, accountants and other bureaucrats,’ the dwarf began. ‘Sadly, such people are a little thin on the ground, these days.’

Thorin sighed, scrubbing his eyes and propping his elbows on the table. ‘When we are functioning as a trading nation, I can see the importance of monitoring our assets, but Erebor is a long way off such times. How does this help us?’

Balin cleared his throat, leaning back in his chair and smoothing his hand down his beard. ‘That depends who you ask. To most people in the mountain, it’s busy-work and nothing more, but at least those of us who keep an eye on such things can note anything strange. Missing supplies and the like.’

‘I’ve seen no evidence of that.’

‘Nor have I, but if we weren’t keeping records, then how would we know?’ Balin smirked as Thorin’s scowl deepened, and he raised his hands in surrender. ‘Do we need this information? Yes. Do we need you to sign each page personally? No, and if you would rather not, you need only say.’

Thorin grimaced, feeling like a dwarfling neglecting his studies. The running of the kingdom was an essential yet unglamorous task. Perhaps if Erebor was as it once was, he would be less hasty to begrudge his duties, but that was not the case. Out in the mountain, his people were working hard to rebuild and repair, and here he was, pushing paper.

‘Surely there are more important things that require my attention?’

‘And what of it would be fit work for a king?’ Balin demanded. ‘We daren’t put you in the treasury, regardless of Gandalf’s protective trinkets. Do you plan to hew stone, Your Majesty, or crawl through tunnels to check for collapses? Or perhaps you would rather be in the forge?’ Balin’s words carried a hint of mockery, but his face was sympathetic as he shook his head. ‘Even in times like this, there are some lines we cannot cross. Fili and Kili can get away with being elbow deep in muck and dust, and earn respect for the Durin name in doing so, but you – you must stay above it.’

‘Balin…’

‘You know I speak no lie.’
Thorin groaned, not bothering to hide his exasperation as he slumped back in his chair. Dwarves may not be as polite as hobbits, but they had their own issues with propriety. A king was the connection between the mines of the mountain and the world outside. He spoke for his kingdom, fought and died for it, but it was not his hands dirtied in its dark, rich earth or scraped by its hard stone.

‘I still use a forge,’ he pointed out, thinking of the tiny workroom he hid in when he had the chance.

‘As a hobby, and that’s acceptable.’ Balin looked at him, his voice gentle. ‘I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.’

‘And there’s no way around it? No little loophole?’

The silence that followed was thick with thought, and Thorin cocked his head, watching ideas flutter over Balin’s cheerful face. ‘What’s on your mind, old friend?’

‘A loophole, you say? Aye, maybe one.’ Balin smiled, leaning forward and folding his hands on the table in front of him. ‘If a king happened to join in with manual labour while discussing matters of state or court – for example, helping Bard stitch fishing nets and speaking of Dale’s future – then most would see that as acceptable. Efficient, even.’

‘Fishing nets?’ Thorin asked, thinking he would be better off with the paperwork.

‘Or perhaps you would prefer to be down by the docks, attending to your courtship with Master Baggins while he helps the workers there?’ Balin’s face was a picture of innocence, and Thorin wasn’t sure whether to roll his eyes or kiss him in gratitude.

‘That would be acceptable, would it?’

‘Aye, I should think so. Wooing a consort certainly counts as a matter of state.’ Balin sighed, glancing around to check no one could overhear before he added, ‘Especially as there does not seem to have been much progress on that score of late.’

Thorin was already shrugging his way into his coat. He reached for the Blood Axe, hefting it in his hand before he gave Balin’s shoulder a quick squeeze. ‘I’ve not forgotten my promise, old friend. Bilbo will know how I feel before the thaw sweeps the land.’

‘But when?’ Balin spread his hands in despair. ‘You don’t have forever, laddie.’

‘Soon.’ Thorin thought of his personal workshop, where the forge allowed seeds of potential to flourish in metal and glass. ‘A day or so more is all I need.’

Balin gave him a long, hard look, as astute as ever despite his age. Whatever he saw in Thorin’s face seemed to give him peace, because he ducked his head, gesturing towards the door. ‘Then be off with you, and don’t forget your escort.’

The corner of Thorin’s lips quirked in a lopsided smile as he slipped away. The sentries on either side of the threshold stood to attention in his presence, and others posted along the corridor stepped forward, ready to move at his word. As always, Dwalin was among them, his hand on the shaft of his axe as he nodded a greeting.

‘Where to, or do I even need to ask?’

‘The docks,’ Thorin smirked as Dwalin huffed a laugh, ‘and be quick about it, before Balin changes his mind.’
‘I told him you would be on-edge before the day was out.’ Dwalin jerked his head to a couple of his soldiers, indicating they should take the lead as he fell in at Thorin’s side. ‘Even you could only last so long.’

‘I wouldn’t bother myself if there was nothing else to be done, but the mountain is in sore need of helping hands. It’s tempting to ignore Balin and just get stuck into it.’

‘Aye, I know. If these were the dwarves that went into exile with us, the ones from Erebor-that-was, I doubt anyone would comment. They got used to the king pitching in with everyone else on the long trek south. This lot, though? Most of them are Dain’s, and they’ll not take kindly to you getting your hands dirty. Not without good reason.’

Thorin’s nostrils flared in annoyance, but any protest was useless. Balin and Dwalin were right. In war, it was a different matter. King and kin alike fought when the need arose. There was glory and honour to be found on the battlefield, and it was only proper that the ruler should lay down his life for his realm.

Unfortunately, there was nothing so clear-cut in their current situation. No blade could tear asunder the enemies they faced. Hunger still threatened to stalk the halls, kept at bay only by the tenuous levels of their supplies. Winter continued to trap the land in its cage, promising short days and long nights, while the ever-present possibility of unrest seemed to linger in the corner of everyone’s mind.

As much as he wished otherwise, Thorin knew this was not the time to disregard the tradition of his role. That way lay disaster. Instead, he would have to do what he could within the tight constraints of propriety, and hope that Erebor did not suffer as a result.

At least there was consolation in Balin’s clever little loophole. He should have known the old dwarf would be thinking of ways to throw Thorin and Bilbo together. No doubt he thought they needed all the help they could get.

Perhaps that had been true when he was newly healed and sore in body and spirit, but things had changed. With each passing day, Thorin grew more confident, not just of his own feelings, but in Bilbo’s regard for him. Once, the idea of speaking openly had filled him with fear. Now, the fluttering in his stomach was more wild and reckless: exhilarating, rather than terrifying.

More than once, he had almost damned his own plans and started the conversation, taking advantage of one of their shared moments at the fireside. Only his desire to make it perfect held him back, forcing him to bite his tongue for just a little longer.

Looking down at his hands, he rubbed his fingertips over the tiny burns and cuts that marked his knuckles. Forge-kisses, the dwarves called them, and he hoped that Bilbo’s joy when he unveiled his creations would be worth every one.

Soon. He would be finished soon, and until then, he could revel in working at Bilbo’s side.

The docks were a hub of activity, full of smoke and conversation. Dori had made it his base of operations as he sorted through blankets and clothes, cleaning what fabric and furs could be saved. The washing was good work for those who had no skill with a chisel, and the mending was perfect for those not strong enough to be on their feet for long. Many of the elders, man, woman and dwarf alike, plied their needle with patience and concentration.

Bofur had taken charge of the warren of storerooms that occupied this level, retrieving what he could from the battered furniture that remained. Wood too rotten or broken to be of use went on the fire, while handles and hinges were pried free and put to one side for later. Pots and pans were graded in
quality, with some pitched aside for scrap while others found a new home in Bombur’s kitchen.

It reminded Thorin of how the docks had once been. Perhaps this activity was only a fraction of the
throng of merchants and workers who had once clogged every square inch of the quayside, but it
was still good to see life in the great cavern once more.

He picked out Bilbo with ease. His hair was mussed and his sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He’d
discarded most of his outer layers, and the gleam of the mithril was almost blinding when it caught
the torchlight, as bright as any beacon.

A wave of panic swamped Thorin’s admiration. If he could find Bilbo so easily in the crowd, then
who was to say anyone else would have difficulty? The cavern made a natural bowl with nowhere to
take cover, and if someone was of a mind, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

‘Look up.’ Dwalin’s deep voice was soft, and Thorin did as he was told, his shoulders relaxing as he
realised what he could see. Guards patrolled the terraces, their boots tromping over rough stone in a
quiet march. Others stood on the balconies and open-sided corridors where the bankers had once
worked, watching the people below. It was not fool proof, but anyone trying to loose an arrow into
Bilbo’s back would struggle to do so unseen.

‘It’s not my favourite place for him to be,’ Dwalin admitted, ‘but the crowd makes it hard to get a
clean shot, and his guards are always nearby.’ He pointed out Ronin and several others, all of whom
were alert as they milled among the people. It would be so easy for complacency to make them lazy
or draw their attention away from their duties, and Thorin was relieved to see they had not
succumbed to the temptation. Perhaps Bilbo would never be completely safe, but with a few simple
words, Dwalin had reassured him that they had done all they could to protect him from harm.

‘Here, you hold this. It’ll only get in the way.’ He handed over the Blood Axe, watching Dwalin
hesitate before wrapping his big hand around the shaft. ‘I’ve still got Orcrist if I need a blade,‘

Neither of them mentioned how useless such a thing would be against an arrow in flight. However, it
was clear the notion preyed on Dwalin’s mind, as every sentry he ordered to watch Thorin carried a
shield upon their arm. ‘I’ll be patrolling the terraces, just to make sure. Shout if I’m needed.’

‘You’ll probably know it before I do.’ Thorin nodded in farewell, reassured by the idea of Dwalin
keeping an eagle eye on everything from above. Soldiers learnt to read the patterns of movement
within a crowd, and if anyone could see an attack before it happened, it was his most trusted friend.

Quickly, he melted into the throng, inclining his head to the various bows of greeting others bent in
his direction. Their community was small enough that his presence at the docks did not cause too
much of a stir. There was something to be said for spending time among the people. It meant he
could put names to faces and learn the stories of the men and dwarves who had taken shelter under
Erebor’s peak. He felt more connected to the mountain than he ever had in days gone by, but right
now there was only one person who held the fullness of his attention.

Pausing a few feet away from Bilbo, he took a moment to watch him work. He was pulling rivets
from a rotten wooden chest with a crowbar, the muscles in his forearms flexing as he gouged each
one out and placed it in the bucket at his side. There was a smudge of dirt on his face, and the
warmth from the oil bowls was enough to make sweat glisten on his brow.

Thorin wondered when he had grown so strong, not in body, but in character. It was as if some
transformation that had begun when they left the Shire had reached completion, revealing all of
Bilbo’s nature to his admiring eyes. Gone was the timid creature he had met in Bag End, full of
outrage that was never quite unleashed. Now Bilbo was humble, yet confident. He seemed more
engaged than ever – not just in the fate of the mountain but in his own path through life – and it warmed Thorin through to see the quiet, calm power in him.

‘Does Balin know you’re here?’ Bilbo cocked his head, his eyes glowing with mischief as he raised an eyebrow.

Caught staring, Thorin could only flush in answer, clearing his throat as he berated himself. Of course Bilbo would realise he was there. He seemed to have an uncanny knack for it, and it was a rare thing indeed that Thorin was able to take him by surprise with his presence.

‘Perhaps I snuck out while he wasn’t looking?’ he suggested, smiling at Bilbo’s amusement. ‘Are you going to give away my secret?’

Something wicked shone in Bilbo’s eyes, making heat pool in Thorin’s belly. ‘What do I get to buy my silence?’ he asked, and there was no mistaking the playfulness in his voice or the suggestive warmth that graced his cheeks.

Bilbo had flirted before, but it had always been subtle and easily misconstrued. It was only over the past few days that his comments had bordered on blatant, and Thorin was happy to answer in kind.

He let his eyes grow hooded as he leaned into Bilbo’s space, tucking the hobbit’s courting braid behind his ear so he could murmur into it. ‘What would you ask of me?’

The catch of Bilbo’s breath made Thorin grin, and he watched the way that gaze lingered on his mouth for a few seconds. He made no secret of what he wanted, and Thorin was tempted to give it to him. To kiss him here, in front of all these people, so no one would think to question his claim.

And yet this – this new flirtation, this game of pursuit – was almost as scintillating as the idea of tasting Bilbo’s lips. His certainty made him bold enough to lean back, letting Bilbo take control as he offered him a fraction more space.

‘Help me with this,’ the hobbit managed, gesturing to the chest in front of him. The breathy quality of his voice was the sound of victory to Thorin’s ears, and he smothered a grin, unable to resist pressing further, if only to see Bilbo’s blush deepen.

‘Is that all?’

Bilbo cut him a look, tipping up his chin and exposing his throat: part-challenge, part-invitation. Blue eyes sparkled, amused and wanting as his lips quirked in a coy little smile. ‘For now.’

Those two words brimmed with promise, and Thorin swallowed, almost lost beneath the tide of heat that swept over his skin. It was a deliberate game, one he was sure they were both all too happy to play, and his heart raced with the joy of it.

Huffing a laugh, he took the crowbar from Bilbo’s hand, brushing his fingertips over Bilbo’s knuckles before he hunkered at his side. Sharp, delicious tension hummed between them, and Thorin revelled in it, bumping shoulders as they worked in quick tandem. The wood was so soft that he could almost dig the rivets out with his fingers, and after a moment or two, he examined the object they were slowly tearing to pieces.

Recognition was a sobering pang in his chest, and he sighed, skimming a hand along the arched lid in fond memory. The old wood was pitted and spongy, eaten by worms and turning to little more than dust in places, but he could recall it in better days.

‘Are you all right?’ Bilbo asked, pausing with his tools and looking up at him. Kindness took the place of flirtation, the heat of their earlier words banked like embers in a grate. For anyone else,
Thorin would have mustered a smile and promised he was fine, but it had always been easy to share his thoughts with Bilbo. He invited Thorin to confide in him just by existing, and it was a relief not to feel that he had to hide his feelings in fear of judgement.

‘This was my brother’s. It sat at the bottom of his bed, and he managed to stub his toe on it almost every day.’

Bilbo hesitated, his chisel kissing the timber near one of the big rivets holding the rusted latch in place. ‘I didn’t know you had a brother.’

Thorin bowed his head, picking free a few more scraps of metal. ‘His name was Frerin; younger than me and older than Dis. He died in battle.’

The warm weight of a hand on his arm made him look up, straight into the compassionate depths of Bilbo’s eyes. It amazed him how the hobbit seemed able to feel so much, not just for his friends, but for people he had never even known. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘It was a long time ago.’ Thorin reached up, stroking Bilbo’s fingers before resuming his work, picking up the pace as he set his sadness aside. ‘More than a century.’

Bilbo nodded, and when he spoke there was a cautious edge to his voice, as if he were not sure whether Thorin would rather enjoy his memories, or ignore them. ‘What was he like?’

‘Young.’ Thorin ran his tongue over his teeth, tasting his words. ‘Too young to be in battle, and certainly too young to die in it.’ He shook his head, feeling the leaden weight of that same old anger. Even after decades, it still lingered in him. However, that was not what Bilbo wanted to know, and not what Thorin wished to remember of his brother.

‘Fili reminds me of him, often fiercely. The same line of his jaw, the colour of his hair, the shape of his nose… In nature, he was more like Kili. Part of that would have been his youth, but he was always more carefree than I. He sought the fun and challenge in life at every opportunity.’

Bilbo smiled, leaning into Thorin’s shoulder. His body was a warm weight at his side, full of comfort and support, and Thorin was glad he did not have to meet his eyes in that moment. He had done his mourning years ago, and yet there were times his grief felt as fresh as the day it was made.

‘I wish I could have met him.’ Bilbo looked up as a wry chuckle escaped Thorin’s lips. ‘What?’

‘He would have liked you. Perhaps a bit too much, if I’m honest.’ The recollection was like a ray of sunshine spearing through the clouds, and Thorin grinned as he remembered his little brother’s flirtatious ways. Mahal, he had been brash; eager and obvious in a way that many still found charming. He would have adored Bilbo, at first just for being new and different, something no one in Erebor had seen before, but Thorin suspected that it would not have been a fleeting fancy.

He and Frerin were as opposite as night and day in looks and temperament, but in some things, there was no denying their kinship. What they sought in the people around them was the same. It went beyond the good breeding and refinement expected of the court of dwarven princes. The pair of them had always taken a long, hard look at the qualities of both friends and lovers. They made their judgement based on intelligence and integrity, as opposed to charm or flattery.

Bilbo would have intrigued Frerin from their first meeting, and unlike Thorin, he would not have hidden admiration behind surly remarks and a foul, defensive temper. He would have endeared himself to Bilbo within hours; Thorin could picture it with ease.

Perhaps it was best that Bilbo and his brother never had the chance to meet. When it came to charm,
Frerin had been well blessed, and Thorin doubted he would have won any battle there may have been for Bilbo’s heart.

‘What about Dis?’

The question interrupted Thorin’s train of thought, and he blinked, shaking off his ridiculous fancies. His brother was long dead – a footnote in his life, these days – and here he was wondering on the impossible. ‘What about her?’

‘Well, Fili and Kili speak of her often, but it’s always as a mother. The few times you’ve mentioned her, it’s been with deep trust and respect for her strength but…’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t even know what she looks like.’

Thorin set aside the crowbar, reaching out and turning the chest around so that they could work on the back. ‘She is about half-a-head taller than you. Dark-haired and dark-eyed, like Kili. She loves the colour red and hates to be left out of anything. She was always chasing after Frerin and I. Trying to run. Trying the fight… It exasperated me then, but now there is no one I would trust more in battle at my side. Not even Dwalin.’

‘She sounds amazing.’

Thorin smiled, thinking of the last time he had seen his sister. It had not been the kindest of partings. After all, he was taking her sons on a journey from which they may never return. She had cursed him up and down the night before, furious because she knew there was no way to talk him out of it. Yet she still bade them farewell the next day, her eyes full of love for them all.

Dis was a gentle soul wrapped up in a practical mind. She felt things deeply, from the troubles of her family to the grievances of her people, but she did not allow herself to break beneath the strain. Instead it drove her, honed her… In fact, there were times Thorin thought she would be a far better ruler for Erebor.

‘I look forward to seeing her again,’ he admitted. ‘As soon as the winter passes, I have no doubt she and many of those from Erebor-that-was will begin the march back home.’ He muttered a Khuzdul curse as his crowbar slipped and he barked his knuckles on the wood. ‘I only hope they bring supplies.’

‘We could be in a bit of bother if they don’t.’ Bilbo stopped what he was doing, grabbing Thorin’s wrist and holding it still. Gently, he plucked free a splinter before pulling a small pot from his pocket. ‘It’s the stuff Tauriel gave me for the cut on my palm,’ he explained as he scooped up a dab of his dwindling supply and smeared it over Thorin’s skin. It was cool and soothing, with a pungent smell.

‘It’s just a graze.’

Bilbo hummed in agreement. ‘A graze from a filthy piece of wood that’s been sat in a dank, mouldy room while a dragon oozes Valar knows what all through the mountain.’ He cocked his head, his eyes sparkling. ‘Best not take chances, don’t you think?’ He rubbed his thumb over the unharmed skin near the wound, and Thorin allowed himself to enjoy the alien sensation of being coddled.

In the serious world of the mines, dwarf children soon learnt the difference between a minor hurt and a major injury. It was not that adults were lacking in sympathy when it came to the bruises and gashes that embellished childhood, but strong reactions to pain were discouraged. It was probably why the other races considered dwarves stoic. They rarely fussed over even the most brutal injuries.

This – Bilbo’s gentle, sympathetic attention – was something new. He was not grim-faced and
drawn, as he had been when Thorin lay dying in Oin’s tent all those weeks ago. It was softer, lacking in urgency but still kind at its core, and Thorin suspected he could soon get used to it.

‘I thought you’d been doing paperwork?’ Bilbo asked as a puzzled frown wrinkled his brow. ‘Why are your hands in such a state?’

Belatedly, he realised his mistake. Bilbo was nothing if not observant. Besides, the forge-kisses were not subtle. Dwarves recognised them on sight and would not bother to ask, but to the hobbit they were something worthy of note. Briefly, Thorin considered a lie, but Bilbo would sniff that out in no time. He’d have to stick to a half-truth and hope Bilbo didn’t press for a full answer. He would hate to have his surprise ruined by his own carelessness.

‘I’ve been doing a bit of work on a small forge near the overseer’s quarters,’ he began. ‘I’m more out of practice than I would like to admit, and it’s led to a few burns.’

Bilbo hissed in sympathy, shaking his head in confusion. ‘Don’t you wear gloves?’ He shrugged as Thorin cast him an incredulous look. ‘What, is that not something dwarves do? The farrier in Hobbiton had hide gauntlets.’

‘He was making horseshoes,’ Thorin pointed out, wondering how to be diplomatic. ‘They are useful, but far from intricate. He does not need the full motion of his fingers and hands to manipulate the metal. There are many smiths – men and dwarves and elves all – who would rather risk burns than hamper their craft.’

Bilbo’s face twisted, not in mockery, but in an honest effort to understand. No doubt before he came to Erebor, the closest he ever got to a proper forge was seeing one’s glow in a marketplace. Since then, he had only seen the furnaces when they forced them from their deep slumber in an effort to vanquish Smaug. Even to dwarves, that great, angry clanking was not a comforting sound. He could see how, to Bilbo, they would have been almost as terrifying as the dragon itself.

His hobbit had no knowledge of the way the heat lanced outwards or the wild, elemental glow of the molten metal as it bent to the whim of the one who coaxed it into new and beautiful shapes. He did not know what it felt like to take something born from the dark shadows of the earth and fill it with light and life.

‘I do not expect you to understand until you have experienced it for yourself. I’ll have to show you,’ he decided. ‘Not now, but soon.’

‘I – I don’t know if that’s a good idea. I’ve never so much as struck a nail. I wouldn’t have a clue what I was doing.’

‘I’ll be there to help you,’ Thorin promised, nodding to himself in satisfaction as he continued to pull the rivets from the chest in front of them, slowly unravelling the metal bolts that held the wood together. ‘I do not expect you to make masterpieces. If you’d rather, you need only watch, but fire and forge are part of every dwarf’s life.’

That, more than anything, seemed to ignite Bilbo’s interest. He may not be intrigued by metalwork for its own sake, at least not yet, but he was eager, almost hungry, for all that he could learn about dwarven culture. Not just their manners and methods, but the passions and skills that gilded their very souls.

Thorin had heard about Bilbo from the Company over the past few days. He had a voracious desire to know everything about Erebor and its citizens, and they were only too happy to help. Thorin could not say what had inspired this change in his idle curiosity, but he was not about to question it.
Not when he hoped it meant that Bilbo was giving true consideration to staying. After all, why make an effort to understand a place and its people when you intended to walk away before the summer sun rose over the land?

‘Tell me about it?’ Bilbo asked. It wasn’t quite a demand, but it was a close-run thing. ‘When did you start using a forge? How old were you? Is it something all dwarves do, even Oin and Dori?’

Thorin laughed, shaking his head at the sudden flow of questions. ‘I was young; most dwarves are. It’s something we all learn, as well as how to wield a weapon. Both are considered essential, as basic as learning your letters and numbers, and for some, even more so. I used to help my father in his forge. I cannot have been much older than ten or fifteen. For men at least, that’s near-grown, but dwarves are slower. I was little more than a babe.’

‘Like gardening.’ Bilbo shrugged, looking apologetic as he pulled the last metal corner piece free of the chest. As if giving its final breath, the wood crumbled into splinters and dust, leaving them with only a few small pieces to pitch into the nearby fire. ‘Hobbit children learn the names of plants and how to tend them even as they’re learning to speak. It’s – the land and its harvest are part of us, somehow. It’s in our blood.’

‘As metalwork is in ours. Dwarves learn early on if they have a greater affinity for steel or stone. Many under the age of fifty will have either one or the other. It’s not until later that they start to branch out, exploring new skills.’ Thorin got to his feet with a groan, following Bilbo’s lead as they moved towards one of the piles of furniture to be sorted and broken down. ‘Of course, it changes with different clan-lines. The Ri family has always been known as weavers so Dori, Nori and Ori will all have learned those skills, though only Dori defines himself by them.’

‘What about healers and bankers, like Oin and Gloin. They come to that later, too?’

‘Yes; they were both armourers, and fine ones at that. They learnt their trades out of interest and necessity both, but if they were called back to the forge, they could still strike steel with the best of them.’ Thorin smiled, thinking of the way the tools felt in his own hands after so long: weighty and familiar. ‘It’s not something a dwarf forgets.’

Bilbo’s queries continued in a similar vein, quizzing Thorin about many aspects of dwarven craft. He answered as best he could while they worked, quickly falling into a steady rhythm of trading questions and answers. He gave as good as he got, ferreting out more information about hobbits and the Shire. Bilbo may not have any siblings, nor much kin to speak of, but there was more than one fascinating ancestor in his past. Clearly, he had inherited a level head from his father’s side, while his sense of adventure came from his mother, who was a Took.

Bilbo said that as if it meant something, and when Thorin frowned in puzzlement, he leant back on his heels to explain. ‘There are families in the Shire, and each has a reputation: wise or reckless, sensible or flighty. Tooks are – well – most hobbits would say the Tooks are trouble, though that’s just the Shire talking. The Tooks are actually quite powerful. They shake things up,’ A rueful little laugh escaped Bilbo’s lips. ‘and there’s nothing a hobbit likes less than change.’

‘They’re clan names. Kin-names.’

‘Yes, and more than that. It’s part of who you are. People expect certain things because you’re a Baggins, or a Took, or a Brandybuck, so that’s who you become.’

‘But it’s not necessarily who you are.’ Thorin nodded in understanding. ‘You were a Baggins when I met you.’
'I’m still a Baggins,’ Bilbo huffed, shaking his head as Thorin chuckled.

‘You’re a better Baggins, now. The one you should be, rather than the one they wanted.’ Thorin scratched behind his ear, wrinkling his nose at the dust coating his hands and face. ‘We have clan names, too, but they’re different. Hundreds of dwarves often share them. Sometimes even thousands. They have reputations, of course: for bravery, or loyalty, or luck, but they are little more than another way to bring our world together. They build bridges, instead of creating rifts.’ He tilted his head, considering the honesty of his words. ‘Most of the time, anyway.’

‘What’s yours then?’

‘Long-Beard is the one we claim.’ Thorin ran his hand over his chin, wincing as he sensed Bilbo’s next question. ‘Many of us cut our beards short when we lost the mountain. It is done as sign of mourning.’

Bilbo nodded, taking a moment to absorb that in silence before he glanced at Thorin from the corner of his eye. ‘Will you grow it back, now that we have reclaimed Erebor?’

A bark of laughter caught in Thorin’s throat, and he shook his head. ‘Ask me again when our food stores are brimming and the mountain is filled with my people once more.’ He scratched his jaw in thought, trying to remember the last time his beard had reached below his collar. ‘In all honesty, I have grown used to wearing it short.’

‘Less chance of catching it on fire in a forge,’ Bilbo pointed out.

‘Or getting grabbed during battle,’ Thorin added with a grin.

‘Less to comb, too, not to mention –’ Bilbo cut himself off, his smile falling from his face as he froze. His very breath seemed to have stilled in his chest, and his head tipped to the side, bird-like and attentive on something other than Thorin.

‘What is it?’

‘Shhh. Do you hear that?’

Thorin stopped, straining his ears to make out anything over the crackle of the fires and the chatter of those hard at work around them. Nothing struck him as out of the ordinary, but a glimmer high on one wall had him looking up. Tauriel stood there, her body rigid and her focus locked, hawk-like, on the water that lapped at the side of the docks.

He followed her gaze, frowning as he noticed the movement of the pool. There were always ripples created by the splash of the washing or the steady trickle of the sluices, but even as he watched, they changed direction, overwhelmed by the steadily growing flow of water seeping out around the gates in the eastern wall.

Before long, it spurted from every bolt and seam, and true fear sliced like a razor down Thorin’s back. If they didn’t do something, the gate itself would smash apart, and any hope they had of controlling the waters it retained would be washed away.

‘Open the drains!’ he roared, plunging the room into shocked silence before a jumble of dwarves rushed to do his bidding. ‘Hurry, all the way! Everyone get to high ground. Shut the dock doors; protect the rest of the mountain!’

‘With us inside?’ Bofur yelled. ‘Shouldn’t we get out first?’
'There’s no time.’ He pointed to the other levels that ringed the cavern. ‘Get up there and pray to Mahal it’s high enough to spare us.’

‘What’s going on?’ Bilbo asked, pushing forward to the water’s edge even as the crowd began to dash out of harm’s way. ‘Where’s it all coming from?’

‘I don’t know.’ Thorin took his hand, pulling him back and half-dragging him up the steps to the terraces and balconies. He could only pray that the old mechanisms to control the water still worked, and were enough to stop the level rising and drowning them all. ‘That’s the tunnel to the Iron Hills, but it was never completed. Perhaps an underground river has changed its course. Either way, we need to release the pressure.’

‘My men are waiting,’ Dwalin barked, gesturing to where a dozen soldiers stood by the machinery that would open the eastern gates.

‘Tell them to use the braces. Open the sluices half way and hope they’ll hold. There’s a lot of water behind those gates. How we’ve only just noticed…’

‘We had other things to occupy our minds,’ Dwalin reminded him before raising his voice, hollering an order.

His men jumped into action, and Thorin winced as the trickle of water became a thunderous cascade, spilling into the docks and quenching the fires that burned bright on the dock. A murmur of unease went through everyone on the terraces, and he sensed the crowd shift back, inching ever higher over rough stone as they watched the torrent with trepidation.

Spray filled the air, making the high oil bowls spit and hiss, but Thorin’s gaze was on the system of drains, where the water raced to escape the mountain. So far, they were doing their job, but his heart ached with the fear of how many lay choked and useless by crumbled masonry or years of neglect.

‘I thought,’ Bilbo wet his lips, looking nervous. ‘I thought these were drains too?’ He pointed to the ground beneath their feet, his finger trembling.

‘They are, but only for the mountain itself. This water is from somewhere else.’

‘When will it stop?’

Thorin clenched his jaw, shaking his head as he watched the maelstrom, which seemed to have no intention of slowing down. ‘I don’t know. If I’m right about an underground river changing its course, it won’t, not until something in the earth moves and it’s diverted away from here.’

Bilbo leaned forward, craning his neck for a better look into the swollen, wave-whipped waters below. ‘So, let’s say it’s a not a new river. What else could it be? Melt water?’

‘Unlikely,’ Dwalin replied, his armour clanking as he prowled back and forth. ‘There’s no sign of a thaw, and no fire-mountains nearby to trigger one such as this.’

‘What about the passage? Could – could Dain have finished it? Could it be water from their end coming through?’

Thorin paused, his lips parted as hope flared bright in his chest. It felt like an impossible fantasy, but was it? His mind whirled in a flurry of theories, but he barely dared to credit them. ‘He would have warned me what he was planning. The engineering involved is immense, not to mention he would have told us to open the sluices before now.’
‘And if his messages didn’t get through? You’ve not had many replies from him since he returned to
the Iron Hills. Have the ravens even come back?’ Bilbo sighed when Thorin shook his head. ‘What
if it is him? What do we need to do?’

‘If it’s a canal, rather than wild water, then we should watch the flow,’ Bofur cut in, having heard
everything they said. ‘It’ll be an isolated system, and if we drain it too far, no boat will get through.
From what I’ve seen of the old plans there are locks all the way along to help ease the gradient. If
they’re still in operation and holding most of the channel back, then I’d expect it to slow down in the
next minute or so.’

Every eye stared towards the surging water below, and all around him, Thorin could feel the air draw
tight. It did not matter that people could not have heard his words over the roar of the deluge; the
rumour travelled on a whisper, sowing hope in its wake. An open trade route to the Iron Hills, one
that could see them through winter and summer alike…

Thorin did not dare to let himself believe it.

‘There, look!’ Bofur pointed, and true enough, the raging torrent was slowly weakening, inching
lower in the smallest of increments. Before Thorin knew it, Bofur was calling out orders, urging
those around him to being shutting off the biggest of drains one by one.

It was a complex task, all about timing, yet as hasty and panicked as they were, the people managed
it, letting boards and blocks fall into place. Slowly, the pool began to calm, the white water
dissipating into dancing bubbles and joyful eddies that sparkled in the lamplight.

Then, Thorin heard it. Now the roar of the water had subsided to a gurgle, he could make out the
low boom of a drum calling out its beat.

It was not the fearful rhythm of the goblins, pounding in the deep. This was a different, higher note,
piercing the air and the clouds of his memories all at once. It was a sound he recognised from his
youth, when the great barges cut through the waters, their rowers and polemen keeping perfect time.

‘Soldiers, to arms!’ Dwalin roared, drawing his axe and gesturing in a sweeping line along the upper
wall. ‘Archers, take position!’

‘What if it’s Dain?’ Bilbo asked, his hand tugging on Dwalin’s elbow.

‘What if it’s not?’

Thorin eased Bilbo back from the edge of the escarpment, his hands gentle on his shoulders as he
steered him away from potential danger. ‘We have no way of knowing who may come through those
gates,’ he reminded him, watching Bilbo’s chest swell in irritation. ‘It’s better to be safe than sorry.’

‘Well, who else could it be?’ Bilbo eased himself free and set off, picking his way down to the
puddle-pocked dockside. The water had receded, and the stones lay slick in its wake. For Thorin, it
was treacherous, but Bilbo’s bare feet had no trouble. He trotted down, sure-footed as a mountain
goat, tutting at the guards who now stood on the pool’s shore. The dwarves’ axes gleamed, and the
men drew their bowstrings tight and steady, pointing towards the distant black maw of the eastern
gate.

‘It’s impossible to say.’ Thorin lifted his voice, making sure his words carried to all those gathered in
the room, soldier and civilian alike. ‘The tunnel has not been used for decades. There is no telling
who could have cut into it and intercepted its path in that time. The drums are dwarven, but our
enemies have come to us disguised as friends before. We must not allow our hope to make us fools.’
The rasp of steel filled the air, a sibilant threat. Everyone had a blade of some kind at the ready. Even Bilbo clasped Sting, his fingers white-knuckled around its hilt as he angled it across his body. The metal shone, newly sharpened, but no blue glow limed its edges. Whatever they faced, it was not a goblin deception.

Still, there were worse things waiting in the deepest dark.

‘Can’t we close the gate again?’ Bilbo asked. ‘Lock whoever it is on the other side until we know who they are?’

‘The weight of the water’s too much, and the wood too rotten to push it back,’ Bofur hissed. ‘It’s a miracle they’re still standing. I don’t dare give the order to try and crank them shut.’

‘You need a metal grille you can drop over the tunnel mouth.’ Bilbo scratched his nose, bobbing his head to get a better view between the bodies of the archers ranked in front of him. ‘Bit late for that now, I suppose.’

‘Hold steady!’ Dwalin roared, his voice carrying as the drums grew closer, throbbing like the heart of some massive beast.

‘Easy for him to say,’ one of the men grunted. He was pale in the ruddy light of the oil lamp, and the sweat of exertion and fear glossed his brow. It was easy to forget that Dwalin’s soldiers were not the trained elite of Erebor’s regiments, but the strongest and best he had been able to pluck from their rabble of survivors.

‘Ease your draw,’ Thorin ordered, stepping forward and raising his voice so all the archers could hear him. ‘Do not lower your bow, but slacken the string. There is no point in spending your strength in wait. You may yet need it.’ He stepped through their rank, his boots kissing the shore of the pool as he peered towards the gate.

A glimmer of light lit the passage, swelling like the bloom of flame in a dragon’s throat. It was like watching the dawn, with no knowledge of whether a new day brought friend or foe home upon its tide. Every second stretched to an eternity, and Thorin felt rather than saw Dwalin and Bilbo stop at his side, the former on his left while the hobbit hovered to his right.

‘Take this.’ Dwalin thrust the lower edge of a shield into the stone at Thorin’s feet. ‘Won’t be long before whoever’s in there can get a straight shot at you, and ye’re not even wearing armour.’

Thorin sighed, ignoring Dwalin’s weary huff of laughter as he reached out and pulled Bilbo behind the cover of the shield.

‘I’ve got the mithril,’ he pointed out, but it was a token protest, and Thorin did not credit it with a response as he let go to draw Orcrist. More than anything, he hoped that their show of force was unnecessary, but he couldn’t take that chance. Whatever came for them had to be met head on, and he would not shirk that duty.

As a young dwarf, he had asked his father why the king was always on the front line of the battlefield. Never did he stand back and let his soldiers fight, or remove himself from danger, regardless of the logic. Thrain had not even hesitated to think on it: ‘If a king will not be the first to battle for his kingdom, then how could he ask for the same from any under his rule?’

And so Thorin stood there, feeling the stretch of the minutes as they waited to see what they must face. A more foolish king may seek to save himself, but retreat had never been the dwarvish way. Nor, it seemed, was it an instinct of the Men. Not a single one of them looked back towards the
closed doors that trapped them in here. Each stood ready, armed with whatever they had to hand. Dori was shielding some of the younger ones, his expression as fierce as any other and a halberd gleaming in his grip.

‘Wait.’ Bilbo’s fingers clamped over Thorin’s right wrist, restraining his sword arm as he leaned forward, straining to pick out anything over the nearing beat of the drums. ‘I hear something.’

‘A voice,’ Tauriel added from behind them.

‘Can you make out what they’re saying? Do you recognise it?’ Thorin demanded, not daring to take his eyes from the open gate.

‘It is Khuzdul, but I do not know your kin well enough to recall it.’

Inch-by-inch, the torchlight began to fill the mouth of the tunnel, rising like molten gold filling a crucible until it spilled over, painting dancing paths on the water. The drums were louder now. Thorin could almost make out the individual grunts of the rowers as they forced their vessel along, but still he could not quite see them.

‘Ho there! Don’t shoot!’

Thorin’s shoulders slumped, relief making him sag against Dwalin’s side. He knew that voice, and knew it well.

‘It’s Dain,’ he murmured, letting out a huff before he spoke up, forcing his words out across the water. ‘Dain Ironfoot comes to Erebor! Stand down your arms!’

A cheer echoed from all around, rising in volume as the prow of the first boat speared from the clinging shadows, chasing the light it cast before it. Sleek and broad, it seated four dwarves abreast, each one armoured and straining as their short oars cut into the water. Polemen stood at the prow and stern, helping to guide the boat through the narrow passage, and they lifted their poles in salute as they emerged into the dock proper.

Dain manned the rudder, his round face red with delight and amusement. Gone was his plate armour from the battlefield, replaced with lighter leathers to help him move freely. Yet as he approached, Thorin could see he was no fool. He still carried several axes and a sword at his hip. All of his men were equally armed, and he did not miss the relief on their faces that they had made it safe to journey’s end.

‘Cousin!’ Dain crowed, clapping his hands in delight as the boat approached the nearest dock. He did not wait for it to bump against the wall before he jumped out, barely giving Thorin a chance to drop his shield or sheathe Orcrist before he bundled him into his arms and smacked him hard on the back. ‘You yet live!’

‘As do you. I’ve heard nothing since you wrote to say you arrived at the Iron Hills.’

Dain’s delight disappeared behind a grim scowl, and he heaved a sigh, clapping Thorin’s shoulder again. ‘Then we must thank Mahal that there was someone in here to open the gates for us. We stopped as much water as we could with the locks, hoping not to flood the place if the way was shut, but …’ He trailed off, shaking his head. ‘Aye, we’ll speak of lost messages and more besides before too long. There’s time enough for that. For now, let’s do what we can to put some meat on those bones!’

He reached for the horn on his hip, pressing it to his lips and letting out a loud blast. It rang through the cavern, making Thorin wince, but even he could hear the answering call, distant and echoing
down the tunnel’s length.

‘I bring food, cousin, and many other things besides.’ Dain grinned and spread his hands wide as the rush of whispers rose around them like a sea. ‘It will be here within the hour. We thought it best to leave the rest back at the last lock, in case there was no one to welcome us.’

Thorin bowed his head, nodding in understanding. ‘Well, we are here, and you are very welcome. I had no idea you were working on the tunnel. I didn’t even think to expect it.’

‘Aye. Made sense to open the bloody thing up as soon as I got back to the Iron Hills. I set my people to the task the moment I returned.’ Dain shrugged, gesturing to the dwarves in the boats, who were handing out the occasional bag and crate to those waiting on the dockside. ‘It was the work of a month, no more. Near finished when the dragon came, and I knew you’d be in need.’ His expression was shrewd as he looked Thorin up and down, grunting to himself. ‘Healthy you may be, but well-fed you are not.’

Thorin laughed, shaking his head ruefully. ‘Our food stores, though good to begin with, succumbed to the dragon’s rot. We have been surviving as best we can.’

‘With a little help from Lord Thranduil,’ Bilbo added, speaking for the first time since Dain had stepped out of the boat. He had held back, giving them privacy and space. Now, Dain’s gaze fell on him, and his faint scowl at the mention of Thranduil’s name vanished. Blue eyes sparkled above the bushy mass of his beard, and he offered a very proper, courtly bow.

‘Master Baggins. It’s brought me comfort to know you’re here, keeping my cousin in check.’

‘I try my best.’ Bilbo smiled, gesturing towards the doors to the docks, which were creaking open to reveal the mountain beyond. ‘Bofur’s waiting to deliver a message to Balin and the others. What shall we tell them?’

Dain laughed. ‘Say I have brought food, and they need choke on elven bread no longer!’

Thorin shook his head, resting his hand on Bilbo’s shoulder and offering him a smile that was returned with readiness and a large helping of relief. ‘Tell them Lord Dain has arrived, and brings with him all manner of things to help us in our time of need.’

He stopped, realisation spreading through him. His worries faded like mist beneath the warmth of the sun, and he closed his eyes as he relished the feeling. No more would he lie awake thinking of their dwindling supplies. His people would not go hungry, Beorn’s beasts would be well-fed, and his mountain would live to see spring warm the land.

‘Tell them we are saved.’
A cool wind toyed with the beads in Bilbo’s hair, making them chime in his ear as he stared out across the snow-swept land. His fingers curled over the stone of the battlements, anchoring him with its arctic chill as he pressed forward, relishing the final rays of the setting sun. The fur Dori had given him shrouded his frame, but he had pulled the hood back and let it fall to his shoulders, eager to taste the fresh air.

The mountain was in high spirits. In the two days since the first of the boats had nosed its way into the docks, Erebor’s stores had been filled to the brim. With every new crate, the mood brightened. Everyone was full of laughter and song, forgetting about their chores as they busied themselves in preparation for tonight’s feast in Dain’s honour.

Bilbo could not begrudge anyone their elation. Nor could he deprive Dain and his dwarves such a celebration, not after all they had done. It was just that the mountain seemed so very crowded. Logically, Bilbo knew the kingdom could hold thousands more with ease, but right now, confined as they were to the rooms by the forges, the result was loud, boisterous and more than a little overwhelming.

Everyone he met wanted to shake his hand, or offer him a bow, or just get near enough so that they could tell their friends back home that they had seen The King’s Hobbit. Not even the stoic faces of his guards could put them off, and before long, he had slipped away, accompanied only by Ronin and a couple of human soldiers for safety.

He would not linger. He just needed a moment to himself – to collect his thoughts and get his head around the enormity of what had happened. Even now, days later, he caught himself worrying before he remembered there was no need. Relief kept catching him unawares, leaving him breathless and exhausted in turn.

Thorin had not been exaggerating when he said Dain had saved them. It was only once they filled the larders and storerooms that they realised how empty they had been; how, even with Thranduil’s aid, they had hovered on the brink. Perhaps, Bilbo decided, he had blinded himself to that fact, as if bull-headed optimism could somehow get them through. Yet the truth was inescapable. If not for help from the Iron Hills, they would not have lived to see the spring.

A shiver twitched down Bilbo’s spine, and he ran a hand through his hair, letting the curls tumble across his brow as he exhaled. Dwelling on such things would do no good. It was past now, and with any luck he would never again know such desperation. He could enjoy this moment of peace, just for a little while longer.

To the east, the first stars showed their faces, and Bilbo watched the last of the sun’s wealth drain from the land – so different from all that he knew. There were no gentle hills here, nor the great, green sprawl of the farmers’ fields. Even the forests of the Shire seemed tame in comparison to the smudge of dense-woodland that lay to the west. Yet Erebor’s lands captivated him. Yes, it was wild, but there was something glorious about its valleys, plains and untamed peaks.

It may look stark in winter’s grasp, but he could imagine it once they rebuilt Dale: the river thick with barges and the distant silver of the gleaming lake thronging with boats. He could picture the roads, newly cut and cobbled, carrying wagons back and forth from Erebor’s gates and marketplaces: beautiful in its industry.

Without conscious thought, he dropped his gaze, looking not out but down to the earth far below.
The fall was dizzying, almost beyond his comprehension, but being this high had its advantages. Sound did not travel, and the racket in the mountain was contained within its thick walls. The only noise he could hear was the song of the wind and the occasional creak of leather as his guards shifted their weight.

‘Master Baggins?’

He looked up at Ronin, noting his apologetic wince. ‘What is it?’

‘Would you mind stepping back from the edge?’ He peered over the precipice, his face paling at the drop. ‘It unnerves me to see you so close.’

‘There’s a wall,’ Bilbo pointed out, but he did as he was asked, retreating a single step. His fingers trailed lovingly over the stone before he lost contact, and he thrust his hands into his pockets to keep them warm. ‘You needn’t stay out here, you know. You can guard me from the doorway. There’s no one here, and no way they could sneak up without being seen.’

Ronin was shaking his head before he had finished speaking. ‘We can weather the cold as long as you, Master Baggins. Besides, I’ll not take the risk. There are more folk in the mountain, which makes it even easier to slip about unnoticed. People might see, but they won’t think anything of it.’

‘That might explain why Dwalin almost bit my head off this morning.’

‘The guards are stretched to the limit,’ Ronin agreed. ‘One of the highest priorities should be getting a full contingent of personal sentries for the royal household, as well as adequate watchers to patrol the passages and halls. Back when Erebor was whole, there were more than eight hundred to keep its corridors and courtyards safe. Now there’s barely two-score of us.’

‘And you are doing a very fine job,’ a new voice said. To Bilbo, Gandalf’s familiar tones were a relief, but Ronin spun around in surprise, his sword at the ready as the old wizard stepped through the threshold from the stairs.

Gandalf’s eyes twinkled as he stretched out his staff, resting it on Ronin’s blade and easing it aside. ‘No one could ask more of you, but for now, I require a moment of Bilbo’s time.’

Ronin looked at Bilbo, seeking his agreement as if it were the most natural thing in the world for the hobbit to outrank someone like Gandalf. Perhaps, to the dwarves, he did, simply by his association to Thorin. It was tempting to say no, if only for the amusement of watching Ronin try and make Gandalf leave, but Bilbo reigned in his wickedness and inclined his head. His guards stepped back, giving them space and privacy without ever turning their backs, and Bilbo found himself on the receiving end of Gandalf’s keen blue gaze.

‘This life suits you,’ he murmured, looking Bilbo up and down as if he were seeing him for the first time. ‘It suits you very well indeed. Your father was a fine hobbit, and there is no shame in sharing his likeness, but it is good to see some of your mother in you at last. I fear the Shire had rather clipped your wings.’

‘You know as well as I do that I’d never gone anywhere further than Bree until you barged into my smial that day.’ Bilbo shook his head, knowing that the wizard was right. ‘If this is your way of trying to convince me to stay…’

Gandalf chuckled, resting his weight on his staff as the wind played games with his robes. ‘I have learnt, my old friend, that I can only persuade you of something if you’ve already half a mind of doing it anyway. The temptation to leave the Shire was inside you long before I arrived. All I did
was give you a nudge out the door.’

Bilbo snorted a laugh, hugging his coat tight around his body. ‘I think you did rather more than that. Is that what you wanted to tell me, that Erebor suits me?’

Gandalf hummed, moving to stand at the wall and stare across the landscape, much as Bilbo had done only a few minutes ago. ‘I would never assume to sway either your heart or your mind. Your choices are yours alone to make, and the one before you is no small task.’

‘To stay or go?’

‘It is not as simple as that, Bilbo, as I think you know. Remain at the Lonely Mountain, and you will always mourn the loss of the Shire. Return to Bag End, and…’ He trailed off, perhaps too kind to continue, but Bilbo understood all the same. If he turned his back on Erebor – on Thorin – he could well leave behind too much of his heart to bear.

‘I came here only to tell you that I feel the first glimmer of the thaw in the air. It is a long way off yet, but your time in which to decide is not without its limits.’

Bilbo cocked his head, wondering what it was that murmured to Gandalf of the season’s turn. To him, the world looked much as it had since the battle, clad in snow and ice, but something must have whispered its story of change in the old wizard’s ear. Something more than Oin’s scryings and the bite of the cold in the bones of the Men.

‘Did a little bird tell you?’

Gandalf smiled, his eyes sparkling amidst the lines of his face. ‘Perhaps, my dear Bilbo.’

‘Do you know when?’ he asked, not even trying to sound indifferent. He had learnt at a young age that lying to wizards was a hiding to nothing. They saw the truth in you whether you wanted them to or not.

‘I suspect that it’ll be upon us by the next waxing of the moon.’ He tipped his staff to the slim, silver crescent in the east, no longer drowned beneath the sun’s light and shimmering with its own majesty. ‘A month, perhaps, but no more.’

‘So soon?’ He swallowed, peeling his eyes away from the night sky to meet Gandalf’s gaze. ‘That’s when you’ll be leaving?’

‘I’m afraid I must. The world moves on, and there is much to be done.’

Bilbo nodded, knowing he had been foolish to hope for more time. It was so easy to live in the moment, with no promises made and none to break. He had been happily putting off thinking about his potential departure. There’d been plenty to occupy his thoughts of late, and now he found such days were numbered.

And still his choice was unmade!

‘Fret not, Bilbo.’ Gandalf rested a hand on his shoulder. ‘The mountain is safe, warm and well-fed. Take this chance to enjoy yourself. I think you’ll find you know your mind when the time comes.’ He smiled, raising his eyebrows and clearing his throat in an affectation of innocence. ‘Speaking of enjoying yourself, I believe King Thorin is looking for you.’

Despite the cold, Bilbo’s cheeks glowed hot with a blush, half-embarrassment and half-pleasure. Gandalf seemed to take great delight in seeing him discomforted. He ushered him towards the door,
smiling all the while. ‘Best not keep him waiting, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Aren’t you coming?’

‘I think I shall stay and admire the night for a little while longer, before the festivities overwhelm us all!’ Gandalf chuckled to himself, lifting a gnarled hand in brief farewell before gazing out across the view as Bilbo had done. His laughter slowly faded from hearing, and Bilbo was left to trot down the endless stairs with Ronin ahead of him and his other guards in tow.

It was like climbing down the gullet of some living beast. Heat rose around them, pushing back the cold and leaving Bilbo’s chilled fingers prickling in its wake.

The tranquility of the outside world fell away, dimming beneath the steady swell of noise. The guttural roar of the furnaces reached them, resonating upward through the rock. Yet that was only the first note in a symphony of life.

Before long, the soft whisper of flowing water joined in, the tiny cascades of the small channels that ran through the mountain adding their laughter. The steady drone of far off voices resolved into raucous song and chatter. Armour clanked and creaked as the guards went about their patrols, and wood banged against wood as people hauled around crates and boxes.

The conversation was like the hum of a swarm, rising and falling without a single individual truly finding their voice. It was a swelling tide, cresting with every step until, as they stepped out into the main corridor near the forges, it broke over Bilbo’s head.

The great thoroughfare brimmed with people despite being no wider than two carts abreast. Everyone was busy with some task or other, hauling around food or furniture. Bombur’s makeshift kitchen had spilled out of the doorway, occupying benches and tables. His helpers pounded dough and stirred bowls, and the occasional boom of a rolled cask echoed in Bilbo’s ears.

The air did not smell clean, like freshly driven snow. Instead, it was rich and hearty, filled with the aroma of baking bread and meat cooking on spits. The bubble of vast pots tickled at his ears, and the more he breathed, the more spices and herbs he could detect. No doubt Bombur would outdo himself, and Bilbo’s stomach growled in anticipation of the fine feast to come.

‘There you are!’

A pair of hands clapped down on his shoulders, making him jump in surprise, and he turned to see Bofur and Balin behind him. Bofur’s hat sat askew, but he made no move to correct it as he grinned broadly, tugging on Bilbo’s sleeve. ‘We’ve been looking everywhere for you. Come on!’

‘Thorin wants to see me, or so Gandalf said.’

‘Aye, laddie. We’ll take you to him. Not to worry.’ Balin’s eyes were agleam, and there was an air of restless energy about him. He strode along, more full of vim and vigour than Bilbo had seen in a while, and he was left to follow, half dragged by Bofur and trailing guards in his wake.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Thorin has something he wants you to see.’ Balin smiled, the mischief in his eyes softening. He looked like a proud father, practically glowing, yet a trace of worry still pinched his brow, waking a swirl of butterflies in Bilbo’s stomach. ‘I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.’

The temptation to demand answers was a tangible thing. Bilbo could taste them on his tongue, honey-thick, but he bit them back. Balin was nothing if not discreet. Perhaps if it was just Bofur guiding the way he could have wheedled something out of him, but he wouldn’t spill the beans under Balin’s beady watch.
Sucking in a breath, Bilbo decided to use his eyes rather than his voice. He may not know the kingdom well, but many of the main areas were at least familiar to him. He recognised the corridors through which they passed, and as they stepped out into the mountain proper, the heat began to dim. It made him glad that he’d not yet shrugged out of his winter coat, because wherever they were going, it was far from Erebor’s crowd.

A quick glance at Ronin revealed a smile, barely smothered. Whatever was happening, his guards were in on it, at least to some extent. That knowledge brought him some peace of mind, but it also made the excitement in his belly grow into the tickling, soaring rush of anticipation.

He tried to think back on Thorin’s behaviour over the past couple of days, but they had both been so busy with the new supplies that there had not been time for more than quick greetings and a shared pipe at the end of the day. He had written off Thorin’s delight and enthusiasm as relief, but was there more to it than that? Did he have something else up his sleeve?

‘This way.’ Balin beckoned, and he followed him up the broad sweep of the central staircase that climbed through Erebor’s heights. It was no narrow servant’s access, and the steps were shallow and sharp cut, as if fewer feet had trodden their length over the centuries. They had already passed the treasury and throne room, moving into an alien part of the mountain he had not yet seen. Up until now, he had thought it off limits, still unsafe, but neither Balin nor Bofur seemed concerned.

Around them, the subtle carvings in the stonework became more grand, and the green-veined marble began to glimmer with inlaid metal and the occasional jewel. This part of the kingdom was all about showing off, and even now, unfurnished and stripped down to its bones, it was beautiful.

Intricate square pillars held the high ceilings aloft, and huge doorways decorated with silver and gold pocked the walls. No tarnish spotted them with age, and the scent of oil and polish hung in the air. The floor, too, sparkled, and Bilbo wondered just how many people had been up here, sweeping and cleaning to restore these rooms to some of their former glory.

This had to be the wing for dignitaries, where foreign visitors would stay. It was the epitome of flaunted wealth, where the kings of old could display the treasures they dug from the mountain’s heart. He may not know all of Erebor’s secrets, but even a sheltered hobbit such as he knew how such stately places worked. Chambers for important guests would be near the royal quarters. That’s where his friends were taking him.

Sure enough, at the end of the marvellous hallway was a portal that put others to shame. Its black face was inlaid with broad silver frames of dwarven patterns. Their geometric forms curled inwards, their square, sharp corners softening like strange wisps of cloud as they neared the centre. There, split down the middle by the seam of the doors was the familiar bare-branched oak tree and star motif that represented Thorin’s family.

Its splendour was so captivating that Bilbo did not notice Ronin slip past him, nor did he see Dwalin’s shadow until they both leaned inwards, grasping the handles and pulling them open to allow him through.

‘This is as far as we go,’ Bofur said cheerfully, whisking off his hat and giving a low bow.

‘Walk straight ahead. Thorin’s waiting for you.’ Balin gestured into the room beyond, reading Bilbo’s hesitation as caution. ‘Fear not, laddie. The place is secure. We made sure of that.’

‘All the entrances are guarded. You will not be disturbed.’ Dwalin’s smirk was a quick one, gone almost as soon as it came, and Bilbo fought against the heat that kept trying to flood his face. Protesting was useless. He had no idea what Thorin had planned, but as far as everyone else was
concerned, it was clearly a seduction. Whether they knew something he didn’t or were only
guessing, Bilbo couldn’t be sure, but he was not about to let himself be flustered for their good-
natured amusement.

He stepped into the royal rooms with his head held high, all false confidence, trying to pretend he
didn’t feel half-sick with anxious excitement. The doors blocked out Dwalin’s huff of laughter as
they swung shut in his wake, and Bilbo blinked, letting his eyes adjust to the low, rich light.

Whatever he had expected, it wasn’t this! A new passageway charted the course in front of him,
made not from walls but great swathes of hanging cloth. Fires burned in the rooms they hid from
view, making the fabric glow in tones of ruby and sapphire. He had no idea where the material had
come from, but it billowed in the icy breeze that drifted in from the open doors at the far end.

He could not see much but shadow beyond the wide archway. Night had fallen, shrouding all
beneath its veils. He couldn’t even make out the stars.

Hesitantly, he stepped forward, his bare feet silent on the marble floor as he searched the darkness
that awaited him. For several paces, it remained undisturbed – nothing but a blank canvas.

Then, in the space between one heartbeat and the next, all that changed.

It started as a fragment; a flash of colour beyond the doors that he almost believed was his
imagination. Delicate amethyst popped into being, wavering unsteadily before it began to grow. His
feet moved on their own, driven by his curiosity, and with every step he took, more light shone. Each
one was a different hue, as rich and bright as any gemstone and made all the more breath-taking by
the shadows around them.

At first, he wondered if they were fireflies, floating insects that drifted on the breeze, but never had
he seen them so colourful, nor known them to stand the air so cold. No, it had to be something else,
but what?

The wind billowed, making cloth swell and ripple as he picked his way forward. The rooms may as
well have been invisible, insignificant in relation to the sight that was unfurling before his eyes.
Stepping through the doorway, his breath caught in his throat, calmed to silence as he took it all in.

Flowers. Not of leaf and petal, but of light. They moved like smoke on the breeze, drifting idly
across the blank canvas of the icy earth and cold stone walls that towered all around him.
Everywhere he looked there was something new: a daisy of purest white, a spire of lavender in
deepest violet and roses of ruby red.

It was magical, more dazzling than Gandalf’s best fireworks, and while his mind struggled to
understand how such things could exist, his heart lost itself in the delight of the moment. He had
never expected to find flowers here – not in the depths of winter, when even the hardiest of plants
withdrew into the warmth of the soil.

Yet there were hundreds, all for him.

‘I could not grow you a real garden, not yet.’ Thorin stepped forward from the shadows, an odd,
shielded lantern cupped in his hands. ‘I only hope this is an adequate replacement.’

‘Thorin,’ Bilbo breathed, lifting his hand and watching a pink chrysanthemum drift across his skin.
‘This is – it’s – I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so beautiful. How are you doing it?’

Thorin smiled, removing a blank metal cylinder from the open top of the lantern and letting the light
flood out. Abruptly, everything fell into place, leaving Bilbo awestruck. A bronze sheet surrounded
the wick, but what had once been solid was now a mesh through which the flames could shine. The voids formed flowers and leaves, and a thin layer of what looked like coloured glass filled each one.

Except no glass of Bilbo’s knowledge could produce such a wealth of colour. They had to be gemstones, the thinnest of glazes deliberately cut to create the vivid display.

Now he looked, Bilbo realised that the lamp in Thorin’s grasp was not the only one. They were everywhere, perched on the stone lip of the dry fountain and hung in the branches of bare trees like beacons. Each was different, and each had been made by Thorin’s own hand.

This – it was so much more than a hastily plucked bouquet at a spring fair in the Shire. More even than a garden grown from seed: glorious and resplendent in a way Bilbo had never even thought to imagine.

‘Oh, Thorin…’ He shook his head, trying to find the words to express the emotion that welled in his chest: gratitude and admiration. ‘Will you show me? Show me how it works?’

Thorin’s expression broke into a smile, pleased by Bilbo’s interest. ‘The lamp sits on two discs. The one in the middle is stationary, while the other can move, either when I touch it –’ He spun it gently, sending the flowers nearest them into a smear of bright colour before they slowed down, reclaiming their shape. ‘– Or when the flame heats to a certain point and the air moves these blades.’ He indicated the strange vents, almost like a flower themselves, which crowned the lantern.

‘And you made these. All of them.’ Bilbo beamed at him, unable and unwilling to hide his delight as he reached for Thorin’s hand, brushing his fingers over the small burns and cuts that still dappled his flesh. ‘That’s where you got these.’

‘Yes,’ Thorin murmured, his low voice soft and rich. The sound ran like sunlight over Bilbo’s body, warming him from soul to skin. ‘Each one was more than worth it to see the joy on your face.’

Carefully, he set the last lantern down, leaving it to add to the waltz of colour as he took Bilbo’s hand. ‘Come, there’s more.’

Mute, Bilbo followed him, allowing himself to be led across old, smooth flagstones. Here and there, more constant oil lamps cast their surroundings into sharp contrast, and he began to recognise what he was seeing. The beds may be barren, choked with rocks and frozen beneath the ice, but he could still see the artistry. This was no random scrap of land, hidden away among the mountain’s plateaus. Once, it had been a garden – one that someone had loved with all their heart.

No plants grew now. Perhaps they lay dormant, waiting for spring, or maybe Smaug had destroyed them with his poisonous presence, but the bare bones remained, preserved through the centuries.

The more they walked, the more Bilbo realised its size. It stretched out in all directions, so far that if he did not turn around, he could almost forget that they were halfway up Erebor’s peak. Yet still, Thorin’s lanterns filled this slice of the world with colour, less dense than they had been near the doors, but just as exquisite.

‘Nearly there,’ Thorin promised, guiding Bilbo through a short tunnel of trees. Once, their branches may have been laden with blossom, but now their boughs had been long bare, left exposed to the elements. Only the small, shielded lanterns tucked into their canopy gave them any colour, creating pools of warmth wherever they hung.

A scent tickled his nose, and Bilbo inhaled sharply, his footsteps stumbling. It started as just a whisper, a hint of promise, but it grew stronger with every stride. Most of this garden may be
sleeping, waiting for the touch that would bring it back to life, but something here still flourished.

The branches above them opened out, and a small cry of amazement escaped Bilbo’s lips. The tree before them was old, its trunk a tall tower and its long fronds brushing the ground. Glossy green leaves trembled in the breeze, but it was the flowers that drew him closer, reaching up a tentative hand to trace their softness with his fingertips.

Each individual bloom was tiny, but they clustered together in great cascades, spilling from their branches and filling the air with a fragrance that made Bilbo think of the distant promise of summer. It was a heavy, heady smell that curled in the back of the throat and chased off the chill, and he wished he could climb its height and bury himself within its bower.

Moths fluttered, briefly distracted before they returned to their hunt for nectar, and Bilbo blinked as he realised what else was remarkable about the sight. At first, he’d thought the ethereal light was from the moon, but it was the tree itself shedding a soft, pale glow. It limed each petal, enticing the insects.

‘Binazláf,’ Thorin explained quietly, taking Bilbo’s hand once more and guiding him through the curtain of flowers, leading the way into the sheltered space beneath. It was a remarkable, secretive spot, shielded from the world outside and filled with heavenly perfume. ‘It means “unsleeping one”.’

‘I – it’s amazing.’ Bilbo trailed his fingers over the gnarled trunk, reverent. ‘How long has it been here?’

‘Centuries. Some say the tree was clinging to the mountainside before the dwarves made it their home. Others believe it was planted by the first consort.’ Thorin shook his head, the beads in his hair glimmering in the light. ‘I am just glad it is still here to bring wonder to your eyes.’

Reaching up, he fiddled with something in one of the lower branches, turning up the wick of one last, remaining lamp and filling their sanctuary with a different kind of radiance. The colours were gone, replaced instead with a clear, white glow. The shape of the glass flowers mirrored those of the tree around them, making the petals sparkle, and Bilbo stared, robbed of everything but the sheer pleasure of the spectacle.

It was only when he looked back at Thorin that he realised something else awaited him, and all his thrumming hope crystallised into certainty. Thorin had grown him a garden in barren land at the heart of winter – had given him flowers when the earth itself could not. Now a small bowl lay cradled in the palm of his hand, the morsels it contained gleaming like rubies.

He did not know how Thorin had come by strawberries at this time of year, and he was not inclined to ask. His heart thrummed high in his throat, caught on a wave of exhilaration as he searched Thorin’s gaze for proof that all this was no accident. Flowers and food were a meaningful combination for hobbits, and one look into those blue eyes showed Bilbo the far-flung realm of Thorin’s desire.

Swallowing, Bilbo stepped forward, holding that gaze. Perhaps some of that old Baggins caution still held sway, because despite everything, he had to hear it. He needed to know that this was all what it looked like, and the words escaped him in a ragged hush, breathless in the heavy air around them.

‘This isn’t a pretend courtship, is it?’ he whispered, his fingers sliding over the back of Thorin’s hand where it still cupped the bowl. ‘Not anymore.’

Slowly, Thorin closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath before he opened them again. A single stride reduced the space between them to a sliver. He paused only to set the fruit aside before
clasping Bilbo’s palms and swallowing hard, trying to choose the right words before, at last, he found his voice.

‘What I feel for you is… it is beyond description. I never thought there would be anyone who could bring me the warmth I find in your company, nor one who would offer happiness in even the darkest of times.’ His voice shook, but he pressed on. ‘However, I meant what I said. I will never ask more or less from you than you are willing to give. If you do not wish it – if you would rather remain as we are – ’

Bilbo freed his hand, brushing his fingertips to Thorin’s lips and stemming the flow of his words. The sudden bloom of Thorin’s pupils and the catch of his breath suggested that when he spoke of warmth and happiness, he neglected to mention a hefty dose of desire. That, more than anything, calmed the whirling storm of butterflies that had taken flight in Bilbo’s stomach. This was Thorin asking him for more, not as a dwarf would, but as a hobbit.

As if Bilbo could say no.

Gently, he swept his fingers over Thorin’s mouth, shifting until the blade of his palm rested along his jaw. The hair of his beard prickled, tantalising to the touch, and he savoured the texture before finding his courage.

Bilbo stepped closer, pressing himself up on tiptoes until, after one more moment of hesitation – one last chance to pull away – he captured those lips with his own.

Any fears he may have had about being the victim of a misunderstanding vanished, obliterated by the harsh, needy sound that caught in Thorin’s throat. It was surprise and wonder all at once, as if a dream had found shape in the waking world. A moment passed, no more, and then Thorin kissed him back, firm and giving, chaste at first until a hint of teeth had Bilbo moaning in delight.

Thorin did not devour him, as other, younger lovers had done in their eagerness. He did not overwhelm Bilbo with his greater height or crowd him. Instead, those rough hands lifted to cup his face, reverent, tilting his chin as Thorin’s tongue slid against his own.

Heat speared through Bilbo’s body, sparks building until he could barely breathe around the inferno in his chest. He had known Thorin in many ways and guises over the course of their journey: leader, protector, rival and friend, but this was new. All those hints and promises found fruition, blossoming in sensuous warmth between them.

He had never realised a simple kiss could be so intoxicating. Hobbits enjoyed such things, but most, in his youth, had been little more than a prelude. This felt more like the main event, flooding him with light from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

Clutching at Thorin’s thick coat, he pressed closer, hating the furs that held them so far apart. His very skin seemed parched for more, and he groaned happily as Thorin’s hands shifted and strong arms engulfed him, holding him close.

Finally, the small sips of air he could draw in through his nose were not enough. He was forced to ease back, giddy with want. Nothing was in focus except Thorin’s face, the burning heat of his eyes and the swollen redness of his lips. Bilbo was certain that if Thorin let go of him now, he’d melt into a puddle of useless desire right there on the icy ground.

‘Mahal,’ Thorin whispered, swallowing hard and resting his brow against Bilbo’s, mesmerising him with the flutter of every shared breath. ‘I have dreamt of such a kiss from you for far too long.’
Bilbo grinned, biting his lip and cocking his head as he husked, ‘Would you like another?’

Thorin’s growl of approval was music to Bilbo’s ears, and he let it sweep him away: new and sweet and so marvellous that it made him ache. Every inch of him hungered, and he returned each caress of Thorin’s lips, slow and shallow at first before trading deeper tastes.

He could not say when he reached for Thorin’s hair, tangling his fingers in the tresses in a wordless effort to keep him close. Nor could he be sure quite when Thorin guided him back against the bole of the tree, letting him support his trembling weight against it. Thorin’s hand cupped Bilbo’s head, protecting him from the scrape of the bark, but that was one sensation among many, all of which were steadily overwhelming him.

The shivers racing down his spine had nothing to do with the cold. How could he feel winter’s bite, when all within him was fire and light? They blended together, pooling in the pit of his belly and lower, slowly building between his legs as he hardened with the want of it all.

‘Thorin!’ he gasped, breaking back and sucking in a sharp lungful of air, trying to remind himself why anything else in the world mattered but the heat between them. That was challenge enough, and then Thorin murmured the most worshipful Khuzdul Bilbo had ever heard.

He may not understand the words, but he knew an endearment when it was whispered in his ear. It flowed over him like the finest silk in all the Shire, and he trembled beneath the answering swell of wanton emotion in his chest.

Thorin’s cheeks flushed with passion, and his eyes were as dark as the night sky. The tense, thoughtful lines that had marred his face through the previous days and weeks had fled, softened by awe. He looked at Bilbo as if he were the greatest treasure in the entire mountain, more important than even the Arkenstone.

Perhaps it should scare him to see so much devotion on full display, but how could it when he felt the same? He could scarce believe his luck that the dwarf he had admired for so long returned his affection; even after all they had put each other through. In a simple, wondrous kiss, Bilbo had found more forgiveness than in any words Thorin could have uttered, and the joy of it made his world spin.

Thorin rubbed the tip of his nose down the side of Bilbo’s, tempting him with the closeness of his lips and the soft tickle of his beard. The hand that wasn’t around the back of his head traced the line of his jaw, skimming over humid skin and his racing pulse.

For his part, Bilbo clutched at Thorin’s hair and clothes, clinging as if he were afraid he would melt away in the moonlight – nothing more than a dream. At some point, his bare toes had found purchase on the vault of the tree’s roots, and he had boosted himself up to be more on Thorin’s level, not quite eye-to-eye, but almost. The nearness made every breath like smoke in his chest, curling hot, languorous tendrils around his heart in a way he had never felt before. Not even once.

Thorin’s hand shook as he shifted, sweeping his fingers over Bilbo’s cheek in adoration. The caress trailed over his skin, leaving sparks in its wake, and Bilbo sucked in a shuddering breath. The tree’s perfume filled the air, and he knew how it would be. Every time he came across the fragrance, he would remember this moment: Thorin’s lips and hands and the torrid, feverish heat.

Slowly, he unclenched his fist from Thorin’s coat, smoothing out the creases as he rubbed a shaking rhythm over the broad plain of Thorin’s chest. His voice had all but deserted him. Had there been words, before all this? There must have been, but he could not bring himself to care, not when Thorin pressed his brow to Bilbo’s own before claiming his lips once more.
The clang of a bell made them both twitch in surprise, bringing the world back into focus with a shocking rush. Thorin swore while Bilbo giggled, unable to help himself as the last notes faded away. ‘What was that?’

‘The feast is beginning.’ Thorin shut his eyes, a flattering shadow of disappointment furrowing his brow. ‘Perhaps I should have saved this until afterwards.’

‘So we wouldn’t be interrupted?’ Bilbo asked, a whole new breathlessness seizing his chest as Thorin looked at him.

That gaze was incandescent, and the rock of Thorin’s hips against his own, hard and strong, removed any doubt to the dwarf’s meaning. ‘So we could finish what we have started, if you wish it?’

Bilbo bit his lip, choking out a happy, appreciative sound as he wondered how long it would take them to return to their chambers: his or Thorin’s, he didn’t care. ‘I definitely wish it,’ he croaked, arching his back and rubbing against Thorin like a cat. The feast was tempting – it was rare a hobbit turned down a good meal – but Bilbo was hungry for other things. ‘Do we really not have time?’

Thorin’s grin was a wicked flash of teeth in the darkness. ‘Not for what I hope to give you,’ he promised. ‘I have waited too long for this to make it quick.’

‘We could skip the feast?’ he suggested, gratified to see Thorin pause, giving it serious consideration. The temptation blazed between them, as bright as any forge flame, but they both knew it was impossible.

‘Dain would never let me live it down if I failed to appear at a meal in his honour.’ Thorin sighed, seeming to dredge up the last vestige of his strength before easing away, putting a fraction of space between them.

‘Nor would the rest of the kingdom,’ Bilbo pointed out, clearing his throat so he didn’t sound so hoarse. ‘How long do we have before we’re missed?’

‘Not long.’ Thorin cocked his head, intrigued as Bilbo reached for the bowl of strawberries that he had set down earlier. ‘What do you have in mind?’

‘Finishing what we started.’ Bilbo grinned at Thorin’s bafflement. ‘Though not quite in the way you meant. When hobbits begin courting, it’s customary they share the gift of food. It’s a bit like signing a contract.’

His words made it sound very official, far too strict and rigid for the Shire, but he knew they were something Thorin could understand. ‘However, before you do, there’s something I have to say…’ He steeled his shoulders, wincing as a wave of uncertainty doused the warmth in his belly. He hoped with all his heart that he was not about to doom them both before they even began, but Thorin deserved to know the limits of his promises.

‘Courting you is more than I ever dared to dream,’ he said, ‘and I would be honoured to share your burdens and your bed –’ Bilbo blushed, wondering belatedly if dwarves were as direct as hobbits about their intimacy. Too late now if they weren’t.

Thorin reached out a hand when he hesitated, sweeping it in gentle comfort down Bilbo’s arm. ‘But?’

‘But… I can’t promise to stay in Erebor. Not yet.’ He closed his eyes, shaking his head before looking at Thorin. ‘I still can’t be sure.’
He waited, his spine rigid and his fingers locked around the bowl in his palms, but Thorin never showed any sign of retreat. Though a twist of disappointment pulled at his smile, his eyes shone with understanding, and when he spoke, it was in the deep tones of the most solemn of oaths.

‘I will only take from you what you are happy to give. No more and no less.’ He reached out, tucking Bilbo’s braid behind his ear, his fingers rolling the courting bead before he let it go. ‘I would not try and make this choice for you, Bilbo, and nor would I turn you aside for your honesty.’

Bilbo’s next breath escaped him in a rush, washing away his dread and leaving light and music in its wake. He felt as if he could float, and his fingers shook as he reached into the bowl, selecting the bigger of the two strawberries and holding it out for Thorin to eat. The sugar on it glistened like mithril, and Bilbo’s own mouth watered as Thorin took a neat bite.

‘All of it,’ Bilbo urged, fascinated by the juice glossing Thorin’s lips and the delicate way he consumed the fruit. There were no flirtatious games beyond the very subtle brush of his warmth against Bilbo’s fingertips, and even that made him shiver, delicious anticipation coiling in the pit of his stomach.

When the morsel was gone, Thorin mimicked Bilbo’s actions, plucking the smaller berry from its resting place and holding it out for him. A mischievous spark kindled beneath Bilbo’s ribs as he put the bowl aside, and he kept his eyes on Thorin’s face, watching his reactions.

At first, he was as delicate as Thorin had been, taking a bite rather than devouring the treat whole. The flavour exploded across his tongue, shocking in its intensity. Bilbo had half feared it would take him back to summer in the Shire, but there was a different tang to it, something more rich and sweet than he’d ever experienced. He almost stopped to ask more about them before reigning himself in. He would find out later. Right now, it was Thorin who had his attention.

Gently, he reached up, cradling Thorin’s wrist to hold it steady as he parted his lips for the last mouthful of the fruit, making sure to suck the juice from the very tips of Thorin’s fingers. It was not much, certainly not obscene by Shire standards, but all Bilbo saw was the sudden flare of Thorin’s pupils before his eyes grew hooded and his cheeks darkened. Calm breaths fell ragged once more, and a tight, choked groan escaped his throat, resonating down to Bilbo’s bones.

‘Mahal!’ Thorin reached out to grab one of the weeping branches of the tree for support. Above them, the canopy jostled, and Bilbo chuckled in delight as the strange, glowing powder that decorated the blooms showered them in shimmering light, catching in Thorin’s hair and making his skin glitter.

A second later, Thorin’s mouth was over his, hot and demanding. It was a blissful, erotic surge of want, and Bilbo forgot all about the feast as he enjoyed the taste of Thorin’s lips, now that much sweeter from the juice of the berries: their courtship promises given life.

‘Hands?’ he asked when Thorin drew back, raising an eyebrow in delighted enquiry. ‘Is that just something you like, or is it a dwarf thing?’

Thorin managed a strangled sound, pursing his lips and taking a deep breath through his nose before he managed to speak. ‘A dwarf’s hands are the means by which we express our craft, whatever that may be. It’s – it is not exactly…’ He trailed off, his cheeks bright with colour as Bilbo looked up at him, trying to understand. ‘Holding hands is fine, but kissing them is considered particularly intimate. Such behaviour,’ he husked, ‘is best restricted to the bedroom.’

‘Not the kind of thing you do in public, then?’ he asked, unable to contain a laugh as Thorin managed to look both aroused and scandalised. ‘Hobbits do it all the time.’ He brushed his lips over
Thorin’s knuckles in demonstration, his lashes fluttering at the low keening noise of desire the simple gesture brought forth.

It made him feel powerful, reducing Thorin to something so instinctive. Bilbo could sense him trembling, either from passion or the effort of self-restraint, and he had to force himself not to tease. Such a thing would only be unfair when neither he nor Thorin had the time to follow through.

‘What do dwarves do? What’s acceptable?’ Bilbo asked, a stray wisp of panic touching his heart. It occurred to him that while he was no stranger to courting hobbits, a dwarf could be a very different matter. He had no idea what was permitted and what wasn’t, and the last thing he wanted was to cause a scandal with what he thought was an innocent gesture.

‘Behind closed doors, that depends on the dwarf,’ Thorin murmured, his smile broadening to a grin as it was Bilbo’s turn to blush. ‘In plain sight of others, we exercise discretion. This is the most customary way.’

He did not flinch when Thorin freed himself, stepping forward to cradle Bilbo’s face in his palm. For a split second, he wondered if he was about to strike their skulls together. He had seen other members of the Company do the same in joyous moments. However, the press of Thorin’s brow to his own was nothing more than a nudge, followed by the warm brush of lips to the skin in the centre of his forehead.

At first glance, it seemed innocent, but Bilbo could see the appeal. It eradicated any distance between them, placing Thorin – not just his body but his heat and scent – right in Bilbo’s personal space.

He could have stayed there forever, safe and happy, but it was not to be. Distantly, the tramp of boots made itself known, and Bilbo sighed as he realised their time was up.

His shoulders sagged, and he looked up, gratified to see his own reluctance reflected in the lines of Thorin’s face. ‘Do you think if we stay hidden here, they’ll leave us alone?’

‘I doubt it. If Dwalin doesn’t see us in a few minutes, he will launch a full-scale search.’ They exchanged a knowing glance, sharing the same brief thought about hiding away and letting Dwalin fret before reality interceded. Neither one of them could miss the feast in favour of seeking out other pleasures. They would have to bear the evening ahead as best they could.

‘Come,’ Thorin urged, his fingers rubbing over the back of Bilbo’s hand before he stooped down to retrieve the bowl. ‘There are worse things to endure than Bombur’s best cooking.’

Bilbo nodded, taking one last look at the miraculous tree before pointing to the lantern overhead. ‘What about those? We need to get them inside.’

‘They’ll survive the night. Oin says no storms are on the horizon, so they’ll be safe in the branches. The flames are contained and the metal strong. I’ll make sure someone collects them in the morning.’ Thorin took his hand, smiling as Bilbo pulled him in for one more kiss before they finally parted, allowing the chill of winter to intercede. Only their interwoven fingers maintained the connection, and Bilbo relished it, trying to memorise the sensation of Thorin’s skin as he gently lead the way.

They passed through the curtain of flowers, and he took one last breath of their divine scent. Each step was a huge effort, as if he were waking from an incredible dream he did not wish to leave. Only Thorin’s smile and the lingering taste of strawberries told him otherwise: this was no fantasy that would dissolve with the dawn.

This was real, and Bilbo intended to make the most of every moment.
Sleep faded in increments, the darkness drawing back from Thorin’s mind to leave him lax and content. He allowed himself to linger in the shallows of a doze, curving his naked body around the smaller form at his side and smiling at his bedmate’s sleepy snuffles. They fit together perfectly, a lock and its key, and he nuzzled the nape of Bilbo’s neck, inhaling the scent of his skin before dragging his eyes open to the waking of the day.

With no windows in Bilbo’s chamber, there was no natural light to herald the dawn, but Thorin felt it anyway. Despite being creatures that dwelt below ground, most dwarves had an uncanny knowledge of time. It had never bothered him before, but now he wished he could close himself off to such instincts. Let the world stand still and this moment last forever: he and his love in happy harmony.

They had shared a bed for more than a fortnight, finding both passion and comfort in one another’s arms. He learned this small body, its likes and dislikes, and Bilbo returned the compliment. No one of Thorin’s acquaintance had ever made him the subject of such intense study. So much so that now all Bilbo had to do was look at him with a certain gleam in his eye for Thorin’s breath to vanish and heat to flood his frame.

Yet there was more to what they shared than desire’s flames. While they were both happy to burn, undone and remade beneath each other’s hands, the time they spent in one another’s company – reading, smoking or talking about the mountain – was equally precious to Thorin. Never had there been a lover he could trust to share the burdens of his heart or his kingdom, not before Bilbo.

Even better, he accepted the problems Thorin brought to him with enviable grace. He did not sulk or demand Thorin’s attention when it was not his to give. He was simply there with understanding eyes and a ready ear, eager to listen and help in any way he could.

A grumble from Bilbo’s stomach broke the silence, and Thorin laughed, skimming his hand around his hobbit’s waist to the softness of his belly. After too long slender by a hobbit’s standards, the plentiful food from the Iron Hills had started to pad out his bones once more, and Thorin was glad of it.

With a happy sigh, he tightened his arms, smiling against the nape of Bilbo’s neck at the grumpy little groan he received in response. He knew he was awake. That belly of his was as good as any morning bell, but they both took pleasure in dwelling beneath the furs: warm and at peace.

‘Want me to get breakfast?’ he asked, knowing all too well what the answer would be. One of the first things he had learned when they started sleeping together was that Bilbo was barely civil before he’d eaten in the morning. There would be no endearments, and a tumble in the sheets was completely out of the question – at least until food had restored his good humour.

The same had been true on their journey, but Thorin had blamed Bilbo’s surliness on lack of comfort. Now he realised the softness of the bed made no difference. Bilbo would sleep on a rock if he had to, but woe betide anyone who got between him and a big meal when he first awoke.

A groan of discontent was his only response, and Thorin smothered a grin, taking one last breath of Bilbo’s sleep heavy scent before sliding out from beneath the covers. The cool air washed over his skin, raising gooseflesh wherever it touched, but Thorin pushed the sensation aside, slipping into a fur-lined robe and fastening its fabric to cover himself before he stirred the fire back to wakefulness.

Slowly, a fledgling blaze began to glow. It nibbled on the kindling before spreading out across the
logs, filling the air with the tang of pine. Thorin nodded in satisfaction, setting aside the pitted iron poker and turning towards the door. Once Erebor was restored to its full complement of dwarves, there would be people to stir the fire before he awoke. However, for now such tasks were his to complete.

Opening the bedroom door, he nodded to the guards on the other side. Previously, Dwalin had been content to post sentries at the entrance to the overseers’ quarters and no more, but as the number of dwarves from Dain’s lands continued to ebb and flow, he had increased security to the best of his ability. Thorin could not begrudge him such caution, especially as Bombur had agreed to leave breakfast unattended at the threshold.

On the one hand, the courtesy gave him and Bilbo their privacy. They could break their fast in peace and prepare for the day together. On the other, Thorin had feared it might give some would-be poisoner the chance to dose their meal.

‘Nobody has touched the trays since Master Bombur left them, Your Majesty,’ one of the soldiers promised, and Thorin nodded his respectful thanks as he retrieved the platters. Neither thought it strange that he had emerged from his room bare-foot and barely dressed, but he supposed they were used to it by now. After all, it had become a daily habit, and one he was content to let continue.

Perhaps he was a fool in love, but he found great delight in coaxing Bilbo from the surly edges of his slumber with offers of food and kisses both. It was a tender reprieve from the chaos of the day ahead, and he planned to savour every moment.

It took two journeys to collect up all the dishes before Thorin could close the door with his foot, shutting them both away once more. The plates went on the bedside tables, taking up every inch of space as he deposited them on the sturdy surface. Their crude clay covers rattled before he lifted off each one, investigating the hot pastries, fresh bread and cooked meat within. Mouth-watering scents permeated the air, and he smiled as Bilbo lifted his head from the pillow, screwing up his eyes tight before blinking once or twice and peering at the delights Thorin held out for him.

The expression that crossed his face was a familiar one: a glorious mixture of happiness, temptation and reluctance. It had not taken long for Thorin to realise the cause of the odd smile-cum-grimace, and he chuckled as he watched Bilbo dither, the same as he did every morning. His hobbit was comfortable, but hungry. He wanted breakfast, but he did not want to leave the bed, and his fastidious manners would not allow him to risk getting crumbs in their nest.

In the end, Bilbo sighed, swinging his feet over the edge of the mattress and standing up before dragging one of the furs around his shoulders. The fine silver hairs of the pelt sparkled in the firelight, its hem trailing on the floor as Bilbo took the plate. He shuffled over to his armchair, sinking into its depths before he reached for a fork and began to devour the food in front of him.

It was an exercise in efficiency. He did not gobble, nor stuff his face as Thorin had seen Bombur do in the past. Bilbo simply packed it away, and with each mouthful, his countenance brightened until he could meet Thorin’s gaze with a smile.

‘Thank you,’ he said by way of greeting, giving Thorin a shy grin as he accepted the offered cup of tea. ‘I promise you I won’t always be like this.’

‘It would not bother me if you were,’ Thorin replied, stopping to press a kiss to Bilbo’s curls before settling in the seat opposite. Once, they might have kept their distance, unsure of their place with one another. Now, the chair Thorin had brought in for his own use was so near Bilbo’s that their knees touched, comfortably close.

Almost as soon as he was settled, Bilbo nudged at his foot, covering Thorin’s cool toes with his own
to warm them. It was a simple gesture, one that had no real meaning in dwarven culture. It meant something to hobbits, or so he had learnt, though it was nothing salacious: another innocent display of affection to the Shire-folk – much like kissing hands.

Arousal fluttered in his belly, and he sucked in a breath. Even now, the thought of Bilbo’s lips on his fingertips was enough to kindle the heat between Thorin’s legs. It glowed from within, made all the more intoxicating by his knowledge of the pleasures they could share. Only his hunger held him back, and he forced himself to concentrate on sating his more normal appetites before succumbing to anything carnal.

Blinking, he focused on his plate, which was loaded indecently high. In public, he felt he had to show restraint and decorum when he ate, but running the kingdom was hard work. More often than not, he missed meals entirely, too busy to stop and eat. Now was his time to shore up his reserves for the day ahead, and he was not ashamed to make a glutton of himself in the privacy of his chambers.

Bilbo shot him a curious glance, polishing off a sausage before taking a sip of his tea. The fur was slipping off his bare shoulders, and Thorin could only admire the sight. The firelight gilded him, catching in the auburn of Bilbo’s curls and pouring over the curve of his arm. Shadows hid in the secretive little nooks and hollows of his body, dancing in the uncertain light offered by the flames. The beads in his hair and the cuff on his ear shone, resplendent, and Thorin stared without a hint of shame, drinking him in.

‘Your breakfast will get cold,’ Bilbo pointed out, not looking up from his own plate. However, the smile that flirted at the corners of his lips and the blush that darkened his cheeks suggested he could feel Thorin’s gaze all too well. He did not move to replace the fur, as he might have done in those first, fresh days of their intimacy. Instead, he straightened his shoulders, and Thorin grinned to see his lover’s subtle preening.

Before long, both their plates were empty and their bellies full. The final tatters of Bilbo’s dark mood had vanished with his hunger, and he sat comfortably, enjoying the last few sips of his tea as he lounged in his chair.

Once, they might have stolen sneaking glances at one another, quick to look and quicker still to turn away. Now all that was gone, and Thorin relished the blatancy of Bilbo’s attention. He was used to people looking at him – as king it was to be expected – but a royal was all most ever noticed. Bilbo saw it all, and did not judge the flaws that stood side-by-side with his virtues.

It was good to be so known by another.

Leaning forward, Thorin set his plate and cup aside. He did not care that his robe gaped open, not when Bilbo gave the view a look of unabashed appreciation. A moment later, warm fingers trailed over Thorin’s bare collarbones and up towards his shoulder, lifting the weight of his hair back and cupping his jaw. The armchair wheezed as Bilbo sat forward, rubbing his nose along Thorin’s before pressing their brows together. ‘Good morning,’ he murmured, sweet and tender, grinning as Thorin hummed in agreement. ‘Thank you for breakfast.’

Tilting his head, Thorin stole a kiss, tasting the sweetness of honey on Bilbo’s lips. He made it slow and leisurely, happy to take his time and feel the changes in Bilbo with each passing moment. Lazy contentment soon melted away, leaving rising desire in its wake, and Thorin leaned back, grinning into the kiss as Bilbo followed blindly, all but crawling into his lap.

The position was snug: Bilbo’s knees were either side of Thorin’s thighs, pinned in place by the arms of the chair. The fur he had draped around himself lost its tenuous grasp, ruffling between them and leaving him beautifully exposed. Bilbo’s fingers tunnelled into Thorin’s hair, taking control of the
kiss with ease. Thorin let it happen, all too willing to be seduced as his hands began to wander over Bilbo’s bare back.

Despite all their hardships, it was a smooth expanse. So few scars littered his frame, and not for the first time, a protective urge sunk its claws into Thorin’s gut. In so many ways, Bilbo was a blank canvas, untouched by battle and decoration both. Hobbits were not known for tattooing themselves, whereas dwarves were the opposite. Several inky designs decorated Thorin’s flesh, and he smiled to remember Bilbo’s delight at being allowed to touch. Even now, one hand had dropped to Thorin’s heart, his fingers tracing the smooth, blue-black lines that charted his skin.

He trailed down the column of Bilbo’s spine, growling in approval as Bilbo melted against him. His hobbit’s love of touch had been a delightful discovery; one he relished every day. It was not just the greedy caress of lust that Bilbo enjoyed. Anything, from an innocent brush of fingertips to an unwavering embrace met with equal and profound gratitude.

Wickedly, he dipped beneath the furs, cupping Bilbo’s backside with a smirk. A sharp inhale hissed through Bilbo’s lips, and he nipped at Thorin’s shoulder, though whether it was in reprimand or encouragement, he couldn’t be sure. A hot tongue followed the hard edge of teeth, and Thorin hummed in disappointment as his lover pulled away.

‘We don’t want a repeat of the day before yesterday,’ Bilbo pointed out, his voice brimming with flattering regret as he leaned back, ruffled in the best possible ways. He looked thoroughly debauched, with the blanket in his lap not quite hiding how very interested he was in continuing their fun.

Thorin scowled at the memory. He respected Balin, but there was nothing quite like his adviser hammering on the door and scolding them through the woodwork to dampen their ardour. The only way it could have been worse was if he had followed up on his threat and burst into the room to drag them both back to their duties.

Bilbo grinned, his eyes gleaming as he slipped his hand beneath Thorin’s robe, trailing down his stomach and between his legs before wrapping his fingers around the hard flesh there. ‘Tonight,’ he promised, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. ‘When no one could possibly have good reason to cut our pleasure short.’

A huffed sigh was the only response Thorin could manage, at least until Bilbo removed his hand and the prickles of pleasure ceased racing up and down his thighs. ‘I do not wish to wait,’ he confessed, stretching up to nip at Bilbo’s lip before leaning back in surrender, ‘but I suppose I must.’

As if to agree with him, the second morning bell chimed, and Thorin scowled all the harder as Bilbo scrambled off him, leaving him sulky with want. ‘Perhaps I should just give Fili the throne now. Then he could deal with Erebor, and I could deal with you.’

Bilbo looked over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow. ‘Is that what dwarves call it?’ he asked, mischief gleaming in his gaze. ‘How would that look in the history books? “King Thorin II abdicated so he could lie abed.”’

‘You make it sound like I would be sleeping. Mahal knows that’s the last thing I have in mind.’

Bilbo’s laughter was music to his ears, and Thorin watched as he dropped the fur and sauntered off to the screen that hid the chamber pot and washbowl. Clearly, a hobbit’s bashfulness and propriety fell away in the company of a lover. It still caught Thorin by surprise, now and then, how utterly unrestrained Bilbo could be behind closed doors. There was no shyness to be found in their bedchamber, except perhaps on Thorin’s side.
With a sigh, he got to his feet, shedding his robe and letting the cold air ease the harshness of his need. Near the fire, he was warm enough, but a few steps away from its glow the chill consumed him. Before long, his shivers had nothing to do with desire, and he pulled on his clothes, leaving his tunic loose so he could wash such bits of himself that needed it.

Grudgingly, his mind turned to the business of the day ahead. He could not put off his duties forever, and there was plenty awaiting his attention. Thanks to Balin’s hard work, there was more structure to his routine. An informal court took up most of the morning, where people could come to him with their concerns, while the afternoon was spent with advisers from the Company, formulating the best ways of rebuilding Erebor to its former glory.

However, today was different. Dain was once again required to return to his kingdom.

Normally, Thorin would have no qualms about being left alone once more, but this time he could not help but feel as if he were losing a precious connection to the world outside the mountain. Oh, the tunnel would remain open, but it had been a wonderful reprieve to meet with Dain in friendly feast and recall the lands beyond their walls.

Not that his cousin had told him everything. More than once, he had tried to pry answers for him and find reasons for the lines of concern etched into Dain’s brow. Yet he only offered Thorin vague reassurances, vowing to tell him more when he had all the information he needed. So it had been for two weeks. Now, Dain had run out of time.

A bump against his shoulder broke his reverie, and he looked down at Bilbo, who was clean and dressed, his hair combed and his braids restored by his own hand. He ferreted one surviving pastry from the scraps of their breakfast and polished it off in a few bites before cocking his head in silent question.

‘I was thinking about Dain,’ Thorin explained, rubbing his eyes. ‘He has news to share with me, news we have both been putting off since he arrived.’

‘You think it’s bad?’ Bilbo asked, licking honey from his thumb. ‘He was waiting by the docks yesterday. At first, I thought he was just watching the boats go by, but then a dwarf got off and rushed to his side. White-haired but not as old as Balin, with a large scar on their neck.’

‘Frin.’ Thorin nodded. ‘Dain asked my permission to allow her here. She is a spymaster. Dain’s equivalent of Nori, but more experienced. She has maintained a connection to the politics of the dwarven world all her life. What she doesn’t know, she at least suspects.’ He waved a hand, ducking behind the screen to make use of the chamber pot and splash his face with water. ‘With any luck she gave Dain all the information he needed. Perhaps now he will tell me what has him so worried.’

Plates clattered as Bilbo piled them back on the tray, and for a short while there was no sound but the industrious noise of him cleaning up their room. When he did finally speak, he was so quiet that Thorin almost didn’t hear him. ‘Do you think it might be something to do with Storn’s death?’

Thorin met his own gaze in the mirror, grimacing as he reached for a cloth to dry his skin. ‘I cannot say. All I know is that whoever had plans for you is proving very hard to find. Their execution may be clumsy, but they excel at hiding their tracks.’

He stepped back into the room, doing up his tunic and regarding Bilbo’s face. He was chewing his lip, and one hand slipped towards his pocket in a fretful gesture that Thorin recognised all too well. Bilbo had learned many things in his time in Erebor. Often, he could control his expression with ease – a natural diplomat – but his emotion bled out in other ways, visible to anyone who knew where to look.
‘That’s unusual, isn’t it? Knowing how to hide, I mean?’ Bilbo asked. ‘Normal people make mistakes. They give themselves away or don’t clean up properly. Doesn’t it mean something that they’ve been able to avoid capture for so long?’

Thorin pulled on his overcoat, pretending to focus on what he was doing so that his hobbit would not see his face. Of course, Bilbo had got straight to the heart of the matter, giving voice to the truth that he and Nori had begun to suspect some time ago: whatever the mystery individual was trying to achieve, they were more than a disgruntled civilian.

‘We think they’re an agent of some kind. Someone working for people with interests beyond Erebor’s walls, but who they are, who they work for and what they truly intend?’ He shrugged, letting out a tight breath as he did up his belt and sheathed Orcrist. ‘There is far too much we still don’t know.’

‘But maybe Dain does.’ Bilbo reached out, straightening Thorin’s collar before meeting his gaze. ‘Will you find him and ask?’

‘I intend to make it my first task for the day.’ He sighed, his scowl easing as Bilbo rubbed his thumb over the flicker of the pulse in his throat. ‘What about you? I’d feel easier about my business if I know where you’ll be.’

‘The treasury. At least for some of the morning. I need to talk to Ori, and then Bifur and Bofur said they had something to show me. I think it was to do with plumbing. Or perhaps heating pipes…’ He trailed off, looking baffled. ‘I’m not certain how they expect me to help with that, but I’ll try my best.’

‘I’m sure you will.’ Thorin reached out, knowing that the most painful moment of each day was upon them. Parting every morning had become a trial of his character. Part of him, greedy and selfish, wanted to keep Bilbo at his side, forever in his sight and within reach. A dwarf’s love was a powerful force, and his was no exception.

Yet Bilbo had not the time to remain in his presence, and even if he did, Thorin knew he could not tether him so. Bilbo would wither and fade beneath such constraints, as would any lover. It was a hard lesson all dwarves learned. He only wished it wasn’t so difficult to remember.

‘Will you meet me in my forge tonight?’ he asked, searching Bilbo’s expression for reluctance and finding only a glimmer of doubt. Thankfully, he had seen that particular look often enough to know it was not his company Bilbo sought to evade, but that of the hot, glowing metal that he seemed to find both captivating and terrifying.

‘I thought we decided last time that metal work was not for me?’ Bilbo folded his arms. ‘You know, after I almost set your beard on fire?’

‘Perhaps, but a forge can mould more than metal, if used properly. There was something I wanted to try, if you are willing?’ He waited, his heart high in his throat. Even now, he still feared that Bilbo would leave. Maybe that was part of the problem. As happy as they both were, Bilbo’s choice lingered unmade between them. He would not push him for an answer; desperate he may be, but Thorin knew better than that. He would give Bilbo all the time and space he needed. In the meantime, he just had to hope that each day they shared was not about to be their last.

‘I’ll be there.’ Bilbo grinned, almost purring when Thorin hungrily returned his farewell kiss. The bed remained a heavy temptation behind them, and it was with a tangible effort that they both turned their backs upon it and went to face the day ahead.
The journey from the sanctuary of their rooms was a short one, and Thorin soon stood at the doors to the overseer’s quarters, watching Bilbo trot off towards the treasury. Ronin and his normal entourage of guards were in tow, but that did little to lessen the ache of their parting. If Dis were here, she would tease him for the abrupt way his mood turned sour and love-sore, but she was still many miles away and unable to bear witness to his temper. Instead, Dwalin and Balin were there, both equally resigned to the fact that Thorin’s scowl was quick to gather once Bilbo was gone.

‘I take it there have been no – ah – decisions?’ Balin asked, his hope fading as Thorin shook his head. ‘Aye, I suppose not. It’s no easy task for Master Baggins.’

Dwalin huffed, but his brother’s glare made him rethink whatever gruff words had been about to escape his lips. ‘If he doesn’t choose for himself the wizard will do it for him. The icicles up on the ramparts are already fading, and the elf-lass says she can see the snow creeping away.’

Thorin bowed his head. He should be overjoyed to hear that winter’s grasp was fading from Erebor’s lands, but instead his heart lay heavy in his chest. He knew of Gandalf’s intention to leave within a fortnight, but would he be taking Bilbo with him? Would that be how all this came to an end – a brief love affair that faded into fond memory and nothing more?

Shaking the thought aside, he clenched his teeth, knowing that no good would come of his doubts; he had to trust Bilbo. He may be mischievous at times, but the hobbit was too kind to leave him in suspense. Besides, Thorin needed him to be sure. He could not bear it if Bilbo found himself always torn between his embrace and the warm climes of the Shire, unable to find peace in either place.

‘As soon as Master Baggins decides, you two will be among the first to know,’ he said, cutting off any further debate. ‘For now, I need to speak with Dain.’

‘He’s already waiting.’ Balin gestured along the corridor with a sweep of his arm, content to fill Thorin in on relevant details about the kingdom as they went. ‘Bomur is delighted with the food from the Iron Hills. There’s more than enough to tide us over for many a month. Even if the year brings a poor harvest, it will bring good trade. He is happy to declare our supply problems over.’

‘Let’s hope he does not speak too soon. Anything else?’

‘Bofur and Bifur are trying to get the baths working, while Gloin and Bard are starting to discuss the rebuilding of Dale. I expect he will want to talk to you about resources and such before long. Oin says the sickness that’s affected the children is not as bad as he feared. He’s also lost a few herbs; he thinks it happened when he moved his infirmary. Nothing irreplaceable, but his mood is less than bright.’

‘Much like someone else we know,’ Dwalin added, chuckling at Thorin’s disgruntled expression. ‘For once I wasn’t talking about you and yer scowl.’

‘Nori is stalking around like a wet cat: all affront,’ Balin explained.

‘It’s Frin. She rubs him up the wrong way.’ Dwalin gave another dark laugh, tucking his thumb into his belt. ‘Nori is used to thinking on his feet, getting results and damning the rest of it.’

‘Frin works differently. She’s very…’ Balin paused, groping for a suitable word. ‘Efficient.’

‘Well, let’s hope she has given Dain all he needs to know. I think I’ve waited for his news long enough.’

‘Aye. That you have.’
Thorin blinked as he realised his cousin was waiting in the doorway, his cheerful face clouded with concern. It was not the only thing different about him. Often, Dain did not care for his symbols of office, but today he looked more the part of king than Thorin did, and it made his gut clench in dread.

He knew Dain well: he preferred comfort to formality, but today he dressed to suit his station. It meant that what he had to say was serious, and deserved all due attention. The news he had to impart was unlikely to be in Erebor’s favour. Of that much, Thorin was certain.

‘What do you know?’

‘Come, sit.’ Dain clapped him on the shoulder, guiding him in and nodding in satisfaction as Dwalin resumed his guard duties at the door. Balin followed them, taking a seat at the round table in the centre of the circular council chamber.

The large room could accommodate more than twenty people, and an additional gallery rimmed the edge, separated by the pillars holding up the domed roof. There was only one way in or out, and Thorin made a point to sit where he would not be seen by the outside world.

‘I would have come to you sooner, if there was anything of note to say, but all I had was pieces.’ Dain sank into the chair at his right, stroking his beard as he chose his words with care. ‘Even now, it is not a whole picture, but Frin has at least confirmed a few suspicions.’

‘Like what?’ Thorin growled, unable to stop himself. He was in no mood for niceties, and the longer Dain dallied, the worse his fears became. ‘Tell me. It cannot possibly be worse than the dragon.’ He paused, knowing better than to take anything for granted. ‘Can it?’

‘It’s no dragon you face, and Mahal knows I might be seeing things that aren’t there, but someone’s been spying on you.’ Dain leant back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. ‘And me, as well. A single raven going missing in bad weather is nothing to question. It happens. Yet not one of them has made it home to you since I told you I’d arrived safe at the Iron Hills.’

‘You think they’re being intercepted?’ Balin asked from where he sat to Thorin’s left, reaching into his pocket for some parchment and scrawling some notes. ‘It can be done. Thror had hawks trained just for that purpose, and outposts across half of Middle Earth. They take the raven alive, claim any letters that they carry, and convince it to speak. They’re clever birds, but don’t have the imagination for a convincing lie.’

‘Aye, we think that’s the way. Whether they kill them or keep them, I can’t be sure, but whatever happens to them, they’re not coming back here.’

Balin grunted. ‘Because they’ll tell us what happened. The clever ones might even be able to recognise the dwarves responsible. Whoever is trying to get information doesn’t want us to know of their success.’ He tapped his pencil against the page, looking grim. ‘Who do you suspect?’

Dain clenched his teeth, a muscle ticking in his jaw as he shared a knowing glance with Thorin. It would be easier to list those he thought could be innocent of such dealings. Perhaps if Erebor were a normal mountain hall, things would be different, but every dwarf in Middle Earth knew its rooms brimmed with gold. If positions were reversed, Thror would have claimed it for his own without hesitation, and there were plenty of other dwarven lords hungry for such wealth.

‘You think too little of your kin.’ Balin sighed, reading their doubts with ease. ‘There is honour, still, among our kind.’
‘And yet the High Council saw fit to deny me aid upon my quest to reclaim these lands. They called it a fool’s errand,’ Thorin reminded him, breathing deeply when Balin gave him a look that spoke volumes. ‘Perhaps they were right to do so, but I would not put it past them to act now that the dragon is gone.’

‘Not once did they question your claim to Erebor –’

‘Because they gave it up for lost! Do you not think they would each have tried for it themselves if the odds weren’t so hopelessly against them? Now Smaug rots at the bottom of the lake, and perhaps the prospect of our home seems more enticing than it once was.’ Thorin shook his head, clenching his teeth to bite back more scathing words. ‘You ask who I suspect? There are none who sit upon the Council who I would trust.’

Dain made a considering noise, lifting an appeasing hand when Thorin glared in his direction. ‘I’m with you, cousin, for the most part. However, the High Council are in it for themselves: status, authority and power. Interfering with Erebor is a risky business. Your claim is beyond doubt and you would be within your rights to demand Masulkhul of any who sought to cast you out.’ He paused, raising his bushy eyebrows. ‘How many of them would want to take that chance?’

It was a good question. Masulkhul was the ultimate punishment for any king: stripped of wealth, lands and connections, his beard would be shorn and his skin branded before he was exiled from every dwarven hall or home. To risk such a thing was foolhardy to any already comfortable with their lot: a statement that applied to many of the old families.

Thorin could recall each of them vividly, the meeting of the High Council as fresh in his mind as if it had been only yesterday. It was not in a dwarf’s nature to pity others, but he had seen sympathy in some of those stern faces. He was among the last of a powerful clan, and while his name held little power, it still demanded respect.

Yet, now he thought on it, there was one delegation that looked upon him with scorn. After all, a dwarf who had lost his family, home and lands had shown weakness. In the eyes of some, such misfortune was not a source of sympathy but of ridicule. How would they feel in the face of his success?

‘The Stonefoots,’ he said, scratching his temple and shifting in his chair. ‘Most at the meeting were regretful in their indifference, but they looked on with spite. If pressed, they are the ones I would consider most likely to work against us.’

Dain grunted, nodding his head and reaching into a satchel beside him. The worn leather creaked as he rummaged in its depths, pulling free several sheets of reports and spreading them out before him.

‘Frin did some digging. Well, she and her network. When Erebor lay empty, the Iron Hills was isolated: an outpost and not much more.’ He grinned, tugging at his beard before offering a page to Balin. ‘No one else was going to keep us in the loop, so I made sure I had some idea of what’s been happening.’

‘And?’ Thorin asked, leaning over Balin’s shoulder and reading Frin’s neat runes, picking out bits and pieces. ‘What did you find?’

‘Interesting you should mention the Stonefoots. Damn good rock-masters, but demand for their wares isn’t what it once was. The money’s running out, and unrest in their lands is on the rise.’ He leaned back in his chair with a wistful sigh. ‘Deep in debt, they’ve plenty of motive to look to Erebor.’
Balin made a tight sound of disbelief, but he did not deny Dain’s words. ‘They came to our aid in the Battle of Azanûlbizar, as you both know.’

‘So did many others. Times change.’ Thorin sighed, grimacing at the financial information Frin had ferreted out for them. ‘Clearly, they have squandered what they had and have little left to support their halls.’

‘Aye, that’ll be King Frár.’ Dain shook his head. ‘Pompous fool. He’s been too busy gilding his own cage to realise the rest of its falling down around his ears. His daughter, Loni, is doing what she can to hold things together, but it’s a losing battle.’

Thorin sat back in his chair, letting the silence surround them as he studied the report. Although dwarves from different clans tended to travel and mingle, there were still areas considered to belong to certain folk. Khazad-dûm, and then Erebor had been the land of the Longbeards, before the ruin of both scattered them far and wide. The Stonefoots made their home at Rholnost, east of the Iron Hills. It was a craggy land, perfect for quarrying stone but poor in terms of gems or gold.

‘So, they could be the ones interfering with our messages?’ he asked, running his gaze down an outline of their military strength and shaking his head in disbelief. ‘They’ve little in the way of a standing army: and what they do have is poorly supplied. What could they hope to do with whatever they’ve found out?’

Dain got to his feet, his uneven steps echoing around the room as he paced. ‘Frár may be a fool with money, but he has a sharp mind. I wouldn’t put it past him to have enclaves of spies set up in strategic places across the land to garner what he can.’ A gusty sigh hissed from his lips. ‘Mahal knows such tricks are nothing new. If I am right, he’ll know he cannot hope to take Erebor as it stands. It’s too well fortified, even if it is almost empty. No, I think he’s trying something different: breaking the mountain down from within – trying to prove the Durin line unfit to rule. If he can convince the High Council of that, they’ll oust you for him.’

‘And reward him handsomely in the process.’ Thorin shut his eyes, the murky outline of possibility resolving into a dark suspicion. ‘My grandfather’s gold-sickness was well-known, and the rumours that it runs in the blood have been commonplace for decades.’

‘Then there’s what happened to you once the dragon was slain.’ Dain sat back down with a grunt, his blue eyes brimming with apology. ‘You know what dwarves are like for the next bit of gossip, and my lot are no different. It’s probably all over Middle Earth by now.’

‘Which will only make it easier for Frár to justify any action to the High Council.’ Thorin sighed, propping his elbows on the table and putting his head in his hands. ‘Mahal damn him.’

‘It won’t be enough.’ Balin’s firm voice cut through the growing fog of despair, and Thorin turned to look at him. ‘The High Council exists for a reason, and preventing war between the clans is chief among them. They would not march here armed and ready to take Erebor with nothing more solid to go on than mere speculation. Frár would have to have proof that you were unfit to rule.’

‘Proof like the messages he has intercepted?’ Dain asked pointedly.

‘They are not damning, unless there’s something you’re not telling me?’ Balin raised an eyebrow, watching them both shake their heads. ‘Everything you, Thorin, have written to Dain has expressed little more than your concern over supplies and wishes for his well-being. None of that would do Frár any good.’

Realisation bloomed in Thorin’s mind, seeds of doubt flourishing into certainty. ‘No, it wouldn’t, so
he’s trying to influence things in the mountain itself: drive me to madness through other means.’ When Balin frowned in confusion, Thorin swallowed, his voice turning rough at its edges as he explained. ‘Bilbo. They targeted Bilbo to get to me, hoping such a loss would leave me vulnerable to either grief or gold sickness. His death would have given them what they wanted, and any letter I wrote to Dain after such an event could well have been all the proof they required."

He closed his eyes, his blood running cold at the notion of what he might have put in such a letter: the fury and pain finding bitter release through parchment and ink. If such a thing had fallen into the wrong hands... The possibilities did not bear thinking about.

‘Aye, and you said yourself that the attempts on Master Baggins have been strangely subtle. At first glance, that looks like someone who doesn’t want to risk getting caught, but if we’re right, then there’s more to it than that.’ Dain harrumphed, a cruel smirk curving his lips. ‘Whoever’s trying to remove Master Baggins is working for Frár. If we trace it back to him, he’s finished. He’d be stripped of his lands and his beard before he could so much as bat an eye.’

Thorin grunted in agreement. The High Council, while hard to convince, were often swift to act once they observed strife between the dwarven clans. ‘If we’re right, then Frár is risking everything in this endeavour.’

‘The question is,’ Balin asked, ‘what will he do now that he has failed?’ He spread his hands wide and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Two attempts on Master Baggins have come to naught. Then, while our food soured and our bellies roared, all was quiet.’

‘Biding his time, maybe? Waiting to see if starvation would leave the mountain there for the taking?’ Dain looked as if he wanted to spit at the thought of such cowardice, but he held himself back. ‘Now you’re well-fed, and I bet he knows it. There’s only two ways it could go. Either he’ll give up –’

‘Or he will grow more desperate.’ Balin sighed, folding his hands over his belly and staring into the depths of his own mind. ‘He has tried to be discreet in his efforts. I fear all that may be behind us.’

Thorin cocked his head, not sure he could share his friend’s worries. He would rather face a direct assault than all this sneaking around in the dark. He loathed the notion that there was something out there that he could not see, poised to harm all he held dear. An army on a battlefield he could understand far better than all this hateful subterfuge.

‘What would you recommend we do?’ Thorin asked, watching familiar lines of concentration shape Balin’s expression. The old dwarf had seen the rise and fall of kingdoms in his time, and his knowledge of the clans – their enemies and allies – was rooted in the deep history they all shared. Of all his advisers, it was Balin he trusted most when it came to dealing with the other old families of their race.

At length, Balin rose to his feet, his movements automatic as his mind spun off down tunnels of possibility. ‘What we need, more than anything, is proof. Without something to show Frár’s involvement, there is little we can do.’

‘Your best chance of that is catching whoever’s doing his dirty work. Not that you’ve had much luck on that score.’ Dain thumped Thorin’s shoulder in pity, his mournful expression growing curious as Thorin pinned him with an intense stare.

‘Perhaps that can change. We have been struggling to maintain a balancing act, too fearful of general unrest to devote the guards to anything else. People are happier now that our stores are full. The chances of a revolt are the lowest they’ve yet been. It’s the best opportunity we have to smoke out our troublemaker.’
Dain cocked an eyebrow, his face shaped by rueful patience as he waited. ‘I know that look.’ His
grousing was good-natured, and Thorin ducked his head in acknowledgement. ‘What would you ask
of me?’

‘How many can you spare to swell the numbers of Dwalin’s cohort? He won’t search the mountain
when he doesn’t have enough men to watch the royal family and keep the general peace, but even a
dozen more will be a start.’

Dain huffed, looking up towards the ceiling as if praying to the Valar for patience. ‘A dozen? You
ask me for so little when I have scores of dwarves clamouring to stay? Dwarves who once called
Erebor their home, or simply want to be here as history is made?’ He tutted, his teasing falling away
as he grew serious. ‘Ask Dwalin how many he can take, and I’ll make sure the number is filled by
day’s end. Perhaps then you can turn this mountain inside out and chase out the one who has hidden
for so long.’

Thorin blinked, a knot of emotion tightening in his chest as he squeezed Dain’s forearm in mute
thanks. When the time came to chronicle Erebor’s salvation, he would ensure that no one made light
of all that the Iron Hills had done for them.

‘While we’re searching, it would be in our best interest to contact the High Council with our
suspicions. Not to name names, but to alert them to the possibility that Erebor is under threat.’ Balin
stroked his beard, a scowl creasing his brow. ‘If they are the dwarves I know of old, they will take
such a warning seriously.’

‘And if they are not, we could be telling our enemies we are vulnerable,’ Thorin pointed out. It was
so hard to trust those who had not come to his aid when he needed it, but he knew he had to move
forward. The last time he had stood before them, he had been the scion of a dying house. Now he
was the king of a wealthy and powerful hall: a valuable ally in his own right. ‘Even if I did contact
them, what’s to stop Frár snaring the message, as he has done before?’

Balin’s belly swelled like a balloon as he drew a deep breath, bracing himself for an unfavourable
response. ‘There’s one message we are certain got through to its intended destination. Thranduil
answered your call for aid within days. Send the letter to him; inform him fully of the situation. If
nothing else, he deserves to know that there could be hostile forces entering the realm.’

Thorin’s nails bit into his palms as his hands knotted into fists, knuckles bleaching beneath the strain.
Already, he felt indebted to Thranduil: more so than any dwarf ought to acknowledge, but he could
not deny the sense in Balin’s advice. Besides, while Frár would attempt to snatch any messages
heading towards dwarven lands, he may not have spies watching the route to Mirkwood.

‘You believe he will assist us?’ He looked up at Balin, his doubt writ large.

‘He has not let us down thus far. Perhaps Master Baggins can help you in the composition? He has a
knack for getting Thranduil to see things his way.’

‘All this speaks of an abundance of faith in your allies,’ Dain warned. ‘Not to say that’s unfounded,
but…’

‘But Erebor is weak, and everyone knows it.’ Thorin ducked his head in understanding. ‘I will do as
Balin has suggested, but it will not be my only course of action. We are well stocked, but poorly
armed. We are unlikely to win battles as we stand, but the mountain can protect us.’ He swept his
fingers across his lips in thought before getting to his feet, his voice losing all trace of uncertainty as
he gave his orders.
‘Dain, as I said, talk to Dwalin about what soldiers you can leave with us, and any stone-workers and masons are more than welcome to join our number.’ He took a breath, pointing in Balin’s direction. ‘I will reach out as suggested, old friend, but while I do so, I need you to start preparing Erebor for a siege. Focus all repair efforts on our defences, and talk to Ori and any other scribes about mapping the mountain. Such efforts will indicate any weaknesses, and may just reveal wherever our troublemaker has been hiding all this time.’

‘Aye, Your Majesty.’ There was no hesitation in Balin’s step as he swept from the room, intent on doing his king’s bidding. Thorin watched him go, waiting until he was out of earshot before turning back to his cousin, who still hovered nearby. ‘Is there anything else you’ve not yet told me?’

Dain shook his head, reaching out to shuffle the reports into a stack before handing them over. ‘It’s all here, everything Frin has been able to find. I must take my leave.’ Dain rested his hand on Thorin’s shoulder, giving it a hard squeeze of reassurance. ‘Send me no more ravens. The boats are slower – it’s a ten day journey through the dark between our halls – but at least they are secure.’

Thorin reached up, gripping his kinsman’s arm and bowing his head. ‘I fear you may receive any message for help too late.’

‘You think so little of me?’ A gusty sigh escaped Dain as he cupped the back of Thorin’s skull, cracking their foreheads together in a familiar gesture: half annoyance, half affection. ‘As soon as I get to the Iron Hills, I’ll begin preparations to march. I’d rather be a fool standing in front of your mountain with no foe to meet than be caught unprepared by whatever you face.’

‘You think Frár will muster a show of force?’ he asked, watching the complicated twist of emotions cross Dain’s features. Mobilising an army was no small feat, and the distance between their lands was not inconsiderable.

‘He has already got spies stationed in this region, far from his own halls. That much we know for certain. He might not have a large force to command, but I’d bet my beard that those he does have are on their way, or are camped as close as they can get without being up to their jambags in snow.’ Dain grunted, giving Thorin’s back one last clap before stepping away. ‘They’ll either try and drive you mad or drive you out, Thorin. Don’t give them the chance.’

‘I have fought too long and hard to win this place from that damned wyrm,’ he replied, gesturing for Dain to lead the way out. ‘No one will take it from me, least of all that fool Frár.’

Determination coated his bones, gilding him in its strength as he bade his cousin a fond farewell. He had every faith that the Company would find homes, food and supplies for those of Dain’s dwarves who would be staying behind. He left them to the logistics as he strode through his halls, allowing the work of the mountain to consume him.

The hours passed in a whirl of chaos, clarifying his orders and meeting with all those who needed to know about the abrupt change of priorities. Bard took in his words, his slender face serious and his eyes dark. He did not point out that, so far, all they had was speculation. Perhaps he knew all too well how often gossip and gut instinct turned out to be true.

‘My men will do as you ask,’ he vowed, straightening where he sat as Thorin inclined his head gratefully. ‘How long can we withstand a siege?’

‘Fresh water is not a problem and, thanks to Dain, neither is food. We could last six months with ease. More, if we keep the tunnel to the Iron Hills open.’

‘Won’t it be a weakness? A way for our enemies to get inside?’
Thorin shrugged. ‘It’s a possibility. There are way stations along the route: access points to the surface. They are built to be manned and fortified, though Mahal knows we cannot spare the dwarves to do it, and Dain has higher priorities. I’ll have to talk to Dwalin and see what we can do. Perhaps we can defend the tunnel mouth: I believe Master Baggins suggested as much when Dain first arrived.’

‘And what of the hobbit?’

Bard’s query made Thorin look up, his eyes narrow as he tried to understand the direction of the man’s question. ‘What about him?’

‘Will it be safe for him to leave if we face a siege?’

For one, heart-stopping moment, Thorin thought that Bilbo had made his decision – that he would return to the Shire after all – and had left Thorin to hear his choice through idle gossip. It took longer than he would have liked to see the gleam of sharp intelligence in Bard’s gaze, and to realise that the human was most likely working on supposition, rather than anything more concrete.

‘I have no doubt the wizard will do as he pleases, regardless of what enemy sits on our doorstep. Whether Bilbo goes with him is yet to be decided.’ He rested his hands on his hips, knowing that he would need to talk to both Gandalf and Bilbo about the matter.

His first, tremulous fear that Gandalf might rush his departure soon dimmed. The thaw may be starting, but it was still a foolish notion to travel. No, if anything, this whole situation would only delay Gandalf’s plans. ‘I will discuss it with him. In the meantime, talk to Dwalin about training and arming your men. It won’t be much, but with any luck he will have both the time and resources to spare.’

Bard ducked his head in thanks, leaving Thorin to lose himself again in the whirl of his duties. Lunch came and went, unobserved, as he met with others and penned his letters. Addressing Thranduil was as challenging as ever, and more than once he wished he could offer the task to Bilbo. Yet despite Balin’s suggestion, he knew he could not shirk his duty. Asking for aid was one thing, but there were deeper undercurrents to his requests: things that skirted the edges of trust and allegiance, and they needed to come from his own hand.

It was a painstaking process, and by the time he found himself on Ravenhill, the sun was dipping beneath the horizon. The world stretched out before him, the remaining snow sparkling like mithril as the clear sky turned to liquid gold.

In the rasping language of his people, he gave the birds their instructions, telling them to go their separate ways to the Elvish realm with their identical missives. While he hoped Balin was right and that no outside influence watched the skies over Thranduil’s forest, he could not afford to take any chances.

The ravens cast themselves into the wind, their wings beating at the air. Thorin watched them go, becoming mere specks amidst the sun’s dying rays before they were gone from his sight. Whether Thranduil would choose to help them, he could not say, but Thorin knew he had done all he could on that score.

A sonorous chime shimmered around him, accompanying his footsteps as the evening bell rang out the hour. He could go to the Company and demand to know their progress, or dive back in to discussions with Bard, but it would be a useless endeavour: talk for the sake of it and little more.

One of the things his father had told him, as they both watched Thror descend into paranoia, was that
a good king knew when to let his counsel carry out his orders. Now was one of those times. Dread may drive him to badger them all for results, but giving into it would get them nowhere. They would come to him in the morning with their concerns, if there were any to be had.

With that in mind, he entered the mountain and took towards the stairs, heading downwards into the heart of the peak. He acknowledged bows and salutes without slowing his pace, turning away from the busy hallways towards the small forge that had become his sanctuary, and the hobbit who waited within.

‘Stay here,’ he ordered, watching the soldiers take up their posts. One stood each side of the entrance, while others positioned themselves along the corridor, their backs to the wall and their axes gleaming in the torchlight. Only then did Thorin press his hand to the door and push it aside so he could step over the threshold.

A blast of warm air met him like the breath of some friendly beast, and the smell of hot wood and coals filled his nose, peeling away the burdens of the day. Yet nothing could bring him more joy than the sight of Bilbo building up the forge fires, working with a competence he had learned these past two weeks. He devoted his concentration to the task, and the firelight bathed him in thanks.

The mithril vest lay over one of the chairs at the edge of the room, as did most of the rest of Bilbo’s clothes. All he wore was a shirt, britches, and a thick leather apron that Dori had cut down to the right size. The air was stifling, and a glimmer of sweat shone at Bilbo’s temples, called forth by the heat that pressed outwards from the hulking shadow of the forge.

‘Long day?’ he asked, his eyes twinkling as he turned around to face Thorin, no doubt taking in everything. It made him painfully aware of the hunch of his shoulders and the bow of his spine, as if the stress of the past few hours had tormented his body to breaking point. ‘Come on, take off that coat before you faint.’

Thorin snorted at the notion, but did as Bilbo suggested, peeling off layers until his skin could breathe again. ‘How much do you already know?’ he asked, aware that the rumours would be rife, and that they always seemed to make their way to Bilbo’s ears. ‘I will tell you all, if that’s what you need, but…’

‘But it’s been a long day, and you would rather not think on it, just for an hour or two.’ Bilbo nodded, stepping back and gesturing towards a tray of food. ‘I know enough to realise that whatever it is can wait. Come, eat.’

A moment later, Bilbo pushed a bowl into one hand and a fork into the other, leaving Thorin with little choice but to sit and give the rich meal his full attention. He had not realised how hungry he was until his stomach roared in thunderous approval, and Bilbo chuckled, filling the silence with news about his day as Thorin sated his appetite. With each mouthful, the foulness of his mood began to ebb, and with every story Bilbo told – from tricks in the treasury to Gandalf’s grumblings – he felt more at ease.

Setting his bowl aside, he got to his feet, reaching out to take Bilbo’s hand before drawing him close. Bilbo came willingly, his smaller body fitting perfectly against him. He could feel Bilbo’s nose against his shoulder and the flutter of each breath at his open collar, but what mattered most was the realness of him: his strength and the sheer wonder of his presence. That, more than anything, helped calm the choppy waters of Thorin’s worried mind, and allowed him to find the tranquillity he so desperately needed.

Burying his nose in Bilbo’s curls, he inhaled, feeling as if he were taking the first proper breath since sitting down with Dain. Perhaps it was because Bilbo demanded nothing of him that he couldn’t
give. He was not an adviser or an ally, looking to Thorin for a decision. He did not come to him with any expectations except to share in all his moments, be they burden or joy.

‘Thank you.’

He felt the swell of Bilbo’s cheek as he smiled, and the arms around his back tightened without a word, pouring strength and tenderness into their shared embrace.

Many uncertainties lay ahead, but as Thorin closed his eyes, he knew that this – what he and Bilbo had built together – was something upon which he could rely. Come what may, be it spy or siege, war or wonder, he would do everything in his power to keep their love safe.
Voices clamoured, filling the room from one wall to the other. Bilbo winced at the din, stifling the urge to press his hands over his ears. This chamber in the overseer’s quarters was where members of the Company met to discuss the issues of the day, but he couldn’t remember it ever being this full. Sweat pricked his hairline, and whenever he moved, it seemed he was banging elbows with his friends. It reminded him of the first time they had met around his too-small dining table at Bag End, and a spark of homesickness tweaked at his heart.

Pieces of idle chatter caught his attention, snatches of gossip and off colour jokes, but an air of excitement ran like a riptide under every word. Something big had happened, and recently too, because none of the whispers that had reached Bilbo’s ears over the course of the day had hinted at anything remarkable.

It had been a busy week since Dain left. If Bilbo thought Erebor was bustling before, he had been sorely mistaken. With extra dwarves filling their ranks, the guards had begun to search the mountain, opening rooms long untouched and throwing light into the shadows. They found many things, from tombs to treasures, and Ori and his scribes had followed every step of the way, updating old maps as they learned their home anew.

The soldiers weren’t the only ones with more work than there were hours in the day. Bombur, Bifur and Gloin had all redirected their attentions to shoring up Erebor’s defences, and the mountain rang with the sound of chisel and hammer. Fili and Kili had rolled up their sleeves and pitched in without question, roping pulleys and hoists so they could clean out crumbling masonry and make the kingdom strong once more.

Tauriel and Dori had taken on the management of supplies, keeping a watchful eye on what they had and making sure no one was left wanting, while Bombur and his army of cooks strove to feed hundreds of hungry bellies. Dwalin maintained his steadfast protection of the royal family, and Nori seemed to be everywhere at once, gleaning all he could from every quarter. It was Balin who brought it all together. The old dwarf had requested this meeting, and now he got to his feet, his dark gaze sweeping the room as silence fell.

To Bilbo, he looked less composed than usual. His snowy hair was sticking up in tufts, and his beard appeared uncombed. Deep lines creased his kind eyes, and the papers in his grasp rustled as his hands shook.

‘Your Majesty,’ he began, his voice grave as he turned to face Thorin. ‘I’ve called us all together so that we may hold council. These were found this morning.’

He held out the sheaf, and Bilbo watched Thorin’s expression twist from curiosity to confusion. From his seat by Thorin’s left hand, it was easy to take a peek at the new discovery, not that it told him much. The paper was not brittle and old, like most of what remained in Erebor, but supple and unstained by age. Beyond that, he could glean nothing, not when every word was written in Khuzdul runes.

‘What does it say?’ he asked, glancing from Thorin to Balin and back again.

‘It’s gibberish. Non-words and numbers.’

Nori stepped forward from where he hovered in the shadows, inclining his head as he offered up another report. ‘That’s why we didn’t bring it to you straight away. I’ve been working to unravel it. I
may be a thief, but I know something of this sort of thing. Besides,’ He cleared his throat, aggravation crossing his features before it was gone. ‘Dain’s spy left me some ciphers and their keys to use when communicating with them.’

‘And?’

‘And they didn’t unlock this one, which is just as well. Each dwarf clan develops their own way of doing things. If the codes for the Iron Hills had decrypted this, then it would suggest someone from Dain’s lands was sending and receiving secret communications from inside Erebor.’ Nori shifted where he stood, his nose wrinkling in distaste. ‘I’ve been in the library, looking through archives to try and find anything that might help unravel what this says…’ He shook his head, admitting his defeat without another word.

Thorin’s frustration was palpable. Bilbo could feel it filling the small space between them, and he reached under the table to rest his hand over the bony hub of his lover’s knee. A mighty scowl rested on Thorin’s brow, as if he could reveal the secrets of the code through the strength of his glare, and Bilbo sighed, wishing he could be of more use.

‘Where did you find it?’ He watched Nori shrug and turn to Bofur, his eyebrows lifting in question.

‘Oh, yeah. It was me that did that.’ The dwarf raised a tentative finger before scratching underneath his hat. ‘Not that there’s much to tell you. We’ve been shoring up the walls on the south side, making sure there were no weak spots anyone might break through. It was just a – a cleft, a little niche someone could hide bits and pieces. There was nothing there but those pages and a handful of strange – beads?’ He looked at Bifur for confirmation, sighing when his cousin shrugged. ‘At least, we think they’re beads. I gave them to Balin.’

The old dwarf dug in his pocket before placing half a dozen things on the table. Bilbo stared, not sure what to make of them. He had seen any number of beads since leaving the Shire, and even the simplest were exquisitely decorated. These were lumpy, ugly objects, made from a yellowish material he had never come across before.

He picked one up, turning it over in his fingers before scratching at the surface. Even after a while in Balin’s pocket, the substance was hard and cold, gleaming with a greasy shimmer. ‘What is it?’

There was no answer from his companions. Each looked as confused as the other and, with a sigh, he got to his feet and trotted over to the door. It was the work of a moment to ask one of the soldiers to seek out Gandalf. Why Balin had not invited the wizard, Bilbo didn’t know, but if anyone could solve this little mystery, it would be him.

Only after the request escaped his lips did he realise he should have asked Thorin first, rather than giving orders as if he owned the place. However, when he glanced back, there was no censure in Thorin’s expression, just a grimace of deep thought as he continued to examine the papers Bofur had found.

Leaning forward, he spread them out before him, bringing a lantern closer so that its light cast the ink into stark relief. Most of the runes looked as if the same person had written them, the strokes of their quill bold and knowledgeable. Yet here and there, someone had scribbled encoded fragments in the margins, as if a previous reader had been making notes.

‘I think these are written by the agent at work in Erebor,’ Nori explained, pointing out the brief additions. ‘The rest of it comes from whoever is in command. Their code writing is confident. There’s no drops of ink or anything on the page to show they hesitated.’
'What does that mean?'

‘Possibly nothing,’ Thorin replied, cutting Nori off before he could respond. ‘However, if I were to write such a thing, it would take me hours. Most kings are not well versed in such efforts.’

‘They have spies to do it for them.’ Nori grimaced. ‘If it is Frár, then the chances are he’s got someone working beneath him to make it all happen.’

Bilbo raised his eyebrows. He’d thought the hobbits were bad, with all their secrets and backstabbing in the Shire. It turned out dwarves were just the same, though it seemed they did things on a larger scale. ‘Has it always been like this? Spies and messages and all that?’

‘Not always.’ Balin sat down in his chair with a sigh. ‘Not to this extent. Spycraft is the refuge of the weak, and I say that without judgement. It is the realms who cannot raise armies that work in the shadows, which to me only makes the Stonefoots likely suspects. They are the weakest of the clans who still have lands to their name.’

‘Weaker than us?’ Bilbo asked, wincing as several of the dwarves mustered affronted glares in his direction.

‘We have allies,’ Dwalin pointed out from where he loomed behind Thorin’s right shoulder. ‘People who will come to our aid when called.’

‘And the Stonefoots don’t?’

Silence followed his question, but it was not one of condemnation. Instead, he could see the growing concern gathering like an oncoming storm, as if he had put into words what they all secretly feared.

‘We don’t even know if it is the Stonefoots yet,’ Ori pointed out, lifting his chin when Dori frowned in his direction. ‘All we have are suspicions, and they won’t be much comfort if someone else shows up to kick us up the jacksie!’ He blushed, as if suddenly remembering they were no longer just the Company, but advisers to the king. Still, he did not back down, and Bilbo had to admire his young friend for his boldness.

‘You’re right, Master Ori,’ Thorin inclined his head in acknowledgement. ‘It is tempting to get ahead of ourselves in the name of preparing for the unknown. If only we could work out what this correspondence means.’

‘Perhaps I can be of assistance?’ Gandalf ducked into the room, adjusting his hat and smiling down at them. ‘I was told my presence was required?’

Bilbo moved before anyone could muster a protest. Thorin may be clever, but he could be stubborn in his pride, and Bilbo was damned if he would watch Erebor suffer just because they didn’t want to admit they needed help. Scooping up one of the strange beads, he held it out to Gandalf, dropping it into his weathered palm.

‘Have you ever seen anything like this before?’ He shuffled closer to Thorin, offering the old wizard some space on the bench. Gandalf accepted it with a small sound of thanks, curling his long body into the gap before tipping their strange discovery to the light.

His grey hair straggled down his face, obscuring almost everything but the beak of his nose. Soft mumblings – internal thoughts given voice – disturbed the air before he hummed in thoughtful surprise. ‘An old trick, not so much clever as cunning.’

He pulled a nearby candle close before holding the object out over the flame, turning it in his fingers
without any obvious signs of pain. Slowly, like blistering skin, the surface began to bubble, a noisome, yellow liquid dripping from it. The candle spat in protest before burning all the stronger as, inch-by-inch, its secrets were revealed.

‘Water chilled wax, done in layers,’ Gandalf explained, giving the thing in his hand a flick to remove the last of the fluid before passing it back to Balin. ‘It’s quite cool to the touch,’ he promised, encouraging the dwarf to take it and tip it to the light.

Bilbo stood on tiptoe, trying to get a better look. No longer was the not-a-bead yellow and bulky, but jet-black and made from what looked like stone. Ridges and furrows, alien to the eye, covered its surface. However, to Balin at least, they must have been familiar.

‘Find me some ink and parchment. Quick!’

Ori obliged, almost slamming a bottle down onto the table before unravelling a blank scroll. Balin dunked the stone without a care for staining his fingers and applied it to the paper, pressing hard as he rolled it across the unmarked surface. In its wake, crisp and clear, were more runes, though judging from Nori’s sharp intake of breath, they were far better than mere nonsense.

‘Clean off the others. Hurry!’

There was a sudden kerfuffle as the rest of the Company reached for candles, lighting their wicks and scrabbling for tongs. Gandalf’s spell-touched skin may be immune to burns, but the dwarves knew to respect even the smallest of flames.

‘It’s cheap tallow, this,’ Dori observed, watching the wax drip away. ‘Probably gathered it up from odds and ends.’

‘We had noticed a few stubs go missing.’ Bombur shrugged, looking apologetic. ‘I thought nothing of it. With only a few moments of burn time left, I just supposed someone else was cleaning up the lamps. The men, maybe.’

Thorin nodded, his voice understanding even if his expression was grim. ‘Whoever is at work within our walls is well-versed in the art of subtlety. They knew candle stubs wouldn’t be missed and hoped these stones would be overlooked.’

‘What are they, exactly?’ Bilbo asked, trying not to feel stupid for his lack of comprehension. Part of it was because he couldn’t read Khuzdul, but he still hated being out of the loop.

‘The key to their code,’ Nori said triumphantly, already beginning to pick apart the missives they had found. ‘That itself tells us a little more about the culprit. A fully trained spy would learn the ciphers of his halls off by heart. He would have no need for these.’ He gestured to the beads, nodding his thanks as the others began to dip them in ink and roll out their patterns into neat lines of words. ‘Whoever is working here isn’t familiar with Frár’s ciphers and lacked the confidence to hide the decoding rods separately. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s an agent for hire, rather than a dwarf raised at Rholnost.’

Thorin grunted, leaning back in his chair as Nori worked. ‘Does that mean that Frár doesn’t have any spies trained to the level needed, or that he hoped it would be one less thing to connect him to the whole mess?’

‘Oh, he’s got the spies all right.’ Nori paused, scratching his nose with a frown before changing a couple of the letters. ‘Frín knew that much. No, if you ask me it’s about dodging the blame: a way to claim innocence, or at least ignorance.’
Peace descended around them, interrupted only by the fitful splutter of the candles and the bold scribble of the quill in Nori’s grasp. He moved fast, indifferent to the state of his handwriting as the others watched his efforts, rapt.

Only Bilbo did not watch him pick apart the code, trading one set of Khuzdul runes for another. There was no point. Instead, he sat back, letting his thoughts turn inwards as he surveyed his companions.

Now, in this moment of potential triumph, each face brimmed with character, and he found himself drinking in the sight. He had never known anyone better than this rag-tag Company. Months on the road together rasped away all veneer of politeness. He knew who snored and who didn’t, who curled up tight beneath their blankets and who was prone to sprawling. He understood Gloin’s deep and abiding love for his absent family and appreciated Balin’s steady, even temper as much as Dwalin’s strength of body and heart.

They had invited him in, slowly at first, and then with growing warmth as the days passed. Now he knew that there was not one of them who wouldn’t take a blade for him. Just as he would do for them.

A fresh ache bloomed beneath his ribs: a heavy bite of sadness at the idea of leaving them all behind. This existence in Erebor may be challenging, but it was a rich and vibrant home. Even Bilbo had to admit that the notion of life in Hobbiton paled in comparison.

Frequently, he found himself looking at the Shire with regretful nostalgia, not because of its people but because of its beauty: the richness of its green hills and the widespread boughs of its trees. The gentle land felt as if it were part of his bones, and even now he sometimes experienced a powerful urge to return.

Yet if he was honest with himself, there was no other reason to go back. There were no close kinships to claim, nor anyone he thought upon with more than a shallow, fleeting fondness. All his love was for the land, and the empty home he had left behind.

He could see it all too clearly: a mundane life spent creeping through the hours of day and darkness, passing little more than pleasantries with hobbits he did not care to know. There would be no adventure, no friendly feasts or kisses by the fireside. There would be no one there who knew him for the hobbit he really was.

Going back was less a desire than it was a duty: something he felt he should do for the sake of his roots and little more. He was a hobbit, and the Shire was where he should belong. There had always been a Baggins at Bag End, and if he returned, a Baggins was all he would ever be.

Perhaps if the battle had gone another way – if Thorin had passed into Mahal’s halls up on Ravenhill – that would have been enough, but Bilbo knew he was fooling himself if he thought he could be happy with such a future.

Home was what you made of it, and he had forged himself a place, not just within the mountain but in this strange circle of dwarves. He had fought at their sides, faced their perils and seen them through to the other side. How could he turn his back on all that?

On Thorin?

These past few weeks had shown him how beautifully they complemented each other. Bilbo could not recall the last time he had felt so confident – at ease with himself and all that he could do.
That was Thorin’s work: whispered praises into hot skin gave him armour no one else could see, and warm glances raised his worth far beyond anything he had found in the Shire. He hoped he did the same for Thorin, reminding him that there was a dwarf beneath all the expectations of kingship. Perhaps others would think it was a chore to support their lover in such a way, bolstering them up whenever the weight of duty became too much, but for Bilbo it was his pleasure.

Looking around at the dwarves he considered his best friends, the truth began to sink in. The Shire was where he was born and where his family had always been, yet it was in his past. Hobbiton was where he had come from, but it was not where his journey would find its end.

He was never going back.

It was as if some unknown weight had lifted, and Bilbo drew a quiet, shuddering breath at the unexpected flood of relief. He had not known how brutally his unmade choice had burdened him! For so long he had dithered, but now he could see the past few weeks for what they really were: a time to mourn the life he was leaving behind.

At last, he emerged from the strange twist of his subtle grief. Possibility unfurled, no longer idle fantasies, but a reality that was within his reach. Already he’d had a hand in reclaiming Erebor, in helping its people and rebuilding its walls, but if he wanted to, he could stay as it become great once more. If he remained, he would get to see his friends live their lives – to see Fili and Kili grow into even more remarkable dwarves and watch an empty kingdom fill to the brim once more.

He almost blurted out his decision there and then. Only a fluttering, eager hope gave him pause. In all his fantasies of staying in Erebor, during silly daydreams that passed the long hours of their journey, he had pictured himself at Thorin’s side, bound in love by their vows. Back then, it had seemed an impossible hope, but now Bilbo trembled with realisation. That could be his: not just a home to harbour him for the rest of his life, but a union to brighten his days and warm his nights. Not an insipid flirtation but something so powerful that he could feel it all the way down to his soul.

All he needed was the courage to ask for more – not only a courtship, but a betrothal.

A flicker of panic uncurled in his stomach, but Bilbo squashed it ruthlessly. He had spent too long in doubt, eager for more. This time was different. In his heart, he knew that his decision to stay was more than just an idle thing. It was a commitment, and one worth making. However, he was not content to settle for only half of his dreams. Erebor alone was not enough, not without Thorin, and new resolve blazed in the taste of every breath.

Thorin had been the one who started this courtship, not as dwarves do, but as a hobbit would, and Bilbo knew that the next step was his to take. He would not live in The Lonely Mountain as he had in the Shire – a shadow of what he could be. He would reach for all that he could, and that included a lifetime at Thorin’s side as lover, friend and consort.

All he needed was a little time.

The sensation of watchful eyes prickled across his skin. All the dwarves were reading over Nori’s shoulder as he continued to unravel the code. The only one not engrossed was Gandalf, who observed Bilbo with a sparkle in his eye. Perhaps his epiphany etched its mark on him, but Bilbo couldn’t help suspect that Gandalf had picked the thoughts right out of his head. That lined face brimmed with happy triumph, his lips curving in a smile as, with the subtest of winks, he touched his fingertips to the brim of his hat. He was aware Bilbo would not return into the west. He had probably known all along.
‘Got it!’

Nori’s triumphant cry made Bilbo jump in surprise, scattering his thoughts as it returned him to the present. Around him, the dwarves leaned back. Those who had stood to watch resumed their seats while others shifted, torn between respect for Thorin and their deep desire to know what their spymaster had found.

Yet he did not pass over the report immediately. Ink-stained fingers clenched, creasing the paper, and Bilbo frowned to see the vivid cocktail of emotion on Nori’s face. Normally, he conducted his work with a sarcastic grin and a wicked gleam in his eye. Now he looked pale beneath his intricate coif, and something shadowed his gaze as he offered the page to Thorin.

Perhaps if it had been the start of their relationship, Bilbo wouldn’t have seen the miniscule evidence of distress that stained Thorin’s expression. He might have overlooked the tightening of his mouth and the narrowing of his eyes, subtle as they were. At first glance, Thorin looked merely perturbed, but Bilbo could see the mask in place, a poor shroud for his feelings.

‘You’re certain?’ he asked Nori, his voice stiff in the peaceful air as the dwarf nodded. His expression may be like granite, unmoved, but Bilbo saw fury flash in his eyes. He had not seen Thorin so fierce since the battle that almost claimed his life on Ravenhill, and there was a sudden, sharp edge to his presence that made the hairs on Bilbo’s neck stand on end.

Silently, he handed the report to Balin, meeting the old dwarf’s gaze meaningfully. Whatever wordless communication passed between them, it stiffened Balin’s spine, and he read the decoded words, statue-still, before he spoke. ‘It brings me no joy to say it, but our suspicions are confirmed. An agent of King Frár has been working to destabilise Durin rule within the mountain.’

It seemed everyone released their breath at once, their questions loud as their voices rose to the ceiling. Each dwarf looked furious, betrayed by another of their own kind. Bombur’s belly quivered with his outraged breaths, and there was no hint of mirth in Bofur’s expression. Even Bifur, normally so quiet, banged his fist on the table, shaking his head all the while.

‘What makes you sure it’s Frár?’ Fili asked, craning his neck to try and read the document in Balin’s grasp. He frowned when the dwarf folded it and tucked it out of sight. ‘Is he mentioned by name?’

‘Frár may be a fool, but even he is not that careless.’ Thorin growled, his fingers clenching into fists as he shot a furtive glance in Bilbo’s direction, as if checking that he was still there. ‘However, there is a seal at the bottom of the page. It’s obscure, but it is one of the Stonefoot clan. These instructions originate from their dynasty.’

‘There is also something I recognise in the wording,’ Balin admitted, raising his shoulders in a shrug as everyone, even Thorin, looked askance at him. ‘A certain turn of phrase that I have heard before, from Frár’s chief adviser: Carth.’

Most of the dwarves around the table seemed none the wiser, but Bilbo noticed the way Gandalf grimaced in distaste. Next to him, Thorin’s scowl broke free of its restraints, shadowing his gaze as he bowed his head.

‘Who is he?’ Bilbo asked, looking between them all. The dwarves did not seem to have it in them to answer but under Bilbo’s determined glare, Gandalf shifted in his seat, clearing his throat before he replied.

‘I know Carth by name only, but his reputation has reached my ears more than once. Conservative, even by dwarvish standards. He has…views.’
'There are some of our kind, though they are small in number, who are violently opposed to the other races in Middle Earth. They condone no allegiance that is not with another dwarf clan and argue against trade with the outside world, among other things.’ Balin sighed. ‘Carth is one of those, as his father was before him, and he is perfectly situated to pour poison into Frár’s ear.’

‘And Frár is stupid enough to listen,’ Thorin snapped, reaching up a hand to press his fingertips to his brow. Bilbo could see the tendons at the back of his neck, solid like rope, and he itched to reach out and soothe Thorin as best he could. Yet he would not do that here, not even among friends. Dwarves could be tricky when it came to anything that may be considered showing weakness, and he was not about to undermine Thorin at such a critical moment.

‘Your orders, Majesty?’ Nori asked, his voice both careful and full of respect.

‘There are other messages from Rholnost?’ Thorin watched him nod. ‘Decode them all, and tell me if they offer any clue as to what we may face. I want to know if our culprit has received new instructions since Dain and Lord Thranduil saved our hides from starvation. Balin –’ He sighed, slipping his hand under the table and groping for Bilbo’s fingers before squeezing tight. ‘– continue preparing Erebor for a siege.’

‘We are almost ready, my king. The walls are sound and our foundations strong. We have turned our attention to the docks, and will work until they are secure.’ He beckoned to Bofur, Bifur, Dori and Gloin. They followed him out of the room, their worried expressions locked into harsh lines of determination. Oin also excused himself, promising that he would ensure the sanatorium was well stocked to deal with injuries. Bombur left on his heels, vowing hearty meals to fill the bellies of those who worked so hard.

Soon, only Dwalin, Ori and Gandalf remained. No one spoke to interrupt Thorin’s thoughtful silence, not until he lifted weary blue eyes to meet the old wizard’s gaze. ‘I fear I must once again ask for your assistance,’ he murmured, waving he left hand towards Dwalin. ‘So far, even with Dain’s dwarves to help us, our search of the mountain has turned up no more than traces of whoever seeks our undoing. Is there any way you can succeed where we have failed?’

Gandalf paused, his beard bristling as he pressed his lips together in a grimace. ‘I am afraid, King Thorin, that there is little my arts and illusions can do for you. If we sought a magical creature, or some spell were at work, I could pick it out, but I have not the talent for unearthing more mundane troubles.’ He scraped the base of his staff on the floor as he rose to his feet. ‘However, perhaps there is another way. There are many parts of this mountain, tunnels long-forgot, and your forces cannot hope to stand watch at every entrance. I cannot stop those who wish it from coming and going, but I can give you warning of their doing so.’

‘Like a magical doorbell?’ Bilbo asked, blinking at Gandalf’s fond smile.

‘A little louder than that, but close enough. We will know if someone enters this mountain. Or if they leave it.’

Thorin nodded, his gratitude on unashamed display. ‘Do it, Ori, I understand you’ve been hard at work mapping our home. Help Gandalf as best you can.’

With a nod, the young dwarf scurried off, leaving Dwalin to draw a deep breath, his armour creaking with the swell of his chest. ‘And me?’ he asked, raising an eyebrow at Thorin. ‘Would you have me continue my hunt?’

‘Will it do us any good?’ Thorin shook his head, curtailing any answer. ‘That they have avoided you for this long speaks more of their abilities than of yours, old friend. Do not think I doubt you.’
‘The sly bastard is moving around, of that I’m sure. They blend in with the crowd and pass unnoticed. They do their duties well enough to gain neither curse nor praise.’

‘They hide in plain sight.’ Bilbo sighed. ‘Just one of those dwarves you see about the place.’

‘It could be almost anyone, and without accusing every man and dwarf in this mountain, I’ll get nowhere.’ Dwalin folded his arms, shaking his head as if he could not believe what he was about to say. ‘Scrap the search. Let the wizard work his wonders while we make Erebor a fortress. I should be here, with you, making sure yer safe.’ He leaned his hands on the table, his teeth flashing white amidst his beard. ‘You have the proof you need for the council to show Frár is behind it. Whatever the Stonefoots have planned has already begun. Let me protect you against the blow, wherever it may fall.’

Thorin closed his eyes, his nostrils flaring as he drew a deep breath. At last, he opened them again, meeting Dwalin’s gaze. ‘You’re right. I can’t risk damaging the trust we have worked so hard to build these past few months in the name of catching Frár’s pawn. If it comes to a siege, we will need the faith of everyone who shares our halls. To undo that now with clumsy accusations could be our downfall.’

Dwalin looked up at Bilbo, a strong vein of certainty running through his frank words. ‘Whoever has it in for you might still try their luck. Go nowhere without half-a-dozen guards. Remain armed at all times.’ He raised his eyebrows, awaiting Bilbo’s vow before he breathed a sigh. ‘I’ll begin drills as well. Make sure our forces, such as they are, know what to do when the time comes.’

He thumped his fist over his heart, bowing to Thorin before marching away, his calls to their guards ringing in the quiet air. Ferocity underscored every syllable, and Bilbo winced to hear it. Dwalin would be blaming himself for his inability to unearth their troublemaker, of that he was sure.

Gently, Bilbo tightened his fingers around the hand that still clutched his under the table, smoothing his thumb over Thorin’s knuckles in an effort to ease some of his tension. There was more to all this than what he could see on the surface. Thorin’s demeanour spoke of more than outrage at Frár’s actions. Anger blighted his face, but beneath it was an undeniable foundation of fear.

‘You must do as Dwalin says.’ Thorin’s voice was a rasp in his throat, half-strangled to Bilbo’s ears. ‘Your guards should be with you always.’

‘They are,’ he pointed out. ‘Unless I’m either in our quarters, your forge or using the privy, they are practically breathing down my neck. Even when they’re not, they’re only a room away.’ He frowned, trying to understand the urgency that ran through Thorin’s voice. Now he listened, he could hear a faint tremor, as if he were struggling to keep some vast emotion under control. ‘What was in that letter? It must have been more than knowing Frár was behind it that’s made you like this.’

‘Like what?’ he asked, a hint of old anger in his words. It reminded Bilbo of the start of their journey, when Thorin had been anything but kind. Back then, he would have retreated, but those times were long past. Instead, he crooked an eyebrow, cocking his head as he shot Thorin a sharp look of his own.

‘Terrified.’

He half-expected him to deny it. As it was, his shoulders straightened and his chin went up, all imperious disdain, but it was a thin façade for everything Bilbo could see all too well. For a split-second, he was certain that Thorin would argue, but it never came. Instead, he pressed his lips shut, his nostrils flaring as he sighed.
'I cannot be sure it will do you good to know.'

'Will it do you good to keep it from me?' Bilbo reached out, grasping Thorin’s spare hand and holding it tight before moving his other arm. Now, their hands were on the tabletop for the world to see, each of them clasping the other just as feverishly. It offered comfort, yes, but for Bilbo, it also stopped Thorin pulling away. He may be trying to do what he thought was best, but this – keeping him in the dark – was not something he would tolerate. ‘Please, tell me?’

He watched, seeing Thorin’s throat pulse as he swallowed and the way his eyes pinched with distress. However, he did not attempt to coddle him with false assurances. Instead, he drew a deep breath, straightening his spine before he met Bilbo’s gaze.

‘You’re right. The letter Nori decoded indicated that you were a target not just because of your relationship to me, but because of what you are.’ Thorin clenched his jaw, shaking his head in distaste. ‘The message made it more than clear that for a hobbit to be courting any dwarf, least of all a king, was an abomination, though the language used was much more… vivid. That is perhaps the bit Balin recognised. Carth makes no secret of his bigotry.’

Bilbo blinked, taking a moment to collect himself as he watched a muscle tick in Thorin’s jaw. Prejudice among the races of Middle Earth was commonplace. Normally, hobbits stayed out of it. They kept to themselves and didn’t bother anyone. Part of him was surprised that Frár, or his sharp-tongued adviser Carth, even knew what a hobbit was.

‘I don’t know what the Khuzdul said,’ Bilbo began, ‘though I can guess. The thing is, it’s old, isn’t it? I mean these aren’t new orders for the agent in Erebor?’

‘No, they were written weeks ago, probably not long after we re-entered the mountain.’

It was an educated guess, but one that made sense. For him and Thorin, they had only been truly courting for a month. However, as far as the rest of the mountain knew, they had been sharing a bed all winter.

‘Well, in that case, I’m in no more danger than before, am I?’ It was a flimsy scrap of logic, but Bilbo clung to it all the same. ‘It doesn’t matter how the letters were worded – how horrible they were – they’ve not managed to carry out their instructions.’

Thorin’s grasp tightened, becoming almost uncomfortable in its desperation. ‘For which I thank Mahal every day, but when I think of what was written – of the abuse on the page...’ He swallowed again, his warm complexion turning pale and sickly. ‘To whoever wrote those orders, it was not merely a case of getting you out of the way, but of punishing you. As if you had reached for too much and should suffer as a result.’

‘Well, you are a king. Some people would think you should be marrying royalty, not some nobody from the Shire.’

Fire sparked across Bilbo’s skin as Thorin gave him a powerful look. The fear that tainted his face vanished beneath a wave of certainty as he pulled Bilbo forward to press a rough kiss to his forehead. ‘You are far from nobody,’ he stated, catching Bilbo’s eye and holding it as if nothing in the world mattered more than that visceral, connected gaze. ‘Never let anyone convince you otherwise.’

With a sigh, he nodded, wishing there was some way he could help. No reassurance he could offer Thorin would undo what he had read, and now he himself was torn. On the one hand, he did not want to see what some horrible dwarf had said about him, but on the other was a morbid fascination
to face the worst. He had always suspected there would be some people who would not approve of his connection to Thorin, but this was the first time he had found concrete proof.

‘Don’t think on it,’ Thorin murmured. ‘I have no doubt that Carth wrote those instructions with Frár’s approval. They are nothing to us, and their opinion is meaningless.’

‘I’ll forget it if you do?’ Bilbo suggested, leaning back and slipping his hands free of Thorin’s grasp. He knew it was too much to ask for either of them to put it out of their minds entirely, but dwelling on it would do no good. Besides, he was not about to give Carth the satisfaction of driving him out of the mountain – not now he had made his choice to stay. ‘Would it make you feel better if I put aside my duties for the day?’

Thorin looked at him in surprise, but there was no mistaking the relief that spread over his face. ‘It would reassure me to know that you are safe. Our quarters –’

‘Won’t do. I don’t want anyone to think I’m hiding, Thorin.’ Bilbo thought quickly. He had an ulterior motive for suggesting he stay out of the public eye for the day. He needed time to work on something, without Thorin in attendance. ‘I’ll be in our forge. It’s out of the way, easy to guard and I can practice the glasswork you’ve been showing me.’

Mention of their shared evenings brought a fond smile to Thorin’s face, and delight glowed in Bilbo’s stomach to see his simple joy. Forging metal had been a disaster from start to finish, but last week Thorin had showed him how to melt sand and shape glass instead. It was small, intricate work, far more suited to Bilbo’s talents, and despite his uncertainty over the ferocity of the flames, he had found himself enjoying it. Now, he planned to put his rudimentary skills to good use.

‘All right.’ Thorin nodded, rising to his feet and offering Bilbo his hand. ‘Have one of the soldiers in the room with you in case something goes amiss.’

‘Ronin will be there,’ Bilbo reminded him, checking the empty doorway for witnesses before brushing the back of Thorin’s knuckles with his lips. The tease had the desired effect, and he watched the worries retreat beneath the bloom of desire in those blue eyes. Perhaps one or two of the guards saw, but if they were scandalised they kept it to themselves, even when Thorin pulled Bilbo in for a breathless embrace.

‘The things you do to me,’ he murmured, his voice little more than a purr in the shell of Bilbo’s ear. It was a perfect moment of warmth and want, a place where they could set themselves apart from the concerns that pressed against them from all sides. Yet despite his desperate wishes to the contrary, Bilbo knew it couldn’t last forever. Before a minute had passed, Thorin swept a final kiss against Bilbo’s brow and stepped back. ‘Promise me you’ll be careful?’

‘I promise.’ Bilbo smiled, not leaving Thorin’s side until they reached the doorway, braced to go their separate ways. There they stood, as if their parting were a precipice, and they were trying to find the courage to jump.

‘It will be all right.’ He gave Thorin’s arm a quick squeeze. ‘Go. Help the others prepare for a siege. Even if an army never comes, it’s better to be safe than sorry. I’ll be waiting for you when you’re finished.’ He watched Thorin nod before reluctantly turning his back, trying to ignore the clench of his heart as he headed towards the forge.

His guards fell in around him, close and protective, but Bilbo barely paid them any mind. Even Ronin, who walked at his elbow, could have been no more than a shadow. He had other things to occupy his thoughts.
The door to Thorin’s workshop closed behind him, and Bilbo took a deep breath, admiring the fragrance of embers and smoke. When Thorin had first invited him, it had been an alien place, full of stinging heat and glittering sparks. Now, it had become Bilbo’s sanctuary too: somewhere he could shed the worries of the day like an old coat and drown out his fears by focusing on the simple movement of hands and tools.

Peeling off his jacket, he glanced over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow when he realised he wasn’t alone. Ronin had not remained outside as normal, but instead stood sentry inside the door, his eyes sharp and alert. His presence was enough to let the anxiety rise anew, pressing beneath Bilbo’s ribs and making his heart hammer in his chest.

‘You don’t have to be in here,’ he said, dropping his hands meaningfully to the hem of his tunic and managing a smile when Ronin turned around, giving him privacy as he stripped off the mithril. The metal may be light, but it seemed to trap the heat of the fire and cleave it to Bilbo’s skin. He had no wish to carry an armour of burns across his flesh. ‘I know what I told Thorin, but it’s not like anyone can get in unless they come through that door.’

He replaced his shirt and donned an apron before looking at Ronin again, noticing the stiffness of his shoulders and the taut line of his spine. ‘All right, you can turn around now if you want.’

Ronin’s boots scuffed against the floor as he moved, facing the room once more. ‘Lord Balin asked me to stay by your side. You’re not to be left alone. Not after –’ He pursed his lips, offering a jerky shrug before shaking his head. A twisted medley of emotions played across his features. Anger allied with disgust, all underpinned by the kind of distress that made him less a soldier and more someone Bilbo had begun to consider a friend.

‘Was that letter really so bad?’ he asked. ‘Did Balin tell you?’

‘Aye, he did. Enough to put me on my guard. It –’ He hesitated, taking a breath before trying to explain. ‘I know dwarves seem harsh, quick to wage war and throw fists: it’s the passion in us. That said, there are still rules we obey. Lines we do not cross. The Stonefoots threw all that aside.’ He clenched his jaw, his fingers tightening on the shaft of his axe. ‘Those letters were never meant to be seen by anyone but the bastard doing Frár’s dirty work. Carth will answer to the council for his threats, but the fact he felt safe to write them, bold as brass, says a lot for his confidence. He thought getting to you would be easy. It’s that, more than anything, which makes the Company nervous.’

Bilbo pursed his lips, ducking his head in brief understanding before turning back to the forge. His stomach roiled, brimming with anxiety, but he shoved it mercilessly aside. What more could he do? He was already hiding in all but name, sneaking off to Thorin’s workroom.

Part of him was tempted to crawl into bed and stay there until it was all over, but that wasn’t an option. Perhaps a hobbit could get away with it, but he had stopped being just a hobbit a long time ago. He was Thorin’s beloved and, if he went through with today’s plan, there was a damn good chance he would be his consort.

He hesitated, his fingers wrapped around the handle of the bellows as he allowed himself one last moment of doubt. Was this really what he wanted? Not just a home, but a throne to go with it? Not merely a lover at his side, but a king? Thorin and all that came with him – the good and the bad?

His answer lay in the pit of his guts and the marrow of his bones. It filled his veins with light and wrapped bands of iron around his spine, helping him to stand tall. Life ruling at Thorin’s left hand wouldn’t be easy. There would always be strife to go with the joy, and the clamouring demands of a kingdom and its allies, but it would be more than worth it.
Bilbo had never been so sure of anything in all his days.

Without a word, he reached out, pushing all thoughts of their current problems aside as he bent himself to the task at hand. He and Thorin had worked on making crude rods of glass, and he collected them together, admiring the different colours. Some were as thick as his finger, while others were slender, as fine as the whisker of a mouse. Blowing bottles and bowls was still far beyond his skill, but beads – those he could just about manage.

They had unearthed plenty such objects in the treasury – precious, glittering things steeped in ancient love stories and half-forgotten history. It would be easier to use one of those, but that idea didn’t sit right. In his own hair, they would give a betrothal validity, including him in the roots of Erebor’s past. However, he wanted to offer Thorin something that was all his own: a promise crafted by Bilbo’s own hands.

He could not work steel or silver, but glass was more forgiving of his mistakes. Picking up a mandrel of a suitable width, he slipped a clay sleeve over it before peering at the rods and taking his pick.

It looked like magic, the first time he saw Thorin melt sand and add a few grains of metal to give the finished result different, dazzling hues. Yet slowly he had begun to understand the knowledge behind it. Thorin had even showed him how to identify the ores and melt them in a crucible, pulling out the metals that leant their creations such vibrant colours.

Now, he picked up one of the rods, as pale as the sky on a midwinter morning. A few bubbles shone along its length, and Bilbo drew a deep breath before easing it towards the fire. This craft was different from metalwork, requiring less heat. Thorin had already admitted that such a task was not ideal for the forge: like using an axe when a knife would do, but for now it was all Bilbo had, and he intended to make the most of it.

Sweat gathered between his shoulder blades as he lost himself, focusing all his concentration on the malleable creation that began to form beneath his inexperienced hands. He dredged his memory for every tip that Thorin had given him, starting over more than once until he was satisfied with the shape of the bead’s body.

His fingers shook as they hovered over the thin strands of coloured glass before he selected one that was shorter than all the rest, and infinitely more valuable. He remembered holding his breath as Thorin created it, adding a single fleck of mithril and turning up the heat until it changed: burning a bright silver that glowed with a light of its own.

With as much care as he could manage, he trailed the melting material over the cooler surface of the bead, watching it come to life before his eyes. The mithril glass banded the top and bottom before crossing over in a traditional braid to symbolise dwarven betrothal.

Letting out a shuddering breath, Bilbo nodded in satisfaction, making sure to keep the mandrel turning in his hand so that his efforts would hold their shape while the additional decoration melted into the surface. Only then did he remove it from the flame, keeping it in constant motion as it began to cool.

‘Now that’s a fine thing indeed.’

Bilbo jumped, snapping his head around to stare at Ronin. He had been so engrossed that he had completely forgotten his audience. He had no idea how much time had passed, but judging from the crimp in his back and the failed attempts littering the floor, he had been at his task for a while.

Blinking gritty eyes, he dipped his handiwork into water that was warm to the touch, watching the
steam wisp from the surface before the bead came free of the mandrel and sank to the bottom. He checked the temperature before scooping it up in his palm and holding it to the light.

‘You think so?’ he asked, suddenly nervous, smiling when Ronin gave an emphatic nod. ‘It needs putting in a kiln for a while to strengthen it, but otherwise…’ He trailed off, biting his lip and running his fingers over the bead, proud despite himself. It looked wonderfully intricate, regardless of its simple construction. A quick prod of the hole through the middle ensured it was smooth and would slide into a braid, and no flaws marked its shining surface.

‘You won’t tell anyone, will you?’ he asked, glancing at Ronin out of the corner of his eye. He knelt down by the base of the forge, opening the door to the oven nestled in the brickwork and placing the bead inside. ‘Thorin doesn’t even know I’m staying, yet. I – I wanted to get this made first to – to show I was serious about it I suppose.’

He felt foolish, saying such things out loud, but only soft delight glinted in Ronin’s gaze. ‘I won’t say a word, Master Baggins. Besides, something tells me you’ll not keep it to yourself for long.’

‘Definitely not. As soon as the bead’s ready I’ll – I’ll ask him.’ A new storm of butterflies thrashed in Bilbo’s stomach: an effervescent blend of excitement and apprehension. He was almost certain Thorin would not say no, but doubts still lingered. It hadn’t escaped his notice that Thorin had remained silent on the prospect of their future, preferring instead to enjoy each day as it came. Was he showing respect for Bilbo by giving him space to make his own decisions, or did it speak of some unvoiced reluctance?

Swallowing hard, Bilbo shook the thought away. He’d find out soon enough.

Quickly, he set about tidying up the forge, melting down his failed attempts and extruding them into new rods before leaving them to cool. Cleaning his tools was quick work before he banked the flames, making the glowing embers safe. A swift sweep of the floor scooped up the debris, and more than once, he was grateful for the thick skin on the bottom of his feet as he stood on the occasional stray scrap of metal.

After he had finished, he opened the kiln door and checked inside, grabbing some tongs to ease his prize free. Something so small did not take as long to harden as bigger objects, and thanks to a difference in the sand, the results were stronger and better glazed than anything he had seen in the west.

Bilbo swore softly, stunned by the transformation. If he had thought the bead fine before, it was nothing in comparison to the finished product. The mithril had changed as it baked, and the delicate shimmer had become a vivid, dazzling glow. Shifting colours wavered at its core, reminding Bilbo of some of the gems in the treasury that changed hue depending on how you held them to the light: white one minute, rich, pale sapphire the next, all encased in tiny veins of braided silver where the mithril glass was thickest.

Perhaps he was being sentimental, but to Bilbo, the bead’s beauty was a blessing. He had not known there would be such consequences to his choices, but now he was delighted at his impulsive decision to use it. Maybe his offering was neither as precious nor as fine as betrothal beads of old, but Bilbo knew he had not seen anything like it, either in Erebor’s treasury or beyond.

Taking off his apron, he hung it up before ambling over to where the mithril shirt and his jacket lay over a chair. He needed to find Thorin. Now the bead was finished, he did not want to delay a moment longer. Perhaps it would be wise to wait until all the business with the potential siege was past, but Bilbo did not think he had that much patience in him. After weeks of dallying over his choice, he was ready to offer Thorin all he had to give.
The soft cloth of his coat brushed against his fingertips, but before he could pick it up a quiet noise reached his ears. Frowning in confusion, he turned to Ronin, seeing the same puzzlement fade into horror as a sudden, choked off cry carried through the thick, wooden door.

‘Wait!’ Bilbo hissed, stretching out his hand. ‘Don’t open it! It’s barred shut. If someone’s out there causing trouble, then we’re safe in here!’

Ronin nodded, stepping back and hefting his axe, ready to bring it down on the head of whoever tried to enter. ‘Arm yourself, Master Baggins. Quickly!’

He lunged for Sting, pulling the sword from its scabbard. His jacket fell to the floor as he scrambled to free the ring from its hiding place. He almost put it on. If it were not for Ronin, he would have done, but he could not risk anyone discovering his little secret. Not after he had kept it hidden for so long.

Instead, he slipped it into the waistband of his britches. Dori had worked his magic, sewing an inside pocket into the cloth. Thanks to clever cutting and crafty stitching, it was invisible to the eye, the ideal hiding place. Currently, the sheathed silver knife Nori had given him hid there: a deadly little last resort. Without hesitation, Bilbo hid both the ring and bead next to the blade, patting his hip to check they were hidden before standing behind Ronin.

A shadow moved beneath the door, inching along the threshold. A moment later, thick fumes began to roll through the gap, curling in beckoning tendrils. Bilbo tried to cover his mouth with his sleeve, but already every breath tasted like poison. It stung his throat and burned his eyes, making his chest spasm in fitful coughs. Ronin was no better, staggering before he shook his head and lunged forward, heaving the bar up and swinging blindly in an effort to find fresh air.

Through streaming eyes, Bilbo saw something hit Ronin in the face. At first he thought it was a fist, but then he watched the soldier bend double, clutching at his throat before he sagged to his knees. His axe clanged on the floor, ringing like a death knell as a figure loomed in the doorway.

Shaking his head, Bilbo backed up, his lungs spasming. Sting fell from his numb hand as he reached for the ring, but his fingers were too clumsy and bloodless to grasp it. Fool of a Baggins! He should have put it on rather than try and hide its existence from Ronin. At least then he would have been able to slip away and find help. As it was, he was like a rabbit in a trap, unable to do anything but watch the hunter approach.

It was impossible to get a good look at him. His eyes watered, painting his cheeks with their tears. All he got was a vague impression of shining glass and swathes of fabric before his attacker lunged, jabbing a fist into his belly and pushing something vile into his mouth.

Dried herbs coated his tongue in a nauseating mixture of flavour, slipping down his throat. Between one heartbeat and the next, the world slid sideways, spinning in a tortuous impression of forge-fire and hard stone. His feet left the floor, floating in empty air as someone slung him over their shoulder and turned towards the door.

He tried to call out, but all he managed was a weak croak before he retched, producing awful dry heaves. His guards lay prone where they fell or sat slumped against the wall, pale-faced and still. Out here, the fumes were starting to fade, leaving an odd, grey dust in their wake. It covered their faces and armour, making them look like the long-dead of Erebor, and there was nothing Bilbo could do to help them.

Every struggle he made was a feeble effort, and his head only whirled the faster for his efforts. He tried to pay attention to where they were going, but the waking world was slipping from his grasp.
The corridors through which they passed got darker and more dusty, lit only by the occasional candle. His captor carried him with ease, barring doors in their wake with his spare hand as he marched ever onwards.

At last, just as Bilbo’s struggles weakened and unconsciousness threatened to claim him, they strode into the open air. The cold stirred him from his stupor long enough for him to see slushy, churned snow and bare rock peeking through its blanket. Weakly, he lifted his head, stretching out a hand towards the door in the mountainside. Even as he watched, the heavy portal swung shut, stone grating on stone until it vanished from sight, as invisible as a dream.

Darkness rose, and Bilbo knew no more.
Weariness dogged Thorin’s footsteps. It had been an endless day, starting with the revelations of that morning and progressing ever onwards. Each hour dragged by, all the more empty for Bilbo’s absence. The only thing that kept him going was the knowledge that his hobbit was safe in the forge. That certainty gave him strength and now, as he strode towards their sanctuary, his heart lifted from its leaden cradle in his chest.

‘Your Majesty?’

Biting back a groan, he turned to face Nori and Balin. More than anything, he longed to delay whatever they had to say until morning, but that was not how ruling a kingdom worked. He was a slave to Erebor’s whims. Besides, he knew his advisers would not bother him if it were not important.

‘What is it?’

Nori offered him a stack of papers, thrusting them out before him as if they were biting serpents. ‘The rest of the decoded instructions from the Stonefoots. It’s all there.’

‘Does it tell us anything we don’t already know?’

Balin nodded, his mild face twisted by harsh, bitter lines. ‘Master Baggins was right. We are not the only ones with allies.’ He folded his hands in front of him, his knuckles white as if he were holding himself back. ‘An army marches, Your Majesty. The Blackbeards.’

Thorin recoiled, unable to control the slack-jawed horror that marred his face. The Blackbeard clan was a noble one; kin by marriage to the Durin line more than once. To hear they had aligned themselves with the Stonefoots was a bitter dose to swallow. ‘You are sure?’

‘That they march? Aye, though I cannot say what Frár has told them to gain their assistance. I know the clan of old. I cannot believe that there is no deception in play.’

‘Deceived or not, they are still coming,’ Nori interrupted, his gaze roving the hallway and taking in the faces of Thorin’s guards. ‘May we walk with you? This is the kind of discussion best made on the move. That way no one but those present get the whole story.’

‘The mountain will have to know soon enough,’ Thorin pointed out, but he did not argue as they began to pace, traversing the hallways with a measured stride. ‘When will they be here? How many? I need details.’

‘And we have none.’ Balin shrugged in apology, spreading his hands wide. ‘The messages were deliberately obscure.’

‘Most likely, they set out after Storn’s mishap in the treasury. A good while ago now. If they were coming from Steranor, it would take them a while longer to get here,’ Nori said.

‘But there’s no way to be sure they marched from the Blackbeard clan’s halls. If they were stationed at Rholnost before this began –’

‘Then they could be on our thrice-cursed doorstep.’ Thorin ran his tongue over his teeth, swallowing back the growl that threatened to rumble free from his chest. ‘We need scouts. I’d send up the ravens, except I cannot be sure they would ever return. Is the plateau yet passable?’
'To a dwarf? Not with ease.' Balin scratched his temple before looking over his shoulder. ‘However, I am sure Mistress Tauriel will offer her services. Elves suffer less with the snow than our kind.’

‘See it done. As long as we are within the mountain, we are safe, but I would like to know what we face all the same.’

Balin acted before Thorin finished speaking, placing a kind hand on the arm of a passing human girl and making his request with a smile. She raced off down the corridor without a hint of annoyance, ducking past a couple of patrolling soldiers as she hurried off. With any luck, she would find Kili’s sweetheart before too long. Perhaps they had lost the light of day and such efforts would have to wait until morning, but then perhaps not. Elves had very good eyes; maybe they would not suffer the shadows of nightfall.

Around them, the halls grew quieter, emptying of people as they approached the forge that Thorin made his refuge. It was a few floors deeper into the mountain than the overseer’s quarters. Up there, everyone would be joining for the evening meal, meeting after a day’s hard toil to share the gossip and catch up with friends.

In its prime, Erebor contained little in the way of peaceful corners. Thorin could remember it well, desperately trying to find a quiet spot during his youth for a quick tryst or a moment alone. These days, everything was different. Huge swathes of his kingdom remained empty, barely disturbed by the passage of feet from one day to the next. His forge was such a place, untouched but for him, Bilbo, and the guards that orbited them through every hour.

‘It is sad to see it so,’ Balin replied when Thorin remarked on the eerie tranquillity, shaking his snowy head in remorse. ‘This place was never meant to be so still.’

A tug on his sleeve made Thorin turn, looking at Nori in surprise. He had reached out for both him and Balin, pulling them up short as their guards stumbled to a puzzled halt. ‘It shouldn’t be this still now,’ he murmured. ‘I overheard Ronin talking to those in his command. He wanted some of them to patrol. We should have run into them, or at least heard their boots. You know how these passages carry echoes.’

Thorin cocked his head, the calm around them taking on an ominous edge. Here, among silent workrooms, not even the chatter of the people above them could be heard. Only the hiss of the braziers and the quiet breathing of those around him leant any definition to the peace.

‘He’s right,’ Dwalin growled, pushing himself forward from where he had been bringing up the rear of their escort. His dark eyes swept the bare corridor, narrow and suspicious as he sheathed his sword and drew one of his axes, shifting it in his grasp. ‘It could be Ronin changed his orders, but…’

He left his sentence hanging, and an icy streak of dread flowed down Thorin’s spine. Orcrist was in his hand before he knew it, gleaming in the ruddy torchlight. His guards had also drawn their weapons, adding the musical chime of battle-worn steel to the air as they fanned out, moving like wolves on the prowl towards the corner up ahead.

‘Stay.’

Fear turned Thorin’s mind into a morass, and he paid no heed to Dwalin’s gruff order. The litany of Bilbo’s name on frantic repeat filled his thoughts, and the sharp clutch of terror clamped around his throat. The temptation to shove his guards aside and sprint ahead trembled in his bones. Only Balin’s hand like a vice on his elbow stopped him from doing just that.

‘Release me!’
'No.' Balin stuck out his jaw, tightening his grasp until his bony fingers left bruises. 'I'll not let you dash into danger. Not when there are others to take the blow for you.'

The curse that escaped Thorin’s lips was crude to the extreme, questioning Balin’s parentage and honour in the same breath. The old dwarf didn’t even blink, shrugging it off like water from a duck’s back as he finally allowed Thorin to move, not at a sprint, but at an agonising, cautious crawl.

Nori’s daggers gleamed, the metal bright as he sniffed the air. ‘Get Oin,’ he ordered one of the soldiers. ‘And the wizard, too. Run.’

Thorin barely heard the clatter of the dwarf’s boots as he sprinted off. He was too intent on the corner ahead of them and the throbbing, brumal chill of horror at the thought of what they might find. Dwalin, three steps in front and on point, flicked his fingers in mute instruction. The soldiers either side of them shifted their swords, bending their knees as they prepared to lunge forward and take in the sight that awaited them.

They pounced, their slow progress erupting into a burst of speed and thunderous footfalls. Yet there was no cry of alarm or the chime of one blade on another. Even Dwalin stopped at the summit of the hallway’s turn, his axe lowered and his expression shadowed. He did not protest as Thorin shook off Balin’s restraint and rushed forward, his heart in his throat as he slithered to a halt at Dwalin’s side.

Later, he would wince at his callous disregard for the prone figures on the floor. He did not trample over them, but nor did he stop to mark their faces or heed whether life still found a home within their veins. He could not spare them even a glance, not when fear for Bilbo filled him to the brim. Desperate and dreading, he skidded through the forge door, his heart so high in his throat he almost gagged on his pulse as he surveyed the room.

‘Bilbo!’

His roar rang through the small chamber, bouncing back at him. He searched each corner, grabbing a torch to peel away the secrecy of the shadows. The squat glow of the forge offered no answer, and nor did the bare expanse of the floor. Only a chair to the side gleamed with anything like promise, and Thorin’s heart sank into his boots as he saw the mithril vest, half-covered by the sprawl of Bilbo’s jacket.

Both spilled from their resting place, as if someone had made an aborted grab for them, only to be dragged away as events unfurled. Now, they taunted him with their disarray, and Thorin stared wildly around, looking for anything that could tell him what had become of Bilbo.

‘He’s not among the fallen.’

Balin’s voice sliced into his panic, but did little to ease it. Perhaps he had not been struck down in this instant, but wherever he was, he had no protection. There was no mithril to shield his heart, and the small silver form of Sting on the floor told its own story. Wherever Bilbo was, he was neither armed nor armoured.

‘We have to find him!’ Thorin snapped, not caring that his voice cracked.

In a fit of morbid fascination, his gaze twisted towards the forge, and he reached for a poker, stirring the embers as fresh sweat erupted across his brow.

Thankfully, his macabre search turned up no evidence that Bilbo had met a horrible end amidst the coals, and logic soon interceded. Bodies did not burn well. They left a noxious fume in the air and a greasy pall over all that the smoke touched. If Bilbo had died in such a way, they would have known...
it before they even entered the room.

He swayed where he stood, the poker slipping from his fingers. He felt light-headed with his panic, his mind dull and useless beneath the shroud of his fear. Possibilities chittered in his skull, each more ghastly than the one before.

In the hallway, raised voices clamoured in alarm, but they barely penetrated the icy cocoon of his shock. It wasn’t until Balin rested a gentle hand on his shoulder that he turned away from the forge: the last, silent witness to Bilbo’s calamity.

‘Where is he?’ Thorin whispered, his gaze beseeching. Over the decades, Balin always had answers to his questions. There were no such words of comfort on this day.

‘Now, lad,’ he warned. ‘Don’t be hasty.’

Thorin’s fingers spasmed, his lips peeling back from his teeth in a snarl as he fought the urge to tear out of the room. He would rip these halls apart to find his hobbit again! He would cut down any who stood in his way. He would not rest until Bilbo was once more safe in his arms, alive and well. Mahal damn his duties and this accursed mountain! Let them take it, if they wanted it so, and may its blighted walls choke them on their victory!

Yet even as the furious thoughts turned his vision red at its edges, he knew that was not how it could go. Being king came with wealth and power, but it was an unrelenting commitment to something far bigger than the dwarf upon the throne. He could not bear the crown only when it suited him. The mantle of rule only lifted with death. What he wanted came second to Erebor’s needs. Not even the cries of his frantic heart could change that.

He pressed his fingers to his temples, clutching at his hair as he curled like a wild beast around a mortal wound. The courting braid strafed over his fingertips, no longer a thing of joy but a damning mockery, and he sucked in a breath, reaching deep within himself for the strength to face what this day had wrought.

‘What would you have me do?’ he whispered, choking on his words as he lifted his head. ‘Leave Bilbo to his fate?’

Balin gave him a disbelieving look, tightening his grip and moving forward to press his brow to Thorin’s: not an adviser in that moment, but a father instead. ‘Don’t be a damn fool. You are the King of Erebor, and Master Baggins is your consort in all but name. He has been taken. Whether we’re ready or not, that is an act of war. Those around you are loyal and your kingdom strong, but you’ll not win this fight if you act alone.’

Thorin closed his eyes, swallowing around the lump in his throat as he allowed Balin’s words to sink in. For so long, he had been ruler in name only: a dwarf without his homelands. He had shouldered those burdens and carried on with neither ally nor army. Balin’s reminder was a timely one; things had changed. He had his realm and his people.

It was time to put them both to good use.

Dragging his hand over his mouth, he dredged up his resolve. Rash action was not the way forward. Since his childhood, he had learned to think strategically. Now, those old teachings returned to him: rudimentary but undeniable. He could devise no plan without the facts, and they were sorely lacking.

If he was going to get Bilbo back, then he had to know every detail of his abduction.

Straightening his shoulders, he stepped out into the corridor, ripping aside the veil of his terror to take
in the scene anew. Fleeting impressions of motionless chaos crystallised into a grim scene. All of Bilbo’s guards lay still, their skin covered with a strange, grey pall. Crouching next to the nearest, he reached out, running his fingers through the grit that obscured the breastplate’s shine. ‘What is this?’

‘Mahal damn and blind them!’

Turning, he saw Oin hobbling up the corridor as quick as his old legs would allow. Fili and Kili followed, their arms full of the healer’s tools and potions. As soon as they took in the sight, both went paler than milk, their eyes huge as they turned to look at Thorin.

‘Uncle?’ Kili asked, sounding younger than his meagre years. All his brash bravado vanished, and he set down his burden with little ceremony to rush to Thorin’s side.

Fili was hot on his heels, clasping Thorin’s shoulder even as his younger brother gripped his wrist, the two of them equally desperate. As if caught beneath some spell, they looked towards the open door of the empty forge, and a tight, hurting sound caught in Kili’s throat: a pulse of noise that made Thorin shut his eyes against a fresh onslaught of grief.

‘Bilbo?’ Fili asked, his voice tight. Thorin didn’t need to look to know his oldest nephew would be counting those who lay prone.

‘Taken.’ Thorin tightened his jaw, hearing someone else swear and looking over his shoulder to see that an audience had gathered. He knew not how news travelled so quickly, faster than an arrow in flight, but it seemed all the Company had come running. Bofur’s hat was in his hands, twisting between his fretful fingers. Bombur looked as if he were blinking back tears, while young Ori seemed to vibrate with the same, impotent fury that roared beneath Thorin’s own skin.

‘We know not how, or where,’ he managed, not caring if they could all hear the way his words shook as they spilled beyond the barricade of his teeth, ‘but whatever it takes, whatever we must do, we will find him.’

As if they were of one mind, the Company straightened where they stood: soldiers called to arms. Kili squeezed his wrist while Fili stepped back, reaching over his shoulders to check his swords. Bofur gripped the axe slung into his belt while Bombur’s hands tightened into fists.

All eyes were on him as they awaited his orders.

‘We might not know where,’ Oin cut in from where he knelt next to one of the fallen, ‘but I think I know how.’ He ran his fingers through the dust, tilting it to the light and showing Thorin the dried herbs caught up within it. ‘They used my own damn supplies.’

‘What do you mean?’

Oin peered through the crowd before waving someone closer. ‘Here lass, tell me my old eyes are playing tricks?’ It was probably the first time anyone had heard Oin eager to be wrong, but even as Tauriel knelt at his side, Thorin knew what her answer would be.

‘The herbs that went missing?’ she asked, her ageless face pinched. ‘I thought they were of no real consequence?’

‘They’re common enough. Take too much at once and you might lose your lunch or fall asleep: nothing worse.’

‘Then how do you explain this?’ Dwalin demanded, gesturing to the bodies all around them, the broad blades of his hands slicing through the air. ‘Six guards dead before they even put up a fight!’
Oin tutted, his milky eyes sharp as he shook his head. ‘Dead? Some soldier you are. Leave your enemies breathing often, do you?’ He groaned as he got to his feet and shuffled towards Ronin. Peeling back his discoloured lips, he wiped a finger across his teeth before lifting it cautiously to his nose.

He recoiled from the odour, grumbling to himself before barking at Kili for one of the bottles in his bag. ‘They mixed it with Virven juice. It comes from a mushroom that grows in damp, dark places. Easy to find in a mountain like this.’ Oin nodded at Bombur’s soft sound of surprise, waving a hand in vague agreement. ‘Every cook worth his salt knows about them. Dried they are delicious, but eat them as they are?’ He shook his head, uncapping the bottle and glossing Ronin’s lips with the sticky substance inside. ‘You’ll know your mistake: dizziness, confusion, sounds that are too loud and lights too bright…’ He tutted. ‘It also strengthens the effects of many of the herbs we use in healing. That’s why they collapsed.’

Tauriel sat back on her heels, looking at her dirty fingertips. ‘They stole Tistle and Jenniflec, isn’t that right?’

‘Aye,’ Oin mumbled, turning Ronin’s head to the side and checking his airway. ‘Tistle gives the restless a good night’s sleep. Jenniflec…’ He shrugged. ‘A headache cure, nothing more.’

‘Except if you burn it, it produces awful fumes.’ She rubbed her fingers together before reaching for a canteen of water, rinsing them clean and suggesting Thorin do the same. ‘This grit is ash. The other soldiers have nothing in their mouths. They breathed in the mixture as smoke. Only Ronin was dosed.’

‘Huh.’ Nori tapped his foot, rubbing his chin as he gave it some thought. ‘So he wasn’t in the corridor when the other guards were attacked. He must have been with Bilbo inside the forge. The culprit had to smoke them out.’ He gestured to a line of darker soot that ran along the threshold, scattered and disturbed, but still visible.

‘Look at the way it’s scuffed.’ He pointed with his toe, and Thorin could see the grime had spread outwards, rather than gone into the room. ‘Someone lunged out of the door.’

‘Fool,’ Dwalin growled. ‘Why come out at all? He’d have been safe inside.’

Oin grunted, giving Dwalin a disapproving glare. ‘Virven juice is nasty stuff. In the air, it’s worse. Tiny droplets in the smoke close your throat and confuse your mind. If Ronin thought anything, it was probably that death was coming for him. He was trying to get to fresh air, and then got hit in the mouth with this for good measure. It dropped him there and then. He didn’t even try and crawl away.’

Thorin shook his head, waving one hand in dismissal. ‘How does this help Bilbo? We know his guards were incapacitated and he was taken, but none of it brings us any closer to finding him.’

‘Actually,’ Fili murmured from where he stood behind Dwalin, staring along the corridor, ‘maybe it does.’

Thorin followed the line of his pointing finger, seeing nothing until he shifted position. Then, as if the veils of some illusion had parted, he saw the footprints leading away from the forge. It was a phantom trail in the shallow ash, so faint it was no wonder they had all missed it at first glance.

‘Only one set; definitely made by a dwarf.’ Nori squinted at the ribbon of imprints. ‘They’re too small and broad for anything else. Looks like they carried Bilbo out.’
‘No scuffs or stumbles, either.’ Dwalin hunkered down, pressing his fingertips into the dust and peering along the corridor. ‘I’m guessing the hobbit didn’t have any fight left in him. He’d not let anyone take him so easy if he had a choice.’

With a quick whistle, he summoned the remaining guards to his side, straightening up and pointing the way as if they were bloodhounds stalking a deer. ‘Find where it goes. One working alone is unlikely to try an ambush, but I don’t want to take that chance. Signal alarm or all clear with yer horns.’

He stepped aside, letting those under his command do their work unimpeded. Dwalin did not follow. Instead, he positioned himself to Thorin’s right, one axe angled to block his path. ‘Not yet,’ he growled, his voice so low only Thorin could hear it. ‘I know you. I know yer desperate to find yer hobbit, but not yet.’

Thorin clenched his teeth. Every muscle quivered with a volatile mixture of anger and fear, while his thighs ached with the urge to give chase. A year ago, he would not have hesitated. During his exile he had grown used to being the master of his own actions, following his impulses with little thought to anything beyond the need of the moment.

Such freedom was his no more.

‘Oin,’ he rasped, desperate to do something, even if it was only giving orders, ‘get these soldiers to the infirmary. Fili and Kili, go with him. Let me know as soon as they awake.’ He turned away as the healer called for stretchers and extra hands. The Company leapt to his aid, but Thorin paid them no mind. Instead, his gaze settled on Tauriel, and he beckoned her with a swift jerk of his head.

‘I have need of your eyes,’ he said. ‘Can you scout in this weather?’

To her credit, she considered his request with care. ‘The snow will not trouble me, but if the clouds have drawn in, I’ll have to wait for the dawn. Not even an elf can find a path at night without the aid of starlight.’

‘Prepare yourself,’ Thorin ordered. ‘Leave immediately if you can, or at sunrise if you must. Head south. The land is such that it is the only sensible way to mount an attack.’

Much to Thorin’s surprise, she bowed. Not a shallow, dismissive thing, but an obliging sign of respect. With that, she was gone, her long legs carrying her away to prepare whatever she may need for the journey ahead. He watched her until the banner of her hair disappeared around the corner like a whisper of flame, leaving him amidst the wreckage the spy had left in their wake.

The blast of a horn sounded the all clear, and Thorin did not give Dwalin the chance to take the lead. He dashed forward, ducking past Bofur and Oin as they loaded the last guard onto the stretcher. Nori and Balin were a half-pace in front of him while Dwalin followed close behind, each of them intent on discovering the soldiers’ news.

In the end, they did not have far to run, and a quick glance at the floor told Thorin all he needed to know. Here, not two dozen paces from the forge door, the ash had vanished, taking all sign of the footprints with it.

‘What have you found, Vril?’ Dwalin demanded, slithering to a stop beside one of the dwarves. She was young, not much older than Fili, but there was a confidence in her gaze as she pointed out something else on the floor.

‘It’s got bits of herbs in it, like someone was trying to spit it out, or puke it up.’ Her brown eyes
flickered to Thorin as if to apologise for her frank speech, but she did not waste time as she led the way further along the corridor. ‘There’s not much, just a spot here and there.’ She reached for one of the braziers, pulling free the torch and indicating that the others should do the same. ‘Still, it’s enough. It gave us a trail to follow.’

She marched across a junction where three hallways met, turning towards the left before coming to a brutal looking door. The wood was old, built so long ago its planks had turned to stone. No lacquer decorated its surface, nor did any rust mark its hinges. It had stood the test of time, and now it blocked their path.

‘It’s barred from the other side. I’ve sent some of the lads to get a ram, but…’ She shrugged, turning to Dwalin. ‘It’s built to last, sir. I don’t know if we’ll be able to get through.’

‘Where does it lead?’

‘Past the old weavers’ guild, up towards the marketplace as well as down to the new mines.’ Ori reached behind his ear, pulling free a stick of charcoal and scrabbling in his pockets for a piece of paper before he began to sketch. ‘We haven’t been this way when we were looking for the spy. I didn’t even realise this passageway was here.’

‘Then how do you know where it goes?’ Dwalin asked, raising an eyebrow as Ori glared.

‘There’s nowhere else this corridor could go, not without cutting through a load-bearing seam of granite and bringing the whole peak down on us.’ He waved his sketch around before giving Thorin an apologetic look. ‘Problem is, both the mines and the marketplace are like a hub. Lots of hallways and passages coming and going.’

‘Uncharted, I’ll bet.’ Dwalin rubbed his chin. ‘Any way we can come at it from the other side? Go through the marketplace and try and pick up the trail?’

‘Not unless you fancy getting lost in the dark.’ Ori straightened up, speaking with a confidence Thorin had not seen from him before. ‘A lot of the middle of the mountain is still unexplored. We didn’t cover it when refortifying, and you never got that far in your search. It’ll be quicker to get through the door.’

‘And if it’s not the only one in our path that’s barred?’ Thorin demanded, shifting his weight and trying not to snarl as the minutes slipped away. ‘Every second we linger, whoever has taken Bilbo has more chance to go to ground.’

‘Then there is not a moment to lose,’ a deep voice said.

Gandalf strode past Thorin, pressing long, pale fingers to the door and muttering under his breath. His beard trembled with every parting of his lips, and as Thorin watched, the shadows seemed to cluster, thickening along the walls and pooling on the floor.

A dozen soldiers approached at a clattering march, the leaden weight of the battering ram jostling between them. One look at the wizard brought them to a halt, and Thorin sensed rather than saw their awe and suspicion. Magic was not something commonplace in mountain halls. Dwarves distrusted anything they could not touch with their hands or craft with their tools. However, if Gandalf’s spells could bring them any closer to Bilbo, Thorin would never have a harsh word to say of him again.

‘Whoever stole Master Baggins worked quickly. The magic to warn us of anyone entering or leaving Erebor has not yet been cast on this side of the mountain.’ He gripped his staff, his weathered face
turning sharp as he stepped back. ‘You may wish to cover your ears.’

Whatever word of magic he uttered was lost in the resonant, rolling wave of sound that filled the air, rattling Thorin’s ribcage and shaking the ground beneath his feet. It was as if the mountain itself were a bell struck with Mahal’s hammer, singing out its alarm. Dust rattled down, billowing as the door exploded inwards, banging back on its hinges as the bar on its other side disintegrated into splinters.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the noise died away, leaving everyone gasping in its wake. Many of the soldiers had dropped their weapons in their desperation to protect themselves from the din. The battering ram lay on the floor, abandoned, and Ori’s maps and papers were scattered all around. Even Dwalin stood unarmed, his hands clapped to the side of his head and his expression furious.

‘Not exactly subtle,’ Nori said, sticking his finger in his ear and giving it a wiggle, ‘but it did the trick.’

‘The time for stealth is long since passed, Master Nori.’ Gandalf tapped his staff on the floor, grumbling as the crystal on top flickered before obliging him with its glow.

He set off at a fast pace, his grey robes flapping like the wings of a battered bird. Thorin followed, glad at last to be taking action. The others fell in immediately, but he paid them no mind, too intent on searching their surroundings for any sign of Bilbo or his captor.

With every step, the corridors grew darker and dust thickened once more. Footprints re-emerged, marking the way like a beacon as their quarry disturbed the filth of the decades. They passed through other open doorways, the splinters of the bars that had held them shut crunching beneath their boots as they went.

The quality of the echoes changed, heralding the marketplace up ahead. A few paces later, they stepped out into the vast, dark space. The ceiling arched upwards, disappearing beyond the small halo of Gandalf’s staff and the torches of the soldiers. Columns sprouted like tree-trunks, and the occasional rotted plank and withered cloth was all that remained of the shops that had once filled the empty square.

‘This way,’ Gandalf said, gesturing them further west and cutting across one corner of the huge chamber. ‘Whoever came here had no interest in going deeper into the interior. They were after something else.’

‘An exit.’ Ori pursed his lips, his face pale in the eerie light. ‘All the doors we could find when checking the walls were sealed from inside, but it wouldn’t be much of a trial for someone to open them again. Not if they were coming from within Erebor.’

‘Aye, and leave a handy way in for any invading army,’ Dwalin snarled. ‘We could have been sitting pretty up on the battlements while they invaded us from down below.’

‘Dwarves do not make their strongholds easy to enter. A door, once shut, is almost impossible to locate from the outside, even if you know where to look.’ Balin said. ‘Or have you forgotten how hard it was to find the keyhole upon our arrival?’

‘I care not for any army that may try to sneak past our defences,’ Thorin snapped. ‘They are not yet making their presence known. My concern is for Bilbo.’

He shot a glare over his shoulder, watching both Dwalin and Balin duck their heads in apology. Neither one questioned his priorities; no doubt they knew it would be a useless endeavour. He had
obliged them by holding back from mindless pursuit, but his patience was almost gone. He needed to
know where Bilbo had been taken – needed to see him safe and well as much as he needed his next
breath – but every shrilling instinct told him he would not find any reassurances within the
mountain’s walls.

Gandalf ducked into a narrow corridor, barely wider than Thorin’s shoulders. It was a service
passage, long forgotten, clogged with debris and neglect. Things best left unexplored crunched
underfoot, and oppressive darkness haunted each step.

They walked for what felt like hours, fear stretching every moment, yet there was no sound or sign
of life up ahead. Travelling in single file, Thorin tried to ignore the uncomfortable press of the walls
around him. He couldn’t be sure if the way grew more narrow, or if his mind played tricks on him.
Ghostly breezes stirred the hairs on the back of his neck, raising his skin in gooseflesh while his palm
grew slick on Orcrist’s hilt.

A murmured word from Gandalf made the crystal on his staff flare, and a collective sigh of relief rose
as they realised the end was in sight. The narrow passage flared into a cramped vestibule, the ceiling
too low for a man to stand tall. Gandalf bent almost at the waist as he stood to the side, letting them
file out into the tight, foetid space. His blue eyes were sharp beneath the gnarled twist of his brow as
he looked around, taking in the first evidence of life they’d seen.

‘Smells like a stable,’ Dwalin complained, wrinkling his nose.

‘That’s because it’s been used as one from the looks of it.’ Nori kicked at a pile of dung, examining it
critically before skimming his fingertips over the wall. He plucked free a knot of hair where some
beast had rubbed at an itch. ‘One of those longhaired ponies; the ones that can move through the
snow. Better than a ram for winter weather, but still short enough for a dwarf to ride without trouble.’

‘Looks like they fed it veg scraps from the dinner table. A bit here and there and no one’s going to
notice.’ Ori peered into the leather feed bucket. ‘It’s not gone off yet.’

‘They left in a hurry,’ Thorin growled, running the flat of his palm across the seemingly blank wall
until he found a faint seam within the stone.

The muscles in his back bunched as he threw himself against the rock face, his teeth bared.
Resistance gave way to a smooth, steady slide, and Thorin lunged, his sword already swinging.

Orcrist slashed at empty air, and he stared around, his heart sinking as Dwalin spat abuse behind him.
‘Lelkhâr! Have you lost yer mind? What if the enemy was waiting? They’d have had yer head clean
off yer shoulders before you could blink!’

‘There’s no one here.’ The words fell like lead from Thorin’s lips as a fresh wave of pain washed
through his chest. His fierce hope that Bilbo would be just outside the walls, held only a fraction
beyond his reach, faded to dust in the twilight. He stared around at the snow-softened land before
him, seeing nothing but the occasional flurry whipped up by the wind: no movement, no life.

‘Not now, maybe,’ Ori gestured to another pile of dung in a sheltered nook to the side of the door,
‘but they were.’ He kicked it with his foot, breaking apart the crust. No steam wisped up from the
mess, and Thorin could already see ice crystals forming on its surface.

‘It’s several hours old,’ Nori murmured, hunkering down for a better look before rubbing a hand
across his face. ‘Whoever has Bilbo has a good head start. Question is, which way did they go?’

Thorin swallowed, sucking in a deep breath of air as he surveyed the empty horizon. Stark and cold,
it offered him nothing. There was no trail of hoof prints in the snow and slush, nor any fleeing figure visible to the eye. Whoever had Bilbo had already made their getaway, and Mahal alone knew where they had gone.

‘Fasâl!’ Thorin swore, hissing the word between clenched teeth. A hand settled on his shoulder, and he looked up into Gandalf’s face, his lips parted to beg for his aid anew. Yet before he could speak, the old man shook his head, his expression falling into haggard remorse. ‘There is nothing more my magic can do. I am afraid we must rely on more mundane methods to find our hobbit friend.’

Thorin clenched his fists, ignoring the bite of the chill at his open collar as he glared his accusations at the plateau before him. A vile tide of helpless despair rose from the pit of his stomach, and he swallowed it back like bile. His heart cried out, beating against the bars of his ribs, but he knew that only failure awaited a thoughtless search. There was too much ground to cover, full of ice to slip the feet and rocks to break the heads of the hapless. He may rule these lands, but in this weather, he was not their master.

It galled him to admit it, but all his hopes were with the elf lass. He had to hope that her quick pace and sharp eyes could find Bilbo when he could not.

The jagged blast of Erebor’s great horn crashed through the air, and Thorin’s hair whipped around him as he spun, staring up towards the craggy heights of the mountain. Every dwarf knew the rhythms and what they meant, be it a call to arms or a reassurance of peace. It was the best way to get urgent news through a large kingdom, and now the notes reached for him, demanding the attention of the king.

‘Come on,’ Balin ordered, gesturing back to the open doorway. ‘They would not sound that horn if it were not important.’

‘More important than this?’ Thorin demanded, spitting a curse and shaking his head before Balin could reply. He knew what the answer would be. What mattered to the king did not always matter to the kingdom. Erebor called, and like it or not, Thorin had no choice but to respond.

‘If you have any notion of what to do next, then speak,’ he ordered, looking at each individual in turn. They met him with nothing but sorrowful eyes and empty hands. ‘So be it. Ori, get to Ravenhill. Send the birds out to scout the skies. Perhaps they won’t see much in the gathering dark, but with luck they’ll spot any campfires. Nori, find out if Ronin or his men have awakened. Maybe they have more to tell us.’

‘Balin and I will escort you and your guards to whatever message awaits you,’ Gandalf said, his smile carrying a hint of sharpness, as if daring Thorin to tell him otherwise. ‘I suggest we hurry.’

With a rough sigh, Thorin stepped back through the doorway, allowing Balin and a couple of soldiers to take the lead as they passed through the twisting corridors. Their flickering torches led the way, and Thorin vowed to himself that as soon as he was able, he would bring all parts of the mountain back to life. He would banish every last lost passageway and secretive room. Then there would be nowhere left to hide.

Bilbo’s abductor had succeeded because of him. He was the one who had been unwilling to spread their sparse resources too thin. He was the one who had decided to focus on the smaller, occupied portion of Erebor, rather than opening up all of its sprawling, empty reaches.

Now it was Bilbo who paid for his mistakes.

In the back of Thorin’s head, logic whispered that he had done all he could with the dwarves and
men he had, but it was a weak reassurance in the face of his fear.

‘Regret will not win this fight, Thorin Oakenshield,’ Gandalf murmured behind him, his words deep with the wisdom of more years than anyone could count. ‘Nor will it bring Bilbo back to you.’

‘You tell me nothing I do not already know,’ he retorted, speaking over his shoulder. ‘Yet with all your time walking these lands, you should realise that the heart rarely heeds the mind.’

‘No, indeed it does not. If I had words of comfort, I would give them,’ Gandalf promised. ‘Instead, I can only offer my counsel, such as it is.’

‘Then tell me, what would you do in my place?’

For a while, there was no sound but the march of their feet and the tap of Gandalf’s staff. He appeared to be musing Thorin’s question, and when at last his answer came, it was not what Thorin expected.

‘Tell your people what Frár has done and who he has stolen away. Voice your suspicions. They will stand with you, man and dwarf, and they will fight all the harder if they are aware of Bilbo’s fate.’

‘You speak as if they do not already know.’

‘They have rumour and speculation. They do not have the word of their king.’ The marketplace rang with the echoes of their passing before Gandalf continued. ‘Bilbo Baggins is a remarkable hobbit; he always has been, but on this journey he has flourished into his potential. In your mountain, he has found his place, and there is barely a living soul within these halls who does not hold him in high regard. They will not look kindly upon those who sought to take him from you.’

‘I agree,’ Balin said from up ahead. ‘These may not be the dwarves from Erebor of old, nor the wealthy, comfortable men of Dale, but they have forged a new loyalty to this place, to its king, and to the hobbit he courts. I hear of it every day. You and Master Baggins gave no one charity, but nor did you leave them out in the cold. You brought them all together, and they are eager to repay you in any way they can.’

‘When they took Bilbo, they did not just steal away the one you care for,’ Gandalf said. ‘They abducted someone who many in the mountain see as second only to you – more important even than those you name your heirs. You will not be the only one keen to see his safe return.’

Thorin closed his eyes, swallowing hard as he nodded his assent. He knew Gandalf spoke the truth: Bilbo was as integral to Erebor as Thorin himself, a large part of some greater whole. Those who had rallied around them through the long winter months had the right to know what Frár had done.

Just as Balin was about to step back out into the corridor by the forge, he wheezed in surprise, the torch in his hand bobbing as someone almost collided with him. Kili skidded to a halt, flushed and out of breath, his dark eyes wide as he struggled to speak. ‘The main entrance hall. You’re needed, Uncle!’

‘What is it?’ he demanded, stopping at Balin’s side and watching his youngest nephew shake his head, still gulping in air. There were no guards flanking him, and Thorin reached out, clapping his elbow and half dragging him along in his haste. ‘Is it Bilbo? Has he – is he…?’ Dread possibilities raced through his mind, but Kili silenced them with a single denial.

‘It’s Tauriel. Well, sort of. She was about to go out scouting as you ordered,’ he explained, staggering up the steps that would take them away from the warmth of the forges and towards the grand entrance hall, where Erebor’s vast main doors opened out onto the world. ‘It’s dark, and
there’s no moon, but she said she would do her best. Except…’

‘Except what?’

They reached the peak of the stairs and Kili gestured before him, indicating the scene with a sweep of his arm. Someone had lit the lamps, their new mirrors casting light into every corner and making the marble gleam. Fires burned in the grate, adding to the heat generated by the press of so many bodies.

It seemed as if everyone in the mountain was there, called together by the whispering pull of rumour. Yet they did not speak among themselves, nor did they look to Thorin. Instead, they formed a dense, rough semi-circle around the doors. Tauriel’s tall figure stood at the fore, her voice a lilting elvish melody as she spoke to the new arrivals.

‘They’re here for you,’ Kili murmured. ‘We made the King’s Call as soon as we realised who it was, but it looks like everyone else beat you here.’

Thorin did not take the time to reassure him. He could only offer a quick squeeze to Kili’s shoulder before he pressed through the crowd. They melted before him, leaving his way clear as he made his approach.

‘Legolas.’ He inclined his head with wary respect, raising an eyebrow at the deep bows he received in return from the elvish prince and those who followed him. ‘What brings you to my halls?’

‘Three ravens arrived in Greenwood, tired and hungry, each bearing an identical message in your own hand. As soon as my father read your warning, he ordered me to lead a scouting party.’

‘And?’ Thorin asked, his body thrumming as he leaned forward. ‘What did you find?’

The elf reached into a pouch on his belt, undoing the laces and pulling free two scraps of cloth before handing them over. ‘An army awaits.’

The coarse fabric was rough against Thorin’s palms as he allowed both to spill, hanging from his fingertips in damning accusation. The colours of the Stonefoots and the Blackbeards were plain to see, and a hissing rush of voices rippled through the gathered crowd.

‘Where?’ Dwalin demanded. ‘Where do they make their camp?’

‘No more than half a day’s slow march to the south. Erebor clings to its ice, but the rest of the land is already free of winter’s grasp.’ Legolas’ youthful expression contorted in a grimace: the bearer of bad news. ‘It is no small envoy. By my estimate, there are more than five thousand bearing arms.’

Dwalin swore, long and vicious, as Thorin closed his eyes. He had expected to face some opposition – had dreaded it from the moment Bilbo had mentioned the possibility of the Stonefoots’ allies – but never had he considered they would come in such numbers. Whatever Frár had told the Blackbeards, it must have been convincing to bring so many troops to Thorin’s doorstep.

The expanse of the entrance hall filled with whispers. No one shouted in denial; they murmured among themselves, trading their suspicions and outrage. To his left, Bard stood with his arms folded, his narrow face sharp with questions he had yet to give voice. Instead, he watched them – Thorin and his Company.

It was only a matter of time before he noticed who was absent.

‘We can withstand a siege,’ Balin reminded him, his words carrying with ease. ‘The mountain is
strong. Without war machines, that army will break on Erebor like waves upon the rock.’ It was a reminder, one he knew his adviser had to offer. Logically, it was the right choice. One life, even one worth as much to him as Bilbo’s, could not outweigh the safety of Erebor’s people.

Swallowing hard, he thought of Gandalf’s advice: all sound guidance that he would be a fool not to take. ‘I will not order you out onto the battlefield,’ he began, fighting to keep his voice steady. Turning to face those who assembled around him, he saw his nephews, both pale but determined. Their expressions mirrored many others in the crowd, and he felt the burden of every staring eye. ‘I will not ask you to confront this attack when we know we can outlast them within our walls. Perhaps our enemies knew that when they acted today.’

He bowed his head, breathing deeply before straightening his shoulders and forcing the truth from his lips. ‘A spy and saboteur has been at work in Erebor. Already, they have cost Storn his life. I know not what other action they undertook in the shadows, but a few hours ago, Master Baggins was stolen from us.’

Shock raced through the crowd. People moved with it as if they were trees bending to the wind, shifting their weight and looking at each other, horrified and grim. Only those who already knew what had happened reacted differently, watching him with the unfaltering loyalty of soldiers awaiting their king’s command.

It was Bard who broke the oppressive silence, his deep voice little more than a rasp. ‘Dead?’

‘No.’ Nori stepped forward, his hand slicing through the air as he stopped at Thorin’s side. ‘There’s no blood. No body. If that was their aim, they’d have left us both to find. They took him, hoping we would follow. They know they cannot remove us from these halls with ease.’

‘I doubt there is anyone here happy to hide while Master Baggins is in their grasp,’ Bard growled, squaring his shoulders. ‘I do not claim to know the laws of Dwarven kind, but to any man this treachery is an act of war.’ He dropped his hand to the pommel of his sword, his jaw working as if he were chewing over his words before he laid them out for all to hear. ‘For better or worse, the men of Laketown have chosen me to lead them. I speak for all when I say we will follow you into battle, if that’s your choice.’

‘I may not be able to call my father’s armies, but the elves I bring before you are the best.’ Legolas gripped his bow, pressing its tip to the floor as he knelt before Thorin. ‘We are at your command until the safe return of Master Baggins, should you so wish it.’

A single “Aye!” from the crowd sparked a chorus of agreement. It rose, quiet and first, then louder as more voices joined the throng. Soon, the room rang with a defiant roar, the echoes bouncing from wall to wall until it sounded as if the land itself spoke.

Only when Thorin lifted his hands did the noise die away. ‘You have my thanks,’ he rasped, meeting Gandalf’s smug gaze before turning back to the assembled dwarves. ‘Should any of you wish to leave, the dock passage shall remain open to return you to the Iron Hills. Depart within the hour; it will not be held against you.’

‘Aye, but know this too,’ Dwalin said, lifting his voice as if he spoke on a parade ground, rallying the troops. ‘Lord Dain already marches to help defend our lands. We do not stand alone, whatever Frár and his ilk may think!’

The crowd stirred like some great beast. People checked the weapons at their belts as they rallied in groups, clumping together along lines of kinship and comradery, but they did not depart. Though their training may be rudimentary, born of fire and desperation, they were still the only army Erebor
had, and already they knew how to act like soldiers.

Thorin placed a hand on Dwalin’s shoulder. ‘Remember, we do not know if Dain is close by. While the way lies clear to the south, we cannot say the same of the east. They may be days away yet.’

Dwalin nodded, his chest swelling with his inhale before he met Thorin’s gaze. ‘Then call a council of war. The Company, Bard and Legolas. Let’s hammer out what’s to be done. Plan for Dain’s absence, but pray for his approach. There’s nothin’ else we can do tonight. Frár won’t march, nor will he send a messenger. Not until dawn, if he bothers at all.’

Thorin’s fingers twitched and he ground his teeth together in mute frustration. Dwalin spoke the truth. They could not launch a pre-emptive strike, not while darkness lay across the land, but nor could he bear the thought of sitting and waiting while Bilbo was out there, suffering Mahal-knew-what.

At last, he could only nod his agreement, setting off for the council room as Dwalin shouted orders, commanding everyone to clothe themselves in armour and ensure their weapons could withstand the harrows of whatever they faced. The entrance hall erupted into busy chaos as people turned towards the armouries, and a quick promise from Dori and Gloin told Thorin that they would leave no one without protection and some kind of blade.

‘Fili, Kili, Balin, Dwalin, Nori and Tauriel, you’re with me,’ he ordered, beckoning as both Bard and Legolas fell in at his side, their pace as swift as his own. ‘Bombur, prepare field rations and ensure we have water barrels on hand. Bofur and Bifur, check the beacon. If Dain is within a four-day march, he’ll see it. With any luck, Frár will miss the significance. He’ll think we believe Bilbo lost and are lighting his way home.’

‘I left Ori up on Ravenhill to wait for the birds’ return. He’ll come to us with any news.’ Nori entered the council room with Dwalin at his side, the two of them in front to face any threat that may linger. It was a long-standing habit, and one neither of them neglected despite the turmoil of their circumstances. ‘Oin’s still in the infirmary, trying to awaken Bilbo’s guards. It could be a while.’

Thorin nodded, too anxious to take his seat. His footsteps echoed as he prowled the room, sweeping back and forth in a long arc. Bard perched on the edge of the table while Legolas leaned against a pillar. At first glance, he looked as if he possessed the same indifferent grace as his father, but Thorin noticed that his blade and bow were unimpeded by his stance. Both could be drawn in the blink of an eye if necessary.

‘What are you planning?’ Bard asked, breaking the restless peace. ‘Do we know how many dwarves Dain is bringing? Are we to wait for him?’

‘No.’ Thorin stopped, leaning his palms on the table and staring, unseeing, at its surface. ‘We cannot rely on Dain’s arrival. Frár and his armies are expecting us to ride out of the mountain, leaving it empty for the taking once we lie dead. They know my grandfather, and a little of my father. They believe me to be as impulsive as they were; arrogant in the belief of my strength.’

Legolas raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Bard’s gaze was harder, and Thorin knew he was thinking of a previous siege of Erebor, when – thanks to the dragon sickness – Thorin had refused to consider any alternative to the bloodshed of war. ‘So we’ll stay in here?’

‘I intend to do everything in my power to return Bilbo to the mountain, but a show of force is not the answer.’ Thorin glanced at his nephews, who were both watching him with the sharp focus of their wits. Mahal willing, one day they would rule in his stead, and he realised now that he was setting a different example than that which had been lain before him in his youth. There was more to ruling a
kingdom than riches and glory. The sooner they knew that, the better. ‘They come hoping for a war they can win. We will not give it to them.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’ Balin asked, cocking his head as if he might understand Thorin’s thoughts better from a different angle. ‘You cannot be considering surrender?’

Thorin pursed his lips, tempted to argue. Perhaps if he gave up this – his mountain and his throne – they would return Bilbo unharmed. All they wanted, he was sure, was the gold within Erebor’s walls and its powerful position in the north. They cared not what became of Thorin’s heart. Whether it beat whole or lay broken was none of their concern. To Frár, Bilbo was a tool, nothing more. With his job done, surely he would let him go free?

Yet life was not so simple. He had only just wrested Erebor from Smaug’s tyranny and guided its gathering of refugees through the bitter depths of winter. He would not hand it over to Frár’s greedy indifference. Perhaps if it were merely himself to consider – his line and his dynasty – he would make the sacrifice, but he could not let his people suffer on the whims of his own emotion, no matter how much he wished otherwise.

‘Our main concern must be the mountain and those who reside within it. As planned, we prepare for a siege. How many strong is our army?’

Dwalin sucked in air between his teeth. ‘Three hundred, maybe four? No more than that.’

Thorin kept his face stiff, refusing to allow the instinctive wince to flicker across his features. Four hundred, and most of them with little in the way of proper training in the ferocity of battle. Bard’s men, for all their strength, were still recovering from the atrocities of Laketown’s destruction. How would their morale hold with one of the strongest armies in the Dwarven world camped upon their doorstep?

‘We take twenty soldiers to meet with Frár and discuss terms. Let him state his lies and all that he has done to bring them about. Let us refute his claims, not only with our words, but with our actions.’ He pinched the bridge of his nose before shaking his head. ‘I cannot believe the Blackbeards have not been deceived into cooperation. Perhaps they will turn from Frár when they discover the truth.’

‘You think he tricked them into supporting him?’ Bard asked. ‘How?’

‘That is the one thing we do not yet know.’ Thorin scrubbed his right hand over his face. ‘Most likely, he was able to persuade them I am unfit to rule. By taking Bilbo, he hopes to prove it beyond doubt. He expects a rash retaliation. We will not give him the satisfaction.’

‘I know Frár,’ Balin said. ‘He likes to show himself in the best possible light. He’ll meet even a score of us with most of his army, just because he can.’

‘Exactly. While he is busy with us, a small team sneaks into the camp and retrieves Bilbo. Frár may not be stupid – he will not leave him unguarded – but with most of his troops out front, it will be our best chance to move unnoticed and with little challenge. As soon as Bilbo is safe, we retreat to Erebor.’

‘And if Master Baggins is not there?’ Legolas asked, lifting a pacifying hand when Thorin looked up at him sharply. ‘Let my scouts confirm his presence. I would not want the king to risk his life only to find we have been deceived.’

Kili shifted, one shoulder jerking in a shrug. ‘Why does it have to be Uncle who goes to meet Frár? Why not Fili, or me?’
Thorin shook his head before his nephew finished, pushing himself away from the table. ‘No, Kili. You and Fili must stay here with Bard to direct the siege.’ He ignored their cries of protest as he approached, clasping both of them by one shoulder. ‘Listen to me. This plan is far from foolproof, and relies on Frár’s arrogance. We need to draw him and his armies out, and anyone else riding to meet him will be seen as an insult.’

‘And if he kills you on sight?’ Balin asked, his voice hard. ‘If he cuts you down where you stand?’

‘Then the throne falls to my heirs, not to him.’ Thorin paused, noting Kili’s fear and the bright flash of concern in Fili’s eyes. ‘Frár is unlikely to be so rash. He needs the support of the council to stand a hope of claiming Erebor from the line of Durin, unless he plans to fight all of dwarven kind for the right to the mountain. Even with the Blackbeards, he has not the strength for that.’

‘What if he decides to take that chance?’ Fili asked, reaching up to clasp his uncle’s forearm. ‘What then?’

‘Then you will be fighting for your crown.’ Thorin paused, moving first to cup Fili’s face and press their brows together, before doing the same for Kili. He spoke quietly, familiar Khuzdul slipping from his tongue as he confided in them both. ‘With Bard’s help, I know that you have the power and courage to defend our home. I ask you to stay because I cannot. I do not have the strength to leave Bilbo’s safety in the hands of others.’

Fili bowed his head as Kili snatched in a breath. Perhaps his emotion surprised them. For all their lives, he had been teaching them of duty and responsibility, even when it had seemed unlikely either one would ever have a throne to their name. Now, he taught them a different lesson: that a king did not act alone, and that sometimes you had to trust your heart and gut, rather than harsh logic.

‘You’ll be careful?’ Fili said, so much like Dis that Thorin’s stomach ached to see it. His sister would have asked just the same. She would know better than to try and sway him from his chosen course. She would help in any way she could, knowing she had to let him face whatever fate awaited him.

‘I swear it,’ Thorin vowed. ‘I do not intend to come away from this day vanquished.’

Stepping back, he turned to the room at large. Balin’s expression suggested he had overheard Thorin’s quiet confession, but no censure shadowed his brow. Instead, he offered a single nod of silent understanding. There was sense in Thorin’s decision to ride out, no one could refute that, but he knew it was not only the mind that ruled Thorin’s choice.

‘Prince Legolas, you should know that any aid you give us may bring war to your father’s lands. Should we fail – should Frár take the throne – he is likely to seek revenge.’

‘The Greenwood can defend itself.’ Legolas inclined his head. ‘What would you ask of me?’

‘As you suggested, we need to know if Bilbo is held where the army camps. If you see an opportunity to free him from their clutches, then do so, but do not put our plan at risk. If you’re discovered, Frár’s armies will be on alert, and any hope we have of retrieving Bilbo could be lost.’

‘We’ll return with news,’ Legolas promised. ‘With your permission, I would take Tauriel with us. She is one of the best trackers I know. If Master Baggins is not with the army, she may be able to find him.’

‘I’ll take my leave,’ Dwalin added. ‘If a siege is what yer planning, there’s plenty that needs doing yet.’

‘We’ll come with you.’ Fili stepped forward with Kili at his side. ‘You need to be with Uncle when
he rides out. Tell us and Bard what to do, and we’ll see to it.’

‘I’m yours to command.’ Bard sketched a quick bow in Dwalin’s direction, who waited for Thorin’s nod before leading the way. Thorin could hear him calling out orders as he went, a commander in his element. Despite all his worries, he knew that Erebor’s defence could not be in better hands. His nephews may be impetuous at times, and still young by a dwarf’s standards, but they would fight to their last breath to protect the mountain and the people within its halls.

It was up to him to make sure they wouldn’t have to.

‘I’ll get your armour.’ Nori scratched at his beard, looking Thorin up and down. ‘Frár will be wearing something flashy I’ll bet. Pretty but useless. You’ll be the opposite. If you come at him dressed to fight, with any luck you’ll rattle him.’

‘Not enough to make him surrender,’ Balin pointed out. ‘He’s too invested. He’ll not give in easy.’

‘I’ll take any advantage I can get,’ Thorin replied. ‘Bring whatever you find back here.’

Balin sighed as Nori departed, leaving the two of them in relative solitude. Only Thorin’s personal guard remained, and they stood like statues, alert but silent, around the periphery of the room.

Sitting in the chair opposite Thorin, Balin leant on the table, his hands clasped upon its bare, cold surface. ‘This plan of yours…’

Thorin pursed his lips, acknowledging the unvoiced criticism. However he looked at it, it was not a flawless strategy. Too much of it relied on guessing how Frár might react. ‘The way I see it, there are two ways it could go. It all depends whether Frár wants the support of the council. If he does, then the plan will work. He’ll need to come and face me.’

‘And if not?’

‘Then it will be settled with the blade.’

Balin closed his eyes and shook his head, a gusty sigh escaping him. ‘I have just one question for you, laddie. If we are too late – if Master Baggins does not live – what will you do?’

The pain hit him like a lightning strike, ferocious and wild. It was the one possibility that he had not dared to consider. Nori had already argued against the likelihood of Bilbo’s murder, but Thorin could not stop thinking about the loathsome vitriol that had filled the orders they had decoded. It plagued him, flooding forward in the wake of Balin’s quiet words and bringing furious fear with it.

If it was over – if Bilbo was gone – then Frár would know the true depths of madness to which Thorin could sink.

Looking up, he made no effort to school his expression, pinning Balin with his gaze. His eyes burned, his chest filling with raging heat as his hands flexed like talons at his side.

‘I will destroy them all.’
Bilbo awoke to the bite of cold on his skin and the low drone of pain in his head. Blissful ignorance was a fleeting reprieve before memory returned, painted in shades of smoke and confusion: the forge, the fumes and the strong grip of someone hauling his body over their shoulder to carry him away from the mountain he called home.

Panicked, he tore open his gummy eyes. No lantern illuminated his surroundings, and while the lack of glare was a blessing for his aching skull, it did nothing to ease his fear. Sinister shadows pressed in from all sides, leaving him with no clue about where his abductor had taken him.

Bowing his head, Bilbo bit back a groan as his body registered its complaints. Everything ached: his head, his shoulders, his belly... His ears were ringing like the great bells in Erebor, and the frigid air was a blade across his flesh. A vile taste of rotten fruit painted his tongue, and his arid throat burned with each breath.

Weakly, he tried to move his arms, grunting when he found someone had bound his wrists behind him. Tight coils of rope chafed his skin, stinging every time he twitched his fingers. The broad strength of a post struck a line up his spine, and he tipped his head back against it, letting it support his sagging weight as the reality of his situation made itself clear.

‘Wonderful,’ he hissed, wrinkling his nose as he shifted, hoping to ease the discomfort in his arms. They’d tied him up so tight his fingers felt numb. Quickly, he set about wriggling them, trying to get his blood flowing again to ward off the cold. It was a small distraction from his general misery, but the simple goal helped him clear his throbbing head.

Patchy memories continued to surface, and his stomach twisted. By the Valar, he hoped Ronin and his soldiers were all right. The last he had seen of them was a fleeting glimpse of armoured bodies motionless on the floor. Did they sleep, or had they died trying to protect him?

The notion made him feel sick, and the fretful patter of his heart only grew worse as he thought of Thorin. Had he arrived at the forge hoping for respite and instead found the carnage of prone bodies and Bilbo gone? It was all too easy to imagine his despair. Bilbo knew well enough how he would feel if their positions were reversed: furious, terrified and helpless. Did he realise he had been taken from the mountain, or did he search Erebor’s halls, frantically hunting for any trace of him?

Did he even know Bilbo was still alive?

His throat closed around a knot of tears, not for himself as much as in empathy to Thorin’s distress. If this had happened a few months ago, he might have questioned whether Thorin would care beyond a vague concern, but those days were behind them. He had spent too many hours in his company, bodies and hearts entwined, to think any differently.

Thorin loved him, and his absence would be tearing him apart.

Bilbo wet his lips with a dry tongue, sucking in a deep breath through his nose as he tried to calm himself. Sitting here fretting about things wouldn’t do either him or Thorin any good. He had no idea where he was or what his kidnapper had planned for him, but Bilbo did not intend to wait and find out. Not if he could help it.

Bracing his back against the post, he paused, trying to get some idea of his surroundings. It was too dark to see much, but gradually his aching eyes adjusted. Where he had thought there was nothing
but shadow there were now hints of shapes, and he squinted, attempting to make sense of them.

His ears rang, but slowly he began to discern traces of sound, quiet at first, then louder as his hearing sharpened. Canvas sighed and shifted, accompanied by the faint creak of ropes. For one nightmarish moment, he wondered if he was on a boat, but the floor did not roll and dip with any waves. No scent of brine reached him, and despite the noise, there was not a breath of air against his face to swell any sails.

Not a ship then, but a tent. The post at his back was no doubt the central shaft to support the fabric, and the sound of rope was probably the guylines holding everything taut.

Squinting, he tried to make out any chink in the canvas that might indicate a seam or a door, but not a fragment of light caught his eye. The smell around him – old wax and bare earth – made him think it must be an oilskin shelter, thick enough to keep out the water and wind.

‘At least it’s not a cage,’ he whispered to himself.

A hoarse, raspy croak answered him, and Bilbo jerked where he sat, his shoulders burning as he tried to lunge away from the unexpected noise. It was definitely in the room with him, and he stared around at the miasmic darkness, trying to see another figure.

‘H – hello?’ he stammered, not daring to raise his voice beyond a whisper. ‘Is someone there?’

The same croak came again, followed by a papery susurrus, but there was no answer to his question.

Bilbo’s mind raced. Was it his abductor, for some reason choosing to watch him from the shadows? Was it another prisoner? Had they taken someone else from Erebor? If so, why didn’t they say something? Unless, of course, they couldn’t talk. He shuddered at the thought, but before he could speak again, the sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears.

There was no time to react as the canvas parted and lantern light speared into the room, rousing the throbbing pain in his head anew. He screwed up his face, turning away as his stomach roiled. He might be a prisoner, but he was not about to humiliate himself by being unwell on top of everything else.

‘So this is it? This is the hobbit?’

Clenching his jaw, Bilbo peeled his eyes open and looked at the three dwarves who stood before him. Each examined him as if he were some creature in a menagerie, rather than a thinking being of Middle Earth.

‘That’s him,’ the one holding the lantern promised, and Bilbo’s fear curdled into anger. He knew that face, not well, but well enough. He had seen the dwarf around the mountain. Now he looked, it was easy to see how he had hidden in plain sight. There was nothing remarkable about him – nothing to make him stand out from the crowd. Brown hair fell to his shoulders and a long beard brushed his chest. He was older than Fili, but younger than Bofur. Even the axe that hung from his belt was a simple thing, barely decorated beyond the minimum anyone would expect.

In comparison to his companions, he was a sparrow to a pair of peacocks.

Bilbo had always imagined King Frár to have a narrow, spiteful face, but the truth was he looked like many older dwarves Bilbo had seen. The hair and beard were grey, but not yet white. His dark eyes shone, and a grimace of distaste twisted full lips. He was tall, but his back hunched as if the weight of his armour dragged him down.
Perhaps that was no surprise. The gaudy golden plate bordered on obnoxious. Even in the meek light, it blazed like a beacon, fighting to outshine the rings that adorned Frár’s fingers and the gemstones that sparkled in his beard. The crown on his head was no better, and certainly not discreet.

The squat dwarf who stood at his right hand may not drip with jewels, but the fabric he wore was sumptuous to the point of decadence. Dyed in rich copper and burgundy, it made him look like an over ripe fruit, bursting at the seams. Still, however ludicrous he looked to Bilbo’s eye, there was nothing to laugh about in his expression.

Cold grey eyes burned with loathing over the beak of a hooked nose. Thin lips, almost hidden by the dark beard he wore, pulled back from his teeth in a triumphant sneer. When he spoke, his voice was like poison honey, deceptively smooth while his words carried the sting.

‘What more proof of madness does anyone need? For a dwarf to willingly bed – that.’ He waved a hand in Bilbo’s general direction. ‘No better than rutting a beast.’

Bilbo managed a choked sound of outrage, but Frár spoke over him as if he were nothing. ‘That will not be enough to convince the council, Carth. No, if this thing matters as much to that fool Thorin as Githin says –’

‘He does,’ the plain dwarf – Githin – answered. ‘The whole mountain speaks of little else. They expect to see Master Baggins on the consort’s throne before the summer.’

The temperature of the room seemed to drop a further few degrees, and Bilbo tried to hide the shudder that uncoiled along his spine as Carth’s gaze found him anew. His bushy brow twisted as his eyes narrowed, his head tilted in an effort to understand. ‘Consort?’ He lifted his knuckles to his lips as if attempting to choke back bile, half-turning away in repulsion.

‘That, rule at a dwarven king’s side?’ He looked askance at Frár before facing Githin. ‘You should have killed him when you had the chance. Now, it falls to us. We cannot allow this to stand unanswered. Halflings and elves near the throne of Erebor, twisting the minds of all who look upon them? It is an abomination!’

‘If anyone here is an abomination, it’s you.’ Bilbo swallowed, his dry throat clicking, but he carried on, his shoulders hard as he forced his words out between clenched teeth. ‘I’m not the one plotting to bring down a kingdom – to uproot the rightful king and his heirs for my own gain. You can’t say the same.’

Carth struck without warning, silent and lethal as a flash of silver gleamed in his swiping hand. Pain scored along the line of Bilbo’s jaw, and he gritted his teeth against it, too shocked by the calm, cruel violence for anything else. Hot fingers grabbed his chin, slipping in blood as they squeezed. Tears stung Bilbo’s eyes, but he refused to let them fall as he glared up into Carth’s calculating face.

‘You do not have the right to speak,’ he murmured, examining Bilbo as if he were some interesting animal he had found in a trap. Blunt nails pressed into his skin, and Bilbo tensed, his body locked tight as he tried not to whimper. ‘You, who knows nothing of our ways, who seeks to taint dwarven halls with your filth. I should slit your throat and be done with it.’

‘No,’ Frár ordered, grabbing the dwarf’s tunic and easing him away. ‘He may yet have his uses. Besides, if word gets out that he died by our hands, rather than in battle, then the council will have both our heads.’

‘Only if Thorin doesn’t get to you first.’
Bilbo lifted his bloody chin as every gaze in the room swung back to him. Frár looked surprised that he had the courage to speak after Carth’s quiet threat, but he was not about to be cowed by some righteous fanatic. Especially one, he noticed, who was holding Bilbo’s own knife. They must have searched him while he was unconscious. Hollow bellied, he wondered if they had also found the betrothal bead and his ring. He had hidden them in the same, secret pocket after all.

Swallowing, he ignored the stinging pain that ran along the line of his jaw and pushed his terror down, crushing it into something he could use. ‘There would be no justice at the council’s hand for you. He’ll come for me, and if he finds me dead, there will be nowhere in Middle Earth you can hide.’

‘We do not hide,’ Frár muttered, his features locked in a patronising sneer, ‘and we do not listen to idle threats from creatures such as you. As for Thorin, you are right. He will come for you, but he’ll not find you. No one but the three of us knows you are here.’ He spread his hands like some great benefactor, indicating the tent. ‘Thorin will face our army with an accusation that we have taken you, but what proof does he have?’

Bilbo paused, realisation crystallising in his mind. Frár was unaware of the orders they had decoded. He honestly believed that Thorin and the others had no idea who was behind all the problems in Erebor. Maybe he hadn’t explicitly ordered Bilbo’s abduction, perhaps that had come later, but there was still enough there to damn him and all his plans.

In his arrogance, he thought no one would discover his deception, and Bilbo bit his lip against the temptation to boast. It might not be much, but Thorin’s knowledge was an advantage. With any luck, they could put it to good use. The longer he kept his abductors in the dark about that, the better.

‘What about my money?’ Githin interrupted, standing up a little straighter as both Frár and Carth turned to look at him. He shifted his hand around the lantern’s handle, as if his palms were sweaty, but otherwise he seemed unruffled. At least, until his eyes flickered in Bilbo’s direction.

Realisation ran down Bilbo’s spine. He knew. Githin knew that Thorin had proof of Frár’s plotting, and he wanted out before things got messy. Nori had said he thought the agent in Erebor was a mercenary. It looked like he was right.

‘You’ll be paid once the mountain is ours,’ Frár explained, his expression one of slimy promise. ‘Not before.’

‘I don’t think so.’ Githin moved too quick to follow, setting the lantern down and resting a cold sliver of metal against Bilbo’s throat, all in the same heartbeat. The knife angled downwards, lined up for a perfect killing blow, and Bilbo barely dared to breathe as he tried to shuffle away from that sharp edge.

‘I’ll not have any of Erebor’s cursed gold, if it’s all the same to you. You’ll pay me now, in Rholnost coin. The rings will do, if you’ve not got money on you.’ He shook his head, and the scent of anxious sweat filled Bilbo’s nose. ‘If not, then your whole plan goes south.’ He pressed the knife against the tendons of Bilbo’s neck, allowing silence to fall as the seconds of Frár’s indecision ticked by.

‘Patak!’ he spat at last, elbowing Carth. ‘Enough of these games. Give it to him.’

Grudgingly, Carth reached into a pocket, pulling free several plain white cloth bags. They clinked as he approached, his fingers marking them with Bilbo’s blood wherever he touched. ‘Go,’ he commanded, all but throwing the money into Githin’s hands. ‘Set your face to the horizon and never look back.’
‘I’ll count it first, if you don’t mind?’ Githin smiled, unperturbed by the way Carth’s fist clenched around the small handle of Bilbo’s knife. Perhaps mercenaries were as offensive to his sensibilities as hobbits and elves, because Carth looked as if he’d like nothing more than to gouge out Githin’s eyes. There was fury there, leashed beneath a mask of cold logic, but Bilbo could see it burning brighter with every passing moment.

Bilbo froze as Carth twitched, turning his head sharply and catching his silent scrutiny. Bilbo didn’t say a word, but it seemed the look on his face was enough provocation. With callous deliberation, Carth lifted back his heavy, booted foot and slammed it with all his might into Bilbo’s side.

His breath left him in a wheezing rush. Sweat erupted over his brow as he fought to get air into his lungs, gasping like a landed fish and wishing he could writhe away from the awful ache blooming in his ribs.

A normal hobbit would have stayed quiet and small; the better to escape further attacks, but months with the Company had given Bilbo too strong a sense of justice for that. Dwarves valued the notion of revenge, and now Bilbo screwed up his strength, fighting the pain as Carth turned away.

It was easy to stick out his foot, tangling it between Carth’s legs and making him stumble. The uneven ground did the rest. Carth sprawled flat on his face, knocking over the lantern as he went.

The tent plunged into darkness, and chaos followed. The croaking thing, whatever it was, started up a squawking refrain. Someone swore: a long, bitter string of Khuzdul, and Bilbo’s eyes just managed to pick out enough movement to help him aim. Teeth clenched with the effort, he drew back his leg and slammed his heel as hard as he could into the nearest target.

Something crunched, and a howl of agony shook the air, high-pitched and deeply satisfying. Carth had been the one closest to him when the lights went out, and while he was no expert, to him it felt like he’d managed to slam right into that ugly nose of his. It was too much to hope the blow would kill him, but at least Bilbo got the bittersweet satisfaction of causing him a bit of pain.

‘Leave it!’ Frár ordered, his voice slithering from the darkness to overwhelm Carth’s tirade. The tent flap parted again, giving Bilbo a brief glimpse of two silhouettes. One was Frár in all his golden glory. The other was Carth, bent almost double with his hands pressed to his face, lurching along with his king’s hand gripping his collar as if he were a misbehaving dog.

Then the canvas slipped shut, enclosing him once more within the secretive gloom.

Still wheezing for air, Bilbo shifted his weight, wincing as a lance of fire shot up his side. He pursed his lips, biting back curses. More than anything, he wanted to curl up in a warm bed while Thorin tended his wounds. It was tempting to let himself fall into that daydream, but he knew that it might cost him his life. He’d done more than broken Carth’s nose with that kick. He’d bruised his pride. He wouldn’t be surprised if the adviser returned to finish him off, no matter what Frár said otherwise.

It was time to get out of here.

The snick of a struck flint made him jump, and he watched burning kindling transfer a flame into the lantern. Its fledgling glow soon spread, and Bilbo found himself staring at Githin. He had assumed he’d fled in the chaos, but now the dwarf hunkered down, just out of reach of his kicking feet.

‘They’re fools,’ he said at last, ‘but they pay well. If I sort out your chin, can I trust you not to smash my face?’

Bilbo thought of Githin’s knife, still in its sheath, and pursed his lips, offering no response but a cold
glare. He watched, mute, as the dwarf looked over his shoulder, checking the tent flap before unbuckling his belt and setting the blade aside on one of the crates that littered the room. Next, he reached into his pocket, pulling out two small objects and tipping his palm so Bilbo could see.

The betrothal bead and ring gleamed where they nestled against his skin, and he set them down next to his effects. ‘Those are yours.’ His voice sounded hoarse, and Bilbo didn’t miss the way his hand lingered over the ring in particular, tracing its curve before he seemed to snap out of his daze. ‘No point in giving them to Frár. They’re nothing but trinkets. Your dagger is all they got.’

Bilbo wet his lips, deliberately not looking at the churned earth where Carth had fallen. He’d moved his legs as soon as he’d seen the glint of silver, covering the little blade from sight. With any luck, Carth’s wounded pride blinded him to its absence. ‘Why should I trust you? You killed Storn.’

Githin shrugged. ‘He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It should have been you.’ His smile was blank, more a muscle twitch than anything else. ‘But you know that already.’ He scratched a hand through his beard. ‘Look, I do what I’m paid to do, and no more. I’m loyal to Frár until I get my fee.’ He jingled the coin pouches in his pockets. ‘After that...’

‘So now you’re on my side?’ Bilbo raised an eyebrow when Githin snorted.

‘Hardly. I do what’s best for me, nothing more. Not going to lie, though, I don’t much fancy seeing that idiot on Erebor’s throne.’ He produced a clean bit of cloth from his pocket and approached Bilbo cautiously, as if he were some frightened beast. ‘I’ll not free you, but should you escape? Well, that’s not my problem. I’ll be long gone. Maybe you can spoil Frár’s plans all by yourself.’

He dripped water from his canteen onto the rag and wiped it along Bilbo’s chin. It crossed his mind to bite, to sink his teeth into those traitorous fingers as deep as they’d go, but he restrained himself. He'd let Githin salve whatever little conscience he had and then trot off back to wherever he came from. The sooner he left, the better.

‘It’s not too bad, though Carth was probably aiming for your neck. Watch him. He acts indifferent, but he’s unpredictable. Dangerous.’ A scowl twisted his brow. ‘Takes pleasure in shooting the messenger. Kill him if you can, before he kills you.’

‘I’m tied up,’ Bilbo pointed out. ‘What makes you think I’ll be killing anyone?’

Githin’s brown eyes met his, warm and knowing. ‘I’ve spent months watching you in that mountain. Frankly, Master Baggins, you can do anything you put your mind to. I’m not Carth, or Frár. I just worked for them, that’s all.’

It was surreal to sit there, talking softly with a dwarf who would have seen him dead beneath a cascade of gold. One who had dragged him from his home and dumped him here, delivering him into the hands of Thorin’s enemies. Not fifteen minutes ago, he’d had a knife pressed to Bilbo’s throat, yet here he was, wiping the blood away from his skin and offering advice.

‘It’s just business,’ Githin said when Bilbo pointed out all the reasons he had not to trust him. ‘I’ll leave you the light and the water. The rest is up to you.’

He stood up, folding the bloody cloth and slipping it in his pocket before retrieving his belt. The knife gleamed as he unsheathed it, bending down to drop the shields around the lantern so only a fraction of the light eked out. With that done, he turned away, sliding the blade down the back wall of the tent, slitting the taut fabric and peering through.

‘You know, you could cut me loose.’
Githin looked over his shoulder, his plain face made almost handsome by his smile. ‘I don’t think so, Master Baggins. Good luck.’

Bilbo watched him go, shaking his head in disbelief as his footsteps faded from earshot. He had no idea what drove Githin to offer what little help he had – a guilty conscience didn’t seem likely – but he was not about to let it go to waste.

Wary of its sharp edge, Bilbo dug in the bare earth for his knife, shifting it as much as he could until it lay atop his toes. His ribs ached with every move, but there was nothing he could do to ease their pain. The problem was, he needed the blade in his hands to cut himself free, and there was no other way to get it anywhere close to his fingertips.

Taking a deep breath, he flicked his foot, shutting his eyes and turning his face away in case his aim was off. With a soft clink, the weapon landed by his hip, close enough to grab. All he had to do was shuffle around the post until he could fumble the hilt into his cold, questing grasp.

It was awkward work, trying to saw through the tough rope. It was too tight to wiggle loose, and he hacked at it as quick as he dared, straining every muscle as he tried to work his way free.

At last, the cord slackened, falling over his hands. Pain sang along his arms, and he bit his lip to stifle his groan of discomfort. His shoulders were stiff from too long in one position, and his frantic efforts had scraped his wrists. None of the cuts were serious, but red stained his pale skin and streaks of crimson daubed the cuffs of his thin tunic.

Wearily, he stumbled to his feet, wheezing as the room swayed in warning. The post that had held him captive was now his only source of support, and he propped himself against it, fighting the twin problems of pain and nausea. His head ached fit to burst, and it felt like every part of him was either cold, sore or both. His chest, in particular, hurt from the brutality of Carth’s boot, and he had to take a moment to collect himself.

Picking up the canteen Githin had left behind, Bilbo took a swig before staggering towards the slit in the tent canvas. With trembling fingers, he reached out, parting the fabric and peering into the world beyond.

Pearl light painted the eastern horizon in the phantom hues of a false dawn. There was maybe an hour before the sun lifted its face, but it was the sight spread out before Bilbo that took his breath away.

Campfires, more than he could count, sparkled like stars. Banners waved in the stiff, cold breeze, and the distant sounds of a resting army drifted up to him. His tent was out of the way, up on a rise and erected among others of a similar structure. Peering at them, he decided they were used for storage.

Armour clanked nearby, and Bilbo drew back as a dwarf walked past, his expression bored and his gaze locked straight ahead. It looked like he was on patrol, but he was by himself. Maybe there were others, but Bilbo suspected Frár had ensured this area remained quiet. He didn’t want some soldier stumbling on the fact that he had a secret prisoner.

Bilbo clenched his teeth, seeing how it was. He was not a hostage: him in exchange for the kingdom. He was just part of an elaborate lie. Frår wanted to make Thorin look paranoid and incompetent, the better to prove that he was unworthy of his throne.

He could imagine how Frár would twist things to his advantage, claiming insult at Thorin’s “wrongful” accusation. Was such a statement enough to start a war in dwarven culture? Bilbo couldn’t be sure. He only suspected that Frar would jump at any excuse.
What would he do when Thorin revealed the proof of his interference? Somehow, surrender seemed unlikely. Bilbo recalled the frantic determination in Frár’s eyes. One way or another, he intended to have the Lonely Mountain for himself, and he had a huge army to assist in its downfall.

Thorin was certain Erebor could withstand a siege; he’d said that from the beginning, but peering out at the encampment, Bilbo wasn’t so sure. There were so many of them, better equipped and trained than anyone in Thorin’s halls. How could they hope to hold them off?

Retreating into the shadows, Bilbo considered his options. He could sneak away and hurry back to the mountain, but he was a long way from home with only his feet to carry him. Even once he got there, he had no idea how easy it would be to get inside. Would they open the doors to him, if they had already braced for an attack? Would Thorin still be there, or would he ride out as Bilbo returned, only to find that Frár’s lies were truth and that Bilbo was no prisoner after all?

No, that wouldn’t do. He had to help Thorin prove Frár was a liar. He had to be here, but that didn’t mean he should sit around awaiting rescue. No rope bound him in place and, thanks to Githin, he had a ring that allowed him to move unseen. Maybe he was not strong enough to fight, but perhaps he had it in him to wreak a little havoc.

Sucking in a deep breath, he returned to the crate where Githin had left his treasures, scooping up the betrothal bead with shaking fingers and ferreting it away in his pocket before reaching for the ring. The metal seemed to hum beneath his fingertips, and Bilbo grimaced as he remembered the pain the last time he had used it. The shadow world was not a kind place, but he would bear the discomfort if it meant he could do something to turn the odds in Thorin’s favour.

He was about to slip it onto his middle finger when a loud croak caught his attention. He stared around before his gaze settled on one of the crates. Its rough wood slats had warped, leaving tiny gaps, and when he moved the shielded lantern closer, he could see something moving within.

Setting the light down at his feet, he reached for his knife, slicing at the rope that held the lid shut. Carefully, he peered inside, blinking in surprise as he realised what it contained.

Ravens, at least half a dozen of them. Their feathers lay askew and they looked a far cry from the plump residents of Ravenhill. Each one regarded him with intelligent blue eyes, and while part of him was surprised they hadn’t gone for him on sight, he knew that these were no ordinary scavenger birds. They were the messengers Frár had intercepted between Erebor and their destination. Bilbo had feared them dead, and it eased something tight in his chest to see they still lived.

‘Can you understand me?’ he whispered, crouching down so he was not looming over them. ‘Can you – can you carry some messages for me?’

The biggest raven lifted its wings, ruffling its feathers and giving Bilbo an offended glare, as if it were reprimanding him for questioning its abilities. Taking that as a yes, he wet his lips, thinking frantically. He had no tools to write anything, and he didn’t know if the birds understood Westron, but he had to try.

‘One of you must head back to Erebor. Tell them I’m safe, that Frár has captured me no matter what he says otherwise.’ He paused, desperate to add more, but he could not put forth any of his plans. There was too much risk that the bird would never be able to deliver its message, or that it would arrive too late. His reassurance would have to do.

‘Another should go to King Thranduil. Tell him that war has arrived at Erebor, and Master Baggins begs his aid.’ Bilbo ran his tongue over his teeth, knowing that none of the dwarves would ask for Thranduil’s help. Even to him, it seemed like a desperate shot. It was one thing for the elves to send
food, but to involve themselves in conflict was perhaps a step too far. Still, he had try.

‘The rest of you, if you have the strength, look for Dain’s army. Tell him to hurry. We will need him.’

Gently, he removed the lid of the crate, edging it onto its side so that the ravens could jump out and stretch their wings. For an awful moment, he thought that they were too weak to fly, having been cooped up for who knew how long. Yet one-by-one, they hopped towards the base of the canvas and dipped their beaks under the edge, wriggling beneath the heavy cloth into the outside world. The rustle of feathers and the beat of wings told Bilbo they’d taken to the sky, and he whispered a prayer for their swift, safe travels.

With one last glance around him, Bilbo gave a nod of satisfaction. Perhaps Frár or Carth would come back and find him gone, but it didn’t matter. To mount a search for him, they would have to admit they had him in the first place, and somehow he doubted they would want their little secret out in the open.

It was time to move.

Snatching up the lantern, Bilbo approached the slit Githin had made. The fabric clung to him lovingly as he eased through the narrow gap, depositing crystals of dew on his tunic and in his hair. Flicking them away, he turned the ring in his grasp, examining its mellow gleam. Its smooth surface felt like an oil slick, vaguely repulsive, and he could not shake the memory of the last time he had worn it. Would the shadow world be kinder now, or more cruel?

Either way, he didn’t have a choice. Hobbits may be stealthy, but in enemy territory with unpredictable patrols, someone was bound to see him. No, he was better off with the ring on his finger, no matter how much it hurt.

The metal closed around his skin, and he bent double against the bitter brutality of the chill. An invisible gale pulled at his hair, and everything looked blurred in tones of twilight. The distant campfires smeared across the land, and the other nearby tents were little more than hulking silhouettes.

It was like moving through a nightmare, all indistinct threat, but he could not afford to linger. Clenching his teeth, Bilbo forced himself to walk, taking care where he put his feet. Most of the snow was gone, but the last thing he needed was to leave tracks in the few scraps that remained.

With each step, his difficulties eased. The cold became bearable, and his vision began to clear. It was still like seeing the world through a veil of shifting smoke, but at least he could make sense of what lay around him. He had the lantern in his hand, and for a moment, he panicked, wondering if it was visible, floating in mid-air. Only a quick glance in a puddle put his mind at rest. As long as it was in his grasp, no one would see the lamp and discover his trickery.

The neighbouring tents caught his eye, and he glanced over his shoulder, checking for patrols before peering inside. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the strange gloom, but he soon realised he was staring at weapon stores. If the dwarves in the army were anything like the Company, they would not be walking around unarmed. He guessed these were spares. Either that, or supplies for more fighters who had yet to arrive.

Bilbo wet his lips, glaring half-heartedly at the swords and axes stacked in open-topped crates. There wasn’t much he could do with them. Where would he put them? Besides, even if he did have somewhere to hide them away, it would take hours to move this many blades.
No, there had to be better targets for his mischief. He just had to find them.

It was a treacherous, breathless slither down to where Frár’s army waited in the shallow valley. More than once, Bilbo almost fell flat on his face. By the time he reached the edge of the camp, his feet ached as much as his ribs. Limping, he edged closer to the nearest fireside, skirting its glow as he stared at the dwarves sitting in its halo.

Some slept in bedrolls, half-buried beneath blankets and furs. A few had tents, but others braved the bare ground and open sky, while their comrades drank from steaming cups and murmured among themselves.

‘I don’t like this,’ one said, looking over her shoulder and tucking a braid that marked her as someone’s sister back into the twist of her hair. If Bilbo weren’t wearing the ring, she would have seen him in a heartbeat, but instead her eyes slid over him, scanning the sprawl of soldiers all around. ‘Something’s not right.’

‘So you’ve said,’ her partner grumbled, his scowl soon falling away as he tilted his head in acknowledgement. ‘Everyone’s on edge. Mad king or not, there ain’t no one with a claim to that mountain but them that’s already in it.’

‘Then why are we here? Why are we helping that gorách Frár?’ She scowled as her friends shushed her fiercely. ‘Let him hear me. See if I care!’ she snapped, but Bilbo noticed the way she watched the shadows.

‘It’s not Frár you should worry about. Want to wake up and find Carth’s cut your throat, do you?’ Her friend sighed, poking at the fire with the stick in his hand. ‘We’ll see what the dawn brings. In the end, we don’t follow Frár’s orders. We follow those of our own king, and if he says fight – that’s what we do.’

The female soldier scoffed and fell silent, leaving Bilbo to turn away, lost in thought. Was what he’d overheard a common feeling, or had he stumbled over a pocket of doubt amidst a confident force? Now he took the time to look, there were a lot of soldiers clustered around each fireside, locked into low, wary conversation. An edge of uncertainty tainted the air – not just the general nerves that preceded battle, but something heavier – like an incoming storm.

Perhaps Frár’s allies were not as loyal as he believed.

The whiff of animals – manure and wet wool – reached Bilbo’s nose, and he squinted around him, searching for the source. There, to the east, stood a large coral, its fences hastily built but strong. Inside were scores of the battle rams that the dwarves favoured, their curved horns gleaming in the torchlight. He would have expected them to fight one another, but instead they milled about, giving loud, angry bleats.

Bilbo wasn’t very fond of farm animals in general, especially ones that were as high in the shoulder as he was tall. Still, he knew a good opportunity when he saw it. Perhaps the rams were battle-trained, but sheep were not renowned for their courage. Maybe they could face down a rank of infantry, but how would they feel about an intruder they couldn’t even see?

Tiptoeing forward, he ducked under the fence, groaning as his ribs throbbed. He had to pause, hunkered down on the churned earth as he waited for the pain to subside. By the time he could straighten up, the rams already knew something was amiss. Silence fell, and a circle of empty space opened up where Bilbo stood. The creatures shifted, turning their heads from side-to-side as they hunted for the stranger they could sense in their midst.
The distressing scent of the barnyard increased, and Bilbo fought not to gag against the smell as a few of the more nervous animals relieved themselves on instinct.

Good, if they were already spooked, then he had a far better chance of success. He knew sheep; they followed the leader. If he could get just one to bolt, then the rest would follow.

Standing on tiptoes, he peered around, noticing the four soldiers on guard. They stood, relaxed and at ease with what they thought was a simple job. The animals blocked their line of sight, and a smile flickered over Bilbo’s lips as he got to work.

Opening the gate was out of the question, but he had watched Bofur building pens for Erebor’s livestock often enough to know that they had their weaknesses. The posts lay shallow, the hard ground preventing them from biting deep into the earth. They moved when Bilbo shoved at them, making the whole fence sway.

‘What in Mahal’s name –?’

A moment later, the fearful fury of the rams drowned out the soldiers’ confusion. Already panicked by Bilbo’s invisible presence, this strangeness was a step too far for them. More than half-a-dozen lowered their heads, their great horns agleam as they charged the moving boundary, bursting through the timbers and racing to freedom.

The rest followed, giving Bilbo only a split second to get out of the way as the stampede gathered speed. Thundering footfalls boomed in his ears, rent asunder by the angry screams of the creatures and the helpless bewilderment of the guards. Some tried to chase the animals, but they were too slow, and the clanking of their armour only frightened them more.

The din roused nearby soldiers from their sleep, and Bilbo smirked to himself as he saw the spread of chaos. He had deliberately driven the flock away from the army, hoping that would make them harder to catch. Besides, this way perhaps everyone would be too busy chasing their mounts to fight.

Dwarves were shouting questions and demanding answers, throwing their hands in the air in disbelief. Squabbles broke out over who was to blame, and no one believed the sentries’ stories of a fence that moved by itself. It was a small triumph, but satisfying none-the-less, and Bilbo stepped back as he considered his next target.

Moving quickly, he began skirting the edge of the camp. Ideally, he needed to make sure that the mayhem was as widespread as possible. The more soldiers who were distracted by disasters, the better. That meant he had to pick his way over the harsh terrain, made no easier by the strange, shifting panorama offered to him by the cloak of the ring’s invisibility.

It seemed he tripped over every bit of rubble and tumbled into more ditches than he cared to count, but at last, he found another opportunity.

More tents, the same as the one that had been his prison, but this time it was not weaponry sheltered by their fabric. Crates of food filled dozens of them, as well as hay for the animals. They were packed close together, almost wall to wall, and Bilbo bit his lip as he considered the possibilities.

The flicker of his lantern caught his eye, and he drew a deep breath. After all, an army marched on its stomach. With no food, how long could Frár hope to hold any kind of siege?

He would have to be quick and careful. Setting fires could go wrong in the blink of an eye. The last thing he wanted was to burn alongside everything else. Still, even a small blaze would be enough to distract the dwarves waiting on Erebor’s doorstep, and with any luck it would set everyone on edge.
Soldiers were a suspicious lot, and Bilbo knew it wouldn’t be long before rumour had it that this whole venture was cursed.

As fast as he could, Bilbo slipped into the first tent, unshielding the lantern and putting its bare flame to the nearest stack of hay. In seconds, sparks caught, filling the air with sweet smoke as the dry grass fed the flames. He did not hang around to watch, darting out of the makeshift opening in the canvas and moving onto one further down the row.

He was just entering the fifth store when a cry of alarm went up, followed by the blasting, shrill notes of a horn. Voices rang through the air, shouting for water, and Bilbo knew his time was up. If he hung around too long, he’d be trapped here among the smouldering supplies, penned in by the dwarves struggling to put out the flames. He had to hurry.

Lifting the lantern, he paused, squinting at the new shapes spread out in front of him. These were not supplies, but big clay pots, stoppered and sealed. Hurriedly, he pried the lid free of the nearest one and stared at the thick, black liquid inside.

Oil.

A shout reached his ears, and he swore as he pressed his foot to the urn, pushing it over so its contents spilt like ink across the floor. There was no time to be delicate, and he rushed to the slit he had made in the canvas, holding it open and stepping halfway through it before he turned back and threw the lantern as hard as he could.

He didn’t hang around to see if the fuel caught alight. He didn’t need to, not when he heard the roar of flames behind him. They baked the air, pushing him forward until he was half-running, half-falling. His hair felt singed, and sweat trickled down his shoulder blades as he ran, not stopping until he reached a safe distance.

Turning, he winced at the evidence of his own destruction. The previous fires had been tiny compared to the last one. Sparks rose high in the air, settling elsewhere and igniting more flames wherever there was enough dry ground and something to burn.

Bilbo had thought the pandemonium caused when he let the rams loose had been bad, but the clamour before him exceeded all his expectations. Within minutes, he didn’t think there was a supply tent that was not going up in smoke, and he could hear the screamed orders of the commanding officers as the dwarves desperately tried to douse the inferno.

‘Water won’t work on oil,’ he murmured to himself, sending out a quiet prayer of thanks to whoever might be listening for that bit of good fortune. They would have to smother it. That, or wait for it to burn itself out, and the more time they spent worrying about the fire, the less they had to spare for planning their attack.

A twinge of guilt caught in his belly as he turned away, beginning his staggering trek towards the south. Despite his hopes for destruction, he did not want to hurt any of the soldiers. Perhaps the Company would call him soft-hearted for that, but thoughts of killing dwarves who were only following orders didn’t sit well on Bilbo’s conscience, especially like this. No one could claim his actions were honourable, sneaking around in the shadows as he was.

With a sigh, he rubbed at his face, wincing at the icy sweat that seemed to burn his fingertips. The ring was starting to take its toll. Every footstep felt like a monumental effort, and now he didn’t even have his lantern to cast its uncertain light.

Something wet and warm splashed over his foot, and Bilbo wrinkled his nose, peering through the
gloom at the strange, dark liquid. Reaching down, he dabbed at it with his fingers, jolting in surprise when they came away streaked with crimson.

Blood, and plenty of it.

It was hard to see on the wet, bare ground, but the melted ice told its own story. Reluctantly, Bilbo followed the makeshift trail, his entire body tense as he reached the lip of a small hollow: some animal’s old burrow, long since caved in to a natural bowl of earth.

The dead dwarf stared up at him, his appearance made ghoulish by the realm of the ring. He looked as if his bones pressed up through the skin of his face, and the milky white of his blank staring eyes turned Bilbo’s stomach. The dwarf had become something monstrous, a creature of the shadows, but even like that, Bilbo knew who it was.

It seemed Githin hadn’t got far.

Checking over his shoulder, Bilbo hunkered down and pulled off the ring, watching the awful, deathly visage fade as his normal vision returned. Githin was still dead, his blood smeared lips parted around his last breath and his eyes unfocussed. A huge cut yawned like a second smile in his throat, and Bilbo grimaced in pity, rubbing a hand over his own neck.

His body had been dumped out of sight, but barely. Anyone who bothered to look in the dip in the landscape would see him. There’d been no effort to bury him, as if whoever had stolen his life didn’t care about trying to hide their tracks. Perhaps they thought that, by tomorrow, he would be just another corpse on the battlefield, or maybe they believed they were above the consequences of murdering a mercenary.

Edging down the steep slope, Bilbo hunkered at Githin’s side and reached out to check he was as dead as he looked. Warmth still resided in his flesh, and Bilbo found himself patting that motionless hand helplessly. Many would say Githin had brought this on himself; he was a murderer and spy for hire, but something panged in the pit of Bilbo’s belly to see how he’d met his end.

Quickly, he checked his pockets, noticing that the dwarf’s knife was missing from his belt. The gold was gone too, and Bilbo would bet anything it was already back in Frár’s hands. The only thing of note was a scrap of torn fabric caught in the clutch of Githin’s fist.

Even in the frail, dawn light, it was distinctive. A rich, copper colour that was worth its weight in gold. No doubt there’d be some matching damage on Carth’s tunic. It seemed he was more than an adviser. He was the one who tidied up Frár’s loose ends, and Bilbo had a growing suspicion that, if he wasn’t careful, he might meet the same fate.

‘Sorry,’ he whispered, knowing it was pointless. Githin couldn’t hear him, but it made him feel a little better as he turned his back and scrambled up the slope. When all this was over, he would tell someone where Githin lay. Maybe he didn’t deserve forgiveness, but to Bilbo at least, a decent burial would not go amiss.

Biting his lip, he replaced the ring, wheezing as if he’d climbed to Erebor’s peak with his bare hands. Returning to the shadow world so soon was nothing less than a punishment, and he swayed where he stood, crouching down as he drew in deep breaths. He would have to find somewhere to lay low, and soon. Somewhere he could rest without the ring to hide him.

Peering blearily around, Bilbo’s gaze settled on a monstrous shadow off to the west, made hellish by the flames. It was not near enough to the blaze to burn, and Bilbo swore to himself as he shut his eyes, shaking his head in disbelief.
Balin’s greatest fear had been a siege engine, but they had all hoped any army would be lacking such a device. Unkind terrain and treacherous conditions made them hard to transport, yet there one stood: a leviathan against the horizon.

Rubbing a hand across his face, Bilbo hobbled towards it, making sure to stay well away from the main crowds trying to put out the burning food tents. More than once, he had to take the long way around, crawling over jutting rocks and groping along in the semi-darkness. Dawn bloomed, but the sun’s rays were little more than an afterthought. The shadows of the ring’s realm held sway, blinding Bilbo to almost everything else.

At last, he stumbled to a halt, looking up at the towering monstrosity before him. In some ways, it reminded him of the signal towers the orcs had used, but where they had been crude yet effective, the dwarves’ siege engine was a thing of cruel beauty. Sleek and strong, there was no doubting the engineering of it, and Bilbo wiped sweat from his brow as he circled around, trying to find a weakness.

A dozen guards surrounded it, alert and watchful for anything amiss. However, their presence was not as off-putting as the machinery itself, all encased in wood. There were no stray ropes to cut, and great lumps of oak stopped its massive wheels from rolling backwards. He tried to shift them, but a minute’s futile effort left him with nothing but crippling agony gnawing at his chest and shadows popping in his vision.

‘Curse it,’ he hissed, panting heavily. Shivers marched along his spine, and his skin felt clammy and slick. Whatever he was going to do, he had to hurry. He didn’t think he could bear the ring’s tyranny much longer.

The knife slipped in his damp palm, and he clenched his fingers, struggling for a better grip as he stared at the one frailty he could find in the thing’s design. A team of horses dozed in their traces, their breath steaming in the air as they waited for the command to move their burden. Hooves like dinner plates shifted on the earth, their fetlocks clotted with mud and rimed with ice. The dozen beasts were far taller than him; too big for even a man such as Bard to ride, and Bilbo wondered if they would scare as easily as the rams.

Well, there was only one way to find out.

Inching forward, he reached out, pressing his invisible palm as high as he could reach on the flank of one of the beasts at the back. It was warm against his chilled fingers, its coat glossy and rich. However, the creature did not seem the least bit perturbed by the touch of a hand it could not see. Even a slap against its leg got Bilbo nothing more than a tail flicked in his face, and he huffed out a breath of annoyance before considering the blade in his grip.

He hated hurting animals, especially those who were not about to be his dinner, but he knew what this contraption might represent: in its planks and pulleys may lie the downfall of Erebor and the death of its king. Not even his pricking conscience could sway him from trying to destroy it.

Quick as a striking snake, he scraped the edge of his little knife across the horse’s flesh, careful not to cut too deep. Immediately, the animal screamed, rearing up and jostling its fellows before slamming its back hooves against one of the struts of the siege engine.

His heart in his throat, Bilbo raced along the line, swiping his weapon and ducking flying hooves as he arced around the front of the team and repeated the motion on the horses he could reach. In less than a minute, they were whinnying and rearing, the muscles in their necks like rope as they gave up kicking and instead sought their escape.
The guards were already moving, trying to calm the creatures, but it was no use. Ponderously, the great siege tower began to move, its wheels inching around. The horses heaved, and steadily it picked up speed, dragged along as they jostled one another, rolling their eyes in panic.

Perhaps if they’d thought more quickly, the guards might have been able to stop it, cutting the team free. However, before they could act, the animals found their stride. Their long legs pumped as the great weight behind them reached the curve of the hill and began to chase after them. Its mighty wheels jostled over rocks, making the beams creak and complain. The horses liked that noise even less, and before Bilbo could blink, they were charging off, made mad by the thing that chased them.

Swallowing hard, he hoped that they would not be killed – that somehow the tower would shake itself apart and free them from their harness – but he didn’t have time to stand around and watch. The booming din of the siege engine had called together any dwarf who was not already trying to contain the fire.

He needed a place to hide.

With a wheeze, he staggered back through the camp, which was rapidly emptying as people tried to deal with the problems they faced. He had to duck fewer guards and patrols, which was just as well. The ring had demanded its price, and he did not so much walk as weave drunkenly from side-to-side, peering around him in a desperate effort to find some shelter.

Pain bloomed in his foot, and Bilbo yelped as he sprawled forward, banging his abused chin on the ground. Stars exploded across his vision as his teeth clattered together, and he stifled a moan as he looked to see what had tripped him.

A wooden stake lay on its side, the rope around it slack. It didn’t take him long to realise it was a guyrope for one of the tents, thankfully far enough away from the conflagration to avoid the flames. His clumsy feet had pulled it free, slackening the canvas so he could lift its edge and crawl underneath.

Half-blind, he scrabbled forward, pressing himself to some stacked crates before yanking the ring from his finger, scraping his cold, swollen knuckles as he did so.

Stifling a groan of relief, Bilbo tipped his head back against the wood behind him, closing his eyes and succumbing to the waves of pain that lapped across his skin. He couldn’t feel one bit of himself that didn’t hurt in some way, and he dreaded to think what he must look like: filthy, bloody and frozen to the bone. Hardly the graceful appearance one would expect from someone courting a king.

Biting his chapped lip, he peeled his eyes open and braced his palms against the floor, the better to steady himself where he sat. It was only then that he noticed this was no bare-earthed storage tent. Beneath him was the edge of a luxurious rug, its pelt soft to the touch. On closer inspection, the wooden crates at his back were not plain, useful things, but heavily decorated, and the smell of incense tickled his nose.

Perhaps this wasn’t such a good place to hide after all.

‘Gurd’uklafl’

Sweat popped anew along Bilbo’s brow at the strange voice. At least it wasn’t Frár or Carth, but the anger in the dwarf’s words did not bring him comfort. Whoever it was sounded as if they were at the end of their tether.

Swallowing hard, he half-turned, looking for a gap between the crates and pressing his eye to its
shadowed nook. It gave him a very narrow view of the room, but it was enough for him to make out the armoured dwarf bent over the desk.

Lamplight shone on a chiselled profile and painted blue highlights in his luxurious beard. Complicated braids wove through his hair, but he did not glisten with the same jewels that made Frár so gaudy. A thin band of silver encircled his brow, and Bilbo drew in a breath as he realised he must be looking at another dwarven king.

One of Frár’s allies, and he did not look happy.

Approaching footsteps, coupled by the clank of soldiers’ boots was all the warning Bilbo got before the tent flap whipped open. Bilbo jerked back, shivering hard, not because of the zephyr of cold air that wormed its way into the room, but because of the voice that came with it.

‘What is it, Brandahr?’ Frár blustered. ‘I do not have time to be summoned on your every whim!’

Holding his breath, Bilbo peered through the gap again, watching the dark-haired dwarf look up. From this angle, he could see the full force of the hard, intelligent glare that lit Brandahr’s eyes. His jaw clenched, and he straightened, surprising Bilbo with his height. He had a good few inches on Thorin, and every line of his bearing told its own story of his strength.

‘If you want my armies, Frár, then you will come when called,’ he pointed out, his soft voice at odds with the hardness in his countenance. ‘Tell me, why has my camp fallen into chaos? Fires, crazed beasts and a siege engine torn to pieces.’ Metal scraped against his desk as he drew the tip of a dagger across the map on its surface. ‘My dwarves talk of ghosts and curses.’

Frár snorted, but if he was planning a sarcastic reply, then he must have swallowed it back. From this angle, Bilbo couldn’t make out the king of the Stonefoots, but he could hear him well enough, and his tone turned wheedling as he made his excuses.

‘You know soldiers. Quick to blame their own laziness on dwarflings’ stories.’

Brandahr folded his arms. ‘The dwarves under my command are some of the best-trained in all of Middle Earth. They are neither lazy nor prone to flights of fancy. It must be your paltry cohort spreading such tales. Either that, or you are mistaken. Perhaps King Thorin brings not an army, as you believed he would, but a saboteur?’

‘His madness would not allow it,’ Frár insisted, his tone oily. His next words sounded rehearsed to Bilbo’s ears. ‘Remember, the only thing cursed in these lands is the Durin line. Who knows what horrors he and his heirs have conducted within Erebor’s glorious halls? The rumours I have heard…’

‘Rumours are just that, Frár. Remember, I am here because I share your concerns for the people of this kingdom. I saw what remained of the town upon the lake. I will defend you and your dwarves against the attack you seem certain is coming, but I will not remove Thorin Oakenshield from his throne without reason.’

Frár sighed. ‘I fear you shall find it when you enter that mountain. Who knows what they have been eating, these past months? How could they survive in those ruined halls, on a land so barren? Why, all they have are each other and the gold… Could you, in good conscience, allow such behaviour to go unpunished? No sane dwarf would consume his own kind, not even if his life depended on it.’

Bilbo swallowed, feeling sick at Frár’s bald-faced lie. Was this the kind of poison he and Carth had been pouring into Brandahr’s ear? He noticed there had been no mention of elves or hobbits. Perhaps that meant their allies did not share their apparent disgust for other races.
‘It is one thing to bring peace to dwarves who have lost themselves to madness and savagery, but hear me, Frár,’ Brandahr walked around the desk, his stride measured and powerful as the light gleamed off the axe slung across his back. ‘I know Thorin Oakenshield, and if I find him lost to the sickness that blights his line, I would consider it a mercy to place him in Mahal’s halls. That will be my judgement, and mine alone. I won’t be your weapon in an unjust war for Erebor’s throne.’

Frár shifted his weight, and Bilbo caught a glimpse of his fleeting smirk before it was gone, replaced by a mask of concerned innocence. ‘I act only for the sake of Erebor’s people, to free them from the nightmare I fear they face. We are in this together, old friend.’

Brandahr’s only response was a grunt, but Bilbo watched Frár, seeing the cruel twist of his expression the moment the bigger dwarf turned his back. His eyes glinted beneath his heavy brow, as if Brandahr was just another means to an end. Would he eventually meet the same fate as Githin? Who would Brandahr’s army follow then? Would the dwarves turn away, or would Frár seduce them with the promise of Erebor and the riches within?

Before Bilbo could do more than wonder, someone else ducked into the tent, allowing in a shaft of bloody morning light. Their shadow reflected their deep bow, while harsh breaths suggested they had run to deliver news. ‘My lords, a force rides from the Lonely Mountain. King Thorin leads it.’

‘How many?’ Frár sounded as if he were giddy with delight and trying to hide it. Yet a moment later his smug smile vanished, replaced by a thunderous scowl at the answer he received.

‘No more than twenty. He comes under a flag of truce.’

Bilbo closed his eyes, whispering his gratitude and relief that Thorin had kept his head. He had protected his kingdom, and had taken away Frár’s advantage. He did not march with an army to annihilate those that challenged him. He came to talk, and with that one action, Frár’s claims of madness began to look very weak indeed.

‘It’s a trick!’ Frár spat. ‘Call the soldiers to arms. We meet him in force!’

The messenger did not leap to obey him, and Bilbo knew, even though he could not see the dwarf’s face, that he was looking to Brandahr for confirmation.

‘Frár…’ Brandahr said, ‘such action would show our weakness, not our strength.’

‘Forget the Oakenshield you think you know,’ Frár hissed, jabbing a finger in Brandahr’s direction, his wide eyes wild. ‘Will you go down in history as another victim to his insanity? This is a trick, I tell you, and I will not fall for it. My army marches, every last dwarf. Yours must do the same!’

Brandahr gave a sigh, and Bilbo’s heart sank as he nodded in resignation. ‘Fine, see to it. I would rather face embarrassment than an ambush that we cannot overcome… and Frár?’ he called out, waiting for him to stop on the tent’s threshold before continuing, ‘For your sake, I hope you’re wrong about Thorin. I have seen him, sane in battle, slay more than I could count. If he is truly mad, it will be no simple fight.’

Bilbo’s breath escaped him in a shuddering rush as he waited, motionless. Only when Brandahr had followed Frár from the tent did he dare so much as move, and even then, he could do little more than wring his hands, trying desperately to think.

More than anything, he wanted to rush to Thorin’s side and show him he was all right, but doing so would only weaken Thorin’s position. No, he had to follow the army as it marched. He had to move from within their ranks and hope his truths would be heard.
Deep in Bilbo’s belly, determination burned. The time had come to prove Frár’s lies for what they were. The dawn rose on his deception and would end in his downfall.

Bilbo would make sure of it.
The morning sun rose over the horizon, spilling its bloody light across the sky. Long shadows speared the land, pooling in hollows where the ice lingered. Thorin’s breath steamed in the air, escaping his lips in a thick cloud of white. The pony he rode snorted, shaking its mane as it continued its steady pace.

‘Scouts, not ours,’ Dwalin growled, jerking his head and tightening his gauntleted fists around the reins of his own mount. ‘Off to the west. They’l’l have seen us.’

‘Let them go.’ Thorin squared his jaw, looking up at the pennant that rose above their party. The dark blue waved defiance in the breeze, the seven stars shining in the gathering day. Beneath it, a white flag of truce rippled, whipping at the air. ‘Frár can’t be far away.’

‘Thank Mahal for that.’ Dwalin winced, his armour clanking as he shifted in his saddle. ‘They’re a fair ride from Erebor’s front door, I’ll give them that.’

‘It won’t take long for them to cover this ground.’ Thorin glanced over his shoulder at the proud spire of the Lonely Mountain. He had waited within its shelter until he could bear it no more, chafing against the passing of every hour as his mind ran in frantic circles. At last, he reached his limit.

In the first silver gleam of dawn, they rode out with lanterns to illuminate the way. Now, those small circles of golden light lay extinguished, and though miles had passed beneath their ponies’ hooves, it still felt as if they had gone nowhere. He knew no more about Bilbo’s fate than he had when all this began, and his ignorance left him sick to his stomach.

Dwalin cleared his throat, his broad shoulders lifting as he gave a sniff. Despite himself, Thorin managed a small smile at his old friend’s discomfort. Dwalin wanted to offer reassurance, but did not know what to say. A warrior and realist, he would not insult Thorin’s intelligence by making promises for Bilbo’s welfare that none of them could keep. Instead, he fell back on what they both knew best: Erebor and its safety.

‘It’s in good hands,’ he began, never taking his eyes off the horizon. ‘Fili and Kili threw themselves into preparing for the siege, and Bard – I can see why his people chose him to lead. He’s a firm man. A good one. They’ll not let the mountain fall. Not while they’ve breath left in their bodies.’

Behind them, Balin cleared his throat, reminding his younger brother that discussing the demise of Thorin’s nephews may not be the best topic of conversation. Dwarves were not known for their tact; they were a practical race, but Thorin was grateful for the interruption. He knew all too well how this day could end, and the less he dwelt on that, the better.

He had started this quest, months and miles ago, with little but his own life to lose. Now, there was so much at stake that it hurt to consider. It was a vulnerability, but it was also his source of strength. He had plenty to fight for, if that’s what Frár demanded.

Thorin would not disappoint.

‘What’s that up ahead?’ Bofur asked, nudging his pony forward and craning his neck. ‘Smoke?’

Thorin frowned, eyeing the air in the distance. At first, he had taken it for mist, but now he looked closely, the blue-black hue declared its true nature. ‘Campfires?’

‘Not unless Frár’s gathered all of Middle Earth to fight,’ Dwalin replied. ‘Besides, that’s not wood
‘May I suggest we see what Prince Legolas has to say?’ Balin asked mildly, tipping his head towards where the elf loped down the hillside with some of his men in tow. Tauriel and a couple of others remained at the top of the slope, watching the land beyond with sharp eyes. There was no sign of Bilbo among them, and though Thorin had not dared to allow himself to hope, the blade of disappointment still cut deep.

‘King Thorin.’ Legolas came to a halt, inclining his head.

‘Have you found him?’ he demanded, doing his best to curb his impatience. ‘Is there any sign they have him?’

‘We scouted the edge of the camp, but we were unable to find where Master Baggins was being held before –’ The elf paused, an uncertain expression on his confident face.

‘Before what?’ he prompted.

‘The battle rams escaped their pen. Perhaps it was an accident, but not long after, the fires started.’ Legolas reached over his shoulder, touching the fletching of an arrow in his quiver as if grounding himself. ‘We watched them catch light; someone started them on purpose. Huge swathes of their tents are little more than ash. Then there was the siege engine.’

Balin sucked in a deep breath, and dread uncoiled in Thorin’s belly. ‘How many do they have?’

‘Now? None.’ Legolas shrugged at Thorin’s bafflement. ‘At sunrise, the one they had was smashed to pieces when the horses stampeded.’

Thorin shook his head, struggling to wrap his mind around the enormity of Legolas’ words. ‘It’s destroyed?’

‘Yes. They will not be able to rebuild it any time soon.’ Legolas looked back up the hill. ‘These events were not caused by careless soldiers.’

‘One misfortune might be an accident, but three?’ Dwalin stroked his beard. ‘Someone’s sabotaging Frá and his army.’

‘They spread their chaos wide,’ Legolas agreed. ‘Whoever is behind it must be able to move freely through the camp. However, their attacks made it impossible to search for Master Baggins.’

Thorin closed his eyes, struggling to manage the fretful flutter of his fear. Swallowing it back, he stared straight ahead, giving a single nod of understanding. ‘Then we will have to make the best of it. Did you see anything else? Anything that could give us an indication of whether Frá has Bilbo?’

‘The valley is bare, with little in the way of cover. There was no movement to or from the camp. It’s possible they are holding Master Baggins elsewhere, but I haven’t seen any messengers that might deliver the news that the abduction was a success.’

‘And Frá is definitely with his troops?’

Legolas gestured towards the brow of the hill. ‘Why don’t you come and see for yourself?’

The pony huffed as Thorin dug in his heels, urging it up the slope. Its ears flicked, but otherwise it offered no protest as it walked over stark gravel and around the occasional, clinging gorse. Loose earth skittered from its hooves as it crested the peak, and Thorin eased back on the reins, bringing the
beast to a standstill as he took in the sight that awaited him.

At this distance, Frár’s army was nothing more than a smudge of colour beneath a pall of smoke. Now and then, the sun glinted off metal, flashing like a beacon. The plain tents that remained pocked the crowd, and the distant hum of many voices tickled Thorin’s ears.

‘Here.’ Balin elbowed him, offering him a spyglass in his weathered palms.

Cold metal kissed his cheekbone as Thorin peered along its length, bringing the seething mass into focus. The valuable lenses were not strong enough to pick out individual faces, but he could make out the brazen armour of Frár’s personal guard posted around one of the central tents.

‘I don’t like it,’ Dwalin grumbled. ‘We’re too exposed up here. Who’s to say there’s not an archer waiting to take us out?’

‘No, that’s not how this will go. Not yet, anyway.’ Nori stopped his pony on Dwalin’s other side. ‘Frár wants to do things by the book. He’ll want his rule sanctioned by the Council, and that means no obvious foul play: including killing soldiers under a flag of truce.’ He leant forward, narrowing his eyes at the lay of the land. ‘It’s when he finds out his plan has gone down the shaft that things could get messy.’

‘And we’ll be in the middle of it all.’ Balin sighed, rubbing a hand over his brow and squinting against the strengthening sun. ‘Remind me of our plan?’

‘Get Bilbo and get back to the mountain.’ Thorin nodded to Legolas. ‘We cannot take on Frár’s army, but without their battle rams, we can outrun them. Will you be on foot?’

‘We have horses picketed off to the west. Once we’ve retrieved Master Baggins, we’ll give you a signal so you know to begin your retreat.’

Bofur unslung a horn from his shoulder, handing it over. ‘Three long blasts and we’ll turn tail.’

‘We shall buy you as much time as possible,’ Thorin vowed, ‘but you must move quickly.’

‘And if we do not find him?’ Tauriel asked, straightening up from where she crouched on the ridge, watching the furore below. Her smooth brow creased in apology, but she did not bite back her question. It was a possibility for which Thorin knew they should prepare. If Bilbo was not in the camp, then they needed to know how to act.

‘Give a long, rising note and then circle round and return to my side. I may be in need of your bow.’

‘You shall have it,’ she promised, turning to look back as a call to arms shattered the morning air. Loud and shrill, it bounced off the hillside. Moments later, the distant hubbub took on a new purpose, and order emerged from chaos as they steadily formed the rank and file.

‘Here they come,’ Nori murmured, reaching for his helmet and placing it grudgingly over his hair. ‘Do we go down to meet them?’

‘Aye, we must,’ Balin replied. ‘We cannot negotiate while holding the high ground. It gives the wrong impression.’

‘We’ll stop halfway along the valley so we can draw everyone away from the camp.’ Thorin checked Orcrist in its scabbard before reaching behind him and brushing his fingers over the shaft of the Blood Axe where it lay slung across his back. It was Nori’s idea to bring it: better, in the eyes of most dwarves, than any crown he could wear. ‘Remember, we are not to fight. Do not raise your
Dwalin huffed, looking around at the small company of guards that was their escort. With one barked order, he had the soldiers encircle Thorin, riding in perfect, protective formation as the horses trotted onwards.

‘I wish we’d brought the wizard,’ he muttered. ‘If only to spook Frár.’

‘Fili and Kili may require the benefit of his guidance. Besides, I do not want to give him the opportunity to accuse us of trickery. He could claim that Gandalf was hiding my madness. This way, there can be no deception.’

‘At least, not on our part,’ Balin added, ‘though I’m sure we’ll hear nothing but lies from Frár himself.’

‘Just be on yer guard,’ Dwalin advised. ‘Frár’s not the only one to worry about. There’s also that adviser of his.’

‘Not to mention his allies.’ Balin heaved a gusty sigh. ‘I would feel better if I knew where the Blackbeards stood in all this.’

Thorin ran his tongue over the edge of his teeth, reaching for his patience. He longed to rage against the political stupidity spread out before him. Did no one understand that there was not time for these ridiculous games? He did not want to negotiate and pacify; he wanted to grab Frár around the throat and throttle him until all that spilt forth was the bitter, sharpest truths of his foolishness.

Yet now, more than ever, he could not surrender to his impulses. It pained him to admit it, but force would not work in his favour. He had to remain calm. Anything else would only give Frár an opportunity he did not deserve.

The wind picked up, blowing cold air against his face and scattering the columns of smoke into a thick blue haze. From this distance, he could not see the voracious tongues of devouring flame. Perhaps they had already extinguished the fires, though it must have been no small feat, considering the smog that veiled the sky.

If it were only Frár’s men, Thorin could well believe they would succumb to panic. Poorly trained and equipped, his soldiers were little better than Erebor’s own rag-tag army. However, the Blackbeards were legendary for their stoic skill: an asset to Frár’s plan. More than anything, Thorin needed to discover the strength of their allegiance. Did something tie the Blackbeards to the Stonefoots, some unknown debt to be repaid, or could their bond be broken?

Reaching into his breastplate, he closed his fingers around the folded sheaf of papers tucked there for safekeeping. Every order they had found bearing Frár’s seal was there, transcribed into damning Khuzdul. Nori had the decryption beads to provide on request, in case anyone mistrusted his skills. On the face of it, such offerings of proof were not much, but Thorin had to hope that it would be enough to unravel this seditious plot and return Bilbo to his side.

Behind him, Balin and Bofur were debating the identity of the saboteur, their calm words belying the tension that caught them all in its grasp. Theories bounced back and forth as the steady progress of their mounts consumed the distance that lay between them and their destination.

‘Could be it’s one of the soldiers unhappy with conditions?’ Bofur suggested. ‘You know how it can get. Even the best infantry in Middle Earth will have a few bad seeds.’

‘But this?’ Balin waved a hand towards the carnage. ‘You heard the elf princeling. What they saw
was a campaign of destruction, not just a few discontent souls and a bit of unrest. Look at it however you want, these actions have crippled Frár’s efforts. They have no cavalry, no siege engines and little in the way of shelter.’

‘So what then? A spy?’ Bofur shrugged, shaking his head. ‘Someone from yet another clan sticking their nose in?’

Nori clicked his tongue and half-turned in his saddle, scanning the horizon. ‘For all we know, it could be Dain’s lot that’s moved on ahead to turn the tide in our favour. It could be someone else entirely. The who is not as important as the why.’ He squared his shoulders, jerking his thumb towards the advancing forces. ‘Why now, on the eve before battle, did they choose to act? Frár’s been here a while, so why not do this earlier and drive them out? Seems a bit convenient.’

Balin harrumphed, a smile playing on his lips. ‘Perhaps there was no opportunity before. Of course, there is one person on our side who is probably in that camp, brought there by Frár himself.’ His eyes glittered as Thorin glanced askance in his direction. ‘Maybe Master Baggins is a prisoner no more?’

Thorin’s heart leapt in his chest, its pattering cadence a heady mix of exhilaration and fear. As much as he hated the notion of Bilbo in Frár’s clutches, the idea of him sneaking through a camp of enemy soldiers was disconcerting in other ways. No one would hesitate to kill a saboteur – to run them through and be done with it. It was a different kind of danger.

‘He’s quiet, I’ll give him that,’ Dwalin murmured, ‘but even a hobbit would struggle to move unseen among that lot.’

‘He might have stolen some armour?’ Bofur suggested. ‘Sure, he’s a bit short for a dwarf, but no one would look twice.’

‘And how would he excuse that beardless face of his?’ Dwalin retorted. ‘No helmet would hide what he is. All credit to him, he has a knack for getting himself out of a tight spot, but I’m not sure even he could manage this.’

‘Assume Bilbo is still Frár’s prisoner and at his mercy,’ Thorin ordered, allowing his low voice to carry so that all those around him could hear. ‘If he has escaped, he will make himself known to us. If not, then it is our duty to see him safely home. Take nothing for granted, and stay sharp. We don’t yet know how this will play out.’

‘I think we’ll find out soon enough.’ Balin reined in his horse, bringing the snorting creature to a halt. ‘Halfway along the valley, just like you said. Now what?’

‘We wait.’

Thorin sat straight in his saddle, his jaw clenched as his mount shifted, pawing at the ground. The animal picked up on his tension, and he forced himself to drop his heels in the stirrups and loosen his fingers from where they choked the reins. Smoothing one hand down the side of its neck, he murmured low reassurances.

Silently, he hoped that the day did not end in battle. They had little in the way of livestock within Erebor’s borders. Those that rode with him were all the horses they had: fed as best they could through the cold winter. They did not deserve a bloody slaughter at the hand of a plotting king.

‘No advance,’ Dwalin said, barely moving his lips as he waited, his fingers resting on his axe. ‘He’s bringing the whole damn lot of them.’
‘How many do you think?’ Thorin asked, surveying the approaching horde and trying to calculate his own estimate.

‘Too many.’ Dwalin grimaced in his direction, his meaning clear. Fighting long odds was nothing new to either of them, but there came a point when even they had to admit defeat. If Frár’s forces put them to the sword, they would not survive.

‘Be prepared to run.’ Thorin examined the crisp blue sky. At least there would be no storm to hamper their retreat, but all those meeting on the field shared that advantage. ‘It may be our only choice.’

‘You think they’ll give us that chance?’ Dwalin demanded. ‘If Frár has archers, he won’t hesitate to use them. He’ll pick us off one-by-one.’

‘It’s a risk we have to take.’ He gazed ahead, narrowing his eyes as the marching mass came into focus. Now, he could make out who rode in the lead. Frár was impossible to miss. His gaudy armour glinted in the sunlight, and Thorin fought not to sneer as he met Nori’s knowing look.

‘Told you,’ the spy said. ‘All flash, no substance.’

‘That army behind him looks like plenty of substance to me,’ Balin murmured.

‘But how many of them are his?’ Thorin asked, watching them with a practiced eye. Most were marching in perfect time, trained by endless drills and decades of experience. However, here and there he could see the tell-tale signs of a more inexperienced cohort. They fumbled and tripped, struggling to keep up as they staggered over the cruel terrain. ‘No more than a fifth, if I’m any judge.’

‘The rest are Blackbeards?’ Balin accepted the spyglass, sweeping it from side-to-side as he counted banners. ‘Aye, I think you’re right.’ A frown clouded the old dwarf’s brow as he heaved a sigh, his body stiff with unease.

‘What do you know of them, old friend?’

Balin’s frowned. He removed his helmet, smoothing his hair back before seating it more firmly on his head. ‘Little more than what I’ve already said. Brandahr is a good king – an honourable one. Perhaps that made him an easy target for Frár’s lies.’

‘Something which could work to our advantage. Negotiating with Frár is useless. It is Brandahr we need to convince.’ Thorin shifted, wetting his lips before swinging down from his horse. His boots thudded on the stone, their heavy soles scraping as he turned to face the advancing crowd.

‘Everyone down,’ he ordered, not needing to look at Dwalin to feel his reluctance. ‘We must discredit Frár’s lies about violence. We can’t do that from the saddle.’

‘Horseback is too distant. Too aggressive,’ Balin agreed, grunting as he slid from his mount.

‘If we need to retreat, they’ll strike us down before we can so much as climb back on,’ Dwalin pointed out, his jaw working before he obeyed. ‘It could well be the death of us.

‘Then we had best hope it doesn’t come to that.’

The earth trembled with the thud of marching feet, and the clatter of armour grew into a cacophony. The noise rattled Thorin’s ribs and shook his breath in his chest, but he did not so much as flinch. The temptation to reach for a weapon was an itch under his skin and an ache in his bones, but he
pushed it down, gritting his teeth until it was something he could control. No matter what, he could not be the first to draw his blade. Not if he wanted to get out of this alive.

The army moved like a landslide, and for one heart-stopping moment, he wondered if they had got it all wrong. Perhaps Frár did not care for the Council’s approval. Maybe he would mow them down under a flag of truce without a second thought. The rank and file surged towards them, consuming the land with every stride: as blank and uncaring as the tide.

At less than a hundred paces away, Brandahr raised his clenched fist, signalling the halt. Immediately, his officers gave his silent command. The haunting notes from the horns they carried trembled on the cold air, and Thorin watched as thousands of dwarves stopped where they stood, the final slam of their feet echoing around them.

‘Impressive,’ Dwalin muttered under his breath. To most people, the display would look like nothing more than grandstanding, but it took skill to bring such a huge crowd to a standstill with such ease. Normally there would be confusion and chaos as the orders travelled through the field, but these dwarves knew better. They were no green recruits, but war-hardened souls who understood the way their king’s mind worked and anticipated his commands.

‘Let’s hope we don’t have to fight them,’ Thorin replied. ‘It’s not a battle we could win.’

Lifting his chin, he ran his tongue over his teeth, taking a moment to collect his thoughts before he deliberately swept his gaze over Frár to meet Brandahr’s blue eyes. He cut an imposing figure, his armour flawless and his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

He looked no different than he had all those months ago, when he stood as witness to the High Council’s decision not to help Thorin. Back then, his sympathy had been a palpable force; an old ally helpless to act on Thorin’s behalf. Now, he was a blank slate: unreadable.

Frár, on the other hand, was an open book. Thorin did not look at him directly. To do so would only acknowledge him and give him power that was not his to hold. Instead, he scrutinised him from the corner of his eye, taking in everything from the narrow smirk on his ruddy face to the fact that his armour had been modified to accommodate his growing girth. Frár was an idle king, happy to feed off his lands until there was nothing left, and it showed.

‘Hail, King Under The Mountain,’ Brandahr said, his strong voice carrying with ease. ‘What brings you from your hallowed halls?’

Thorin gave the assembled soldiers a look of studied indifference, taking a moment to choose his answer. Accusations lay heavy on his tongue, hot to the taste, but he swallowed them back. That was exactly what Frár wanted, but Thorin would be thricely damned if he would give him the satisfaction. Instead, he drew a deep breath, inclining his head respectfully.

‘We come seeking your aid, King Brandahr.’

The ripple of shock that went through the crowd was a tangible thing. Thorin saw it on the faces nearest him and felt it in the air. Frár gaped like a landed fish, his cheeks quivering, while Brandahr’s cool mask slipped to reveal genuine concern beneath.

‘Stay sharp, laddie,’ Balin whispered. ‘I see no sign of Carth.’

Thorin nodded in quick acknowledgement. The telling absence had not slipped his notice, and his stomach clenched with fear of what it could mean. Was he with Bilbo, exacting whatever vile revenge his bigotry demanded, or was he elsewhere, playing some other, invisible role in this plot?
‘If it is in my power to assist you, I will do so.’ Brandahr swung down from his horse, ignoring the choked sound of Frár’s protest as he approached, crossing the no man’s land between them so that they could stand face-to-face. ‘What troubles you, Thorin?’

Behind him, Thorin sensed Dwalin shift his weight, no doubt keen to remind Brandahr that he was far from unprotected. Yet there was nothing sly or cunning in those chiselled features. More than anything, the Blackbeard clan put great stock in honour, and any remaining doubts about their role in Frár’s plan faded away. They had been deceived. Of that, he was certain.

‘We have faced many trials since winning Erebor back from the dragon, from rotten food to cursed gold. It is only thanks to our allies in the Greenwood and the Iron Hills that we survived the winter. However, that was not the limit of our troubles.’ His eyes itched to turn to Frár and pin him with the weight of his accusations, but he fought the urge. Brandahr was the one he had to convince.

‘First, the structure of the treasury was sabotaged, killing a dwarf in the resulting cascade. Then, an unknown individual shut Master Baggins, who I am courting, out in a storm. He was lucky to return to us alive.’ Taking a deep breath, Thorin swallowed past the growing knot in his throat, struggling to keep his voice steady. ‘Yesterday, he was taken from the mountain. His guards were found poisoned, and signs of a struggle show he went against his will.’

Brandahr scowled, his chest swelling in outrage. ‘Do you suspect a faction within your own people?’

‘At first, but it soon became clear that there was an outsider at work.’

A loud scoff came from Frár’s direction, and Thorin turned to see him slip down from his horse and stride forward. Behind him, trotting along like obedient puppies were a number of his guards, their beaten gold breastplates bright enough to hurt the eyes. ‘Brandahr!’ barked Frár, insinuating himself between them. ‘You are listening to the ravings of madness! Sabotage, kidnap, outside influence… He is trying to distract you!’

‘I have proof.’

Silence rippled in the wake of Thorin’s words. Even the wind fell still, as if waiting with bated breath. Frár’s face locked into an ugly rictus of disbelief, but not before Thorin had seen the first flower of fear flourish in his eyes.

‘You are a long way from home, Brandahr, leading an army that is the envy of Middle Earth. I did not ask why you came to be on my lands; I only ask for your help. I am not the one deceiving you.’ He reached into his breastplate, pulling free the sheaf of papers. ‘We found these hidden in a disused part of the mountain. They are ciphered instructions to a dwarf living within Erebor’s halls.’

Slowly, as if reaching for a serpent that was liable to strike, Brandahr eased the paper from Thorin’s grasp. His brow pleated as he read the translations, his thin lips pursed in concentration. Beside him, Frár bobbed up onto his toes, craning his neck for a better look. A gleam of sweat shimmered on his skin, and Thorin bit back a smirk of triumph to see him so discomfited.

Shifting his weight, Brandahr turned so that Frár could not read over his shoulder, his pale eyes pinning Thorin. Just because they were strong did not mean the Blackbeards relied on force alone. They were an intelligent clan, and Thorin could already sense the wheels turning in the head of their king.

‘How were you able to decode these orders?’

‘The spy was a mercenary, My Lord,’ Balin explained with a polite bow and a kind smile.
‘Unfamiliar with the cipher, he used these.’ He urged Nori forward, who surrendered the beads into Brandahr’s palm. A moment later, the scraps of parchment bearing their inky imprints joined them: their damning secrets revealed.

Thorin watched, seeing Brandahr’s eyes drift to the seal on the original orders. Air whistled between his teeth, his face creasing as he turned to Frár.

‘You,’ he said, his calm voice heralding the brewing storm of his fury. ‘These documents bear your mark.’

Frár spluttered, his eyes darting around in his head. To Thorin’s surprise, he did not flee. Instead, fear crystallised into grim resolve, and some new and merciless cruelty warped that old face. ‘Ridiculous,’ he replied, his voice no longer wheedling. It was as if a mask had fallen away to reveal the greedy, ruthless dwarf beneath. ‘Why would I bother myself with the internal politics of a failing kingdom?’

‘Erebor’s wealth is renowned.’ Thorin’s hand twitched towards the hilt of Orcrist, but he held himself back, clenching his fingers into a fist as he stared into Frár’s face. ‘When the dragon sat upon his hoard, the risk was too great for anyone to try and claim it, but that day I requested help from the High Council and was denied, you began to watch this region with more interest. When you heard that the mountain was ours again, you made your move.’

‘You are paranoid,’ Frár interrupted, ‘seeing monsters in the shadows and enemies where there are none!’

‘You knew our numbers were low and our food scarce. You and your adviser Carth sought to destabilise my kingdom from within, to cast suspicion among my people when we were at our weakest.’ Thorin peeled his gaze away from Frár, not giving him time to interrupt once more as he dragged Brandahr back into the conversation. ‘Tell me, when did Frár approach you and ask for your help?’

Brandahr glared in Frár’s direction. ‘He requested aid with the defence of his kingdom not long after your meeting with the High Council. We marched for Rholnost immediately. Honour demanded it.’

‘What did he need defending from?’ Dwalin asked, speaking for the first time. ‘Rholnost is in good, safe lands, far from any troublesome border.’

‘Bandits.’ Frár’s beard bristled as his jaw worked. ‘I do not have to stand here and listen to these vile accusations against my name. We came here for a purpose, Brandahr!’

‘For which I have yet to see evidence, unlike this.’ Brandahr waved the bundle of parchment under Frár’s nose. ‘I will hear what more the king of Erebor has to say.’

‘Were there bandits?’ Thorin asked, careful to keep his voice mild. He could feel the waves of Frár’s cold fury radiating through the air. Where he had once seen a king fat on riches his realm could ill-afford, he now saw an unpredictable threat that could cost Thorin his life.

‘Not that I ever saw,’ Brandahr admitted. ‘It was before midwinter that King Frár expressed his concern for the people of Erebor. When rumours of the battle here reached us, as well as questions about the soundness of your mind, I began to listen.’

Thorin nodded, appreciating his tact. ‘Based on those reports, I would have done the same. I cannot deny that the madness took me –’

‘Hah!’ Frár cried, pointing a finger. ‘Just as I said!’
‘– But its grip was short-lived,’ Thorin continued. ‘I broke free before the battle’s end, and as you can see, it has not returned.’ He spread his hands wide, indicating both himself and the small party of dwarves at his back. ‘I came to meet you under a flag of truce, rather than confronting your armies with force. Now I must ask you this, Brandahr: Does it not strike you as convenient that you and your soldiers were already in Rholnost when Frár began proclaiming his doubts over my sanity? Near enough that you could reach us by the thaw?’

‘You are a fine story-teller, Thorin.’ Frár waved a dismissive hand. ‘That’s all this is – a story. I have no grand schemes against your kingdom. This so-called “proof” you have is meaningless. Probably false papers constructed by your own scribes.’

‘Why would he create such a lie?’ Brandahr asked, shaking his head and folding his big arms across his chest. ‘What could he stand to gain? He had no way of knowing, until he found these papers, that you might have any interest in Erebor. He has no desire to usurp you from your throne at Rholnost.’

‘The madness –!’

‘What madness?’ Brandahr roared, his voice ricocheting around the valley. Its echoes rippled back and forth, and only once they died away did Thorin hear the noise he had been waiting for. There, carried along on the breeze came the blast of a horn, rising upwards in one, uninterrupted cry.

The elves had not found Bilbo.

It hit him like a blow to the belly, driving the air from his lungs and crushing his ribs in a vice of fear. He had not known the sharpness of his own hope until it lay shattered around him, its pieces cutting at his composure. A tremor ran down his spine, making his thighs ache with the desire to run, to hunt, to rip the camp to shreds until Bilbo was safe in his arms. Red tinged the corner of his vision, and he took a deep breath, frantic not to succumb to the ferocity of his desperation.

Behind him, the air thickened, tight with concern. Balin’s hand rested on his shoulder, a phantom of weight thanks to the armour. Still, it was a connection, one that offered consolation and a warning. At his side, Dwalin shifted his weight over onto the other hip, leaning closer in silent support. They understood the depths of his struggle, even if none of it showed on his face.

‘What was that?’ Frár whipped around, scanning the horizon. ‘What have you brought down upon us? Another army? I knew it was a trick!’

‘There is no army.’ Thorin’s words tasted like stone on his tongue, a dusty burden. ‘It was a message from our scouts. They were searching your camp for the one I court.’

‘Nothing,’ Frár hissed, his face blotchy behind his beard. ‘You found nothing, because there is nothing to find. Confirmation, should you need it, that the line of Durin is cursed in the mind!’ He stabbed a finger in Brandahr’s direction. ‘He is pouring lies into your ears. Filling your head with tall tales of spies and betrayal. He comes here with his accusations, but what does he have to support his claims? A few messages that could have been written by anyone!’

Brandahr looked down at the papers, consideration pleating his brow as he examined the originals and the translation, looking from one to the other and back again. Banners flapped in the breeze as the horses nickered and cropped the few strands of scrubby grass that tried to sprout in the meagre soil. Leather and armour creaked as the soldiers stood to attention, awaiting the judgement of their king.

‘Someone’s coming,’ Nori murmured, stepping forward to speak in Thorin’s ear. ‘Along the west side. Do you see?’
Cautiously, Thorin turned his head, narrowing his eyes against the morning sun until he spotted the movement, no more than a speck but growing fast. ‘Can a horse go so swiftly?’

‘They can if their rider’s an elf. Someone’s got something to tell us, and they’re in a hurry.’

Balin placed the spyglass in Thorin’s outstreched hand, and he extended the tube to peer along its length. He could not make out much beyond the dark coat of the beast and the long, red flare of the rider’s hair, but it was enough. He knew who raced across the land towards them, all thoughts of stealth and discretion thrown to the wind.

‘Lord Brandahr, one of my scouts rides to deliver a message. An elf. She brings no threat.’

‘An elf?’ Frár shook his head, throwing his hands in the air. ‘Liars and thieves! For a dwarf to welcome such a monstrosity into his halls? It is a disgrace.’

Thorin stepped forward, his hand slack around the hilt of Orcrist as he narrowed his eyes in Frár’s direction. To his satisfaction, the vain lord stumbled back. Thorin neither drew his blade nor lifted his voice. He simply allowed his words to carry as the drumming of the horse’s hooves drew near.

‘You do not speak for everyone, Frár. Times change, and for a kingdom to grow and prosper, the king must change with them. Mistress Tauriel has my respect. I will not listen to your ignorant opinions of her kind.’

Frár spluttered, waving his hands towards Thorin and casting a look at Brandahr. However, his erstwhile ally offered no support, merely raising an eyebrow before turning to watch Tauriel approach.

The horse skidded to a halt, sweat gleaming on its flanks as she leapt from its back. Immediately, she dropped to one knee before Thorin, her loyalties clear. He suspected it was a show for their audience, and something petty stirred within him. Let Frár think he was a disgrace. He knew whose high opinion he valued more.

‘Arise, Mistress Tauriel. You need not bow to me.’

Tauriel’s smooth features betraying a glimmer of surprise and gratitude before falling serious. ‘My Lords, while we did not find Master Baggins, we came across evidence that someone has been kept prisoner.’ She held out a tattered bundle: a hank of frayed rope sliced by an uncertain, stuttering blade.

‘There was a tent set back from the camp. It was empty except for that rope dropped near the central support, and a few crates, one of which was open. These were inside.’ She reached into her pocket, pulling free a long, dark feather. It shone, iridescent in the sunlight despite its tattered appearance.

‘Many of our messages sent by raven never made it to their destination.’ Thorin met Brandahr’s eye. ‘We believed they had been captured and either killed or caged.’

‘This – this proves nothing! A bit of rope and a feather this she-elf could have picked up anywhere!’

‘I would be happy to show you the tent, My Lord,’ Tauriel promised, keeping her face impassive when Frár rounded on her, spittle flecking his lips.

‘Happy to lead us into a trap, you mean. Some accursed elvish trick! Is this what we have been reduced to? Taking the word of some ill-gotten tree-lover?’

‘Enough!’ Brandahr sliced his hand through the air, looking as if he might reach for his axe at any
moment. ‘You shame yourself, Frár. King Thorin speaks for Mistress Tauriel’s honour and fealty. He and those who follow him should command your respect.’ He turned away from Frár’s speechless disdain, urging Tauriel on. ‘Was there anything else of note?’

She paused, her lips parted as she hesitated before ploughing on as if in a hurry to reveal the painful truth. ‘The earth inside the tent was kicked about as if there was a struggle. There was blood, both on the ground and the ropes.’ She pointed out the brown stain on the fibres, her touch skimming over the mark as if she were loath to let Thorin see it. ‘Also, we found this.’

Dipping her long fingers into the collar of her tunic, she pulled something free, cupping it in the palm of her hand. The silver bead winked in the morning light, the sapphires and emeralds obscured by the mud that clung to their facets. Filthy as it was, Thorin recognised the treasure. He had seen it last in Bilbo’s hair: his courting bead.

A hard lump rose in his throat as he reached out to take it in his trembling grasp, skimming the pad of his thumb over its surface before he managed to speak. ‘Is that proof enough for you?’ he asked tightly, holding it out for Brandahr to see. ‘Master Baggins, the one I intend to have rule at my side, was wearing that when he was taken from the mountain. Now it is found here.’

Thorin’s fury gushed to the surface, so hot it felt as if it were blistering his skin. Frár’s choked off snarl of outrage fell on deaf ears as he spun around, his fingernails digging into his palms. ‘Where is he?’ he demanded, shaking from the effort of his restraint. ‘Enough of your games. Where is he?’

‘You stand there and make demands of me?’ Frár spat, the last veneer of his deception falling aside to reveal the darkness beneath. ‘You, who consorts with elves? You, who would put some — some creature on the throne? Even I could never guess the line of Durin would sink so low!’ His chest swelled, his golden armour blazing in the sunlight. ‘You do not deserve these lands. You, who would turn your back on what it means to be a dwarf!’

Reaching behind him, he snatched a banner from one of the bearers and lunged, jabbing its staff deep into the ground at Thorin’s feet. The wood creaked in protest as the fabric snapped in the wind, but Frár’s pageantry was not what caught his attention.

A flicker of light off to the west. The gleam in Frár’s eye. A taste upon the air. Later, he could not say what warned him of what was about to unfurl. In that moment, all he knew was instinct.

‘Get down!’

Without a thought, he lunged for Brandahr, trusting his dwarves to heed his order. His shoulder slammed into Brandahr’s ribs, spilling them both to the unforgiving earth in a commotion of crashing metal. Something whistled above his head, hitting the thin soil with a sickening thud.

The world stood still.

Frár’s scream of fury rang out, his sword in his hand as he raised it high. Thorin was helpless to stop the downward sweep of the weapon. He could only suck in one last breath and snarl his defiance, waiting for the blow to fall.

‘No!’

Sparks flared like diamonds, dazzling to the eye. Frár’s strike slid aside, the steel ringing in protest as it glanced off something Thorin couldn’t see. Before anyone could move, Frár wheezed, his mottled face turning pale. ‘What is this?’ he whispered. He held himself rigid; his chin tilted back and to the side as if he were trying to twist away, but fear paralysed him.
At first, Thorin thought he was imagining things – that his mind had truly snapped beneath the burden of the gold sickness and the danger of the day. There was no way Bilbo could be standing there, filling the space where only emptiness reigned a moment before. Yet there he was, bloodied and filthy, with the tip of his dagger pressed against the throbbing pulse in Frár’s throat.

‘Drop your sword,’ Bilbo rasped.

Thorin’s breath stalled in his chest, arrested by the beauty of Bilbo’s anger. He had seen many expressions on his hobbit’s face over their time together, but never this visceral, protective rage. Gone was his natural warmth and cheerful demeanour. In its place was something cold and glorious: determined to the core.

‘You dare attack me when I have an army at my back? You would start a war?’ Frár cried, shifting his grasp, but refusing to relinquish his weapon.

‘I’m not the one who started this war, you are.’ Bilbo cocked his head, leaning in and speaking through gritted teeth. ‘You started it the moment you sent those orders to have me killed.’ His breath left him in a shuddering rush, and Thorin watched a bead of blood well up where the point of the knife made its mark on Frár’s throat. ‘Do you deny it? Even now?’

‘I do not have to explain myself to you,’ Frár snarled, his eyes darting back to his guards, who had yet to rush to his aid. It seemed no one was inclined to step forward and put themselves in the middle of this chaos. ‘You, who have infected this land with your foreign ways; you have become his weakness. If you were not here, none would dare try and usurp him!’

Frár swung wildly, lunging to escape Bilbo’s knife as he flailed with his sword. The silver blurred as it cut a wide arc, but Bilbo was already gone, ducking under and darting to the side. He slammed his foot into the back of Frár’s knee, making the armour ring like a bell. The dwarf collapsed, his outrage strangled in his throat as Bilbo stood behind him, exposing the long, vulnerable lines of his neck and pressing the edge of the dagger against Frár’s skin.

‘I am no one’s weakness,’ Bilbo hissed.

He looked up, meeting Thorin’s eye. Relief lit his face, and it was all Thorin could do not to leap to his feet and rush to his side. Bilbo was alive, and he ached with the urge to touch him. He wanted to trace his outline – to check he was not some phantom or illusion – but a whisper of common sense held him back.

The tension in the air told its own story. The infantry stirred like a restless ocean, whipped into waves of uncertainty. Brandahr was cursing under his breath, struggling to his feet as he grumbled and fumed.

‘Someone had best start talking,’ he growled. ‘Not you, Frár. You’ve said quite enough. I would hear Master Baggins.’ He clicked his fingers, summoning his personal guard and directing them to stand watch over Frár. They hauled him up, keeping a tight grip on his arms as he snarled and struggled.

‘Get a shield wall up,’ Dwalin snapped, leaping into action as the danger of reality intervened. ‘Block off the line of fire from the west. We’re lucky they only took one shot.’ He gestured to the arrow where it protruded gruesomely from the ground, its fletching stark in the sunlight. Nori knelt beside it, wrinkling his sharp nose as he traced his fingertips up the shaft. He did not give voice to his musings, and even if he had, Thorin doubted he would have heard him. He was too absorbed in drinking in the sight of Bilbo.
The moment his hobbit staggered away from Frár, he could hold himself back no longer. The intervening distance vanished beneath his stride as he reached out, cupping Bilbo’s shoulders and bending his knees so he could meet those downcast eyes.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, tracing his fingers above a shallow, bloody gash under Bilbo’s jaw. Dirt obscured his skin, but Thorin could still make out the occasional reddish stain of gathering bruises. A gentle tremor had taken residence in Bilbo’s frame, and it grew worse as he managed a shaking nod.

Thorin reached up to his throat, undoing the laces of the cloak around his shoulders and wrapping Bilbo in its depths. His hobbit made a soft sound of relief, leaning against Thorin’s frigid armour as if it were the only thing in the world keeping him upright.

Helpless to resist, Thorin wrapped him in his embrace and pressed a rough, desperate kiss to his brow. It was not enough, not when he longed to scoop Bilbo up and take him back to their bed. He wanted to chart the edge of every bruise and scrape – to know precisely what his hobbit had suffered – but once again, his duty would not allow it.

‘I’m all right,’ Bilbo whispered, looking up as Brandahr cleared his throat, reminding them both of his presence. He pressed a palm to Thorin’s metal-clad chest, and he reluctantly let him go, allowing him to stand on his own two feet.

Thorin watched, full of pride, as Bilbo sketched a bow in Brandahr’s direction. A wince darted across his face, but he hastily smothered it, speaking in a steady, serious voice. ‘A dwarf called Githin took me from inside Erebor. He hurt my guards and –’ Bilbo’s eyes widened, and he turned, his distress plain. ‘Are they still alive?’

Thorin stifled a smile at Bilbo’s obvious concern. Even in this moment, he put others first. ‘Oin’s taking care of them. They should recover before the sun goes down.’

‘Good.’ Bilbo nodded, looking down at the dagger in his grasp as if he had never seen it before. ‘Whatever it was it – it made me dizzy. I couldn’t fight back. He carried me out of the mountain and then – I don’t remember the rest. Not until I woke up here.’ He looked around, surveying the sea of faces. ‘I was abducted on the orders of King Frár and hidden away on the edges of the camp. He hoped Thorin would ride to war – would accuse him of the crime he had committed – so Frár could deny it and claim that madness still held sway.’

‘Lies!’ Frár spat, struggling against the grip of those who guarded him. ‘All lies! You would believe the word of this – this thing over a dwarf such as myself?’

Brandahr gave him a long stare. ‘You are not the only one who stands accused, Frár. Perhaps your adviser would care to defend himself? Except he appears to have fled your side.’

‘Not fled.’ Bilbo ducked his head in apology for the interruption. ‘Githin, the dwarf who took me, lies dead. A piece of Carth’s tunic was caught in his clenched fist, and the gold I’d seen him receive as payment for his deeds was gone from his pockets. Carth does King Frár’s dirty work.’

‘And is still doing it, if I’m any judge.’ Nori looked up from where he crouched by the arrow. Tauriel was hunkered at his side, her face pale and her dark eyes tempestuous. ‘Their plan to discredit my liege was tenuous at best. As such, I suspect they had another strategy.’

‘To kill me.’ Thorin folded his arms, glaring in Frár’s direction. He could not forget that, if not for Bilbo’s timely interruption, Frár’s sword would be lodged in his heart as Mahal ushered him into his halls.
‘Not at first, Your Majesty. Judging by the angle and where it landed, this arrow was for Lord Brandahr.’ Nori’s grim expression told its own story. ‘I imagine that, with you dead, Frár hoped to wrest control of your army and use it to attack Erebor. That nice bit of melodrama with the banner was probably the signal for his archer to take the shot.’

Thorin glanced at the staff Frár had driven into the ground. Its bright colours glowed in the sun, visible for miles. What he had taken for anger, he now saw in a different light. Perhaps Frár was not as stupid as he had always assumed.

‘When you pushed Brandahr out of the way, saving him from such a shot, Frár knew his plan had failed.’

‘So he raised his blade to finish it himself,’ Thorin concluded, lifting his chin as he dared Frár to deny it, ‘and damn what the High Council made of his actions.’

Frár’s lips thinned to nothing, yet he did not shout and bluster. Instead, he spoke through gritted teeth, his face ruddy. ‘That is an elvish arrow. Who is to say it was not Thorin’s so-called allies who sought to have you out of the picture, Brandahr, so that he could claim your armies for Erebor?’

‘What sharp eyes you have,’ Tauriel murmured, her clear voice ringing like a bell in the wake of Frár’s bitter statement. Her gaze flickered to the west, and a faint smile curved her lips before she turned towards Brandahr and Thorin. ‘Yet elves from different regions have unique arrows. See the way the fletching is threaded?’ She indicated the feathers at the arrow’s base. ‘I would certainly be interested to know why a weapon created by our kin in Imladris is so far north.’

She reached over her back and pulled a shaft free from her quiver, showing them the stark differences. ‘If I had to guess, I would say this was purchased in an effort to incriminate my people. Unfortunately, whoever bought it did not realise that one elvish arrow is not like another.’

‘So if your kin did not fire it, then who did?’ Brandahr demanded, turning around when Thorin gestured towards the approaching riders.

‘I think we are about to find out.’

Dust billowed from the horses’ hooves as they came to a halt, prancing where they stood. Legolas and his scouts dismounted with ease, but it was the bundle that they brought with them that enslaved everyone’s attention.

Carth’s face was purple, his dark eyes shining with rage as he struggled against his bonds. The rope held fast, and Legolas pulled him from the saddle, dumping him at Thorin’s feet before casting a bow and quiver down before him. ‘We found him up on the ridge.’ He indicated the nearest peak. ‘We went looking after we saw the arrow’s flight.’

A gag muffled Carth’s words, though Thorin doubted he had anything of interest to say. ‘You have my thanks.’

‘Well, Frár? Do you have any further excuses?’ Brandahr demanded, his blank face clouding with repulsion. ‘Any further shame you would like to bring upon your line? You have lied to me; made me party in your disgrace and attempted the unlawful overthrow of a rightful king of the realm. I swear I will see you pay for these crimes, even if I have to drag you in front of the High Council myself.’

‘That won’t be necessary.’

Thorin turned at the new voice that emerged from one of Brandahr’s guards. The dwarf stepped
forward, peeling off her helmet. Multiple braids wound through her blond hair, but none were as distinctive as the broad barrel plait that labelled her an enforcer.

‘Who – who are you?’ Bilbo asked, no doubt sensing the surprise that rippled through those around him. He looked up at Thorin, seizing his hand in an instinctive demand for comfort. Those smaller fingers twined with his own, heedless of the cold casing of Thorin’s gauntlets. It hurt to see him so unsettled, wide-eyed and anxious, but Thorin could not blame him for his fear – not after all Frár had done.

‘My name is Viri; I am an enforcer for the High Council. I have the power to pass their judgement, and to mete out punishments.’ She pulled off her gloves, tucking the tough leather into her belt before holding out her hands, palm down, for all to see.

Khuzdul runes charted the way across her flesh, trailing up each finger to her nails. Each enforcer bore such marks and the simple designs indicated her station. Any doubts Thorin had that this was another elaborate ploy melted to nothing, and he ducked his head in respect to her power and authority.

‘You concealed yourself among the Blackbeard guards?’ Balin asked, raising one eyebrow as he gauged Brandahr’s reaction to this turn of events, ‘and without their king’s knowledge, if I’m any judge. Tell me, why did the High Council decide on such subterfuge?’

Viri stood to attention, her grey eyes confident as she beckoned two other dwarves close. Unlike her, they did not remove their helmets. Nor, Thorin noticed, did they lower their weapons. Each carried a fearsome axe, while swords and knives hung from their belts. Their stance made it clear that they were Viri’s to command, and they would defend her without question.

‘Frár’s machinations did not go unnoticed by other members of the Council. However, they were not unduly alarmed until the Blackbeards moved towards Rholnost. That was when I was given the task to observe both the Stonefoots and Blackbeards for any wrongdoing and act as I saw fit.’ Her lips pinched into a thin line, and the creases in her brow deepened. ‘My only regret is that I was unable to gather enough evidence to put a stop to this plot before it came to fruition.’

‘The march to Erebor didn’t give you a clue?’ Dwalin growled.

‘No.’ Viri sighed. ‘As far as most of these soldiers know, they are here to rescue Erebor’s people from a tyrant. Rumours of murder and worse in the mountain’s halls run rife. Only now has it become clear that these were deliberate lies to secure the cooperation of the Blackbeard clan.’ She inclined her head towards Brandahr, whose expression remained grim as he glared at Frár.

‘You have dishonoured me,’ he rasped, his jaw working with the intensity of his emotion. ‘You have used me and my kin for your own foul purpose – to break all laws of dwarven kind – to smear mud on the noble line of Durin – and for what?’

‘The gold.’ Bilbo shrugged as all eyes turned in his direction. ‘He blamed Thorin for madness, but perhaps he’s the one who has lost his mind to greed?’

Frár lurched forward, fighting against the restraints of his guards with all his might. The tendons in his neck stood out like cords of rope as he clenched his jaw, spitting his hate through gritted teeth. ‘You know nothing! Nothing at all! You stand there as if you own this place, these lands, but you are nothing!’

He jerked around to look at Viri, his expression beseeching. ‘All I hear are accusations of deception, but you do not stop to think that I have also been deceived!’ With a deep breath, he continued, his
excuses pouring forth. ‘The seal that marks those orders as mine – it was stolen! Everything I told Brandahr I thought to be true. Carth was the one who told me of the misery Erebor’s folk suffered! The lies are his!’

Carth’s eyes bulged, his voice a muffled screech behind his gag. He spat as Legolas yanked it free, releasing a venomous tirade of Khuzdul.

‘You stupid son of a whore! You think you will crawl back to your mountain, innocent, after what you have done? You robbed your people for your own trinkets. Only when they had nothing left did you turn your attention to Erebor’s hoard. I listened to you rant about the Durin line – how their honour and glory should have been yours. Everything I did was on your orders. Do not try and say otherwise!’

He carried on, Frár’s secrets spilling forth like a flood as all veneer of loyalty fell away. Thorin listened, stunned into silence. In the depths of his mind, he had wondered if Frár’s plan was some elaborate vengeance – a matter of honour – but with every word Carth laid those fears to rest. Greed drove them and hate fuelled them.

For that, he had almost lost everything: his kingdom and his love.

Frár’s roar resonated through the air, vibrant with rage. He ripped himself from the grasp of the stunned guards who flanked him, lunging for his sword. The blade slashed sideways, tracing silver in its wake.

Without thinking, Thorin urged Bilbo behind him, putting his armoured body between his hobbit and a blow that never fell. He waited, breathless, for the strike to come, but he was not Frár’s target.

Carth’s words ended in a gurgle, the edge of the sword wedged so deep into his neck that it had lodged in the bone. He folded, his knees smacking into the unforgiving ground before he slumped sideways, slipping off of Frár’s blade. His body jerked, blood frothing at his open throat as everyone stared in shock.

Bilbo darted around Thorin, crouching at Carth’s side. Viri was right behind him, the two of them reaching out to try and stem the flow that poured so freely from the mangled wound. It drenched everything, pooling on stone and soaking Carth’s garish tunic. Red smeared the dwarf’s teeth as he glared his silent defiance. He could not speak. Still, the hate in his gaze, focussed on Bilbo alone, made his feelings clear: He would rather die than allow a hobbit the honour of saving his life.

It looked as if he would get his wish.

The crash of Frár’s armoured knees hitting the rock rang like a gong. Thorin peeled his eyes away from the dying dwarf, watching the wide-eyed king’s chest heave. His guards stood to the side, making room for Viri’s heavy-handed colleagues, but it seemed their restraint was unnecessary.

Frár’s shoulders slumped, his head bowed as if all his anger lay spent. Only Carth’s dying gasps punctured the air. A moment later, even they fell silent.

‘This is what the Stonefoots have come to,’ Brandahr rasped. ‘A king so lost to dishonour that he would accuse his only ally, and then strike him down while he was bound. A dwarf so consumed by greed that he would happily destroy another kingdom to benefit his own.’

‘Bind him,’ Viri ordered. ‘I must confer with the Council about what is to be done. I feel they will think his crimes too great to allow for mere exile.’

‘They’ll kill him?’ Bilbo asked. He did not sound as horrified as he might have a year ago, but
Thorin could still see that even the death of his enemies had the power to cause him pain.

‘Yes, and thanks to his selfish rule, it is likely his clan cannot continue without him. They will be forced to leave their homes and join other mountain halls. That, or face a slow end.’

Frár choked out a bitter laugh, his eyes gleaming with unshed tears as he lifted his head and speared Thorin with a hateful stare. ‘Take heed, Thorin. The fate of my kingdom is what awaits yours if that – that thing – rules at your side. How long will you last before your people turn against you, humiliated by such weakness on the throne? You are friendless – helpless – easy pickings for any dwarf with the courage to bring war to your doorstep!’

Thorin stepped forward, blocking out the sun that shone on Frár’s face and forcing him to cringe in his looming shadow. He stared down at the wretch who had brought so much strife to Erebor, taking in the mottled pallor of his skin and the disarray of his beard, committing the sight to memory before he spoke.

‘Back when I first reclaimed these lands from the dragon, others may have agreed with you. I was selfish and cruel. Obsessed with gold, I cared nothing for the plight of my people or those who share this realm. I fell prey to passing madness.’ He narrowed his eyes, shaking his head before he retreated. ‘You have no such excuse. Erebor did not fall to you, nor will it fall to any other, regardless of whether a hobbit, a man or an elf sits at the side of its king.’

‘We are strong,’ Bilbo added, his hand clenching into a quick fist before he looked to the western horizon. A smile bloomed on his lips, small at first but spreading quickly. ‘And we are not alone.’

As if summoned by his words, a bright, ethereal sound rang out, making the air shimmer with its melody. A moment later, another horn blast joined it, deep and resonant, like the strike of a mighty hammer upon an anvil.

Following Bilbo’s gaze, Thorin sucked in a breath, barely daring to believe what he was seeing. A lone rider stood on the prow of the land, the broad splay of his mount’s antlers clear for all to see. Then, as Thorin watched, other figures joined him, their armour agleam. They marched ever onwards, their footfalls keeping perfect time as Thranduil led his people down towards the valley floor.

A moment later, others joined them, some riding battle rams while others marched on foot, banners waving high above their heads. At first, Thorin thought it was Dain, and wondered what extremes had driven his cousin to march side-by-side with Thranduil. Only Balin frantically patting his shoulder made him think twice. His old friend was grinning fit to burst, his eyes sparkling as he offered up the spyglass.

One glance, and Thorin’s breath left him in a rush, leaving his gasping in surprise. His mind crowded with questions, but for now the how and the why could wait. All that mattered was that his sister had returned to Erebor, and it seemed as if she had brought all of Ered Luin with her.

Lowering the spyglass, he packed away the metal tube, relishing this moment of triumph. ‘You think they ride to my call? You are wrong, Frár.’ He pointed towards the approaching forces. ‘They come because of Bilbo. You thought you would find us broken yet look at you now. One hobbit brought you to your knees. If he is weak, what does that make you?’

Frár’s growl fell on deaf ears as his guards hauled him to his feet, binding his hands behind his back before leading him away. He did not rant and rave, choosing to cling to the tatters of his dignity. However, all Thorin saw was a treacherous liar walking towards the fate he richly deserved.
‘I will let you know the Council’s decision,’ Viri promised, bowing to both Thorin and Bilbo. ‘I trust you and Lord Brandahar are in no further need of my assistance?’

‘No,’ Brandahar promised. ‘The shame I feel for my part in all this is great, and one I shall bear to the end of my days. We will quit your lands immediately, King Thorin.’

‘Without food?’ Bilbo winced in apology, waving a hand towards the haze of smoke that still lingered in the air. ‘I don’t know if any of it can be saved. I’m sorry.’

‘Your actions are a credit to you, Master Baggins.’ Brandahar smiled, though it lacked humour in the face of the obstacles ahead of him and his men. ‘You took necessary action to protect your land and your king. I admire you for your courage and determination.’

‘Not to mention his common sense,’ Thorin added. ‘He is right. It’s a long way home, and you have few supplies to get you there. Bring your camp closer to the mountain. We will see what can be done.’

‘You would offer this?’ Brandahar asked. ‘After all that has come to pass?’

‘You are not guilty of Frár’s misdeeds.’ Thorin reached out, clapping Brandahar on the shoulder. ‘You acted with honour, even if, in the end, you were misguided. I cannot hold that against you. Now come,’ He jerked his head towards the approaching masses. ‘I need to tell my people that there will be no siege, and that our friends have rushed to our aid.’

Brandahar nodded, raising his open hand. Immediately, his officers began giving orders. The soldiers retreated with enviable precision, beginning the march back to the sad remains of their camp so that they could bring their few possessions and salvageable stores into the shadow of the mountain.

Amidst all the noise of their departure, Thorin turned to Bilbo, taking in the sight of him. It was as if he were parched, and now he drank his fill, yanking off his gauntlets so he could stroke bare fingers over Bilbo’s smooth cheek. His hobbit sagged into the touch, the last of his strength leaving him as he swayed where he stood.

Bilbo leant against him, indifferent to the chill of his armour as he let Thorin support his weight. ‘Is it all over?’ he asked, his voice little more than a whisper as Thorin’s arms went around his back, cradling him in his embrace.

Thorin smiled, burying his nose in Bilbo’s curls and inhaling deep. There was still much to do, and many questions to answer, but for now all that could wait. Erebor lay secure and, more importantly, the one he loved was safe in his arms once more.

‘Yes. It’s over.’
Bilbo slumped against Thorin’s chest, his eyes burning as the horse swayed beneath him. Thorin held the reins, his arms bracketing Bilbo’s waist and helping him stay in the saddle. The pony huffed as it trotted up the slope, snorting under the burden of their combined weight.

‘I could walk…’ he suggested, wincing as exhaustion slurred his words. A long night had passed, and his whole body ached from his exploits. ‘It’s not far.’

‘More miles than you can manage right now, I think.’ A kiss fell on the crown of his head, and Bilbo smiled at the loving gesture. ‘Rest. I will see us safely back to Erebor.’

‘What about Thranduil and your sister?’ Bilbo yawned, cuffing at his eyes with his wrist as he tried to marshal his soggy brain into order. ‘We can’t just leave without saying thank you!’

Thorin’s quiet laughter rumbled in his ears, and a warm, proud smile rewarded him when he glanced over his shoulder. ‘Fear not. Balin is on his way to meet them and extend our invitation back to the mountain so that we can show the elves our proper gratitude. Dis will join us there, along with the dwarves she leads from Ered Luin.’

‘Bofur rides ahead to deliver the news that no siege awaits the kingdom,’ Dwalin said. ‘Nori remains with Brandahr to help organise his camp and deal with Frár.’

‘And Githin,’ Bilbo added, knowing that the others did not understand his insistence that the mercenary be tended in death. ‘He at least deserves a decent burial. I wouldn’t have got free if not for him.’

‘Nor would you have been there in the first place,’ Thorin pointed out, a trace of anger leaking out in the sharpness of his words. He clenched the reins, his gauntlets creaking beneath the force of his grip. ‘My main concern is getting you to Oin. You did not escape unscathed.’

Bilbo grimaced, knowing better than to argue. Every impact of the pony’s hooves jostled his aching chest, and the cut on his neck stung bitterly. Bruises contributed their own notes to the tune of his discomfort, and his tiredness did not make it any easier to bear. ‘I’ll live,’ he promised. ‘Which is more than I can say for Carth.’

‘And probably that bastard Frár,’ Dwalin agreed, shrugging when Bilbo glanced his way. ‘If he’d just led the Stonefoots to our doorstep, then he’d face exile and not much more. Instead, he brought the Blackbeards into it.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘There is a difference between marching on a kingdom on your own and involving the other clans. It incites discord,’ Thorin explained. ‘Dwarves rely on the loyalty of not just their clan, but their race as a whole. Frár betrayed that with his manipulations. The High Council will make an example of him.’

‘They woulda done the same of Carth,’ Dwalin added, ‘if they got the chance. Still, I doubt many’ll shed a tear about that.’

For a while, they rode on in silence. Bilbo was happy to lean back against Thorin’s unflagging support, turning the events of the morning over in his mind. More than once, his memories tried to return to the moment that Frár held his sword aloft over Thorin’s frame, but he shied away from the recollection. His fear was still too sharp – too fresh – for him to face the thought with courage. For
the second time in a handful of months, he had almost lost everything, and it shook him to the core.

Swallowing hard, he pushed his mind down another path, probing at the events of the morning like a sore tooth as he tried to sort it all out in his head. ‘What about the enforcer? Did you know that the High Council would plant someone in the army?’

Thorin grunted, shifting where he sat. Neither of them were particularly comfortable sharing a saddle meant for one, but Bilbo knew he wasn’t the only one who needed such closeness. It was reassuring to them both, even if the barrier of Thorin’s armour still held them apart.

‘It does not surprise me that they were keeping a watchful eye. Frár’s actions don’t just betray us, but the Council as well. After all, he was a member of it.’

‘The other kings didn’t get where they are by wallowing in ignorance,’ Dwalin agreed. ‘Wouldn’t put it past them that’s on the Council to have spies in every kingdom of Middle Earth: man, dwarf, elf and more.’

One thing bothered Bilbo, and he chewed on his words with care, wondering if it were better to hold them back. In the end, however, he could not keep his silence. ‘Spying seems to be a big part of dwarven politics: you’re always keeping an eye on each other.’ He blinked as Thorin hummed in agreement. ‘How is it then, that Brandahr could be deceived?’

Dwalin snorted, but it was Thorin who replied, his words measured in a way that spoke volumes of his experience in diplomacy. ‘The Blackbeards are a capable clan with a fine army, but they are not without their weaknesses. Honour means a great deal to them.’

‘Aye, they’ve made a weakness of a strength. Let it blind them to common sense!’ Dwalin nudged his horse’s ribs, urging it closer to Thorin’s mount. Despite his anger, he was gentle with the creature, and stroked the flat of his palm down its neck before lowering his voice to explain. ‘Frár knew that – of everyone he could have chosen – the Blackbeards were the ones who wouldn’t ignore the shit he spewed about Thorin and Erebor. It would go against their – their –’ He waved his hand, as if trying to come up with the right word.

‘Morals?’ Bilbo supplied.

‘More than that.’ Thorin sighed. ‘It is part of their culture, ingrained so deep in the clan’s laws that it may as well be written in their bones. The Blackbeards do not lie, they do not cheat and they do not turn aside any dwarf in need. Frár took advantage of that. He knew exactly what to say to get Brandahr to listen.’

‘You would think they’d use their own spies to make sure no one could abuse their hospitality.’ Bilbo shook his head. ‘Or is that kind of thing too dishonourable for them?’

‘Something like that.’ Thorin looked up as a booming note rang across the land, filling the sky with its call. It seemed to shake the very ground with its news, and Bilbo winced, fighting the urge to clap his hands over his ears.

‘Is that anything we should worry about?’ he shouted, trying to make himself heard and sagging in relief when Thorin shook his head. He didn’t think he had the energy to deal with another calamity. There had been quite enough drama and excitement for one day. ‘What does it mean?’

Rather than answer, Thorin pointed east, where the flat plateau offered a sprawling vista towards the horizon. At first, Bilbo saw nothing, but as he squinted he realised the indistinct line where land met sky was moving. It heaved and glistened, like a crawling mass of ants. If it weren’t for Thorin’s
certainly, he would have been concerned.

‘Dain,’ Dwalin laughed, his dark eyes crinkling at their corners. ‘Poor bastard missed all the excitement.’

‘Lucky him,’ Bilbo murmured, wincing as a yawn stretched his jaw and hurt the wound on his neck. Thorin’s body was a broad expanse behind him, and he paid little mind to the bitter chill of the armour as he leant back, huddling in the cloak and allowing his eyes to drift shut.

Between the jostling of the horse and the cold that nipped at his skin, Bilbo did not expect to fall asleep. Nor could he pinpoint when the world lost focus, dissolving into a miasma of fragrance and sound. All he knew was a hazy half-slumber until the noise of the horse’s hooves turned sharp, striking chipped, worn stone instead of scrubby earth.

Jolting upright, he gasped in pain, cursing under his breath. His hand flew to his ribs, but there was nothing he could do to ease the agony that flared along his side.

‘We’re almost there,’ Thorin promised as he guided Bilbo’s body back against his chest. ‘A few more minutes.’

Bilbo managed a groan of acknowledgement, blinking away the sudden sting of tears. It had all been too much – the abduction and imprisonment, the sabotage and his desperate, panicked lunge to stop Frár from cleaving Thorin’s head in two. He ached to be warm again, curled up in the bed he and Thorin shared. He longed for the jumping flames of the fireside and the familiar nest of his armchair. More than anything, he wanted the day to be over, but he knew it was a futile hope. They could not hide themselves away. Duty was the price to pay for loving a king, even if Bilbo wished otherwise.

‘I’m all right,’ he whispered, clearing his throat and clutching at his throbbing side. ‘A bit banged up is all. I’ll be glad to get off this horse.’ He patted the creature’s shoulder in apology before looking ahead towards the great entrance of Erebor.

From this distance, he could just make out the archers on the wall. They stood proud and tall, their weapons lowered but still to hand. While the news that the siege was over before it began had no doubt reached them, everyone knew better than to take any chances. The people of the Lonely Mountain had been through too much to offer their complete trust, even to their closest allies.

The horse huffed, its pace quickening as it sensed the nearness of its comfortable stable and a bucket of food. Within a handful of minutes, they approached the mountain. Bilbo watched as the doors began to part, ponderous at first, then with greater speed as the heavy mechanism peeled apart the ancient stone.

‘The King has returned!’

A roar of triumph went up, as much an assault on the senses as the great horn had been. It thrummed at Bilbo’s ears and took his breath away to see the crowd amassed in the hall, all there to bear witness. Fili stood at the forefront, his back straight and one sword raised to lead the cheer. There, perched on his other arm, was a familiar raven, watching Bilbo with beady eyes.

It seemed his messages had got through after all.

‘Uncle! Bilbo! Are you all right?’ Fili stepped forward as Thorin dismounted. ‘What happened?’

‘Later,’ Thorin promised. ‘Half of it is not my story to tell. For now, know that Frár is captured, his accomplices lie dead, and the armies on our doorstep are our friends.’
‘All of them?’ Bard asked, craning his neck, trying to peer out of the open doorway for a better look at the approaching forces.

Thorin smiled, years falling from his face as happiness stole over him. ‘All of them.’

Bilbo drew in a breath, gripping the pommel of the saddle tight as he tried to work out how to get down without hurting himself any more than necessary. Getting up here had been bad enough. ‘Where’s Kili?’ he asked, hoping to put off the moment for a little longer.

‘Up on the wall.’ Fili sheathed his sword, standing aside as Legolas, Tauriel, and the other elves clattered through the door. ‘He wanted to greet you, but we didn’t want to stand-down the archers until we knew the full of it.’

‘I’ll go and relieve him.’ Dwalin jumped down, his beard barely hiding his crooked grin. ‘There’s one person he’ll be eager to see.’ He inclined his head towards Tauriel, who leapt from her mount with her usual grace, but it was not just his love that Kili would want to embrace. If Thorin was right, if Dis and her people rode with Thranduil, then soon both boys would be greeting their mother.

‘Master Baggins, are you hurt?’ Bard stopped at the horse’s shoulder, making it clear that, to the man at least, the creature was merely a pony.

‘We need to get him to Oin,’ Thorin explained, saving Bilbo the effort. ‘Would you help him down for me? You are a better height to spare him any further pain.’

Bard nodded, running his sharp eyes over Bilbo’s frame before stepping forward and shortening the stirrups. ‘There, use that and hold onto my shoulder.’

Gingerly, Bilbo did as he was bid, gritting his teeth as he clambered down. Despite Bard’s help, it was still far from comfortable, and a wave of dizziness almost bowled him over. If Thorin hadn’t been there, he would have ended up on his back. As it was, deft hands gripped his hips, mindful of his hurts as they held him steady.

‘Can you walk?’ Thorin asked. Warm blue eyes watched him, searching for any hint of a lie. It was tempting to give in, to let Thorin carry him and surrender to his pains, but Bilbo could not allow that. He meant what he said to Frár: he was no one’s weakness. He may not be as resilient as the dwarves around him, but he still had their respect. He would not jeopardise that by succumbing now that he was home.

‘I’ll manage,’ he promised, mustering a grin as Thorin raised a doubtful eyebrow. ‘I’m all right. I can get to Oin if you need to –’ He waved a hand, gesturing to all the responsibilities he knew would settle on Thorin’s shoulders.

‘If you think I am leaving your side, then you are sorely mistaken.’ He pressed one finger to Bilbo’s chin, guiding his head up to look deep into Bilbo’s eyes. ‘I thought I had lost you forever. You’ll forgive me if I choose not to part ways just yet.’ Thorin brushed the pad of his thumb across Bilbo’s lips before ducking down to replace his touch with the tender warmth of his mouth, loving and chaste.

He may be tired, but Bilbo’s body still responded, swaying closer as weary nerves shimmered into shocking life. His fingers skittered over the blank sheen of Thorin’s armour as he looked for something to hold onto, and despite his restraint, he could taste the edge of Thorin’s passion and relief.

Only the knowledge that they had an audience prevented Bilbo from pressing himself too close, and
he stifled a needy whimper as Thorin drew back. He was not the only one so affected. Those bright eyes had darkened, and Thorin’s face had taken on a touch of colour. He stared at Bilbo as if he couldn’t look away, even as he began issuing orders to the grinning spectators.

‘Fili, I will need you and Bard to meet with our guests. Make them welcome and ensure they have everything they require. Prepare chambers for them, and apologise for our lack of luxuries.’

‘Yes, Uncle.’ Fili gave a wide grin, winking in Bilbo’s direction. ‘What if someone asks for you?’

‘Tell them the truth: I will not be available until I have seen to Bilbo’s welfare.’ Thorin straightened up, bestowing a rare smile on his oldest nephew. ‘I am placing Erebor in your capable hands until then.’

The entrance hall burst into activity as Bard and Fili both began giving instructions. Everyone rushed to prepare for the new arrivals, jostling one another as they saw to the logistics of making the kingdom a welcoming place. It was no easy task, considering the situation, and Bilbo did not envy any of them as he watched them get to work.

A hand on his elbow reclaimed his attention, and he tried not to limp as Thorin guided him through the crowd. It was slow going, made worse by the fact that Bilbo felt too tired to lift his feet. He kept stubbing his toes, and by the time he shuffled into the healing rooms, he was fit to drop.

‘Master Baggins!’ His name left more than one pair of lips, and Bilbo saw a number of his guards struggling to get out of bed. They had been stripped of their armour, made small by its lack, but they were alive and well, which was all he cared about.

Ronin was the first to reach him, his hands twisting in an apologetic knot and his shoulders slumped. ‘It’s a relief to see you. I – I wanted to apologise for my failure to keep you safe. It is unforgivable.’

‘No, it’s not.’ Bilbo shot a firm look at Thorin, just in case he was thinking the same thing. ‘There isn’t a guard here that could have done a better job. You were attacked as much as me, and I’m relieved that you’re all okay.’

‘Aye, well enough,’ Oin barked, ‘but not yet meant to be up and about. Back down, the lot of you!’ He pointed to their waiting cots, watching like a hawk as the cowed soldiers obeyed. Only Ronin lingered, bowing so deep that Bilbo thought he might topple over before Oin ushered him away.

‘It’s good to see you, laddie,’ he said, his stern demeanour softening as he looked over Bilbo with a critical eye. ‘This way, come on. Let’s have a look at what ails you.’ He gestured to the anteroom in which Thorin and his nephews had recovered, leading them both through the swinging door before gesturing to the bed. ‘Sit, and tell me what hurts the most.’

‘My chest.’ Bilbo eased himself down onto the rushes. ‘Carth kicked me… hard.’

Thorin made a tight noise, his hand going to the hilt of his sword. He had been a master of self-control, restrained to the point of perfection. Now, Bilbo could see Thorin’s emotions unravelling, honing themselves on the edge of his simmering anger.

‘None of that,’ Oin snapped, not bothering with etiquette. In these rooms, he was king, not Thorin. ‘Wait outside. This is a private examination, not one that needs an audience.’

‘No, please!’ Bilbo shook his head and swallowed back the sharp lump of emotion that lodged in his throat. He felt too raw to be away from Thorin right now, and in this tranquil room, in front of friends, he was not ashamed to show his frailty. ‘I want him to stay.’
Oin grumbled, his beaky nose twitching as he gave a disdainful sniff. ‘Fair enough, but take that armour off. A healing room’s no place for it.’

Thorin sighed but did as he was told, peeling off his gauntlets before setting to work on the buckles and straps that held the rest of the sturdy plate in place. The polished metal glimmered in the lamp light, and Bilbo watched it gleam as Oin set about removing the cloak and slicing him free from his tunic.

A hiss of pity escaped the healer’s lips, and Bilbo glanced down, wincing at the evidence of brutality painted across his skin. The bruise had bloomed, swollen and thunderous in unhealthy shades of black, purple and raw red. About the size of a man’s fist, it blazed in gruesome testament, and he tried not to flinch as Oin’s fingers fluttered around its outline.

‘He got you with the toe of his boot. A kick, not a stomp.’

‘Is that better or worse?’ Thorin demanded, his voice clipped as he dumped his breastplate on the floor with a clang.

‘The injury is smaller, but the force is more focussed. More likely to do deep damage.’ Oin looked up, sighing as he watched Thorin struggle with the rest of his armour. ‘Wait there. I’ll help you with that in a minute.’

Marching over to the worktable, he mixed together some herbs with boiling water, stirring in a spoonful of honey before handing it to Bilbo. ‘Sip this slowly, and stop when you start to feel tingles. It’ll numb your pain.’

Bilbo accepted the cup, letting the clay warm his chilled fingers and humming his thanks as Oin cast a blanket over his shoulders. With that, he turned to assist Thorin, leaving Bilbo to watch in fascination.

It was a complicated business, preparing for war. There were any number of fastenings, overlapping plates and padded clothes underneath. In many ways, it was like watching a butterfly free itself from a cocoon, except that what emerged was in no way delicate. By all rights, the loss should have made Thorin look small. Instead, it was as if he were released from invisible constraints. He practically glowed with power and poise, and despite his aches, Bilbo’s pulse quickened at the sight.

‘Right then,’ Oin said, interrupting his giddy train of thought. He snorted in amusement as Thorin strode to sit at Bilbo’s bedside. His astute old eyes gleamed as he looked over his king. ‘I take it you’re not hurt?’

‘Not a scratch,’ Thorin vowed.

‘Though not for want of trying on Frár’s part,’ Bilbo pointed out, setting down the half-empty cup. The herbs filled his veins with a pleasant warmth, drawing a veil between him and his discomfort. It was still there, but it grew more bearable with every moment.

‘You are the one who suffered.’ Thorin’s brow knitted in regret, and he bowed his head, his hair swinging forward to shadow his profile. ‘I wish I could have spared you that much.’

Bilbo slid his fingers into Thorin’s grip and squeezed tight. ‘I know, but none of it was your fault. Besides, it could have been a lot worse. Frár did not lay a finger on me. This was all Carth.’ He gestured to the cut on his neck, sucking in a gasp as Oin’s fingers pressed against his side.

His warm hands were careful, but they still struck sparks wherever he touched. At his first cry of pain, Bilbo found himself in Thorin’s lap, cradled in his arms with his fingers knotted in his tunic.
Tears pricked his eyes, more from the shock of it than anything, and his head began to spin as he gritted his teeth through Oin’s ministrations.

‘Sorry, lad.’ Oin’s mouth twisted in consideration. ‘Have you pissed at all?’

A watery chuckle escaped Bilbo’s lips, and he sniffed as Thorin swept the tears away from his cheeks with his thumb. He should have known it would come around to the contents of chamber pots sooner or later. ‘I’ve not had enough to drink,’ he croaked, drawing in a shuddering breath. ‘Why?’

‘The blow’s low on your ribs, sharp and deep. You’ve broken a couple and bruised a few more if I’m any judge. Strikes to the lower half of the back can turn your piss to blood, in my experience. It’s something to watch for.’

‘Is it serious?’ Thorin’s voice did not shake, but the muscles in his chest became bedrock, calcified by dread.

Oin gave a thoughtful hum. ‘Painful enough, but it usually passes with rest and time. I’m going to apply a poultice to that bruise, see if we can draw it up to the surface. Broken ribs are a blight. All I can do is bind them.’ He stepped away to mix up the poultice, and Bilbo turned his attention to Thorin.

It could be hours, even days, before their duties eased enough to allow them time alone in one another’s company. As such, he felt very little guilt for drinking in as much of Thorin as he could manage. He rested his head against Thorin’s chest, listening to the heavy beat of his heart. It echoed like a drum in his ear, and he nuzzled the hollow at the base of Thorin’s throat, smiling at the softness of his short beard and the wisps of hair escaping from the collar of his tunic.

Thorin held him as if he were made of glass, so fragile he could break. Part of him resented such tenderness, but he understood why it was necessary. As much as he wanted to lose himself in Thorin’s passion, he knew he wasn’t up to it, not with his ribs in pieces. Instead, he had to content himself with every breath, inhaling the scent of leather, soap and sweat that imbued Thorin’s skin. The fragrance soothed his frazzled nerves, and the tender brush of Thorin’s lips against the top of his head felt like a blessing, oft repeated.

‘I’m going to need you to lie down,’ Oin said. For once, he sounded apologetic, rather than brusque, as if he knew how much comfort they drew from being in one another’s embrace. ‘Let me tend him, Thorin, then you can rest at his side until he falls asleep. No funny business, mind. You’ll do more harm than good.’

Before Bilbo could even shift his weight, he found himself lifted in the cradle of Thorin’s arms, supported by the breadth of his chest before he deposited him gently on the bed. It was only a pace or so away, but Bilbo still admired the care with which Thorin held him.

Relaxing into the rush-stuffed mattress, Bilbo let Oin help him lie on his good side. He tried to smother the flinch that flickered across his features as the warm poultice spread over his skin. However, Thorin saw it with ease. He hunkered down by the bed, taking Bilbo’s hand and rubbing the pad of his thumb back and forth over his knuckles.

‘Is it very bad?’ he asked, no hint of judgement in his voice. Bilbo was aware that most dwarves would shrug off any injury that was not life threatening, and he was grateful that Thorin did not condemn him for his pain.

‘Sore, but it could be worse,’ Bilbo promised, smiling as Oin bade him to tilt his head up on the
pillow. ‘Carth could have slit my throat, for one thing.’

‘He gave it a fair go,’ Oin grumbled, wiping away the copper stain of blood and peering at the injury. ‘If he’d stood a bit closer, he could have had you. This is a quick swipe, done in anger. It’s shallow and clean,’ he added. ‘My concern is that it’s in an awkward place, too tricky to bind and unlikely to heal in any hurry.’

He cocked his head, his eyes agleam as he considered his options. ‘I’ll mix up a salve, something to help it seal. For now, you should rest. That poultice needs a few hours, and you look like you could use the sleep.’

Bilbo smiled his thanks, watching Oin hobble back over to his workbench before turning his gaze to Thorin. ‘You need to lie down with me,’ he said, grinning as Thorin raised an eyebrow. ‘Healer’s orders.’

‘Only because Oin realised he couldn’t stop me,’ Thorin pointed out, straightening up and getting the furs from the bottom of the bed. He arranged them over Bilbo with care, making sure they would not slip off onto the floor. At last, he bent down to remove his boots before climbing in at Bilbo’s side, face-to-face and careful not to bother his ribs. ‘Is this all right?’

Bilbo hummed, burying himself in the blankets. An embrace was out of the question. His good arm was underneath him, and if Thorin touched his side, he would awaken the slumbering agony. Instead, they could only press close, sharing every breath as Thorin’s legs entwined with Bilbo’s own, his foot rubbing up and down Bilbo’s calf.

With a sigh, Thorin slipped his arm under Bilbo’s neck, wriggling his fingers to make space before pulling him closer, cradling his head on the meat of his shoulder. It was a wonderful compromise, and Bilbo dipped his hand under Thorin’s tunic, brushing the plane of his belly and the hardness of his chest.

Kisses trailed across his brow, crowning him with their grace. Thorin did not seem to care that Bilbo was grubby at best, or that sweat and grime turned his skin gritty to the touch. He worshipped him with beautiful diligence, whispering praises for his bravery and cleverness in between the devoted caress of his fingers and the brush of his lips.

‘I feared you dead,’ he confessed, his trembling fear falling into the shell of Bilbo’s ear like poison from a wound. ‘That I would never see or hold you again.’

‘It didn’t happen.’ Bilbo shut his eyes, allowing the first wave of true relief to sweep through him. He knew how bad it could have been. If Frár and Carth hadn’t felt the need to keep him alive, it would already be over: his life here lost before it even began. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

His heart lifted in his throat, driven high by a flash of anticipation. The betrothal bead rested against his hip, kept company by the ring. In an ideal world he would wait – wait for himself to be whole so he could offer Thorin everything – wait for privacy and the perfect moment – but he had learned at his cost where such good intentions could lead.

‘I mean it, Thorin,’ he whispered, glancing over to see Oin slip out of the room on some errand before he reached into his pocket, fighting the stiffness of his arm and the ache in his side to tug free his prize. ‘When I was taken, I was on my way to tell you – to ask…’ He stumbled, wetting his lips as Thorin leaned back, the better to look down into his face.

Wordlessly, he opened his palm in the sheltered space between their bodies, letting the light gleam off of intricate silver and mithril glass. ‘I was making this so I could – could ask if you would –’ He
took a deep breath, grasping his determination hard as he uttered the question that had haunted him through the hours of his captivity. ‘Will you be my betrothed?’

Thorin’s breathing hitched. Those blue eyes seemed fathomless. His face was a mask, unreadable, and Bilbo’s heart sank to his gut. He had been so sure, but in the silence that followed, his certainty vanished like a puff of smoke. ‘I’m sorry – I – I thought…’

‘Stop,’ Thorin rasped, his eyes bright with emotion. ‘Do not apologise for this.’ He ducked his head, capturing Bilbo’s lips. There was nothing chaste about this kiss. It was bruising and brilliant, flavoured with desperate, aching passion. The scrape of teeth across his lips sent a shiver of delight down Bilbo’s spine, and the warm glide of Thorin’s tongue against his own made him forget all about his injuries.

The sharp pang in his ribs was a rude interruption, and he bit back a curse, damning Carth all over again for leaving him like this. ‘Sorry,’ he said again, shaking his head and smiling as Thorin gave him a look.

‘I am the one who should apologise.’ Thorin’s hand hovered in the air over Bilbo’s side, as if he could cast the pain away with his presence. Sadly, no such miracle was forthcoming, and Bilbo stifled a sigh as he met Thorin’s gaze.

‘Was that kiss your answer?’ he asked, the last of his doubts fading to nothing as Thorin’s palm rested on his cheek.

‘I did not dare to hope for this,’ Thorin murmured, cupping his face as he pressed their brows together. ‘That you would want to be with me – that you would carry the burdens of rule to be at my side – especially now, after all that Frár has done to you.’

Bilbo nodded, seeing how Thorin could think that. Abduction, injury and death were constant threats in the life of a royal, no matter what their race. Perhaps if he were a lesser hobbit, he would let that fear control him, but he had no intention of being cowed by the likes of Frár.

‘I was on my way to you when I was taken,’ Bilbo explained. ‘I was thinking of you when Frár held me prisoner, and again when I ripped that camp apart. None of it changed my mind, Thorin. If anything, it made me more certain. Erebor is my home, and you – you are the one I love.’ He took a deep breath, closing his eyes before repeating his offer. ‘Will you be my betrothed?’

‘Yes.’ Thorin’s lips curved, his smile spreading into a grin as the last lines of uncertainty faded from his face. Now, at last, he looked like a dwarf who had woken up to find his wildest dreams a reality. He captured Bilbo’s eyes in an adoring gaze, tracing the line of his brow, his nose and his lips, admiring him as if he were an exquisite treasure. ‘Yes, I will.’

A joyful laugh bubbled in Bilbo’s throat, and Thorin caught it, letting his mirth flavour their kiss. It tasted like a promise, all sweetness and strength – intoxicating to the senses. Bilbo’s breath fled as dark fire pooled through his body, making his toes curl beneath the furs. He craved the touch of Thorin’s bare skin, to feel their hearts beating in time as they lost themselves to each other, but it was not to be.

Someone coughed as they crossed the threshold – a pointed, accusing sound – and Bilbo blushed around his foolish grin as he saw Oin watching them with his arms folded. He hadn’t heard the healer re-enter the room, yet there he was, glaring at Thorin as if he were a naughty dwarfling rather than a noble king.

‘That’s enough of that,’ he scolded. ‘Master Baggins needs rest, not excitement.’
Bilbo rolled his eyes before glancing at the bead, wondering if Thorin intended to explain the reason for their affection. However, instead of breaking the happy news, Thorin placed a hand over Bilbo’s and ducked his head to whisper in his ear.

‘He will know along with the others, when we are side-by-side with betrothal beads in our hair. I want you to myself for a while longer.’ He raised an eyebrow, checking Bilbo’s reaction. ‘Dwarves can be exuberant in their celebrations, and once this news breaks, I fear we will have little opportunity for privacy.’

Bilbo grinned, a softer wash of pleasure filling him at the thought of his friends sharing in the celebration. Back in the Shire, there had never been anyone he believed would truly care for his happiness, not after his parents passed. Now, he was blessed with an abundance of people, all of whom would be eager to rejoice.

‘All right. We’ll keep it between us.’ He glanced over at Oin, checking he was still distracted before shifting his hand so that Thorin could see the treasure cupped in the bowl of his palm. ‘Do you like it?’ he asked, suddenly worried that his novice efforts were more insulting than endearing. ‘You can always choose one from the treasury if you would prefer – something more suitable.’

He swallowed, watching Thorin pick up his creation and tip it to the light, examining it from every angle. He scrutinised it with all due seriousness, giving Bilbo’s question consideration before he replied. ‘It is exquisite,’ he promised, making Bilbo blush anew with his hushed praise. ‘I have never seen anything like it, and there is nothing in Erebor’s hoard as splendid.’

‘Flatterer.’ Bilbo wrinkled his nose, feeling like he was floating despite the discomfort of his injuries weighing him down. The yawn came upon him suddenly, and he tried to smother it, managing an apology before he continued, ‘I know I’m not as good as a dwarvish craftsman, but –’

Thorin silenced him with another quick kiss, gifted while Oin’s back was turned. ‘If I had not taught you myself, I would think you had been making glass for years,’ he replied, shaking his head as Bilbo tried to protest. ‘You know me; you know I do not seek to spare the feelings of others, not even those I love.’ He cradled the bead in his hand, as reverent as if it were a relic from the ancient past, rather than something newly forged. ‘I am only sorry I have made nothing for you in return.’

Another yawn stretched Bilbo’s jaw. Whatever Oin had given him for the pain turned his world misty at its edges. He did not want to waste these precious moments with Thorin in sleep, but before long, he would have no choice. ‘Any bead you choose would be special to me. Besides, I’m sure Balin will say it needs to be an heirloom. Something to validate me as dwarf enough for you.’

Thorin grunted, a hint of sour annoyance creeping into his voice. ‘I wish I could promise you that nothing of our union would be swayed by politics, but…’

‘But I’m marrying a king.’ Bilbo smiled, nestling into Thorin’s chest and letting his eyes drift shut. ‘I know. Don’t worry, I understand it’ll be far from any kind of marriage I could expect in the Shire.’

The veils of a drugged stupor began to sweep across his mind. ‘I hope I’m up to the challenge.’

The warm blade of Thorin’s palm smoothed through his hair, and delicate kisses fell like rose petals against his brow. He just had time, before he faded from wakefulness, to hear Thorin’s words, soft and certain.

‘You are. Of that I have no doubt.’

The world dissolved, reduced to sensations of warmth and comfort before even they were gone. No dreams stained his mind, nor did the passing of the hours impinge upon him. He didn’t notice
Thorin’s reluctant departure, nor Oin checking the poultice on his side. Happily oblivious, Bilbo slept on, until his ravaging thirst dragged him from his rest.

‘Ugh.’ His voice cracked in his throat as he peeled open gritty eyes. His tongue felt swollen in his dry mouth, and his pain had morphed from a high, alarming sting to a permanent, thundering ache that seemed to fill his chest. His joints were stiff from disuse, and when he tried to prop himself up on one elbow he almost bit through his lip in an effort to smother a cry of misery.

‘Easy, lad. Easy!’ Rough hands guided him back down to the bed, and he focussed on Oin and Dori. ‘You’ll feel like one big bruise, no doubt.’

‘Water?’ Bilbo gasped, his head spinning. ‘Please?’

Dori grabbed a cup full as Oin supported Bilbo’s shoulders, helping him half upright so he could get the liquid down his throat. ‘Take it slow,’ he advised, wincing at the first three deep gulps Bilbo took. ‘Slower than that. You’ll make yourself sick.’

Grudgingly, Bilbo did as he was asked, trying not to simply pour the cold, crisp water down his gullet. The cup was empty in less than a minute. His stomach ached, but didn’t react badly to the much-needed drink, and before long, the strange dizziness passed, leaving Bilbo to look around the healing room.

A fire filled the hearth, turning the air warm and dry. The cracked shutters in the ceiling gave him a view of a sky darkening with dusk, and all was peaceful and quiet.

‘Where is everyone?’ he asked, lifting his good arm to his head before rubbing at his eyes. ‘What time is it?’ He hesitated, screwing up his face. ‘What day is it?’

Oin chuckled, stuffing pillows behind Bilbo’s back to help him stay upright without hurting himself. ‘Same day you returned to Erebor, just the end of it, rather than the beginning. How do you feel?’

Bilbo grimaced. ‘Like I’ve been hit by a siege engine.’ He glanced around the room, unable to hide his disappointment that Thorin was gone.

‘The king is dealing with our guests, answering their questions as best he can,’ Dori explained. ‘However, there are some parts of the story that only you know. Are you well enough to rise?’

Oin made a noise like an angry cat, his expression mulish. ‘He should stay abed. Rest is what he needs.’

‘It would be an hour. Little more than that.’ Dori held up his hands in surrender before turning to look at Bilbo. ‘Surely the decision belongs to Master Baggins?’

Bilbo ran his tongue along his teeth, debating his options as he gingerly moved his aching limbs. ‘I feel I might turn to stone if I lie abed,’ He raised an eyebrow at Dori’s triumphant smirk. ‘But I’m not sure I have the strength for more. I’d like a wash. How about we see if I can get through that and then decide what’s next?’ It was a compromise, diplomatic to the core, and Bilbo smiled as both dwarves bowed to his suggestion.

Oin shuffled off, returning with a bowl of hot water and a clean cloth as Dori helped Bilbo out of bed. Clumsy and weak, he did little to help, but Dori was both steady and careful, and set him on his feet with no difficulty.

Bilbo reached for the cloth, a grunt of protest lodging in his throat as Oin tweaked it out of range. ‘Let Dori do it while I see to that poultice,’ he ordered. ‘Blot, don’t scrub.’
Dori did as Oin instructed, wetting the rag and squeezing out the excess water before he began to pat away the grime that daubed Bilbo’s forehead and stained his cheeks. More than one scab stung beneath his ministrations, but no blood flowed. ‘Tell me if it hurts,’ he said, his round face pinched.

‘I could do it myself,’ Bilbo protested, sucking in a breath when Oin lifted the stiff mask of the poultice from his ribs.

‘Aye, and no doubt do yourself more damage in the process. Let others care for you, Master Baggins. You’ve already done enough for us, if the rumours are to be believed.’

‘What rumours?’

Dori smiled, his braided brow moving upwards. ‘I’ve heard plenty. Some, I suspect, are nothing but prattle. Others? Let’s just say that people are crediting you with ending the siege before it began. Something to do with tearing the camp apart and appearing out of thin air to stop Frár.’

Worms of anxiety threaded along Bilbo’s spine. ‘Oh. That.’ He sighed, regretting it immediately. Even breathing hurt. ‘I’ll – I’ll probably have to explain that.’

‘The kingdom will be all ears.’ Dori looked as if his curiosity was gnawing at his bones. Bilbo fidgeted under his gaze before peeling his eyes away and looking at the mess of his side.

Deep purple, black, red and sickly green splashed across his skin like dyes. Oin’s concoction had drawn the swelling to the surface, leaving a grotesque lump that stretched two hand widths along his body. To Bilbo, it looked worse than it had before he fell asleep, but Oin seemed satisfied with its progress.

‘We’ll bind it, just to give a bit of support. Not too tight, mind. Broken ribs heal without too much interference. Its coughs and pestilence of the lungs that become a concern.’

‘Let me finish before you start worrying him with all that,’ Dori said, patting down Bilbo’s neck and across his collarbones. ‘I won’t be long.’ He skimmed the cloth over Bilbo’s bare arms before focussing on his hands, banishing mud and murmuring his pity at the raw, red marks around Bilbo’s wrists. ‘What about these?’

‘I’ve got some salve,’ Oin reached out for a pot of pungent paste and spread it over the twin bracelets of damaged flesh. ‘Bastards didn’t want you getting away in a hurry, did they?’

‘I managed it though.’ Bilbo smiled as Oin and Dori both chuckled their approval of his attitude. If he was honest, his injuries were more an inconvenience than anything – the only lasting mark Frár and his plans had left behind. He wanted them gone so that he and Thorin could get on with their lives, but Bilbo knew it wasn’t that simple.

‘I wish I could have a proper bath,’ he murmured, wistful. Dust made his curls into an unruly nest, and he felt like the dirt of the camp had engrained itself into his skin.

‘Maybe later,’ Oin said. ‘You’re bruised and battered, but there’s nothing here that must be kept dry. If you promise to rest and go easy on yourself, you can even sleep in your own bed.’

‘A moment ago you didn’t want him to get up!’ Dori pointed out, standing back and letting the healer approach with a broad ribbon of cloth. Holding it in place with one hand, he smoothed it around Bilbo’s chest, keeping the tension perfect so that it braced his aching ribs without stifling his every breath.

‘It would be for the best, but I admit there’s not a lot more I can do for him. Time’s what he needs.’
Oin frowned, pausing what he was doing and asking Bilbo to take in as much air as he could manage. It hurt more than he would like, and a moment later he was coughing, bent almost double as his body clamoured with agony.

‘Here.’ Oin thrust a bundle of blankets into Bilbo’s arms. ‘Hug that to your chest.’

The coarse fabric prickled his skin, but the bulk of the cloth seemed to help, and he managed to get himself under control, wheezing as he pulled a face. ‘That was awful.’

‘Coughing and laughing,’ Oin replied. ‘They’ll be your weaknesses. It’ll get better, but it’ll hurt like the blazes for a while. Don’t try and stifle your coughs, and take deep breaths as often as you can. It’ll stop your chest filling with scum.’

‘Anything else?’ Bilbo asked, trying not to let his sarcastic irritation seep out into his voice. Pain made him grumpy, and he knew Oin was used to it, but that didn’t mean the old dwarf deserved to be on the receiving end of his foul temper.

‘Any fever or sickness, and you come see me straight away. No dilly-dallying. Now, do you feel well enough to keep going, or are you better off back under the blankets?’

Temptation twined languorous fingers through Bilbo’s mind, but he pushed it aside. He could manage for an hour or two.

‘I’ll go.’ He glanced down at his bare chest and the ragged britches that clung to his hips, streaked with mud and grime. ‘Though I’m going to need more clothes to wear.’

Dori waggled a finger and turned towards a bundle at the foot of the bed. ‘Fear not, Master Baggins.’ He scooped up the fabric and began to spread out each item. ‘You’ll be dressed in no time.’

Bilbo should know better than to be surprised by Dori’s efficiency, but it was impossible not to be impressed. He admired the intricate embroidery that lay along the hem of the tunic, noticing the tightness of every stitch. The blend of dwarvish quality and hobbit design did not pass him by. These were not hand-me-down clothes, but pieces made with him in mind.

‘Dori, when – when did you find the time?’ he whispered, his fingers fluttering over the rich cloth. They did not have the garish colours or bold embellishments of Carth and Frár’s garments, but to Bilbo’s eye they were ten times as fine.

‘A labour of love is time well spent,’ Dori replied, his words brisk but his smile broad. ‘Besides, every good craftsman enjoys a new challenge. I have never made anything like this before. Now, let’s get you dressed and see how you look.’

‘Is that all right with Thorin?’ Bilbo asked, remembering his lessons at the start of their courtship. ‘I thought clothes had to come from him?’

‘And so they did. I created these for you at his request. He has offered me, as royal tailor, open permission to attend your wardrobe.’ He blinked back the abrupt gleam of tears, sniffing as he cleared his throat. ‘It’s a great honour, and one I never expected.’

‘It’s well-deserved,’ Bilbo promised, looking from the clothes to his bandaged chest. ‘Any idea how I’m going to get them on?’

‘Carefully. Here, allow me.’

Minutes passed as they worked together, Dori’s usual brisk movements slow to avoid jarring Bilbo’s
injuries. He slipped cloth over skin and tied delicate fastenings, humming to himself as he took note of his work. ‘Very nice.’ He smoothed warm fingers along the shoulders, checking the fit. ‘I left a fraction of room for the mithril and under-layers, but the less strain we place on your chest, the better. We’ll keep clothing light for now.’

‘Will that be all right?’ Bilbo asked. ‘The mithril –’

‘Is still important as a symbol of your courtship, especially as your bead is not in your hair, but exceptions can be made. The whole mountain knows you are injured and will not begrudge its absence.’

Bilbo’s hand flew to his hair, and an awful, choked noise caught in his throat. He had not even noticed the bead was missing, but now the lack of its tiny weight felt like a wound all its own. ‘Oh no! I’ve got to find it!’

Dori’s hand on his chest arrested his first stride, and wide eyes met his, solemn and earnest. ‘Thorin has it. Legolas and his scouts found it in the camp and gave it to him. I’ve no doubt he will weave it back in the moment he has the opportunity.’

Bilbo’s shoulders slumped, his racing heart slowing to its usual beat. ‘Thank the Valar for that,’ he murmured, too relieved to be embarrassed at his reaction. Besides, it was clear from Dori’s half-stifled smile that he found Bilbo’s urgency endearing. ‘A fine thing it would be if I lost an Erebor heirloom!’

Dori chuckled, reaching for the trousers and holding them up. ‘Can you get into these yourself, or do you require my help?’

‘Let me try.’ Bilbo admired the softness of the wool in his hands before wriggling out of his previous britches, now stained beyond repair. More bruises dappled his legs, gathered during his time in Frár’s captivity, but none of them were serious enough to need Oin’s attention. His smalls protected his dignity as he managed to dress, biting his tongue against the sparks of shifting discomfort in his side.

At last, he stood, looking down at himself to admire the soft fawn colour. Truth be told, there was nothing this good in the Shire, and he resisted the urge to preen. ‘They fit perfectly! How do I look?’

‘Regal, even if I do say so myself.’ Dori beamed with the triumph of a job well done. ‘Just one more thing.’ He held out a jacket, thick and padded for warmth, but dyed in a sumptuous colour that drifted between deep blue and verdant green. Guiding Bilbo’s arms into the sleeves and offering support where he could, he soon had it on his shoulders. The cut of it was distinctly hobbitish, and Bilbo smiled at the familiar length and feel of the garment.

Dori handed him a comb, and Bilbo knew that this part, at least, he had to do himself. Thorin may have given Dori permission to help with clothes, but hair was another matter. Using his good arm, he tried his best, smoothing out the rat’s nest and tucking the braid of the Company behind his ear. The cuff that Fili and Kili had made him still gleamed in place, and he smiled to feel that the smooth metal was none the worse for his adventures.

‘There. I think I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.’

‘Then let us away.’ Dori urged, gesturing towards the door. ‘Thorin will be in the Council room with our guests, as well as Lady Dis and most of the Company, if I’m any judge.’

Belly fluttering at the mention of Thorin’s sister, Bilbo swallowed hard. He was almost sure that Dis would be lovely, if her sons were anything to go by, but that did not stop his nerves at the thought of
meeting her. He knew how much Thorin respected her, and Bilbo couldn’t help but fear her judgement.

It was tempting to pump Dori for information, but he restrained himself. It seemed undignified. Besides, he would rather meet Lady Dis with an open mind.

Dipping his fingers into his pocket, he felt the weight of the ring. He had slipped it out of his old britches while Dori’s back was turned, but now the smooth metal brought him no comfort. Instead, it burned cold, leaving him shivering and unsure as he stepped across the threshold to the main healing rooms.

‘Ronin?’ He stopped dead, staring at the soldier who stood waiting. He wasn’t the only one. All of his guards were ready for him, stiff-spined and stubborn. ‘Are you meant to be out of bed?’

‘Pah!’ Oin spat from the far end of the room, his voice raised and his deafness in absence. ‘Fools!’

‘We are well enough, Master Baggins. I hope you will allow us to escort you through the mountain, despite our recent failings.’ Ronin stared straight ahead, not meeting Bilbo’s gaze. His heart broke for the young guard who clearly blamed himself for what had happened.

It was useless to argue. Once an idea got into the head of a dwarf, it was almost impossible to pry it loose. Instead, he drew himself up as much as his ribs would allow, observing the assembled soldiers. ‘It would be my honour and privilege to have your protection.’

Behind him, he heard Dori’s hum of approval and knew he had said just the right thing. Ronin and his men stood even further to attention, pride straightening their shoulders as they parted to allow Bilbo to pass. They did not stamp their feet, perhaps in respect to those still in Oin’s healing rooms, but their movements were military perfect as they escorted Bilbo up the steps towards the Council chamber.

The hallways were alive, bustling with dwarves calling out to each other. Bilbo caught snatches of conversation, and even the Khuzdul, guttural as it was, sounded enthusiastic to his ears. These were people coming home after decades in exile, and while they may mourn the loss of the kingdom as they had known it, each one seemed excited at the possibility of what it could become.

Bilbo half-expected his guards to have to clear a path, but before they could reach the throng, they began to separate, standing back and bowing low. Most of the dwarves were unknown to him – so many had come from the lands to the south and only arrived that morning – but there were familiar faces in the crowd. Sigrid and Bain, Bard’s two eldest children, were grinning from ear-to-ear. They bowed in equal measure to those around them, delighted by Bilbo’s surprise.

When they straightened up, the dwarves’ closed fists rested over their hearts in a traditional gesture of loyalty. He had seen them do it for Thorin in the past, as was expected. He was their king after all. He didn’t understand why he was being offered the same respect, especially as they hadn’t been told about his and Thorin’s betrothal.

‘Why are they doing that?’ Bilbo whispered to Dori.

The look he received could have made even Gandalf feel witless. ‘Well, let’s see. You freed Erebor from the dragon and helped unravel the king’s madness. Then you negotiated with the elves to save the lives of the Durin line.’ Dori smiled, amused by Bilbo’s increasing embarrassment. ‘Then, last night, you stopped a war, and probably saved the mountain all over again.’ He grew serious, reaching out to touch Bilbo’s elbow. ‘You have earned their respect, Master Baggins, and you shall always have that, wherever the future takes you.’
Warmth glowed in Bilbo’s belly, spreading along his arms and legs until his whole body basked in its glow. He’d had respect in the Shire, of course, but that had come more from being a Baggins than anything else. They looked at him and saw the family, wealth and property, not the hobbit and his actions. Here, half the world away and in the company of a race that was not his kin, he had found so much more.

‘They do me great honour. I’ll do my best to live up to it.’

‘I shouldn’t think you’ll have any trouble with that.’ Dori nodded towards the archway up ahead. ‘Through there. I’m afraid I must leave you. There is a great deal to do if everyone is going to have a bed for the night. Don’t let them keep you too long, or Oin will kill us all.’

‘I won’t, don’t worry. I’m eager for the comforts of my armchair.’ He smiled in farewell as Dori stepped back, leaving Bilbo and his guards to carry on alone.

He had never seen the Council room so full before. Almost every chair at the circular table was occupied, and a number of sentries – dwarves, men and elves – held station at the pillars that supported the domed roof. Yet their watchful presence did not sour the calm and business-like atmosphere.

Thranduil lounged in his seat as if it were the sprawl of his impressive throne, as graceful as ever with his son at his side. Dain chuckled at something Fili said, while Tauriel and Gandalf were locked in a quiet conversation. Brandahr and the enforcer pored over documents while Bard watched over them, asking questions and listening attentively.

Kili was talking to a dwarf who Bilbo knew immediately had to be Dis.

Hers was the only face Bilbo didn’t know on sight, but the family resemblance was impossible to miss. Her hair was as dark as Thorin’s, but barely touched by silver. A simple braid held back her tresses, the better to keep them under a helmet, and she wore what looked like leather armour. Her beard was finer than Thorin’s, carrying a gentle curl that softened the line of her jaw. Yet it was the wisdom and mischief alight in her eyes that put Bilbo at ease. She carried a lot of her sons in her, and the lines marking her features suggested more pleasure than misery.

She noticed him watching her, and her expression lit up with interest. Joy at seeing her kin turned into intrigue, and she examined him from head to toe before turning a knowing look on her brother. Her teeth flashed white as she failed to hide her grin, and Bilbo heard Thorin’s gruff growl of warning: their sibling affection and teasing plain for everyone to see.

Thorin got to his feet, bowing slightly to Bilbo before striding to his side. Bilbo’s heart jumped into double-time, and he was unable to stop the small, secret smile seeping across his face. Happiness warmed Thorin’s complexion, and Bilbo wondered how it was that no one could have guessed their secret. Surely one glance at the two of them would give it all away?

‘Are you all right?’ he asked as his hand cupped Bilbo’s elbow, offering mute support even as the warmth of his body drew Bilbo closer. ‘Oin seemed adamant you weren’t to leave the healing rooms.’

‘He wasn’t that keen on the idea, but eventually he admitted there wasn’t much more he could do.’ Bilbo shrugged, trying not to let his expression betray the way his ribs grumbled at him. ‘I’ve been better, but I’m well enough for this. Dori said you wanted to speak to me?’

Thorin gestured toward the table, and Bilbo’s gaze followed the sweep of his hand, his eyes growing wide when he realised that everyone had risen to their feet. Like the dwarves in the hallways, they
offered their respect, lords and kings alike bowing to a hobbit from the Shire.

A warm touch at the base of his spine guided him to the seat at Thorin’s left, and Bilbo sank into it, letting the sturdy wooden back take his weight and ease the strain on his chest. It was not the most comfortable chair, but any respite was welcome. Perhaps Oin had been right and this was too much for him after all, but Bilbo was determined to see it through.

‘I have done my best to explain all I know,’ Thorin promised, ‘but there are some parts of the tale that are yours alone, and the enforcer has a few queries.’

Bilbo nodded, squaring his shoulders as he met Viri’s eyes. ‘I’ll answer any questions you have, but first I would like to offer my thanks.’ He looked around the table, taking in each watchful face. ‘Everyone here came to Erebor’s aid, whether they already lived within our halls or were many miles away. It would have been easier to remain uninvolved, but instead you acted in our best interests despite any personal cost. For that you have my gratitude.’

‘And mine,’ Thorin added, his low voice resonant. ‘Those within the mountain attended their duties with courage, while those who marched arrived just in time.’

‘Too late, you mean,’ Dain muttered, looking wretched. ‘If it were a battle you had faced…’ He shook his head, his expression turning petulant. ‘Worse, my lot were beaten here by elves!’

Bilbo winced, restraining a sigh. He should have known that while Thorin and Thranduil had begun to put aside their differences for the good of the kingdom, Dain was another matter. He remained happy to bicker, no doubt because there was little that his halls would suffer in consequence from Thranduil’s annoyance.

Yet before he could soothe any ruffled feathers, Thranduil spoke, his usually indifferent voice carrying more energy than Bilbo had ever heard. Mirkwood had awakened, and its ruler, too, had stirred back to life, vivid and present rather than secluded in his realm.

‘I have seen the size of your army, Lord Dain. Even with the dwarves from Ered Luin at my side, my party was smaller and able to move more swiftly than your numbers would allow.’ Mirth danced in his eyes as his pacifying words washed over them all like a lullaby. ‘Besides, the terrain to the east is treacherous. Only a skilled commander could march so many from the Iron Hills with such admirable haste.’

Thorin and Bilbo exchanged a glance, both trying to hide their smiles at the unabashed flattery. Bilbo suspected Thranduil took pleasure in the power of his newly reclaimed charm, rusty from dis-use, but still effective – at least if the prideful swell of Dain’s chest was anything to go by.

‘Aye, that’s true. Though credit where credit is due, I had a head start.’ He nodded to Thranduil. ‘I left with my army as soon as I could. We guessed what was coming. It was only last night when we were almost upon Erebor that I got the raven begging extra speed.’

‘We, too, were already moving towards the mountain. A promised escort for the Lady Dis and her people, who were eager to return home,’ Thranduil’s gaze slid to meet hers, one eyebrow raised. ‘despite my advice to wait until we had news of the kingdom’s safety.’

‘Your words were heard, Lord Thranduil,’ Dis replied. Her voice was smooth and warm, like molten gold. ‘I merely chose not to heed them.’

Dain guffawed, slapping his hand down on the table as Thorin pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to hide his smile. ‘Stubborn,’ he muttered in his sister’s direction, which only seemed to amuse her
further. A grin danced over her lips and her eyes sparkled.

‘I learnt from the best, Brother.’ Her gaze settled on Bilbo, her smile fading as she fell serious.
‘Forgive me, Master Baggins. I should not be keeping you here with my joking when you must be in sore need of rest.’

‘I can’t be the only one,’ Bilbo replied. ‘You’ve come a long way. Thorin and I doubted you would be here before midsummer.’

Dis ducked her head, the guilty twist of her features reminiscent of Kili when he did something of which he knew they would not approve. ‘I’m afraid by the time I got word that Erebor had been reclaimed, my patience had run out. We began to hear stories of what had happened, and our people made the decision for me.’

‘They started to leave?’ Thorin asked.

‘Not quite, but if I had left it another week, I’m certain they would have done so. Instead, I chose to lead all those who wished to follow. The winter in the south was a mild one, and I called upon every favour owed and all the kindness that was on offer. It was a hard journey, but I’ve no doubt it was much easier than your own.’

Bilbo wasn’t so sure about that. Yes, their trek had been endless and harsh, but there were only fourteen of them to worry about. Dis had marched with hundreds of dwarves, and not all of them were soldiers. There was more than enough children and infirm among them. It spoke volumes of her determination and intelligence that she had got them all across the distance with such speed, and with so few succumbing to the trials of their efforts.

‘Your arrival could not have been better timed,’ Thorin conceded. ‘We feared we would face a siege. If not for Bilbo’s actions, that could still have been the case.’

‘Master Baggins,’ the enforcer began. ‘Can you tell us what happened when you were abducted? Be as precise as possible. It will help support any decision the Council makes about Frár’s fate.’

Bilbo nodded, pressing his hands palm down to the table as he organised his thoughts. The cool stone calmed him – stable and sure – giving him the strength to relive what could have been the last night of his life.

He told them everything, from Githin’s abduction to Frár’s boasting. The bruise in his side throbbed when he mentioned Carth’s violence, followed by his escape. No one interrupted him as he outlined his desperate attempts at sabotage, not even Brandahr, who bore witness to the destruction of his encampment. Every eye was upon him, but Bilbo did not check the reactions of his friends and allies. His attention was on the enforcer, watching her note down his words in concise runes.

‘When Frár raised his sword to slay King Thorin, you appeared out of nowhere.’ Viri pressed the quill to her lip, her ink stained fingers wrapped tight around its shaft. ‘If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would ignore it as the tall-tales of soldiers. Is that an ability all hobbits possess?’

Bilbo ducked his head, conscious of the ring in his pocket. It pulled at the fabric like a guilty secret plucking at his hip. So far, he had managed to avoid giving away the trick up his sleeve, but there was more at stake here than his selfish desires. He had carried the truth with him over more miles than he cared to count – his and his alone – but it was time for that to come to an end.

His tongue turned heavy and his mouth grew parched, his voice stifling in his throat. He swallowed hard, shaking his head as he forced his way past the strange compulsion, uttering words that stung
his lips as they flew free. ‘I found a ring, back in the Misty Mountains. It turns me invisible. It’s not comfortable to wear – just cold and exhausting – but it’s saved more lives than my own, and more than once.’

He glanced at Thorin, wincing at his frown. That mouth Bilbo so admired sketched a thin line, and creases pleated his brow. Now he came to speak of it, Bilbo realised how ridiculous he sounded, like a faunt telling stories. Still, this was no make believe, and he was happy to prove it if that’s what the enforcer needed to see.

‘I can show you if that would help?’

‘That won’t be necessary.’ Gandalf’s brittle smile chilled Bilbo to the bone, and there was a pull to his words that stilled those around them, who had been shifting in their seats. ‘There are many magic rings in Middle Earth. Some are little more than fascinating trinkets, but others –’ His gaze fell to the table, as if he could see through the stone surface and into the nest of Bilbo’s pocket. ‘– Others are treacherous. I do not doubt Bilbo’s word.’

The enforcer raised one eyebrow, her gaze fixed on Gandalf’s amiable expression. A cool silence unfurled, broken only by the crackling of the fire before she finally inclined her head. ‘As you say. Is there anything else you would like to add, Master Baggins?’

Bilbo bit his lip, puckering the flesh as he sorted through the questions that boiled in his throat. They swarmed like bees, but in the end, there were only two that refused to fade. ‘Is execution really the best punishment for Frár? Isn’t there another way?’

A coarse growl rumbled in Thorin’s chest. His jaw clenched, and his fingers tightened into fists on his knees, but he did not interrupt. Instead, he nodded along as the enforcer began to explain.

‘The nature of his crimes are beyond redemption. He has betrayed the honour of a noble clan in the hope of bringing about the extinction of another. I doubt the Council will see any alternative to his demise. If allowed to live, he is likely to fester in resentment, and it is Erebor that would pay the price if he ever found his freedom.’

‘What about Rholnost?’ Bilbo reached out, stroking the back of Thorin’s left hand. ‘What happens to his family? His people?’

Balin leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table and shaking his snowy head. ‘It will fail and fall, as all kingdoms must in time. He has little kin, only a daughter, who inherits nothing but a penniless throne, despite her efforts to prop up her father’s halls. The Stonefoot clan will scatter to other realms who need their skills. Rholnost will be no more.’

Bilbo closed his eyes, his heart heavy as he thought of the young dwarf who would soon realise she had lost everything. She would be a princess with no home, all thanks to her father’s greed. He had not hoarded gold, like Thrain – whose madness had brought a dragon to Erebor’s door. Instead, he spent it on fripperies and favours until their treasuries were bare and cold. There was no monster to slay in Rholnost, only the spectre of consequence.

‘Is there nothing we can do?’ He turned to Thorin, ignoring the hot lance of fire that ricocheted through his chest at the movement. ‘Nothing to help them?’ He frowned as he noticed the stubborn set of Thorin’s shoulders, sighing inwardly at the sight of his pride. Thorin was a good dwarf in many ways, but he was a product of his upbringing. Sometimes, that showed. Compassion was not something he had learned at his grandfather’s knee, but Bilbo knew him better than that.

He curved his fingers over Thorin’s wrist, bidding him to meet his gaze with nothing but a brush of
skin. ‘I’m not suggesting charity. Rholnost has some of the best quarries in Middle Earth: strong, beautiful stone, and the Valar know that Erebor needs building supplies.’

‘We have our own quarries.’

‘And they’ve been derelict for years. How long will it take to get them going again; how long before the first block is even hewn?’ Bilbo cocked his head. ‘I’m sure that, if we offered, the new queen could have wagons of granite and marble with us before the summer, and at a fair price. She needs the gold, and we need good stone.’

Thorin let out a gusty sigh, the look he sent in Bilbo’s direction full of reluctance. ‘Frár would have killed you.’ His spare hand drummed a tattoo on the table top. ‘He would have besieged our kingdom and slain its people, all for his own gain.’

‘She is not her father.’ Bilbo smiled as he saw the light of realisation dawn in Thorin’s eyes. It came on slow at first, little more than a glimmer, but soon it spread across his face, easing the harsh, spiteful lines of his expression. Quietly, so no-one but Thorin could hear, Bilbo uttered a few more words, driving his point home as gently as he knew how. ‘Just as you are not your grandfather.’

He watched the flicker of conflicting feeling swirl over Thorin’s features: bitter marks of anger and spite bracketing his lips even as his eyes softened.

At last, a sharp, mirthless laugh caught in Thorin’s throat, and he bowed his head in surrender. ‘Clever hobbit.’ He smiled then, leaning in to press their foreheads together before turning back to their audience, who all watched with rapt fascination.

‘Bilbo is right. We can give Rholnost a second chance in terms of trade. Balin, please draft a letter to be included alongside the enforcer’s notification of Frár’s fate. I only hope his daughter shows better sense than her father.’

Balin nodded, his gaze flickering to Bilbo. His broad smile indicated his approval, and he wasn’t the only one. Dis’ eyebrows had almost vanished beneath her hair, but her expression suggested satisfaction at his actions, rather than doubt. Even Thranduil looked impressed, his quicksilver eyes narrowed in benign consideration.

‘Aye, I’ll see it done.’ Balin hauled himself to his feet and turned to the enforcer. ‘Now, is there anything else that we need to discuss? I’m sure Master Baggins requires his rest, and there’s much for us to do.’

She shook her head, her pen hovering over the roll of parchment before her. At last, she set it aside, speaking with unwavering authority. ‘I am confident that Frár is the only culprit still alive to punish for the events of the past few months. That includes the death of Storn.’

Bilbo let out a breath, blinking against the surprising sting of his tears. For too long he had wondered if Storn would ever find justice, or if he was doomed to languish in Mahal’s halls, dead thanks to the crimes of some unknown other. To hear him mentioned – not merely as an innocent bystander but a genuine victim – brought him a measure of relief.

Brandahr cleared his throat, running his fingers along the table’s edge before rising to his feet. Gone was the imposing dwarf Bilbo had witnessed back in the camp. Now, he looked almost grey with guilt, eroded by misery. Dwarves did not tolerate pity, but Bilbo felt its pinch all the same. Brandahr’s only crimes were being too trusting, and clinging to notions of honour that others used against him. Frár had hurt more than Erebor with his actions; Steranor had suffered a blow, to their pride if not their kingdom.
‘I must once more apologise for my part in this,’ Brandahr rasped, moving around the room like a dwarf facing his execution. He stopped at Thorin’s side before dropping to one knee, his head bowed. ‘Foolishly, I heeded Frár’s words, casting aside my faith in the Durin line in favour of rumour and hearsay. I should have known your integrity remained, despite your hardships, yet I allowed myself to be deceived.’

His breath hissed between his lips, his shoulders heaving, but he forced himself on. ‘I pledge the fealty of myself and my kingdom to Erebor and those who rule it.’

‘You would make Steranor a vassal of Erebor?’ Balin asked, his voice hushed at the prospect. A ripple of shock uncoiled through the room. ‘You would put your kingdom under our rule? Your army under our command?’

Surprise ricocheted through Bilbo’s body. This was not a mere renewal of friendship between clans, but the pledging of one to another, with Thorin gaining control over the vast Blackbeard resources. He could see the temptation. For all its former glory, Erebor was sorely lacking in many respects. They had little in the way of a military force, and even less when it came to industry. Yet one look at Thorin’s face eased his fears. There was no greed there, no daydreams of grandeur and empire.

The beads of kingship gleamed in his hair as he shook his head, rising from his chair and offering a hand to help Brandahr to his feet. ‘I have no need for vassals, though your pledge honours you and your kin. Erebor would be glad of the Blackbeards’ friendship, as we once were.’

Brandahr sagged, his body swaying before he smiled for the first time Bilbo could recall. It carved years from his face, and he clasped Thorin’s forearm in a familiar gesture of brotherhood. ‘That you shall have, without question. I will help you and the people of Erebor in any way I can.’

‘And we will do our best to return the favour. Speak with Bombur about rations for your army. We shall make sure you have enough food to carry you back home.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ Dain promised, clapping Brandahr on the arm. ‘You’ve many mouths to feed, and Thorin has few farms, if any. There’s more supplies on-route from the Iron Hills. We’ll see what can be done.’

Slowly, people began to disperse, some hurrying away to do business and others pairing off in conversation. A hand on Bilbo’s shoulder made him look up, and he smiled at Thorin, trying to hide the way his bones dragged at his flesh. For all his protests to the contrary, his injuries were taking their toll. The last vestiges of Oin’s miracle tea had worn off, leaving him feeling like one big bruise.

‘Let me take you somewhere more comfortable so you can rest,’ Thorin urged. ‘I’ll see you settled before returning to my duties.’

‘You’ll do no such thing,’ Dis protested, shaking her head as she scooped together the documents that littered the table and shot her brother a stern look. ‘You need peace as much as Master Baggins. You barely slept last night, by all accounts. Besides, I’m sure you’ll take comfort in one another’s company.’ Her sly smile made her eyes glitter before she bowed to Bilbo. ‘It’s been a pleasure meeting you. I’ve heard a great deal of your exploits.’

Bilbo winced, blushing when Thorin’s sister chortled. ‘I promise you, every word that reached my ears brimmed with praise, and seeing what I have today, I think it’s well deserved.’ She placed a hand on his arm, giving him a gentle squeeze. ‘I look forward to getting to know you better.’

‘Thank you,’ Bilbo managed, grinning up at her. ‘The feeling is mutual.’
‘There’ll be time enough later, I hope. For now, I agree with my brother. Leave duty to the rest of us. There are kings and princes aplenty to keep Erebor running smooth. You may as well take advantage of the peace while it lasts!’ She winked at Thorin before striding away, her long braid swinging behind her.

‘It would be foolish to ignore an order from my sister,’ Thorin said ruefully, offering Bilbo his arm and gesturing towards the door. ‘Shall we?’

‘Lead the way.’ Bilbo eased himself to his feet, chewing on his tongue to keep a groan of pain at bay. Thorin supported his weight with patient ease, saying nothing of Bilbo’s stiff, awkward gait. Sitting down had probably done him more harm than good. He felt as if his whole body had seized up, and the idea of a soft bed was a glorious promise.

‘Bilbo? May I have a word?’ Gandalf fell in beside him, his voice thick with kind concern. It reminded Bilbo of being a faunt in the Shire, tousled from his adventures and sitting at the wizard’s knee. ‘It won’t take long.’

Bilbo nodded, frowning as Gandalf looked at Thorin, all apology. ‘I will have your hobbit back at your side in a moment, but I am afraid what I must say is for Bilbo’s ears alone.’

Thorin glanced towards Bilbo, waiting for his approval before stepping back, removing himself from earshot but staying close enough to come to Bilbo’s aid if he called.

‘I think you already know what I’m going to ask.’ Gandalf leant on his staff and raised his eyebrows. There was no point in feigning ignorance. It had never worked in Bilbo’s youth and it wouldn’t work now.

‘It’s just a ring,’ he replied, shaking his head. ‘Nothing more.’

‘A powerful ring, and one of unknown provenance. Perhaps invisibility is its only gift, but are you willing to take such a chance?’

‘It’s never done anything else.’ Bilbo’s fingers closed around the smooth metal band. ‘Like I said, it’s not pleasant to wear, but it’s not harmful.’

‘And it has never changed the way you think? The way you feel? You have never acted unlike yourself?’ Gandalf’s eyes dropped to Bilbo’s hips. ‘You never spent so much time with your hands in your pockets before.’

‘Perhaps my fingers are cold,’ Bilbo snapped, his anger growing as Gandalf’s gaze hardened. ‘It’s mine. I found it!’

‘Or it found you.’ Gandalf closed his eyes, shaking his head before crouching down, reducing his looming height so that they were face-to-face. ‘Bilbo Baggins, you are a clever hobbit who has proven his worth a thousand times over – and who would have done just as well without the ring.’ He reached into his robe, pulling free a yellowing envelope and holding it out, its mouth agape. ‘Let me take it for you.’

Panic seized Bilbo’s heart, tight and choking. A fierceness welled in his throat, all hot fire and fury, but before any poisonous words could spill from his tongue, Gandalf continued, his voice little more than the whisper of a breeze, but potent all the same.

‘I do not ask only for your safety, old friend, but for that of Thorin. Think of the gold. Think of the Arkenstone and how soon the seeds of obsession flourish. Perhaps the ring is harmless, but if not… Do you want to take that risk?’
It was like being doused in ice water. The tang of anger vanished, its flame snuffed out to leave Bilbo gasping. Memories flooded him of Thorin in the treasury, rummaging through the hoard with single-minded focus. He remembered the Arkenstone and the battlements – the fury and pain in Thorin’s eyes. He could not do that to him again. They had fought so hard to get to where they were, carving out an existence together. He could not put that in jeopardy. Not for nothing more than a band of gold.

Swallowing, he took his hand out of his pocket, rubbing the smooth metal between his fingers before dropping it into the envelope. It clung to his skin, unwilling to part, but finally it fell into the paper prison, sounding heavy for so small a thing.

Quick as a flash, Gandalf sealed it with wax from a nearby candle and tucked it into his robes. No greed marred his face. Instead, he looked like a man handling a snake, wary of its bite and the poison within. ‘I will keep it safe, Bilbo, and find out what we are dealing with.’

The tip of his staff scraped on the stone floor as he smiled, all seriousness fled. ‘Now, go and enjoy some well-deserved rest.’ Pale eyes twinkled above the hook of Gandalf’s nose, and he gestured Thorin closer before leaning down to whisper in Bilbo’s ear. ‘Do not concern yourself with the fate of the ring, Bilbo. Not all treasure is made from gold.’ He glanced meaningfully in Thorin’s direction, and the last tendrils of Bilbo’s resentment withered away.

‘You’re right,’ he said, ducking his head and smiling when Thorin reached his side. He felt lighter than he had in months, set free from some great weight. Even his ribs ached less, and though his pocket seemed strangely empty, it was an absence he could ignore.

There were more important things in life than trinkets; more valuable prizes than gold and jewels. Love could not be bought or sold; it could only grow. Many people never found someone who could make their heart sing, and even if they did, circumstances often got in their way. He and Thorin had faced impossible odds on an improbable journey. Sometimes it seemed all of Middle Earth was against them, and yet here they were.

And here they would stay.
Glorious

Thorin hovered at Bilbo’s side, his pace slow to accommodate his hobbit’s injuries. Their footsteps echoed with a faltering rhythm, mimicked by the march of the guards behind them. It was so unlike Bilbo’s normal quick stride that Thorin’s heart ached at the sight. It seemed that, despite Oin’s healings, the effort of the day had taken its toll. He moved as if he had aged fifty years in the space of a few hours, and Thorin wished there was more he could do to ease his misery.

He had asked Gandalf about extra healing before Bilbo joined them, but the wizard had nothing to offer but apologies. Even Thranduil had shaken his head, his impassive face lined with sympathy. They both said the same thing: that time was the best healer of broken ribs. Neither would be moved, despite Thorin’s pleading, and so Bilbo was left to suffer while he could do little more than bear witness to his pain.

‘Where are we going?’ Bilbo paused, looking around the hallway before quirking an eyebrow. ‘This isn’t the way to the Overseer’s quarters.’

Thorin shook his head, taking Bilbo’s hand and guiding him towards the majestic sweep of Erebor’s central stairs. They climbed upwards in a graceful curve, with gleaming railings guarding their edge. The vast lantern high above glowed, the mirrors turning the mountain’s dark heart to daylight.

‘The royal wing?’ Bilbo asked. ‘I thought it was still in need of repair?’

Thorin kept his expression neutral, doing his best to guard his anticipation. After all, he would not want to ruin this simple surprise. Not after Bifur and Bofur had put in so much hard work these past few weeks, using their spare moments to weave their magic.

‘It’s habitable enough,’ he promised. ‘Others were in need of the comfort of the Overseer’s quarters more than us.’

‘Oh.’ Bilbo pursed his lips, disappointment darkening his face like a cloud skating across the sun. A moment later, he banished it, managing a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. ‘Of course. I was looking forward to my armchair, that’s all.’

‘Can you manage the stairs?’ he asked. The climb was shallow, carved for the feet of old kings and worn by the centuries, but it still might be too much for Bilbo, who even now seemed to struggle for breath. Perhaps this idea would be better left for another day.

‘I’ll be all right.’ Bilbo reached for the railing with his good hand and let Thorin support his bad side. ‘It could take a while, but I can do it.’ He squared his shoulders, shuffling onwards as he continued to speak. ‘No one actually mentioned what’s happened to Frár. I’m guessing he’s in chains…’

Thorin scowled. He would rather tell Bilbo that the one who had caused so much trouble was far from their halls, but honesty had come to form a strong foundation of their relationship. He could not bring himself to lie, not even for Bilbo’s comfort. ‘The dragon left Erebor’s prison untouched. The bars stand sure and the locks are tight. There are no weaknesses of stone or structure. Frár is occupying a cell there, until his fate is decided.’

‘It sounded like the enforcer was pretty sure what would happen to him.’ Bilbo grimaced, reaching his hand up to his neck as if imagining the fall of the executioner’s axe.

‘It is not as simple as that. There is procedure and paperwork. Everything must be witnessed in an attempt to prevent dispute. It’s complicated enough when executing a normal dwarf, but when it
comes to lords and kings?’ Thorin shook his head. ‘I fear it will not be quick.’

‘And so he stays here, in the mountain he wanted so badly.’ Bilbo’s face drew tight, shadows passing in the clear pools of his eyes. It sliced at Thorin to witness such sadness, and he stopped on the step below, guiding him in a gentle turn before capturing those pensive lips in a kiss.

Like this, they were of a similar height, and Thorin shivered as a frisson uncoiled down his spine. Bilbo’s good hand burrowed into his hair, tracing his braids in a way that was inappropriate for anywhere except the bedroom. Not that Thorin could care about that, not when a low, happy moan pulsed in Bilbo’s throat.

A cough from one of their guards brought them both back to reality, and Thorin shot a scathing glare over his shoulder, noticing that several of them looked flustered at witnessing such affection. Still, it was a timely reminder. There were better places for him to concentrate on chasing the last whispers of sadness and fear from Bilbo’s expression.

‘Come,’ he rasped, drawing back and steadying them both. ‘Let’s get you upstairs. Do not think any longer on Frár, or duty, or whatever else is caught in your head.’

‘Perhaps I’ll have to let you take my mind off it all.’ A wicked smile curved Bilbo’s mouth, and his eyes sparkled with a passion that left little to the imagination. Either he had forgotten about his battered ribs, or he was determined to ignore their fragile state.

Thorin could not be so casual about Bilbo’s hurts. He had suffered enough, and Thorin did not plan to add to that – not even by accident.

‘I shall do my best,’ he promised, taking Bilbo’s hand and continuing their journey, watchful for any sign that the strain might be getting too much. Though the occasional flinch narrowed Bilbo’s eyes, he did not complain, and when they reached the top of their climb, his gaze was bright and curious.

With a nod to their guards, Thorin left them to their stations along the corridor. They peeled off one-by-one until only two remained. With the brisk efficiency Dwalin drummed into all his recruits, they led the way, opening the double doors to the royal quarters and checking inside before allowing Thorin and Bilbo access.

‘All clear, Your Majesty.’

‘You have my thanks.’ He rested a hand in the small of Bilbo’s back, ushering him across the threshold. The lock tumbled into place with a satisfying click, drawing a line between the mountain beyond and a space that was solely for the two of them.

‘Oh!’

Thorin grinned at Bilbo’s amazement, taking in the sight that awaited them. Gone were the veils of fabric that had shielded the dilapidated decor from view when he had shown Bilbo the garden. Now, thick rugs covered polished stone floors, and the marble walls gleamed with oils that bought out the shifting colour of the ores within. Runic patterns, inlaid in silver, became molten gold in the lantern light, and where bare archways had stood were strong doorways, each hiding a different chamber.

‘Is this all ours?’ Bilbo asked, taking half a step forward before looking over his shoulder. He shifted his weight like a hound on the hunt, eager to explore. If it weren’t for his bruises, Thorin suspected he would already be off, examining every corner.

‘They are the rooms for the ruler and their consort.’ A grin too powerful to hide curved his mouth as he slipped his hand into his pocket, his fingers closing around the bead Bilbo had given him earlier.
He carried it with him, safe and treasured, until Bilbo could weave it into his hair. ‘As you are my betrothed, that makes them ours.’

Bilbo bit his lip, his happiness contagious. A hint of colour warmed his cheeks, but he wore it with pride as he held out his hand for Thorin. ‘Then we had best look at our rooms together, unless you’ve already seen them?’

‘The last time I saw this place in anything but ruins, it belonged to my grandparents.’

‘Was it beautiful?’

Thorin paused, considering the question. ‘They were as much an exhibition of status as the rest of the mountain. Wealthy and decadent. I remember preferring the green of the garden to the riches of my grandfather’s furnishings.’

‘Well, if any of that’s still around it will be down in the treasury.’ Bilbo shrugged, hissing as the movement jostled his ribs. ‘That’s where it can stay, if you would like? The Valar know I have no need for gold. Give me an armchair, a few good books and…’

Bilbo trailed off as Thorin pushed open the first door, the sight stealing his words away. Thorin had not specified much when he asked Bifur and Bofur to take on this project, but they had spent enough time with them both to understand what would bring them true pleasure.

For Bilbo, it was this: a cosy room lined with bookshelves, their leather spines newly oiled and gleaming thanks to Ori’s attentions. A quick glance at the titles showed many of them were translated into Westron, and Bilbo trailed his hand along their covers in fascination. A fire smouldered in the grate, casting its ruddy glow on the armchair that, until a few hours ago, had been in their rooms down in the Overseer’s quarters. At its side was the seat Thorin had come to think of as his own, and a table and pipe sat between them, ready and waiting.

Two desks, carefully restored, occupied a nearby nook. Lead-paned windows cut narrow slices through stone walls to the outside world. There were inks and quills at the ready, as well as comfortable chairs to support them through their work, be it signing papers or more leisurely pursuits.

‘This is incredible!’ Bilbo murmured, taking it all in. ‘I could stay in here forever!’

Thorin had to agree with him. Bofur and Bifur had not merely rebuilt ruined furniture; they had created an air of tranquillity in what had, a few short weeks ago, been little better than a dreary catacomb of half-forgotten memories.

‘What’s down here?’ Bilbo asked, gesturing to a flight of steps that led to a thick door. ‘A wine cellar?’

‘Not quite. My grandfather had little interest in smithing once he was no longer a youth, but my grandmother was masterful at the most intricate pieces. Much like you, she had the hands for such delicate work. She had a forge installed in the royal quarters upon her marriage.’

He watched understanding dawn in Bilbo’s eyes, and was more than a little gratified to see his interest. At the start of their journey, he would have been indifferent to the tools of metalwork. Now, it seemed, he enjoyed sharing some knowledge of Thorin’s passions.

‘I promise that, later, we can spend as much time in here as you please.’ He gestured back towards the hallway. ‘For now, there is something more I want to show you.’

Bilbo peeled himself away from the books, his gaze roaming their ranks as if he thought they might
disappear with the dawn. Only when Thorin beckoned him did he follow, intent on discovering the other secrets that awaited them.

The small pantry, fully stocked, met with hums of delight, as did the private dining parlour large enough for them and a handful of guests. Sturdy, functional furniture held reign throughout, embellished with subtle carvings and rich, dark upholstery.

A second sitting room, more formally designed and reminiscent of Thrain’s time caught Thorin’s eye, and he grimaced as he explained. ‘It is considered a great honour among dwarves to be permitted into the royal quarters. In my grandfather’s day, they literally killed for the right to be in his presence. I believe he encouraged it.’

‘But you won’t.’

It wasn’t a question, but Thorin shook his head all the same, watching Bilbo pace around the circular, wooden table, counting the chairs that surrounded its rim.

‘Our rooms also have a diplomatic purpose, don’t they?’ Bilbo asked at last, gesturing back towards the rest of the mountain. ‘Out there, you are king first and foremost, and our allies hold their own stations in their minds. Here, it is easier to meet as friends and discuss matters openly.’

‘You’re right.’ Thorin should not be surprised by Bilbo’s understanding, but he had always considered hobbits defensive of their comforts. Perhaps it was his memories of Bilbo’s grudging hospitality at Bag End that gave him that impression. Would he come to resent the chattels of rule? Would he grown bitter over time, constantly having to offer so much of himself to others?

‘I do not want you to feel as if you have no choice in such things,’ he said, slowing their pace so that they were ambling along the final hallway. ‘If it becomes too distasteful hosting our allies in our quarters, then changes can be made.’

Bilbo clenched his hands into quick fists before releasing them again, and Thorin did not miss the way his fingers edged towards his pocket before darting away. ‘I won’t lie and say I like the idea, but I understand it. You’re a king, always. There’s no escaping that or what it entails. I – I wouldn’t have asked for a betrothal if I didn’t accept that.’

‘It seems you are making many sacrifices,’ Thorin murmured, the concerns he had been trying to keep at bay seeping back in. ‘I wonder what you are getting in return.’

‘You.’ Bilbo spoke without hesitation, his voice resonating through Thorin’s bones. ‘I’m getting you.’ He lifted his chin as if daring Thorin to argue. ‘It’s more than worth the whole lot. Battles, kidnapping, sabotage and all.’

His joking smile had Thorin answering in kind, and he slipped an arm around Bilbo’s waist, relishing the warmth of him as Bilbo leant against his shoulder and allowed himself to be led. ‘It seems you have a knack for it – the sabotage at least. I don’t think Nori and a team of spies could have done a better job.’

‘Being invisible helped.’ A veil of melancholy flitted over Bilbo’s brow, but he seemed to cast it away. ‘I will admit, though, it was quite satisfying to watch all that confusion.’

Thorin cocked his head, discerning the glassy edge to Bilbo’s voice. He may not have heard what Bilbo and Gandalf had discussed, but he had watched as Bilbo handed over the ring that had seen him through so many dangers. Yet what should have been a matter of indifference had instead stained his features with bitterness. Such emotion had no home on his hobbit’s face, and Thorin
knew exactly why it bothered him so.

The Arkenstone and all of Erebor’s hoard had not swayed Bilbo from his good heart, but it was clear that the ring he carried had poisoned him day-by-day.

Like the dragon sickness, it seemed something had crept into Bilbo’s mind, attempting to ensnare him in its clutches. Perhaps he would have gone his whole life without falling to the same depths Thorin had experienced, but for his part, he was glad they would not have to find out. Gandalf could take care of the ring, and he could take care of Bilbo.

‘I have never met anyone as ingenious as you,’ Thorin said, hoping that Bilbo would see his words for genuine praise, as opposed to shallow flattery. After all, he spoke nothing but the truth. ‘I have no doubt you would have been just as successful without the help of a trinket.’

As soon as he uttered that last word, Thorin cursed himself for his mistake. More than once, during his sickness, Bilbo had tried to trivialise the Arkenstone – to reduce its importance in Thorin’s mad mind. Every time, it had driven him to anger, and now he saw an echo of that pinch Bilbo’s cheeks and set his teeth in a hard line.

However, whereas Thorin’s rage had been without end, Bilbo’s seemed fleeting, here one moment and forced aside the next. Perhaps he was not smiling anymore, but Thorin preferred the thin veneer of weary interest to that dark well of uncharacteristic anger that threatened to bubble to the surface.

‘You had something else to show me?’

The change of topic was clumsy, but Thorin would take it and be grateful. They were treading dangerous territory, and he suspected neither he nor Bilbo had the strength to navigate it safely.

With a nod, he pushed aside the final door leading to a room Bilbo had seen before. Back then, his gaze had focussed elsewhere, entranced by the light-dappled garden beyond the glass doors. Now, the shell of his false excitement cracked open, revealing the wonder Thorin had hoped to see.

Thick hide rugs covered the floor, warding off the chill of the stone. Bilbo’s toes curled as something in him seemed to unwind. A mighty fire roared in the huge hearth, the flames reflecting on the polished metal patterns that decorated the surround. Another pair of armchairs perched in front of it, deep and comfortable, but it was the magnificent bed that he knew would draw Bilbo’s eye.

Thick posts of hardwood supported heavy drapes pulled back from a fresh stuffed mattress. A mountain of pillows sat heaped at one end, while smooth sheets and thick furs lay waiting to cradle them both in their embrace.

The noise Bilbo made at the sight was obscene – pure pleasure – and his half-step towards their nest only halted when he looked beyond, to where the glass doors shielded them from the chill of the garden. He grinned, admiring the drifting lights from the lanterns Thorin had crafted when their courting became official. ‘It’s beautiful!’

‘There is space in here for many other things, and we can rearrange the furniture however you wish, but I thought you would like to see your garden from the bed.’

‘Yes – yes I would.’ Bilbo grinned, his eyes crinkling at their corners. ‘My only concern is that the sheets are so fine! I would hate to get them dirty.’

Thorin raised a teasing eyebrow, chuckling as Bilbo blushed at the implication.

‘I meant from all this grime!’ Bilbo gestured down at himself. ‘I did my best with a cloth when I
woke up, but I hardly feel presentable.’ He wrinkled his nose, his voice falling into an irritated mutter. ‘I still smell of horse, for one thing.’

‘Perhaps I can help you with that. I’ve already checked with Oin, and he said it would be of benefit to you, though we’re to remove your bandages first.’

‘What would be of – oh!’

Bilbo gaped as Thorin ushered him into a nearby anteroom. It was no wonder the sight struck his hobbit speechless. Even Thorin, who had seen this room back in his youth, had to admire it anew. Warm sandstone, not polished or slippery, formed the chamber. Niches in the rock held small lights, and tiny tiles decorated the walls and ceiling in a multitude of hues.

Yet it was the pool in the centre, lined in vivid blue and turquoise, that captivated the senses. Steam blossomed from its surface, and the delicious fragrance of oils added a subtle nuance to the humid air.

‘That’s the biggest bath I’ve ever seen,’ Bilbo squeaked. ‘You could fit every hobbit in the Shire in there.’ He edged closer to the rim, looking down into its depths. ‘You could drown every hobbit in the Shire. How far down does it go?’

‘Look at the edges.’ Thorin indicated the wide ledges that staggered at different heights along the walls while ignoring Bilbo’s exaggeration. The bath may be large, but it could hold no more than a score of dwarves at once. ‘My great grandfather commissioned it for himself and his family. He made it so that even a babe could be bathed safely.’

He took Bilbo’s hand, squeezing in quick reassurance. ‘You’ll come to no harm, and besides, I have every intention of joining you.’ Thorin puckered his brow, hoping he was not misreading Bilbo’s mood. ‘Unless, of course, you would rather be alone?’

‘No, you’re coming in with me.’ Bilbo nudged Thorin’s jaw, nuzzling at his beard. ‘I’m not the only one who needs a bath. You smell like armour.’

A bark of laughter escaped Thorin’s throat. At least he knew he could rely on Bilbo to be honest with him. He was not one for false flattery, and it brought him great relief to know that their relationship would not be shadowed by such manipulations. Even his mother and father, who had loved each other very much, were more than capable of twisting the other to get their way, and Thorin had always believed that if he got married, he would be doomed to face the same.

‘Thank you,’ he murmured, brushing a kiss over Bilbo’s brow before stepping back. ‘Here, let me help you undress. You seem to be struggling.’

‘It’s my side,’ Bilbo confessed. ‘I’d forgotten that such injuries could make everything hurt so much. Every breath – every movement of my arm – it’s horrible.’

‘You’ve suffered such a thing before?’ Thorin asked, peeling back the layers of Bilbo’s clothes and taking care not to let the shift of fabric rile up his pains.

‘I was a wild faunt.’ Bilbo grinned at his memories. ‘My father despaired. My mother encouraged me. I was forever up trees and rambling through forests.’ His happiness faded, sobered by some other recollection. ‘It seems like another life, sometimes, but I took my fair share of spills. I hurt my other side, though I doubt it was as bad as this.’

Thorin folded Bilbo’s overcoat before turning his attention to his tunic. ‘Most of the time I’ve known you, you’ve been just as adventurous. You’re not as different from back then as you think,’ he
pointed out. 'Less giant spiders in those days. Not many wizards or elves either, for that matter.' He ran a hand over Thorin’s knuckles. ‘But you’re right. I suppose I’m not that different after all – though that’s probably thanks to you and your quest. If you hadn’t shown up at my door that night…’

Thorin raised Bilbo’s fingers to his lips, careful of the cuts and grazes that left their marks. ‘It was not my arrival that led you on this journey. You decided that yourself, and I thank Mahal for whatever changed your mind.’

With as much care as he could muster, he helped Bilbo out of his clothes, pushing aside soft fabric to reveal the skin beneath. The heavy air bred no shivers in Bilbo’s body. In fact, he seemed to flourish in the wet heat, his colour returning and his pain-locked muscles falling smooth.

‘You’re overdressed,’ he murmured, grinning when Thorin engulfed him in a tender embrace. He felt small, warm and yielding, but far from vulnerable. Bilbo sagged against him, his nose resting in the hollow of Thorin’s throat and his nostrils flared as he relished the scent of him.

‘I thought you said I smelled like armour?’

‘You do. I didn’t say it was bad.’ He plucked at the laces of Thorin’s britches, clearly considering damning his injuries and stripping Thorin himself.

‘Let me.’ Thorin eased him back. ‘I’ll be quicker at it.’

True to his word, he wasted no time disrobing, abandoning his clothes on a nearby bench before returning to his admiring hobbit. Bruises may rest beneath Bilbo’s eyes, but they did nothing to detract from the desire in his gaze. His shameless scrutiny brought warmth to Thorin’s cheeks, and heat began to pool lower in a way that would soon be very obvious.

The only thing that remained was the bandage around Bilbo’s ribs, and Thorin reached out, unravelling the knot that held it in place before unspooling the cloth. ‘Let me know if I hurt you,’ he husked, passing the swathe from one hand to the other.

It should not be erotic, unbinding a wound, yet there was something about the slow exposure of such innocuous flesh that made his breath catch in his throat. His mouth watered, eager to taste the salt of Bilbo’s skin. By the time the tail of cloth fell away, he felt dizzy with his own imaginings, drawn towards Bilbo like iron to a lodestone.

He was not the only one so affected. Bilbo’s fingers had gone to the remaining braid in his hair, stroking the weave of it before tucking it behind his ear and tilting his head. He swayed in, his tongue darting out to wet his lips and his pupils unfurling.

‘Bath?’ Thorin managed, his question as much for himself as Bilbo. He had not missed the fact that, despite the want in his eyes, Bilbo remained soft, his body too exhausted and hurt to bother itself with thoughts of coupling. Thorin, on the other hand, was already half hard with wanting him.

‘Ignore that,’ he ordered as Bilbo’s eyes slid downwards, mischief and amusement making him look years younger. ‘I have no expectations.’

‘That’s a pity,’ Bilbo replied, his smile wavering even as the flirtation left his lips. ‘Though I thank you for it. I’m not sure I could, tonight.’

‘That is hardly a surprise.’ Thorin stepped forward, dismissing the way his hardness bobbed between
his thighs as he guided Bilbo to the water’s edge. The floor fell away in a shallow slope, allowing bathers to step in slowly if they preferred. Warm ripples lapped at their ankles as he led them deeper, towards a ledge he knew would accommodate them both.

Bilbo’s earlier trepidation about the depth of the pool seemed to fade. He sat down, the curve of his spine pressed to Thorin’s chest and his hips flanked by Thorin’s parted legs. Fingers that clung to him like claws soon eased, and Thorin smiled to himself, enjoying the pleasure-cum-pain of his erection trapped between their bodies.

‘Sorry,’ he growled, his lips brushing the shell of Bilbo’s ear. ‘That’s probably not comfortable.’

Bilbo bit his lip, white teeth puckering plump flesh. ‘I’ll survive,’ he promised, slumping as he began to relax. ‘Just don’t let me fall off this ledge.’

Thorin pressed his face into Bilbo’s hair, smiling as the damp curls tickled his nose. From here, he had an excellent view down Bilbo’s body, over the brackets of his ribs and the soft swell of his belly to where his legs bent at the knee, hanging over the edge of their perch. His feet moved up and down in the deep water below, the hair atop them twisting like golden seaweed in the teasing currents.

‘I will have to teach you to swim, one day,’ Thorin mused, almost to himself. ‘It is something all dwarflings learn. Water can occur in unexpected places, and it is good to know how to survive it.’

Bilbo grunted, his eyes fluttering closed and his lashes tracing curves against his cheeks. ‘Hobbits are better at sinking than swimming, unless they’ve got a barrel to hold onto.’

Thorin tightened his fingers over Bilbo’s hip at the memory of their turbulent escape. ‘All the more reason to teach you. I learnt here, in this bath.’

Bilbo cracked open one eye. ‘Well, it’s certainly big enough,’ he mused, ‘but I worry you’d be wasting your time. Especially tonight.’

Thorin lifted a hand, capturing the braid that marked Bilbo as a member of the Company. ‘I would not dream of such a task unless you were both healthy and happy with the idea,’ he promised. ‘You need do nothing that you do not want to, Bilbo.’ Plucking with agile fingers, he undid the woven twist of hair, pulling free the bead and setting it aside in a niche built to hold treasures safe.

With that done, he reached up, teasing out the gems that sparkled in his own hair. Bilbo’s hands gripped his thighs, his touch not hard or panicked, but cautious, as if he felt the need to anchor himself in place. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked, watching Bilbo shuffle lower so that the water lapped at his chin.

A happy hum was his only answer, and Thorin smiled as the silver and black of his hair flared in the water, coiling among Bilbo’s shorter curls. Oin had suggested he let Bilbo soak, and he was more than happy to do so, keeping a watchful eye to make sure his hobbit did not slip beneath the surface.

Whether Bilbo fell asleep or merely lost himself in his own thoughts, Thorin could not be certain. All he had to measure the time was the beat of Bilbo’s heart against his palm and the steady whisper of his own breaths. Tranquil and calm, he relished the moment, bearing Bilbo’s weight with ease as the silence furled around them.

‘I’m going wrinkly,’ Bilbo murmured some time later, lifting one hand to show Thorin the puckered skin at his fingertips. ‘But I really don’t want to get out.’

‘Then don’t.’ Thorin straightened up, mindful of Bilbo’s ribs as he shifted him between his legs and wrapped one arm low over his belly. With the other, he reached out for some bottles. They were set
in the floor, their silver lids protruding upwards, engraved to make them easy to grip. Each one had been filled, according to Bombur, with soaps that were more precious than gold. It was a wicked indulgence, but he was more than happy to lavish such rarities on the hobbit who had chosen to remain at his side.

He managed to tip a bit out into the cup of his palm. A fresh, woody scent bloomed, like a forest after the rain, and he felt Bilbo perk up in his embrace.

‘What’s that?’ Bilbo craned his neck, trying to get a better look at the amber liquid. His backside pressed against Thorin as he wriggled, and the banked embers of his arousal flared anew, leaving him breathless.

‘It comes from the far north,’ he rasped, clearing his throat. ‘The trees there produce a fragrant sap that the people blend with crushed soap. Just don’t let it get into your eyes.’

Tilting his hand, he watched the elixir drip onto the crown of Bilbo’s head, mixing with the droplets of water that had collected like dew from the steam that surrounded them. Wetting both his hands, he began to smooth it through Bilbo’s hair, admiring the way gold and copper darkened to bronze amidst the snow-white froth.

He kept his thighs tense around Bilbo’s hips, holding him in place so that he would not drift away. In return, Bilbo reached down under the water, stroking down Thorin’s legs and over the hubs of his knees. Lithe fingers wandered down his shins, spanning the strength of his calves before beginning their journey in reverse.

Swallowing hard, Thorin trailed soap over the points of Bilbo’s ears, admiring the glimmer of the cuff Fili and Kili had given him as the bubbles hung like pearls from Bilbo’s skin. ‘It is good to have you home safe,’ he husked, making no effort to hide the emotion that threatened to choke him. ‘I cannot deny that I feared the worst.’

Bilbo’s fingers tightened over Thorin’s knees, squeezing his reassurance hard enough to leave bruises. Not that Thorin cared about such minor pains: they were testament to Bilbo’s presence once more at his side.

‘Erebor is my home.’ Bilbo swallowed, the water rippling as he turned to kneel between Thorin’s legs, his palms over Thorin’s heart and their gazes locked. ‘You are the one I’ve chosen. I will never let anyone take that from me without a fight.’

Burnished as he was, not only by the lights around them but by the courage that glowed beneath his skin, Thorin could well believe his every word. He had always known there was more to Bilbo than the Shire had ever seen. Now, in Thorin’s arms, he shone.

Reaching up, Thorin hovered his fingers over Bilbo’s jaw, where Carth’s brutality had left one of its most noticeable marks. ‘And what a fight it was.’ He leaned in, brushing his lips over Bilbo’s mouth, pouring as much as he dared into the kiss: his sorrow and relief, his gratitude and joy. His chest felt full to bursting with it all. He wanted to scoop Bilbo up and carry him to bed, to show him in no uncertain terms how he admired and loved him – every inch – from the whole and glorious to the broken and bruised.

Only a muffled cry of discomfort stopped him, and Thorin eased back, all apology as he pulled his hand away from Bilbo’s injured side. It was easy to get lost in the moment – to sink into a different kind of fervid madness – but he was better than that. There was far more to what he and Bilbo shared than their intimacies between the sheets. Every little thing, be it loving touches or captive glances across crowded rooms were just as meaningful and worthy of celebration.
'Stop looking at me like that,' Bilbo grumbled, scowling as Thorin feigned innocence. ‘I’m not made of glass. I won’t shatter!’

‘I think Oin would beg to differ.’ Thorin chuckled as Bilbo pulled a face, pressing a kiss to his nose. ‘I know you are strong, but I never wish to be the cause of your pain.’

Bilbo sighed, reaching over Thorin’s shoulder to pick up the bottle and pour a generous amount of the liquid into his own palms. ‘I’m not the only one who was hurt,’ he pointed out. ‘You might not be battered, like me, but Frár wounded you when he had Githin take me from the mountain.’ He massaged his fingers over Thorin’s scalp, spreading the soap before wetting his hands to form the lather and working it through the length of Thorin’s hair.

Nimble fingertips charted the hollows of Thorin’s skull, applying gentle pressure and pausing to deal with a couple of tangles as he worked. One arm had more range of motion than the other, Thorin noticed, and before long Bilbo dropped his left hand to his side, continuing with just his right as he ruffled his fingers through Thorin’s beard.

‘It galls me to know I couldn’t keep you safe. All our efforts, and still they managed to sneak you away.’

Bilbo sighed, cocking his head. He probably meant to look stern, but the white peaks of suds in his hair rather ruined the effect, and Thorin had to turn away to conceal his grin. ‘We did the best we could. You know Dwalin’s bemoaned his lack of soldiers from the start, and there’s far too much of this mountain that’s still in the dark. It’s full of places to hide. All that will change when you restore it.’

‘We,’ Thorin corrected, catching Bilbo’s arm and pressing a kiss to the vulnerable underside of his wrist. ‘We’ll restore it, unless you’ve changed your mind?’

Bilbo pressed his forehead to Thorin’s in a solemn vow. ‘Definitely not. You’re stuck with me.’

‘Thank Mahal for that.’ Thorin kissed him again, laughing as soap bubbles dripped from his beard and got caught between the cinch of their bodies. His gaze followed the white trail where it curved over the pink bud of Bilbo’s nipple and slithered downwards, snow-bright against the streaks of dirt that still marred his golden skin.

‘Here, let me,’ he urged, reaching for a second vial and pulling off the stopper. The scent of a wild-meadow, earthy yet fresh, wisped through the air as he lathered the thicker substance in his hands. ‘It’s made especially to be used in baths. It doesn’t disappear as soon as it gets wet.’

To prove his point, he began to spread it over Bilbo’s body, tracing his outline with slick palms. Even when he dipped beneath the water, counting down the half-hidden notches of Bilbo’s spine, the soap did not vanish, leaving him free to smooth away every last trace of sweat and dirt.

‘I could get used to this,’ Bilbo murmured, humming in pleasure as Thorin cupped the swell of his backside and gave a brief, lustful squeeze. ‘Though I can bathe myself, you know.’

‘I know,’ Thorin grinned. ‘but I doubt you would find as much satisfaction in it as I do.’ He arched his hips to prove his point, his hard length nesting in the crease of Bilbo’s thigh.

‘I’m afraid “satisfaction” might be the last thing you get tonight.’ An apology tinged Bilbo’s smile, which only grew when Thorin shook his head, dismissing his concerns. ‘I know you said you didn’t mind, but…’

‘There is a different kind of pleasure to be found in this,’ Thorin promised. ‘Taking care of you is its
own reward.’ He shifted his weight, guiding Bilbo’s body as he changed their position. ‘I need you to lie down so I can rinse your hair. Fear not, I won’t let you drift.’

He would not have been surprised if Bilbo protested, but either his hobbit was too tired or his faith in Thorin too absolute. He leaned back in the warm embrace of the water, lax and trusting as Thorin washed the foam from his hair and rinsed it from his skin, leaving Bilbo clean and pink in its wake.

‘What about you?’ Bilbo asked, his words unhurried as he relished the attention. ‘I could –’ He reached a hand towards the bottle of soap, but Thorin beat him to it, kissing his fingertips before helping Bilbo sit up.

‘Another time,’ he promised, knowing all too well that if Bilbo put his hands on him now, he would end up far from relaxed. Better that he wash his own body tonight, so he could get his hobbit into bed for some more well-deserved rest. ‘Stay here. I’ll be right back.’

Only when he was sure that Bilbo was secure on the ledge did he strike out for the middle of the bath. The bottom of the pool fell away, leaving him treading water amidst the warm currents. He ducked under the surface, banishing soap from his hair and body alike before emerging to return to Bilbo’s side.

‘Do we have to get out?’ Bilbo asked, clearly not relishing the idea of the cool air that would await them in the rooms beyond their humid sanctuary.

‘I think we must, before you fall asleep.’ He hid a smile at Bilbo’s grumbling as he helped him up, guiding him free from the water’s embrace and back onto solid ground. A pile of towels waited on a nearby bench, and Thorin flared one over Bilbo’s shoulders, letting it hide his body from sight and trapping him in its warm confines.

It took no time at all to banish the droplets from his own skin, but his hair was another matter. Blotting away the worst of it, he wrapped the towel around his waist and turned to attend to his hobbit. It seemed a good omen that Bilbo had dried himself, dabbing at his scrapes and bruises. Only the hair on his head and his feet remained wet, and the look he cast Thorin brimmed with pity.

‘It’s going to take all night for that lot to dry,’ he said, gesturing to where slick strands fell down his back and stuck to his shoulders. ‘It can’t be comfortable.’

‘My people are nothing if not ingenious,’ Thorin answered, unashamed of his boast as he beckoned Bilbo towards a metal hopper in the wall. Cloth wrapped around its handle to protect the user’s skin from the heat, and Thorin eased it open, filling the room with the roaring rush of air.

Bilbo’s baffled wonder was a sight to behold. He reached out, testing the temperature of the updraft before peering into the maw of the stone pipe. The strength of the wind was enough to lift his hair back from his face, ruffling through his curls. ‘It comes from the forges?’ he asked, his mind sharp despite the trials of the day. ‘How is there no smoke?’

‘The air never touches the flames, nor the fumes that come from them. The pipes run next to the fires. Cold air is drawn into the mountain from outside and heated, where it rushes through our halls, warming stone and water alike. It moves fast as it goes up. By the time it gets to this level it’s nearing the peak and cool enough not to burn.’

Thorin shifted so that Bilbo could stand next to him, allowing the clever invention to do its job. Minutes passed, and with each one the room grew hotter. The blast of baked air would not be enough to dry Thorin’s hair entirely, but it chased off the worst of the lingering damp.
When he was sure Bilbo was finished, Thorin shut the hopper. The metal clanged, echoing around them as he padded back to the pool’s edge, scooping up the beads from their resting place in the stone divot.

‘Are you ready?’ he asked.

Bilbo pulled a face, no doubt thinking of how cold their chambers would be after the paradise of their bath. ‘I suppose I have no choice,’ he grumbled, bracing his shoulders and reaching for the door.

Frigid air rushed over the threshold, breaking Thorin’s skin into a rash of gooseflesh and bringing his bare nipples to pointed attention. Bilbo winced at the abrupt temperature change and all but dashed to the fireside, only just managing not to set the edges of the towel aflame as he stood as close as he could get to the hearth.

Quickly, Thorin took stock. Heating pans rested between the sheets, warming the fabric. Clean clothes lay waiting for them, and a pot of tea steamed on the bedside table. Someone had even provided a fresh bandage for Bilbo’s chest.

Heading towards the bed, he set the beads on the side table and piled up the pillows, ignoring the delicate tremor of his own shivers. Retrieving the bandage, he turned back to Bilbo. ‘We need to wrap your ribs again,’ he explained, trying not to laugh at Bilbo’s pout or the way he clutched at the towel like a shield. ‘Once that’s done, you can get straight under the furs and have a nice drink to warm your bones.’

He could see Bilbo assessing his chances of getting Thorin to forget about the bandage and deciding he had little hope. Oin was a force to be reckoned with, and not even the king dared to cross him.

At last, he ducked his head, letting the towel fall to his waist and revealing the extent of the damage. Thorin had been doing his best not to dwell on the injury, but there was no denying it in the aureate light of the flames. Oin’s poultices had brought out the colour in full force. It spread over Bilbo’s side like spilt ink, staining his skin in furious hues.

Biting his tongue against a new tirade of invective against Frár and Carth, Thorin approached, holding the end of the bandage in place while he unrolled it around Bilbo’s torso. ‘Too tight?’ he asked, pausing halfway and watching Bilbo shake his head. ‘Good. Oin doesn’t want you to wear it for long, but a few more days should help it heal.’

He tied off the end, tucking it into the swathes of white cloth before gesturing towards the bed. Bilbo needed no further urging. If he didn’t ache so much, Thorin had no doubt he would have thrown himself at the mattress, eager for its comfort. As it was, he eased himself down, lying back against the mound of pillows with a groan of relief. His towel pooled on the floor where he had abandoned it, and Thorin scooped it up, spreading it over the chair before pouring out some tea.

‘Here, drink this. It’ll help warm you and ease your aches.’ He pressed the mug into Bilbo’s palms before slipping in next to him. The bed cocooned his body, a soft haven after what felt like an endless day. Truth be told, he was just as tired as Bilbo, running on battle nerves and little else. They had both earned a good night’s rest, and from the looks of it, Bilbo was already halfway there. His eyelids drooped, and before long, Thorin had to rescue the half-full cup from his grasp.

‘Sleep,’ he urged, kissing Bilbo’s brow and smiling at his mumble of protest. Small hands reached out for him, one curving around his hip and the other resting over his heart. His nose pressed against Thorin’s collarbone, and the rush of each breath drifted over his skin. Within minutes, his own body grew heavy, cloaked in the irresistible weight of slumber. Comforted by Bilbo’s presence, Thorin
was soon lost to the welcoming tide of his dreams.

Sometime later, soft sensation stirred him back to wakefulness, teasing aside the veils of oblivion. A cautious finger traced the lines of his tattoos and explored the whorls of hair on his chest, bringing his body to shimmering life. He hummed, the sound catching in his throat like the purr of a giant cat as he opened his eyes.

Warm twilight suffused their chamber, given shape by the low burning lamps and the embers that glowed in the hearth. He had not drawn the hangings around the bed when he tumbled into Bilbo’s arms after their bath. It made it possible to see the first silver glow of dawn touching the garden outside, enriching every leaf and stone.

Yet even that sight was not as beautiful as the one that lay at his side. Bilbo’s hair was a riot of curls, turned wild by sleep. They coiled across the pillows, their short length trailing like fine filigree on the cloth. His gaze, clouded by weariness and strain the previous day, was now bright and alert, spilling over with the strength of his character.

Only the bruises and scabs from his injuries gave their testament, and even they seemed to pale in comparison to the power of Bilbo’s presence. Gone was the hobbit muted by pain and exhaustion. Seeing Bilbo like this made Thorin’s heart lift in his chest, and his hands ache with the need to touch – to make sure this vision was real and not merely another dream.

‘Are you all right?’ Thorin whispered, trailing a finger across Bilbo’s cheekbone. ‘Are you in pain?’

‘No.’ Bilbo’s hand wandered downwards, idle explorations taking on a new and tempting purpose as he traced the dark line of hair that charted a course down Thorin’s belly. ‘No, I’m fine. I didn’t mean to wake you.’

Thorin smiled, knowing that he spoke the truth. It was deeply satisfying to realise that the hobbit he loved had been eager to reach out, to map his body and the lines that marked it as he watched Thorin sleep.

‘I’m unlikely to doze off again if you keep going,’ he warned, listening to the susurrus of the furs as Bilbo’s hand slipped even lower, shielded from sight as he circled Thorin’s navel before dipping down.

His hips twitched, pushing his awakening arousal into Bilbo’s grip. The gentle pressure was exquisite torment – a deliberate tease – and Thorin bit his lip as sparks of pleasure glittered in his veins. Before long, he was hard and heavy, tender with his first waking and sensitive to every benediction of Bilbo’s fingertips.

Reaching out, he pulled Bilbo closer, having just enough forethought to consider his hobbit’s hurting ribs as he tucked Bilbo against his side. Only the chafe of the bandage interrupted the seam of skin that joined them, and Thorin’s toes curled as he revelled in the softness and strength of Bilbo’s frame: the staunch columns of his bones and the yield of his flesh.

Against his thigh, Thorin could feel the steady surge of Bilbo’s thickening erection. Pressed tight as they were, it soon became an insistent presence, one that made Thorin’s body hum and his mouth water. More than anything, he wanted to reach down between them and stroke Bilbo to life – to share in the pleasure he so eagerly bestowed.

‘You are wicked,’ he growled, admiring the gleam of power and mischief in Bilbo’s gaze before he blessed that smiling mouth with a messy kiss. The sweet swell of Bilbo’s lips slanted across his own, and Thorin dipped in to taste him, revelling in the hot slick of his tongue.
Bilbo’s hand stuttered over him, sending a new thrill down Thorin’s thighs. That slow, sensual rhythm began to fall apart, Bilbo’s grip loosening as he lost himself in the tide of Thorin’s adoring kiss. One blended into another, their shared breaths turning thin until, at last, Thorin had to pull back.

The wings of Bilbo’s lashes swept apart, revealing eyes darkened to tempestuous greys. His gasps whispered through parted lips, adding to the colour that ripened his cheeks. Resting his head on Thorin’s shoulder, he huffed a laugh, his tongue darting out to lap at the first salty sheen of sweat on Thorin’s neck. ‘I can stop if you want?’

Disapproval rumbled like thunder in Thorin’s chest, and he moved without thinking, flipping Bilbo onto his back and straddling his hips, the better to enjoy the sight of him.

Bilbo’s pleasure cracked through with pain, his face creasing as a choked cry clogged his throat. Thorin scrambled away, kneeling between Bilbo’s spread legs as his hands fluttered uselessly over the strapping. Apologies fell from his lips, a chaotic jumble of Westron and Khuzdul that only halted when Bilbo reached for his hand.

‘It’s not your fault,’ he promised. ‘Would you believe I forgot it was a problem?’

Thorin shook his head, cuffing his fingers through his hair and sitting back on his heels. ‘Do you need Oin?’

‘No!’ Bilbo’s cheeks darkened with mortification at the idea. ‘Absolutely not.’ He let out a rough breath, wetting his lips and touching an experimental hand to his side. ‘It’s not that bad. Just tender is all.’ He gave Thorin a beseeching look. ‘Can’t you kiss it better?’

Thorin bowed his head, closing his eyes as relief and disbelief warred for supremacy. He should have known that, even in this, Bilbo would be stubborn about getting what he wanted. His good judgement told him they should stop now, before any true harm was done, but the pull of temptation was too great. Saying no to Bilbo, it seemed, was no longer in his power.

This time, he was more careful, bracing his weight on his elbows and keeping his chest well away from Bilbo’s hurts. Their passion had ebbed, doused by the icy flash of pain and guilt. Still, while the torrid temptation may no longer brim in Thorin’s veins, he soon realised there was a slower pleasure to be found. Not in the eager, brutal rut of bodies, but the slow stroke of palms and tantalising glimpses of heat.

Bilbo’s hands moved over Thorin’s arms and shoulders, tracing the bulge of his muscles before running his fingers up through the fall of his hair. He did not pull, instead letting the tresses sift through his grasp before he cupped Thorin’s nape, guiding him down for a shallow, sultry kiss.

This time, Thorin did not lose himself in base desire. Knowledge that every movement could bring Bilbo pain kept him still, present and focussed on the places their bodies touched.

He had never known such devotion, Thorin realised, his head buzzing and his lips a-throb with the slide of Bilbo’s mouth and tongue against his own. He was not lost in a haze, but exquisitely aware of the hobbit under him and the sensations that shimmered beneath his own skin: not the rage of the forge, but the slow build of a storm within him. He was at Bilbo’s command – too busy holding himself away from Bilbo’s injuries to reciprocate with more than hissing breaths and worshipful sighs.

‘I don’t want to hurt you,’ he husked, shivering as Bilbo trailed his blunt nails as far down Thorin’s back as he could reach.
‘Then don’t.’ Bilbo closed his eyes, his smile beatific as he reached up for Thorin’s hair, guiding his movements with soft tweaks and tugs. Yet it was not another kiss he sought. That much was obvious when he urged Thorin to move down the bed.

Chuckling, he obliged, shuffling away from his bandage wrapped ribs until he lay on the mattress between Bilbo’s spread legs, his head resting on his belly and his thumbs pressed to the sharp peaks of his hips.

‘All right?’ Bilbo asked, giggling as Thorin replied without words, forging a chain of kisses across his waist. He resisted the temptation to sink his teeth into Bilbo’s stomach, instead admiring its shape with the skim of fingertips and the rasp of his beard. Even then, he had to be careful. Perfect pressure was necessary to prevent tickling. He did not think Bilbo’s ribs would appreciate the laughter that might ensue.

Yet there was power to be found, both in Bilbo’s surrender and in Thorin’s painful control. He may be supplicant to Bilbo’s desires – giving the pleasure, rather than receiving it – but he was in command of what Bilbo felt. He could bestow as much stimulation as he wished, such was Bilbo’s trust in him.

Against his collarbone, he could feel the soft curl of Bilbo’s penis, unassuming once more thanks to the sharp shock of pain he had suffered a short while ago. The dark gold hair around its base tickled, and hints of the soap’s scent lingered from their bath, made lush by the heat of Bilbo’s body.

With a flicker, he traced the tip of his tongue over the halo of Bilbo’s navel, reveling in the glide of his soft skin and the vulnerability of Bilbo’s exposure. Most dwarves of Thorin’s acquaintance would never give themselves so freely, too well-trained as warriors to offer their unlimited trust. Yet Bilbo did not even hesitate.

The fingers in Thorin’s hair lay idle, doing nothing to restrain him as he skimmed lower, blessing teasing kisses down towards the vee of Bilbo’s thighs. A faint moan became a growl as Thorin chuckled against him. His mirth buzzed in his chest, and he felt the pulse of Bilbo’s stirring arousal.

‘Thorin…’ A whine caught in Bilbo’s throat, choking to silence as he switched sides, nuzzling through the dark curls between Bilbo’s legs. His tongue darted out, lapping at the sensitive plane of Bilbo’s inner thigh. Painting a wet stripe, he blew against it, letting the chill sharpen the eager thrum of Bilbo’s body.

Easing back, he admired his handiwork. Bilbo did not lack imagination; perhaps that was why his tender teasing had such an effect. Bilbo’s flesh had forgotten its pain. Arousal flourished wherever Thorin looked, from the taut buds of his nipples to the full pout of his lips. Bilbo’s erection curved, hard and demanding where it lay against his belly, and Thorin smirked as it twitched, keen to be touched.

Well, who was he to deny his hobbit?

‘Oh – yes!’ Bilbo’s fingers tangled in the furs as Thorin took him in hand, stroking up the stout length before circling the ruddy head. He loved the silken feel of Bilbo here, the way the thin veil of skin shifted over such strength. Even better were the noises Bilbo made. Not rapturous cries of passion – all performance – but hums and whispers of enthusiasm, lazy and decadent.

Through their time together, from friends to lovers, Thorin had learnt much about what Bilbo liked. He knew what to say to spark a smile, and he knew the secret places that would make stars explode behind Bilbo’s eyes. To Thorin, the study of Bilbo’s pleasure was a craft he would gladly take a lifetime to master, and now he put his skills to good use.
It began with hands: fingertips and the broad blades of his palms. They wandered for the joy of it, stroking Bilbo’s length and cupping the heft of his balls beneath, tracing their curve and the crease behind. The swell of Bilbo’s buttocks had only ripened as he regained the weight he had lost through the harsh winter. Sparse muscle and bony edges filled out into luscious depths that Thorin could grip tight, holding Bilbo still as he lowered his mouth to taste his prize.

Bilbo’s keening was music to his ears, blasphemous and obscene. It struck sparks along Thorin’s veins, threatening to drive the licking flames of his desire up to an unstoppable peak. His own erection lay trapped under his body, pressed into the tickling depth of the furs. However, it was Bilbo’s that had his full attention: a hot brand across his tongue as he lapped up its length before sinking down as deep as he could.

His hands gripped Bilbo’s hips, holding him steady as he drew off and trailed open-mouthed kisses along Bilbo’s glistening shaft. He did not perform such an act because he enjoyed the taste, but because he loved watching Bilbo shiver and sigh, losing himself to an erotic tide that was entirely of Thorin’s making. He could either let the waters rise, slow and tempting, or bring a wave of release crashing down on Bilbo’s head.

Now, he chose the former path, devoting himself to his adorations and allowing Bilbo’s whispered praises to serenade him. At his sides, Bilbo’s thighs tightened, and one foot hooked over Thorin’s waist, exposing him further to the stroke of Thorin’s tongue and the wicked exploration of his fingers.

Sweat glossed Bilbo’s chest. One hand found its way back into Thorin’s hair, guiding his bobbing head, as if he were afraid that Thorin would pull back and leave him wanting. Muscles clenched beneath Thorin’s touch, but the storm of ecstasy had not yet broken.

‘Wait!’ Bilbo gasped, his toes flexing as Thorin swirled his tongue, tasting salt and musk. ‘Wait, stop!’

‘Stop?’ Thorin rasped, unable to keep the disbelief from his voice. He would do as he was asked, of course, but Bilbo had never called a halt to their passions before. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘No, no.’ Bilbo reached out a hand, his eyes slate dark. ‘You’re too far away, and I’ve barely had a chance to touch you. I want you up here.’ He grinned as Thorin obliged, accepting his kiss without hesitation before shaking his head. ‘Actually, I meant a different part of you than your mouth.’

His fingers wrapped around Thorin’s girth, making black spots waltz in front of his eyes as sensation flared. His wanting, ignored in favour of Bilbo’s pleasure, had reached an almost unbearable ache. His shaft jumped in Bilbo’s hand, greedy for attention, and a purr of satisfaction rolled in Bilbo’s throat as a white bead of fluid welled up at its tip.

‘Lie down on your side?’ Bilbo asked. ‘Head towards my feet?’

Thorin grinned, reading Bilbo’s intention with ease. He was not some dwarfling innocent to the many ways of the bedchamber, but this was not something he or Bilbo had done together before. Now, given the limitations of Bilbo’s injuries, it made perfect sense. This way, they could both find their satisfaction without jostling his hurts.

He did as he was asked, positioning himself so that Bilbo could lie on his good side, his face level with Thorin’s erection and his eyes agleam with admiration. He did not waste any time exploring from this new angle, laving his tongue up the underside before the faintest scrape of teeth followed.

The contrast of sensation – hot and wet, then sharp and hard – sent a jolt of power rushing through
Thorin’s bones, distracting him before he could return the favour and take Bilbo back in his mouth. His head fell to Bilbo’s thigh, his body curving to minimise the effects of their height difference as he luxuriated in Bilbo’s focus.

Much like he had done before, Bilbo seemed to bend himself to the task of wringing moans and cries from Thorin’s lips, tempting him into muffled rhapsodies. Sometimes it was little more than a lazy pressure moving up and down him, but others the strength would grow, honing itself to the point where Thorin was almost overwhelmed.

He swore in Khuzdul, his curse as much a prayer as anything else. His entire body glowed with internal heat, turned to molten need by Bilbo’s touch. It was only his delicious teasing – approaching the brink but never quite going over it – that gave Thorin the presence of mind to exact his revenge.

Nipping at Bilbo’s thigh, he smirked as the muscles jumped. Those legs parted, one knee cocked to give Thorin better access to the pulsing, hard shaft awaiting his attentions. Wrapping the base in his grasp, he guided the head over his lips, feeling the drag of humid skin and the slide of salt and musk. This was Bilbo at his most primitive, reduced to sparks of flavour on Thorin’s tongue as he opened his mouth and sank down.

A hum vibrated around Thorin’s length, resonating up through his core. Bilbo began to move in earnest, the glide of his hand and the swirl of his tongue quickening as he devoted himself to chasing Thorin’s release.

He led the dance, and Thorin followed, a willing partner as he mirrored some of Bilbo’s tricks while adding a few of his own. He knew a quick flick here made Bilbo’s hips stutter, or that a long, slow drag of his lips would leave him breathless and cursing, his head lolling back in reckless abandon.

With each minute, they worshipped one another, climbing higher as they prepared to take the plunge. Heat sparked, the tempest of desire building until they were panting and clumsy in its approach. Tension pooled in Thorin’s hips as he felt Bilbo stiffen, hovering at the precipice.

Softly, he slipped a finger back and stroked, closing his eyes in triumph as Bilbo pulsed against his tongue and came with a breathless cry. The sound was music to Thorin’s ears; the sharp taste of Bilbo’s release a worthwhile price to see his hobbit spend himself, sweat-slick and trembling, in Thorin’s mouth.

Bilbo’s ragged breaths whispered over him, cool against his forge-hot length. One arm was slung over his hip, the fingers lax against the curve of his backside as Bilbo revelled in his ecstasy.

‘Valar bless. I needed that,’ he wheezed at last, pressing a smiling kiss to Thorin’s skin. ‘And so do you, from the looks of it.’

A strangled moan was the only answer he could manage as Bilbo curled his tongue around him, following the wet warmth with the perfect pressure of his lips. No scrape of teeth touched him now. No doubt Bilbo realised how close he was, especially judging by how his warm fingers cupped Thorin’s sac, feeling how his balls were pulled up tight and full against him.

The time for teasing had passed, and Thorin moaned nonsense as Bilbo’s hand and mouth worked in glorious counterpoint, building the flames until he could bear it no more.

Release found him like a lightning strike, quick and brutal. His fingers spasmed in the furs, clenching into fists as he threw back his head. A rushing tide of ecstasy consumed him, washing away all trace of lingering stress and tension in its flood. Muscles uncoiled, falling torpid as his mind went gloriously still, lost to everything but the heady fulfilment of his desire.
Reality encroached in increments, breaking upon him like the dawn, all soft hues and tranquillity. The thrum of his heart began to slow, and his panting breaths eased to whispers. The air of the room cooled the sweat that glossed his skin, and his body felt like little more than ash, left to float apart after the fires had fled.

‘Are you all right?’ he croaked, his lips and tongue clumsy as he tried to remember if he had bucked his hips during his climax. It occurred to him, too late now, that Bilbo’s broken ribs would stop him from holding Thorin down, and the last thing he wanted was to cause Bilbo any more harm.

Peeling open his eyes, he glanced up the bed to where Bilbo lay, his head propped on Thorin’s hip and his gaze sparkling with satisfaction. He looked like the cat who got the cream as he licked his lips and grinned, his bashful blush only adding to his charm.

‘I’m better than all right,’ he promised, reaching for one of the furs and arranging it over the twist of their bodies to shield them from the chill. It felt strange to lie like this, top-to-tail and curled towards each other like puppies in a basket, but Thorin was too content to move.

Now, with the warmth of the blankets around him and Bilbo’s heat at his side, sleep tempted his spent body. The slow wander of their hands continued, soothing rather than arousing as whispered adorations nestled in Thorin’s ears. Soon enough, even those ebbed, giving way to steady breaths as a blissful, sated slumber claimed them both.

He resurfaced alone in their bed, resting upon an altar of pleasure. The pillows were askew, and half the covers had fallen to a tangled knot on the floor. One still lay over him, tucked prim and proper around his frame, but of Bilbo there was no sign.

A spark of panic glowed in Thorin’s chest, but it faded to nothing when he propped himself up and noticed Bilbo standing by the doors to the garden. A pale fur wrapped his body, but his mind seemed lost in thought.

The glass panes stood open, letting the harsh bite of the nascent day coil into the room. The silver of dawn had grown to rich gold as the sun showed its face over the horizon, staining a crystal blue sky with its luxurious tones. Winter may be on its way out, but spring had not yet staked its claim upon the land, and even from where he lay, Thorin could see frost sparkling like diamonds on flagstones and tree boughs alike. Yet Bilbo seemed not to notice, too enthralled by whatever had captured his attention.

Sitting up, Thorin shivered, dragging the remaining bedding around himself like a cloak before shuffling to stand behind his lover. Clenching his teeth, he opened up his blanket, pulling Bilbo in to share in its circle and keep them both warm. ‘I didn’t feel you get up. How long have you been here?’

‘Not long.’ Bilbo leaned back against him. ‘A few minutes, that’s all.’

Thorin shifted his toes, running them through the golden hair on the top of Bilbo’s feet and feeling the cold seeping in to the skin beneath. He doubted that Bilbo had deliberately lied, but he suspected his hobbit had been lost in thought for longer than he realised.

‘What are you thinking about?’ He rested his chin on the crown of Bilbo’s head, pressing an idle kiss to his temple.

‘Home.’

Thorin tensed, his heart lunging high in his throat. Had Bilbo changed his mind about their betrothal?
Had he decided he didn’t want to stay after all? Did the kindly West still call to him, urging him to make the long journey back to where he was born?

His fear must have telegraphed itself to Bilbo, racing across wherever their skin touched, because he lifted his hand beneath the blanket, gripping Thorin’s wrist and speaking with tender certainty. ‘I’m not talking about the Shire. I meant here: Erebor, Dale, all of it.’ He drew a deep breath, looking out over the garden as the burgeoning day chased off the shadows. ‘I keep wondering what it will be like, in one year, or five, or twenty…. Trying to imagine how different it might be.’

Thorin smothered a sigh of relief, bending his head to drop a kiss on Bilbo’s shoulder. He stepped away, turning towards the bedside table and picking up a pair of glistening objects from its surface. The beads sparkled in his hand, catching the new light of the day: the others that would normally decorate his and Bilbo’s hair could wait. Right now, these were the only two that mattered.

‘It will be all that you want it to be,’ he promised, wrapping his arms around Bilbo’s body and showing him the treasures that glittered in his palm. ‘That is, if you still wish for me to be your betrothed?’

Bilbo’s breath caught, arrested by the sight before him. Another bead joined the one he had made, and his reaction allayed all of Thorin’s fears. Intricate amber threads ran through the emerald, a twist of fate in the gem’s creation. Softer metal encased it in the traditional pattern of betrothal, silver and gold twisting together in perfect harmony.

Part of him regretted that he could not make a bead of Bilbo’s own. However, even in this, there were politics to consider. As a hobbit and an outsider, Bilbo needed items to tie him into the line of Durin, and so Thorin had spared a moment while he slept in Oin’s care to investigate the treasury.

‘This belonged to a dwarf called Pira. She was the Queen of Thrain the first, founder of Erebor.’ He swallowed, hoping Bilbo would understand as he continued to explain. ‘Thiers was the last successful, prosperous rule of the Lonely Mountain, untouched by strife or madness. The kingdom flourished under their care.’

‘It will do the same under yours,’ Bilbo said. ‘I’m sure of it.’

‘No, you don’t understand.’ Thorin closed his eyes, pressing on before his courage could falter.
What he was asking form Bilbo was more than just a marriage, but would it be a step too far?
‘Normally, someone marrying the king becomes a consort: a royal, yes, and a source of support, but they have no real power. Pira and Thrain were equal in all things. They both ruled Erebor, neither one more important than the other. That is what I would like for us.’

Bilbo eased himself from Thorin’s embrace and turned to face him. His lips parted, but no words shaped the air. Stunned speechless, only the gleam of hope in his eyes told Thorin he was not outright rejecting his offer.

‘I – Are you –’ Bilbo cleared his throat, his brow pleated. ‘Are you sure that’s what you want? I’m not even a dwarf, Thorin, nor any kind of royalty. Won’t people complain?’

‘No one who knows your courage and strength could ever question your ability. Erebor needs more than the kings of old; more than I can offer. It needs new ideas and a different way of thinking if it is to thrive as it once did.’ He looked down at the treasures in his hand, gleaming with all the promise of that future. ‘My rule alone will not be enough, and so I ask only this: share it with me.’

There were some, greedy for power and riches, who would jump at the chance. Thorin could remember suitors in his youth who would have killed scores to be offered so much, but that was
what made Bilbo different. He understood the strain of rule, had seen it first hand, and still he did not shy away.

Bilbo looked over his shoulder, gazing through the open doors as sunlight spilt across the realm. Thorin wondered what he saw in the harsh lines of its ridges and smooth plateaus, its towering peaks and sheltered valleys. However, Bilbo’s thoughts were his own, and he kept them so as he turned back once more.

Reaching out his right hand, he placed it over the beads, trapping them within the press of their palms. Warm from the heat of Thorin’s skin, they seemed to pulse between them: silent witnesses to Bilbo’s next words.

‘I will.’

Thorin’s heart soared as he bent his head, kissing Bilbo hard. He poured all of himself into their meeting, feeling more free and alive than he thought possible.

For too long, he had been like the kingdom that was his birthright, ruined by strife. His battered soul had longed to crumble beneath the strain, and his temper had turned dark under the storm of his misfortunes. Back when he had set out for Erebor, he had known it would probably be his final act in this world. Yet, thanks to Bilbo, nothing could be further from the truth. The future lay before them and now, at last, they could seize it in both hands.

Their adventure – across the wide horizons of Middle Earth, through perils and tragedy, through the harshness of winter to the dawn of spring – had come to an end. It was time to set off on a new journey, one that would rebuild the land and raise Erebor from the ashes of the dragon’s wrath.

And they would walk that road together.
Bilbo’s breath steamed in the air, escaping his lips in a cloud of white as he watched the morning light spill across the land. The hard balustrade of the garden’s edge pressed against his elbows, the stone cold through the layers of his clothes. The cloak around his shoulders kept the threat of winter at bay, the wolf’s pelt tickling his chin as he stared out over the kingdom.

His kingdom.

The mad flutter of his heart stirred anew, and he rested a hand over his belly, trying to still the thrashing of his nerves. Durin’s Day had dawned, and once again, his life was about to change. A year ago today, he and the Company had found the hidden door into the Lonely Mountain. He had helped Thorin reclaim his home, and by the time the sun set, he would be ruling at his side, married and crowned.

Bilbo swallowed, smiling ruefully at his own anxieties. In reality, the ceremony would make little difference. He had shared Thorin’s life and the royal bed for months. News of their betrothal met with rapturous celebration, not just from their friends but from all who made the mountain their home. Bilbo was their consort whether he wore a crown or not, and they honoured him as such, respecting his opinion and obeying his rare commands without question.

Yet despite all that, today would change his life. His and Thorin’s wedding would go down in the history books. It seemed everyone, within the Lonely Mountain and beyond, saw this moment as the start of a new era. They had received letters from places Bilbo had never heard of throughout their betrothal, offering heartfelt and enthusiastic congratulations. Every dwarf lord from west to east, north to south, had made their approval clear with extravagant gifts and powerful alliances.

For Thorin, though, what mattered most were the kind, quiet words of pride from those who had known his father and grandfather – who had seen Erebor in its heyday and witnessed its ruin. Their faith in Thorin spoke volumes, and Bilbo saw their effect first hand. He remained passionate and dedicated, but the ragged edges of desperation that had fuelled their trek across Middle Earth had worn smooth, polished away with each passing day. He flourished, as if he were a missing piece that had found its rightful place, and Bilbo was glad to see it.

In his mind at least, Thorin deserved all the good things the world could offer, and he intended to spend the rest of his life making sure he got them.

With a sigh, he pulled the cloak tight around his shoulders, closing his eyes as the weak rays of the sun touched his face. Winter’s promise lay thick on the air, gifting hints of ice to his every breath. Once, Bilbo would have grumbled about harsh frosts and the health of his garden back at Bag End, but now he relished the fresh flavour of the chill on his tongue and the fingers of the breeze ruffling his hair.

Looking up, he admired the clear blue sky, so pale it looked like it might break. A good omen: at least according to Oin. Ravens wheeled overhead, flying from their roost. Some delivered messages; others stretched their wings, enjoying their freedom before duty called.

Their shadows ghosted across the land beneath, dancing over scrubby grass, sturdy heathers and, where the terrain allowed, farmers’ fields, ploughed and planted. It was hard to picture the war-torn
battleground of less than a year ago. It hovered in his memory like a far-off nightmare, half-
remembered, at least when he was awake.

Even in his dreams, the memories lost their detail, fading into impressions of colour and sound, all
underscored by a desperate, aching dread. No, so much had changed since the five armies amassed
in front of Erebor that, more often than not, it felt like a story – one that had already become
legendary.

It was not the only tale to his name – not any more. His efforts to prevent the siege was renowned.
Glory soon gilded the grains of truth from the gossip mill, and Bilbo had long ago given up
correcting people. To others, his capture and subsequent escape seemed heroic. Frankly, he would
rather they clung to that illusion than they realised the facts: luck, more than skill, had swung the
events of that night in his favour.

His lips curled in distaste as Carth’s vitriol hissed anew in the vault of his mind. He could almost feel
the presence of the dwarf at his back, and Bilbo clenched his hands over the balustrade, the wind-
worn granite biting into his palms. Phantom pain throbbed in his ribs, long-healed now, and a sickly
sweat prickled Bilbo’s hairline.

‘Stop it,’ he whispered, talking more to himself than the ghost of a dwarf who had died months ago.
‘He’s gone. They all are. Even Frár.’ Bilbo had not seen the disgraced king’s execution on
midsummer’s day. After everything, he couldn’t forget that Frár was more than just an enemy; to
some, he was kin. The moment of their grief was not something he wished to witness.

Shaking his head, Bilbo scrubbed his hand over his eyes. Normally, he would already be in Thorin’s
arms, soothed by the power of his embrace and the murmured words of understanding in his ear. He
never dismissed Bilbo’s distress – he understood better than most how the past could cast a long
shadow – but he knew how to guide Bilbo free from the mire of his own guilt, making his concerns
manageable once more.

Yet Thorin was not here. He had departed their chambers before the dawn, as was tradition on a
dwarven wedding day. The betrothed couple greeted the sun in solitude, taking their last, unmarried
awakening to contemplate the life that lay behind them and the future ahead.

Sucking in a deep breath, Bilbo reached for his composure, wiping his damp palms on his cloak
before lifting his chin. The recent past may haunt him still, but if that was the cost of standing at
Thorin’s side, then so be it. He was more than willing to pay the price, not because of a crown or a
throne, but because of the dwarf he loved. Never, in all his years back in the Shire, had he dreamed
that this could be part of his life. He had barely pictured himself going beyond Bree, let alone
halfway across Middle Earth.

He had not cared much for the treasure that awaited them at the end of their journey – gold and
jewels did not tempt him, even now. He had found something far more valuable.

Love and companionship for the rest of his days.

A touch on his shoulder made him turn, blinking in surprise to see Dis standing behind him. Her
smile rounded her downy cheeks as she pulled him into a hug, laughter bubbling in her throat.
‘Today’s the day!’ She stepped back, taking his hands in hers and looking him in the eye, raising one
elegant brow. ‘I hope you’re not getting cold feet?’

Bilbo grinned, the last shreds of his melancholy vanishing like mist beneath the force of her
friendship. Over the past few months, they had gone from tentative strangers to close confidantes. He
had always imagined Dis to be a stern dwarf, hardened by the tragedy in her life. He could not have
been more wrong. She was one of the most cheerful people he had ever met, and her endless happiness demanded reciprocity.

‘I’ll have you know, a hobbit’s feet never get cold,’ he replied, his voice prim for a moment before he shook his head. ‘I’m fine. Nervous, but more because I’m worried that I’ll fall flat on my face in front of everyone, or drop something important…’ A vast array of possible embarrassing mistakes welled up in his mind, and he bit his lip, pushing a curl of hair back from his brow. ‘It would help if I knew what to expect. Can’t you tell me anything?’

Balin dashed his faint hopes, his dark eyes sparkling as he sauntered out to meet them with Dori in tow. ‘You’ll find out soon enough, Master Baggins. We’d best start getting you ready.’

Bilbo sighed as Dis chuckled. They had come upon a stumbling block with the dwarvish custom of marriage. Bilbo wasn’t a dwarf by any stretch of the imagination, and outsiders were not supposed to know the specifics of the preparations. A difficult prospect, considering that he was a central figure to the whole thing.

Once he was married to Thorin, Bilbo would be considered a dwarf in all legalities and traditions, and would therefore be privy to the information he required. The problem was that, before that moment, even Thorin was reluctant to discuss what he should expect. For all he knew he was going to have to battle someone to the death for Thorin’s hand.

Knowing dwarves, it wouldn’t surprise him.

Dori bustled forward, no doubt reading Bilbo’s uncertainty as he ushered him back into the royal chambers and directed him towards the bathroom. ‘Fear not, Master Baggins. It is probably not so very different from a Shire wedding. Go and get clean. I’ve left some undergarments in there for you.’

‘Towels,’ Dis said, passing him a bundle with a sly wink that made Bilbo frown in confusion. ‘Don’t linger too long in there, though. You wouldn’t want to be late.’

With a sigh, Bilbo did as he was asked, slipping into the humid chamber as Dis, Dori and Balin bustled around, intent on their mysterious preparations. Somehow, he doubted today would be as straightforward as a Shire wedding. Back in Bag End, he would be dressing in his best clothes and finding flowers for his beloved. They’d make their promises before the whole of Hobbiton, and then celebrate well into the night. Now, he didn’t even know what he should wear! He would just have to trust in Dis and the others not to lead him astray.

Slipping off his cloak and the garments beneath, he stepped into the water, letting the heat lift away some of his concerns. He would drive himself mad if he kept fretting. Better to focus on this moment of drifting steam and peaceful solitude.

Reaching for the soaps set in the floor, he realised the bottles had been replaced. Oin’s familiar handwriting marked the labels, and as he lifted them from their niche, a slip of paper fluttered to the damp tiles. Bilbo rescued it before the ink could smudge and read over the few sparse sentences.

“From me and the Elf lass, to calm nerves and put you at your ease. Add three drops of the green and blue to the bathwater. Use the gold to wash. – Oin”

Bilbo smiled, touched by the gesture. He wondered if Thorin was bathing in a similar concoction, wherever he was.

Following the instructions, he swirled the oils through the water and inhaled, drawing the delicious
scent down into his lungs: spring flowers and soothing sunshine. His head filled with a pleasant buzz, and the last few knots in his neck melted away as he lay back and let the mysterious elixirs work their magic.

Languid, he reached for the remaining bottle, tipping some into his hand. It sparkled in the lamplight, and Bilbo peered closer, realising that the aureate colour was no coincidence. The soap was thicker than usual, and when he rubbed it on his skin it left a fine gloss of sparkling dust wherever it touched.

With a laugh, Bilbo shook his head, knowing that no matter how hard he rinsed, the saffron glow would mark his flesh for days. He didn’t know if this was some dwarven tradition or a ridiculous luxury from Oin, but he soon realised he had little choice; there was no other soap he could use. Lathering it through his hair, he ducked beneath the water, opening his eyes to watch the gold swirl around him: a cloud of stars.

Reluctantly, he breached the surface, Dis’ reminder not to dally foremost in his mind. Scooping up the towel on top of the pile, he blinked as another piece of paper wafted to the floor. The neat angles of the letters belonged to Ori, this time, and Bilbo picked it up, his smile spreading as he read.

“The custom is for family to attend the couple before a wedding. As you have no kin in Erebor, those of us who consider you our friend drew lots. The Lady Dis, Balin and Dori won the honour of helping you. In the eyes of dwarven custom, they are considered your kin from the moment the sun rises. The laws are old and clumsy, with plenty of loopholes if you know where to look. As only a dwarf can be kin to a dwarf, it is easy to argue that you became one of us at dawn this morning, when Dis, Balin and Dori took on their roles.

I thought you might find this useful. – Ori”

Bilbo laughed, the sound echoing like the peal of a bell as he admired Ori’s intelligence. He should have known that the young scribe wouldn’t rest until he found a way to bend the rules in Bilbo’s favour. With this in mind, he could ask the others about the wedding again, and see if Ori’s logic made them change their tune.

A flicker of guilt stirred in his belly as he considered circumventing old traditions. He didn’t mean to disrespect Thorin’s culture, but he did not think his beloved would take offense. If anything, Thorin had seemed frustrated over these past few weeks, unable to share in the significance of an event that had such deep meaning to the dwarven world.

Bilbo wanted to understand what it all meant. He wanted to comprehend as well as Thorin the symbolism of the ceremony that would join them for life, and he was unwilling to let fussy technicalities stand in his way.

Folding Ori’s note and hiding it back in the pile of towels, he dried himself off, wiping steam from a polished mirror and blinking at his reflection. He had half feared he would come out of the bath as bright and brazen as Erebor’s hoard, but the glittering specks kissed his skin like dew. He did not shine; he merely glowed, as if he had spent the first week of summer lounging in sunbeams.

Water darkened his hair, but by the time he had opened the hot air vent in the wall and stood in its breeze for a few minutes, he could see the occasional sparkle of precious metal where it caught in his short curls. Perhaps he should feel ridiculous, but instead Bilbo felt decadent as he admired his naked reflection.

Not that he could show up at the wedding dressed in nothing but a few flakes of gold. Thorin might not mind, but he suspected that it would cause a bit of a stir among their guests!
Reaching for the smalls Dori had provided, Bilbo covered his dignity before pulling a light tunic over his head and letting it fall to his hips. Plain it may be, but even here, Dori’s skill was in evidence. The cloth was neither too tight nor too loose, and it felt soft against his damp skin. There were no trousers to slip on, which left him feeling a tad embarrassed, but he doubted any of his dwarven “kin” would bat an eye.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed open the door, blinking in surprise at the change to the room. The mattress was a dais of smooth sheets and fluffed pillows, with clothes laying neatly across it. He craned his neck, trying to sneak a better look at the garments, but Dori intercepted him before he could get closer, handing him some trousers.

‘Put those on,’ he ordered, ‘then eat. I know your manners are impeccable, but don’t fret if you spill anything. What you’re wearing is easy to replace. Those are another matter.’ He jerked his thumb towards the bed, waiting for Bilbo to finish dressing before guiding him to the fireside, where a sumptuous feast sat ready.

Normally, Bilbo would have fallen upon it, enjoying sweet fruits and glazed pastries, but despite his relaxing bath, nerves still threatened to tie his stomach in knots and rob him of his appetite. Rather than taking a plate, he reached for the teapot and poured himself a cup before filling three more.

‘For my kin,’ he explained, catching Dis’ eye and gifting her a wink of his own as she took a sip to hide her smile. ‘That’s what you are, isn’t it? For today, I mean?’

Balin raised an eyebrow. ‘Aye, lad, that’s right. Mahal willing, we’ll be so forever after, by marriage at least.’

Bilbo smiled at the thought. Most of the Company were related to Thorin, tied by distant blood. It felt good to know he would be a part of that connection, an additional thread to bind them all together.

‘Well, surely it’s only logical that, if you’re my kin, then I am a dwarf, like you?’

He took a sip of his drink, focussing on the woody flavour as silence fell. Dis had turned away, facing the fire to hide the laughter in her eyes. Bilbo would bet a fortune she knew about Ori’s note. Perhaps she had even encouraged his research.

Balin watched Bilbo, exasperated and more than a little fond. ‘Do I sense the talents of young master Ori in your thinking?’ he asked, chuckling as Dori squawked in outrage at his brother’s actions.

‘I couldn’t say,’ Bilbo replied. ‘I’m right though, aren’t I? Surely that’s an argument people can accept?’ He shrugged, setting his cup down and leaning forward. ‘Balin, I need to know what will happen today. If I don’t understand the significance of the ceremony, then it loses all meaning. It might as well be nothing to me.’

Balin rubbed a hand over his brow, glancing towards Dori. Bilbo knew he made a compelling argument, even before surrender shadowed the faces of the two older dwarves. ‘All right. If I am honest, I am surprised no one has broken their promises and told you more before this.’

Dis pulled a face, looking so much like Kili that Bilbo laughed out loud. ‘I would have explained it all to him as soon as I saw the betrothal beads,’ she replied, before shrugging in apology. ‘Only politics stopped me. I didn’t want anyone to accuse Bilbo of disrespecting our customs or give them cause to disapprove.’

‘So,’ Bilbo swallowed, his anxiety creeping up his throat in a wave of shivering cold. The moment of truth was upon him. In his ignorance, he had been able to look at his upcoming marriage with little but distant curiosity. Now, only hours away, it was suddenly, alarmingly real. ‘Tell me what
happens.’

It was Dori who spoke, his voice soft and respectful. ‘There is nothing about today that passes without meaning. From your solitary contemplation to your bath this morning, the food that breaks your fast to the objects that adorn you.’

‘Marriage is special to all races, but dwarves hold it in particularly high regard,’ Balin added. ‘We believe that when Mahal makes us, he leaves a hole for us to fill with love as we see fit. Some do so with passion for their craft or fervour in their duty and are no less complete for it.’

‘While my brother is honourable and determined, he has never found anything to fill that void,’ Dis finished. ‘Not until he met you. That is why marriage is so special to us. We know it completes those who would otherwise return to Mahal’s halls without knowing what it is to be whole.’

Bilbo realised he was holding his breath, and he let it out in a steady stream. Few hobbits would take a union so seriously. Back in the Shire, it was about care and companionship, but he knew well enough that devotion rarely came into it. His own parents had been one of the few exceptions, and it was something Bilbo had always wanted for himself.

Thorin granted him that wish.

‘We’ll explain everything as we go,’ Dis promised, checking the plate she had prepared. ‘We serve your food this morning, composing dishes that we believe symbolise the important things in life together. Every marriage breakfast is different for this reason. You need only eat a small bite of each, if you’re too anxious for more.’

‘Though I suggest you manage what you can. It’s going to be a busy day,’ Dori added, offering him the meal he had prepared with a flourish. Bacon and sausage glistened on a bed of caramelised fruit. ‘Pork for strength, and apple for health. May you be blessed with both, for all your years to come.’

He knelt on one knee, the plate cupped in his hands and offered up to Bilbo. The first bite exploded with flavour on his tongue, the sweetness complimenting the herbed meat to perfection. With the initial, ceremonial taste out of the way, Dori bowed his head, placing the meal on the table for Bilbo to enjoy at his leisure before allowing Balin to take his place.

The berries in the bowl glistened like rubies and opals, treasures of the earth. A swirl of cream fanned outwards from the centre, buttery and mouth-watering. ‘May happiness and good fortune find and keep you,’ Balin said, his lined face creased with kindness. ‘And may all your labours bear the very best fruit.’

Bilbo nodded, touched by the blessing of his two close friends. Their words rang like vows, as if daring the universe to prove them wrong in their hopes.

Dis came last, a crisp pastry placed in solitary splendour in the centre of her plate. It smelled divine, rich and warm, and it took all Bilbo’s control to listen to what she said, rather than lunging for the morsel. ‘Honey for sweetness, and spice for excitement.’ She waggled her eyebrows, chuckling as Bilbo blushed. ‘Key components to any marriage.’

‘Thank you.’ Bilbo cleared his throat, trying to remove the rasp from his words. It felt like a bubble of joy had caught in his chest, teetering somewhere between laughter and tears. ‘All of you. Thank you.’ He gestured to the other plates that seemed to fill every available surface of the room. ‘Please eat, if it’s permitted.’

‘I’d like to see you try and stop me,’ Dis joked, standing up and smoothing out the deep purple skirts
she wore. Her mirth eased away some of the seriousness of the moment, and the four of them fell into easy conversation, speaking of everything from the guests that currently filled the kingdom to the chaos of Bombur’s kitchen.

‘He’s as happy as can be,’ Balin explained, catching Bilbo’s faint expression of concern. ‘It’s an honour for him to create the meal for such an event!’

‘I think we’re the ones who should be honoured,’ Dis answered, speaking with her mouth full. ‘He is a master chef. There’s not been a single dish I’ve had since I got here that didn’t satisfy.’ She licked her fingers, the beads in her beard chiming as she glanced towards the clock on the mantel.

‘We have plenty of time, don’t we?’ Bilbo asked. ‘The ceremony is not until midday.’

‘True,’ Dori answered, ‘but we cannot rush getting you ready. It’s –’ He gestured with his fingers, his eyes narrowed as he tried to explain. ‘It’s a chance to acknowledge that things will never quite be the same for you.’ He drew a breath, full of confidence as he clapped his hands together. ‘They will be better.’

‘The best years of your life,’ Dis added, rising to her feet and turning her back as she busied herself with a bottle from the ice bucket. Bilbo had not missed the touch of wistfulness to her words, and he ached for her. All of this must remind her of the husband she had loved and lost, and though the grief may have softened with time, he knew it could not have faded entirely. It made him appreciate her presence with him today all the more, and he ducked his head in thanks as she turned, sharing out glasses of silver, sparkling wine.

‘The last blessing,’ Dori explained, checking to make sure everyone had finished eating before he, Balin and Dis raised their drinks in unison. ‘May the words flow, sweet and honest, from your lips; may arguments be brief, and may you live merry and well.’

They all drank deeply, relishing the verdant taste. Bubbles danced on Bilbo’s tongue, tickling his mouth as a pleasant buzz began to swim in his veins. The conversation flowed with ease, full of mirth and happiness as it slid from the duties of their friends to the gossip of the guests.

‘Sani arrived this morning,’ Dis said, watching Bilbo over the lip of her second glass of wine. ‘I know you invited her, but I wasn’t sure if it was more out of politeness than a real wish to have her at your wedding.’

Bilbo shook his head, forcing back the memory of Frár that his daughter’s name brought with it. ‘I’m glad she came. I was worried she would be too busy with Rholnost to attend.’

‘She’s doing a fine job. There’s few who could make such progress with an impoverished kingdom as she has done.’ Balin twirled the stem of his glass between his fingers, watching the liquid dance within. ‘She’s a good lass, calm and strong, with plenty of gratitude to you and Thorin. She knows that, if not for you, she would have no home to call her own. The crimes of her father were hard on her, but she’s pulled through.’

‘Better than Thorin or I hoped.’ It was impossible not to take an interest in Sani and her kingdom, and day-by-day, the bitter associations of Frár began to fade. ‘Please make sure she feels welcome here.’

‘That’s already taken care of,’ Dori promised. ‘The people of Erebor won’t hold a grudge.’ He ignored Bilbo’s snort of disbelief at that statement. ‘Frár’s execution was recompense enough for his crimes. Sani will not suffer from her father’s memory.’ He glanced at the clock, raising his eyebrows at the passage of time before struggling to his feet. ‘And now, Master Baggins, we need to get you
The glass chimed as he set it down on the table, smoothing his palms over his knees before looking towards the bed, where the clothes Dori had for him lay waiting. ‘I’m afraid I’m not going to be much use to you,’ he explained. ‘Hobbits are a simpler folk when it comes to weddings.’

Dis reached out to pat the back of his hand, her gaze sympathetic. ‘Are you sorry that you won’t be having the kind of wedding you know?’

Bilbo gave it some thought. ‘Not really,’ he admitted at last. ‘Besides, I understand why we must do it the dwarven way. We can’t give anyone an excuse to say our marriage isn’t valid.’ He sighed. ‘It’s just – as beautiful as I’m sure it will be, what happens today isn’t just for me and Thorin. It’s for all of Erebor. It seems a bit less personal, somehow.’

‘You might be surprised,’ Balin murmured, getting to his feet. ‘The day is still for the two of you more than anyone else. Are you ready to prepare?’

Drawing a deep breath, Bilbo rose, spreading his hands in invitation. ‘Where do you need me?’

Dori beckoned him towards the bed, letting him see the clothes for the first time. He wasn’t sure what he expected – robes and regalia, perhaps – but his outfit was surprisingly plain. The creamy, lustrous fabric caught the light, and when Dori picked up the shirt, Bilbo saw a thousand cobweb-fine threads of gold glisten like a sunburst through the weave.

‘Oh!’ he breathed, reaching out to brush his fingers across the cloth, almost afraid it would catch on his hands. Dozens of tiny buttons ran up the front, and Dori undid them with swift grace, holding it up for Bilbo to slip on over his thin tunic. It fit like a dream, perfectly sized to his shoulders and tailored to his waist.

Lifting his chin, he let Dori fasten the garment, turning his arm this way and that to admire the dance of the light as he moved. It took him a moment to realise that there were no cuffs. The sleeves ended in a hem halfway down his forearms. The soft cloth tickled his skin, and he rubbed a finger along its edge.

‘Here.’ Dis’ capable fingers folded back the sleeve three times, until it rested just above Bilbo’s elbow. She held it in place as Balin approached, something sparkling in his hands.

‘I hope I adjusted these right,’ he said as he placed it over the fold and clipped the band shut. The metal was light and delicate, fitting snug over Bilbo’s arm as emeralds shone luminous green in their mounts. The gold twisted in runic symbols, and a triangle of gilding pointed down to rest in the hollow of his elbow.

‘It is where the skill of the hands meets the passion of the heart,’ Dis explained, brushing over the veins that lay close to the surface of his skin. ‘Is it comfortable? Can you bend your arm?’

Bilbo did so, surprised to find that the jewellery did not poke or pinch. It flexed with him, and did not slide down as he half feared. ‘It’s lovely,’ he murmured, running his fingers over the design before Balin placed a matching piece on his other side. ‘The forearms are left bare?’

‘You’ll see why in a minute,’ Dis promised, checking the sleeves were level before clasping his hands tight. ‘Thorin doesn’t stand a chance. You take his breath away already. When he sees you today –’ She shook her head. ‘I can’t wait to see his face!’

Butterflies danced in Bilbo’s stomach, joining the bubbly wine in a chaotic dance. He wondered where Thorin was right now. Was he putting on clothes similar to Bilbo’s, half-sick with excitement,
or had some last minute duty to the kingdom cropped up and dragged him away?

‘Change into these.’ Dori held out a pair of trousers that matched his tunic, and Bilbo smiled to see that he had hemmed them to the perfect length for a hobbit. It was a small concession to his tastes, but one for which he was grateful. It would not be right any other way.

‘Thank you,’ he said, meaning it with all his heart. It took only a moment to remove his plain trousers and slip the new pair up over his hips. Like the shirt, they were a perfect fit, tailored just so thanks to Dori’s sharp eye. The fabric whispered against his skin, smooth and seductive. It wasn’t going to be very warm, but Bilbo suspected that was for the best. He could only imagine how hot a crowded throne room might be.

Dori stepped back to examine his work, brushing his fingers over the shoulder seams before nodding in satisfaction. Looking down at himself, Bilbo watched the subtle glimmer of the metallic thread. It added sparks of heat to the buttery cream of the cloth, gifting wealth to the uncomplicated cut of his clothes.

‘It’s wonderful,’ he said, admiring himself in the looking glass set into the far wall. ‘I don’t think any tailor in all of Middle Earth could have made anything near as good.’

Dori beamed with pride, his round face flushing in pleasure. ‘Thank you, Master Baggins.’

‘We’re not finished yet,’ Dis said, stepping forward with an earthenware bowl. Inside was what looked like liquid metal, and Bilbo tilted his head in question. ‘Sit down,’ she urged, gesturing to a chair. ‘I need you to be still for this part, and it’ll make it easier for Balin to put in your braids.’

‘One of the few times anyone but Thorin will attend your hair for you,’ Balin said, placing a bundle of velvet on the table. Unfurling it, he revealed the glittering array of Bilbo’s beads, from the plain wood of the one that marked him as part of the Company to the exquisite delicacy of his courtship and betrothal beads.

Yet it was the new addition that caught his eye. No bigger than any of the rest, the diamond shone like starlight, so bright it would be noticed across a crowded room. He had only seen one set of stones that dazzled so, and he had returned them to Thranduil soon after the battle in a show of good faith.

‘A Jewel of Lasgalen?’ He shook his head in disbelief as Balin nodded, picking up a comb and smoothing it through Bilbo’s curls as he explained.

‘King Thranduil presented us with two matching gems when he arrived. He recalled a complaint from Thorin’s mother, long ago, that so many of the wedding beads had been lost over the ages, and those that did survive were in a sorry state.’

‘Were they?’ Bilbo watched Dis as she carried over a small table and covered its surface with a towel before guiding Bilbo to place his hands upon it.

‘Aye. I knew it myself, and had ordered repair work to be done, but the settings we found were so old they were little more than dust.’ Balin sighed. ‘Thranduil spared us combing through the treasury in a panic. Besides, I would not dare refuse such a gesture. Not for all the coin in Erebor.’

Bilbo nodded. He knew how much the Jewels of Lasgalen meant to the elves, and how the conflict over them had boiled for too many decades. By volunteering such treasures, Thranduil had shown his support not only of their marriage but also of their rule. He strengthened the ties between Erebor and Greenwood in a way that, a year ago, Bilbo would have believed impossible.
‘Dori, would you mind going to him and thanking him from me personally? I’m sure Balin’s already expressed gratitude, but –’ He shrugged. ‘It deserves more than that.’

‘Of course.’ Dori bowed low before hurrying out, intent on his task. Bilbo caught a glimpse of the guards out in the corridor before the door swung shut, leaving him in Dis and Balin’s gentle care.

‘He’ll get Thorin’s thanks as well.’ Dis reached into her pocket and pulled out a delicate paintbrush, dipping it in the bowl of flowing metal before gripping Bilbo’s right hand and trailing it over his skin. It was not hot, as Bilbo feared, and he watched, fascinated, as golden designs unfurled across his flesh. ‘To give such a gift – it speaks volumes of Thranduil’s hopes for the future. I doubt he would have offered such a prize if Thorin were wedding anyone else.’

She paused, smiling at Bilbo before bending over her work anew. ‘Thranduil thinks very highly of you.’

‘And with good reason.’ Balin divided off a piece of Bilbo’s hair, beginning to braid with fingers that remained dextrous, despite his age. ‘There’s little that has happened between Erebor and Greenwood for which Bilbo cannot take credit. He views the elves with an open mind, where all dwarves would turn their backs. Thranduil knows the value of that.’

Bilbo smiled, grateful that people had started to call Thranduil’s realm by its proper name. It had been one of his rare commands to the kingdom. After all, “Mirkwood” no longer applied to the lush forest that had taken the place of the dark and twisted trees.

‘Politics comes first, I’m sure,’ he agreed. ‘but I think elves just like having someone to talk to – someone new and different, who they’ve not shared the centuries with. They seem a bit lonely.’

Dis nodded, her tongue skating over her lip as she concentrated, painting rings around Bilbo’s fingers and joining them with delicate dots to a latticework that trailed over the back of his hand. ‘I think you could be right. I always believed them to be distant, careless creatures, but when Tauriel is with Kili…’ She smiled, peaceful and serene. ‘I see how deeply they love, and understand them a little better. Closer relations between Greenwood and Erebor will be good for everyone, and it’s no hard trial to wear so fine a trinket in your hair.’

‘A constant reminder that there is more to this realm than just our mountain.’ Balin picked up a loop to help him slide the beads onto Bilbo’s newest braid. ‘Something Thror was quick to forget.’

‘And something Thorin shall always remember.’ Bilbo’s heart, already too full for his chest, swelled further. He had every confidence in the dwarf who was soon to be his husband. Such trust had not been easily won, but now it formed an unbreakable bridge and they were all the stronger for it. ‘He will be a good king.’

‘He’ll be all the better for having you at his side,’ Dis replied, meeting Bilbo’s gaze. ‘The two of you together? I don’t think there’s been a power like that on a dwarven throne in centuries.’

From anyone else, such praise would seem lavish. As it was, Bilbo couldn’t hide the flush that warmed his skin, but he had grown to know Dis well these past months. She did not say such things without meaning them, and it was an honour that Thorin’s sister, the last of his closest kin, thought so highly of him.

‘I’m not on the throne yet,’ he pointed out, his protest weak even to his own ears. They all knew that, though he and Thorin had not been crowned, they still ruled the kingdom. ‘And if I mess up the ceremony, I never will be. You said you’d explain what I have to do?’
Balin paused in his braiding, dropping a hand to squeeze Bilbo’s shoulder. ‘Aye, so we did. Gandalf is the one who will wed and crown you both. Normally, it would be the king who did such things, and princes would be married long before they assumed rule. However, this time, we must look to the wizard. He returned from his travels this morning.’

‘You need do very little but listen,’ Dis added. ‘The marriage comes first. You and Thorin must not touch until the right moment.’

Bilbo bit his lip. ‘How will I know when that is?’

‘Gandalf will ask if you take Thorin as yours. At that point, you reply, and the two of you join hands.’ Balin breathed deep, his chest swelling in the corner of Bilbo’s eye before he let out a happy sigh. ‘That is when your union will be complete.’

Looking down at his fingers, Bilbo realised that Dis had carried the design up his forearm. The glimmering trails stopped when she reached the band that marked the border between his skin and his sleeve. The pattern was intricate, but Bilbo noticed how, here and there, some lines came to an abrupt end: incomplete. He opened his mouth to ask her more, but Balin continued before he got the chance.

‘The crowning is a simple matter of Gandalf making it so. You need only kneel to accept it.’

It sounded so small a thing: an almost inconsequential moment that would transform him. Never again would he be merely Bilbo Baggins of the Shire.

He would be a king.

Closing his eyes, he swallowed, allowing the enormity of it to wash over him. It seemed unreal, as if all this was happening to someone else. He felt if he looked at his feelings too hard – his excitement, hope and love – they would overcome him, leaving him lost.

Dis moved onto his other hand, giving his palm a quick squeeze. ‘All will be well,’ she whispered, smiling as she went back to her work. He found himself focussing on the glide of her brush, drinking in the sensation of the cool ink and the way Balin’s fingers danced through his hair, sliding the last of the beads into place before drifting away.

‘There,’ Balin murmured, nodding in satisfaction. ‘It’s done.’ He held up a mirror so Bilbo could see. He had never worn this braid before, and it wove through his curls, thick and bold. The courting bead was near the top – Thorin’s handiwork showed off to its best advantage. His betrothal bead, which had been a solid weight at the ends of his hair, now rested halfway along, while the gift from Thranduil shone at the braid’s tip, capturing the woven tresses in its embrace. ‘Every time you and Thorin remake this braid, you are promising your love all over again,’ he explained. ‘Or so we dwarves believe.’

‘I like it.’ Bilbo resisted the temptation to run his fingers over the twisted pattern. With the weight of the beads, it reached to his jaw. On the other side of his head, the Company braid lay behind his ear, revealing the cuff that still adorned his flesh. The wooden bead dangled below, a shadowy reminder that Bilbo was no stranger to Erebor’s troubles. ‘A wedding is more than just one day.’

‘Indeed it is.’ Balin set the mirror down, looking over Dis’ efforts with blatant approval. ‘That’s fine work,’ he said when she sat back on her heels, setting aside her brush and checking the symmetry. ‘You’ve a steady hand.’

‘I’ve been practising,’ Dis confessed with a smile, examining Bilbo’s arms. The patterns mirrored
each other, and she pursed her lips, thickening one or two lines before nodding. ‘That’ll do nicely.’

A knock on the door made them turn, and Dori eased his way back in. ‘Are we ready?’

‘A few more minutes,’ Dis answered, blowing gently over Bilbo’s hands. ‘I just want to make sure this is dry.’

‘It can’t be time for the ceremony already?’ Bilbo asked, anxiety tightening his throat. It seemed only moments ago that the whole morning lay ahead of him.

‘It is indeed, or will be, once we get to the throne room.’

Dis tutted, shaking her head. ‘It can’t start without you, Bilbo. Nor does it have to until you’re ready. Do you have any other questions? Is there anything else you’d like to know?’

Emotion washed through Bilbo’s mind, crashing against him like breakers on a sea wall. A maelstrom of doubts swirled in his chest, bringing with it a thousand worries. Was he doing the right thing? Was marrying Thorin the best way forward, or would the kingdom suffer from such an unusual union? Would he do more harm than good at Thorin’s side? Would they find happiness, or would the world seek to tear them apart?

Yet Dis could give him no answers. No one knew what the future might bring. No one could offer him any guarantees, and when it came down to it, he would rather take the chance – would rather set out on his next big adventure with Thorin at his side – than go back to the way his life had been.

Steadily, the tempest of his fears faded, their dark veils slipping away to reveal the clear skies of certainty. In the end, all that mattered was that he and Thorin made each other happier than they had ever been alone. The hand fate had yet to deal them remained to be seen, but they were better off facing it together.

‘I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,’ he said, letting out a shuddering breath before managing a smile.

‘It’s normal to be nervous,’ Dis promised, getting to her feet and dusting off her gown before checking her reflection in the mirror. Like Dori and Balin, her hair and beard were beautifully groomed. Tiny gems sparkled in the depths of her curled tresses, and delicate colour rouged her lips and lined her eyes. ‘I don’t envy Fili and Kili the job of managing Thorin. He’s like a beast with a sore head when he’s worried.’

‘That’s why Dwalin’s helping them. If nothing else he can bear the brunt of Thorin’s temper while Fili and Kili get him ready.’ Balin smiled, gesturing for Bilbo to rise with the sweep of his arm. ‘Shall we proceed?’

Bilbo nodded, resisting the urge to wipe his sweaty hands on his trousers. The last thing he wanted to do was smear Dis’ handiwork or ruin Dori’s tailoring.

‘Here.’ Dis offered him a square of soft, absorbent fabric. ‘Don’t worry, the ink’s dry and won’t be going anywhere in a hurry. It’ll wash off in a month or two.’ She patted his palms to prove her point. True to her word, the lines stayed fixed in place, clear and crisp. ‘Are you ready?’

Bilbo swallowed, too nervous to speak as he nodded his head.

‘Then let’s go.’

Dori opened the door to the royal rooms, revealing the long stretch of the hallway and the guards who flanked the walls. The lamplight shone off their armour, but it was not the functional, battered
plate that Bilbo so often saw cladding the soldiers. Intricate etching coiled down the shoulders and along the arms, inlaid with gold. Not a dent marred a single piece, and Bilbo drew a breath as he noticed the motif of the decoration.

Acorns and oak leaves.

Ronin stepped forward from his place, his salute precision perfect. Yet even he could not stifle his grin, his delight for the occasion letting itself show. His eyes sparkled as he gave the order for his men to fall in, forming two lines on either side of Bilbo and his entourage. The pair in the lead raised their horns, the notes ringing through the mountain as they began their steady procession.

The ceremonial pace was achingly slow, prolonging the agony of anticipation. Any doors that blocked their way parted as they approached, held open by dwarves dressed in their finest clothes. Each one bowed low as Bilbo passed, and those who knew him better offered a smile that he returned in kind.

It felt like walking through a dream. The rugs were soft under his feet before the cool kiss of stone touched his soles, and the smoke of burning herbs fragranced the air. Garlands of leaves festooned the pillars and stairs, plucked from the ground of the nearby forests and dried into a riot of ruby red and brilliant amber. The heady perfume of the woods clung to them, and Bilbo breathed it in, knowing it would forever be tied to his memories of this day.

Over the sound of marching feet, he could hear the steady hum of voices. They droned like bees, buzzing with excitement at the prospect of the ceremony ahead. Distant music played, keeping their guests entertained with the distinctive, rhythmic melodies of the dwarves, and Bilbo found his heart jumping in time with the triumphant beat, joining in its march.

Dori beckoned them away from the main entrance to the throne room and slipping down a corridor. ‘You’ll enter from one side and Thorin from the other. Before Thror’s day, the rulers of Erebor used these passages to get into position without walking through the crowds of their petitioners.’

‘Thror redesigned it, elevating his seat of power onto the walkways with which you’re familiar,’ Balin explained. ‘Though there, too, there’s been some changes.’ He smiled as Bilbo looked over his shoulder, raising a questioning eyebrow. He had not been in either the throne room or the treasury for months. They had used the council chamber for all the necessities of the kingdom, and Bilbo had been too busy to help Ori and the others deal with the hoard.

‘Not much farther,’ Dis said with a smile, gesturing to a doorway of polished bronze up ahead. ‘Are you all right? Do you need anything?’

Mute, Bilbo shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. His stomach was a mass of thrashing butterflies, dancing in clouds beneath his bellybutton and up into his chest. Every breath felt like more than his lungs could possibly contain as his heart raced, his pulse skittering in his throat.

‘Then let’s begin,’ Balin murmured, giving Bilbo’s shoulder a quick squeeze as the guards parted, lining the hallway and flanking the door. Dori and Balin processed between them, reaching out to open the beaten metal panels as Dis placed herself in front of Bilbo, leading the way with measured strides.

Bilbo followed her, clenching his hands at his sides as he tried to keep his breathing steady. Step-by-step, the noise from the room beyond grew louder, the hum of voices gaining definition. Bilbo could not hear their words, but the air of eager celebration was palpable. The atmosphere seemed to vibrate with anticipation, a contagious shiver of exhilaration that took up residence in Bilbo’s flesh and hurried through his veins.
The blast of horns cut through it like a knife, their exuberant call bringing silence in their wake. Brassy notes echoed as Dori and Balin parted the doors, standing back so that Dis could lead Bilbo out onto the dais.

A rush of whispers rose from the crowd. It seemed to go on forever, and Bilbo glanced towards the audience out of the corner of his eye, almost stumbling when he saw how many people filled the room.

The old, dark walkways were gone, replaced by a sweeping semi-circle of white marble that arced out from the throne. At least, he assumed it was all white. He could only see a narrow strip of it. Beyond that was a sea of eager faces. They packed in everywhere, strong bannisters at the edges of the platform preventing any nasty falls. Even more figures filled the galleries above, craning their necks for just one glimpse, and Bilbo looked away, overwhelmed.

He hadn’t seen so many in one place outside of a battlefield. Now they were all here to witness this: his marriage to Thorin and the crowning of their king.

Pursing his lips, Bilbo drew in a deep breath, forcing himself to stare at Dis’ back. Her dress whispered around her feet, the luxurious cloth sweeping across the polished marble as they approached the centre of the platform, where Gandalf stood waiting.

Bilbo almost didn’t recognise him without his battered hat, and giddily he wondered who had peeled off the wizard’s tattered old robes and replaced them with fabric of dark slate and subtle silver. Even his hair had been combed and tied back, making him look more austere and powerful than Bilbo had ever seen. Only the warmth in those blue eyes hadn’t changed, and Bilbo smiled as Gandalf ducked his head in greeting.

Dis came to a halt, facing whoever stood opposite her. Thanks to her height, she blocked most of Bilbo’s view, and he didn’t know who it was until she bowed, revealing Dwalin in full armour. He caught Bilbo’s eye and winked before mimicking Dis, bending at the waist to reveal who waited behind him.

Thorin.

Bilbo’s heart slammed beneath his ribs as he drank in the sight of him. In many ways, they matched, but now Bilbo could see that Dori and Dis had made him the sun to Thorin’s moon. Whereas his clothes danced with subtle golden thread, Thorin’s flashed striking silver. Pale lines glinted in the designs that charted their path across his bare forearms, and his dark hair fell loose except for two braids: one for the Company, and the other dotted with the three beads that marked his and Bilbo’s marriage.

Thorin’s determination and pride made it hard for most people to call him beautiful, but in that moment, it was all Bilbo could think. He looked like something spun from the power of the Valar, otherworldly and untouchable.

He was not the only one staring. Thorin looked as if someone had stolen the last of his air – motionless and bewitched as their gazes locked. It was as if they were alone, rather than standing before a crowd of thousands, relishing the sight of each other. Anyone would think it had been months since they had been in each other’s company, instead of mere hours. Yet, to Bilbo at least, he could be seeing Thorin for the first time: not just his lover and friend, but the dwarf who would soon be his husband.

He was so intent on Thorin that he barely noticed Dis and Dwalin step aside, leaving them separated by a narrow stretch of stone.
They moved at the same time, closing the intervening distance in two equal strides. Bilbo’s nerves were gone, replaced by a dizzy euphoria. Nothing he could do would dim his smile, and he only just remembered not to reach out and take Thorin’s hands. His fingers twitched at his side, and he clenched them into quick fists, grinning as he saw Thorin do the same.

He looked as eager as Bilbo felt, shining with his own excitement. It smoothed the years from his face. That, along with the clean lines of his clothing, made him look like the prince he must have once been, as yet unburdened by the trials of rule and tragedy. Instead, in this moment, there was only hope, and it lit both of them with its beacon.

Silence filled the room. Everyone appeared transfixed, caught up in the same spell and breathless with anticipation. Yet Bilbo could not bring himself to look out at the crowd. There was just him and Thorin: the only ones who mattered.

‘And so it begins,’ Gandalf said, his old voice carrying a timbre that Bilbo didn’t know he possessed. His words drifted through the air, soft but audible to all those who listened.

‘There are many great stories that adorn the lives of those who dwell in Middle Earth: tales of courage and strength, forgiveness and fealty. Yet few of us have the good fortune to witness one unfold before our very eyes. After a journey of many miles, Thorin Oakenshield and Bilbo Baggins stand together, hobbit and dwarf, to join their lives as one.’

Bilbo swallowed, letting Gandalf’s words wash over him. It was no quiet promise, nor some great, Khuzdul oath. Instead, a wizard he considered an old friend spoke of hope for the future and joy for their present.

‘It is love that fills our lives with wealth, and gives us strength when we would falter. Devotion enriches us, and companionship shields us from the chill of a world that is often shadowed and cold.’ Gandalf stepped forward, resting one hand on Thorin’s shoulder and the other on Bilbo’s, urging them both to look at him with the gentlest touch.

‘This is what Bilbo Baggins offers to you, Thorin. Do you accept?’

Thorin nodded his head, clearing his throat before holding out his hands, palm up, in the space between them. ‘I do.’

‘And you, Bilbo? Do you accept Thorin Oakenshield in this promise?’

Bilbo’s heart felt like it might overwhelm him, and the pinch of tears stung his eyes as he lifted his chin, his voice clear and sure. ‘I do.’

He placed his palms atop Thorin’s, relishing the touch of his warm skin and the calluses that he knew so well. Gripping one another’s palms, Bilbo smiled, swallowing a bubble of happiness as he noticed the same glimmer of joyful tears in Thorin’s eyes.

Gandalf’s big hands cupped theirs, his voice dignified with the wisdom of the ages as he bestowed his blessing.

‘So be it.’

Sparks blazed as Gandalf stepped away, and Bilbo twitched in surprise. The ink on his arms, so painstakingly charted by Dis’ careful brush, glowed with life, the rich gold shimmering as it began change. There was no heat to burn his skin, only a rapid unfurling of light. It carried on going, right up to where the paint ended and the gleaming cuffs held back his sleeves.
When it faded, Bilbo could not help the breadth of his grin. He didn’t know if it was Gandalf’s magic or some ingenuity of the dwarves, and nor did he care. All that mattered was that some of the lines on his skin had become silver, their mellow aureate turning to moonlight. The same change had happened to Thorin, gifting him with Bilbo’s colours and making each of them a blend of the other, the patterns twisting in perfect harmony.

Best of all, when Thorin shifted his hand, weaving their fingers together, he saw that the delicate trails matched up, forming a continuous design with both of them as its canvas.

‘Your union is complete,’ Gandalf said, breaking into a smile as the throne room erupted into cheers and applause. Horns blew out joyful notes as dwarves stamped their feet, adding to the thunderous celebration.

Thorin tugged Bilbo close, pressing their brows together and holding his hands tight. ‘Husband,’ he murmured, as if he could barely believe it. Now, Bilbo could feel the gentle tremors running through Thorin’s frame. Not that he was much better. His body did not know what to do with all these feelings: full to overflowing. He felt like laughing and crying all at once, so instead he pushed himself up on tiptoes, untangling one hand to tug Thorin down for a warm, happy kiss.

‘I love you,’ he whispered when they broke apart, meaning it with all of his heart.

Thorin grinned, wrapping his arms around Bilbo’s waist and lifting him off his feet for another kiss, which had their friends whooping and whistling. ‘I love you too,’ he promised. ‘Now, and for all the rest of my days.’

At last, Gandalf raised his hands, silencing the crowd without a word. His lined face grew solemn as he gestured off to the side, beckoning Fili and Kili forward from where they stood.

A dark blue cushion sat in Fili’s grip, its fabric sumptuous beneath the lamplight. However, it was the object that rested on its surface that drew every eye in the room, reminding them that more than one promise was being made that day.

A solitary crown shone, its metal tempered to display a myriad of warm hues, from darkest bronze to fiery copper. Yet it was not the one that Thorin had placed upon his brow in his madness, only to cast off later. This was not a piece of Erebor’s history, pulled from the hoard to lend its pedigree to the new king. It was too bright and crisp to be anything but newly forged.

The traditional, angular design of the dwarves gave way to something softer, sharp corners rounded for a less brutal appearance. Shallow points of different metals lay over one another like intricate plate-work, all embellished with the same fine traceries of oak leaves and acorns that adorned the soldier’s armour.

Smiling, Kili stepped forward, cupping the higher portion of the crown. With a faint click, it came free, revealing the exquisite trickery and craftsmanship. A whispered gasp went up from the crowd as Kili placed the second piece next to the first, and Bilbo reached out, clutching Thorin’s left hand in his right. He had never spoken of a crown for himself – had assumed that Thorin would wear it for them both – but it seemed the people of Erebor had other ideas.

The two circlets caught the light, shimmering in a cascade of colour. When placed together, they locked into a ceremonial crown that would grace any treasury with ease. Yet separated, they did not diminish. Rather, they became something greater than the sum of their parts, combining dwarvish design and Shire simplicity.

Squeezing Thorin’s hand, he sucked in a deep breath, following his husband’s lead as they both
knelt before Gandalf. The stone was hard against his knees, unforgiving. Perhaps he was fanciful, but it felt like the mountain was making its presence known, the land itself reminding them of its place in their lives.

He didn’t release Thorin from his grasp, nor did Thorin try and break free. They clung to each other, connected by so much more than just skin as Gandalf lifted the bigger crown from its cushion. He held it aloft, letting the light caress the metal as more than a thousand dwarves bore witness.

A soft song ghosted from Gandalf’s lips, his voice carrying an evocative tune Bilbo had never heard before. He spoke in a language unfamiliar to his ear, neither Khuzdul, nor Westron, nor any of the tongues of the elves. Yet despite that, its sentiment rang clear: a promise and a plea to powers beyond their knowing to mark this occasion.

Bilbo looked up, unable to stop himself. After all that they had been through – all the perils they faced and the battles they fought – he wanted to see Thorin in this moment. He had struggled so long, through bloodshed and madness, to regain this kingdom. While this day was mostly about new beginnings, there were also endings, and for Thorin, he knew this was the true last hour of his exile. It was the culmination of all his struggles, and nothing in the world could have made Bilbo look away.

The band of metal settled on Thorin’s head, snug against his temples. Perhaps it was not as big as Thrain’s, nor as jewel-encrusted as others that Bilbo had seen in the treasury, but it looked right – as if the Valar themselves had a hand in the symbol of Thorin’s destiny. Graceful and elegant, it allowed the strength of Thorin’s personality to shine through. He was not a king because he wore the crown. With or without it, he still ruled this land, of that there could be no doubt.

Thorin’s fingers tightened around Bilbo’s, urging him to face forwards once more. Now, it was his turn, and he bowed his head to accept the treasure that Gandalf bestowed. He expected it to be heavy, the crown as much a burden as the office it represented, but the metal rested easy on his brow, the padded rim offering extra comfort as it nestled atop his curls.

‘I give you the Kings of Erebor!’ Gandalf’s voice rose to a boom, echoing throughout the mountain as Thorin and Bilbo got to their feet. The horns called out their song, heralding the start of a new reign, but this time cheers did not accompany them. Instead, the crowd moved, rippling as if a pebble had been thrown into a pool of calm water.

The front row was the first, bending at the waist in low, sweeping bows. Others followed as dwarves, elves and men alike showed their unfaltering respect.

The lump in Bilbo’s throat pulsed, and he swallowed hard, blinking back the threat of tears. All his life he had thought he had respect in Hobbiton, but never before had he felt as if his presence was cause for celebration. Good Shire manners were no replacement for the genuine enthusiasm the people of Erebor had shown him.

Thorin’s hand on his cheek caught his attention and he turned, too overwhelmed to stop himself melting into the bowl of Thorin’s palm. ‘Are you all right?’

Bilbo smiled, glancing up at Thorin’s crown. ‘It suits you,’ he whispered, clearing his throat. ‘It suits you very well indeed.’

‘As does yours,’ Thorin murmured. ‘Thank you.’

‘For what?’ Bilbo asked, grinning as Thorin shook his head. He nudged the tip of his nose down the side of Bilbo’s before pressing a kiss, sweet and clinging, to Bilbo’s lips.
'For everything.'

Far above, the great bell of Erebor rang, its sonorous notes filling the air. It bounced around the pillars and curled in the vaulted ceilings, crying out for all to hear. Voices rose, happy conversation competing with the chimes as the applause began anew, rising to a rumbling roar. People shouted their praises, exuberant beyond all measure.

‘Are you ready?’ Thorin asked, gesturing as the crowd parted and soldiers took their places. They lined a clear path through to the great hall, where feasting and revelry awaited them all.

‘Absolutely.’

Hand-in-hand, they stepped forward, sharing measured paces and soft words as they strode into their future.

The kingdom would prosper, the lands finding peace after too many years beneath the dragon’s careless tyranny. Gold would flow anew, but it would be the least of the Lonely Mountain’s wealth. Its greatest riches would lie in the bonds formed between its people. Forged in strife, uneasy alliances grew into unaltering friendships as they all poured their souls into restoring the realm.

The crown of Erebor may be riven, split in half and shared between two kings, but in Thorin and Bilbo’s capable hands, it was far from broken.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It's finished!!! And by complete coincidence, I am posting the epilogue on September 22nd, the birthday of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins =D
Thank you to everyone who has read this story, commented or supported me. I hope to write more in the hobbit fandom, but you can check out future projects, as well as links to my fic in other fandoms like BBC Sherlock and Fullmetal Alchemist, at my Tumblr. Thank you again, from the bottom of my heart, and I hope you enjoyed the story!
B xxx

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!